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ASSERTIVENESS IN WORKING WITH DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING PERSONS

Jasmina Karić^{1,2}, Vesna Jovanović³ & Vesna Radovanović²

² University of Belgrade – Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Belgrade, Serbia

³ High Medical School of Professional Studies, Belgrade, Serbia

SUMMARY

In everyday life, many people easily communicate with others, creating good relationships, but when we talk about communication in professional relationships, it becomes the main tool for achieving professional goals. Its use is particularly significant for employees in those departments which characteristics are to have direct contact with people in different kinds of trouble and suffering (health workers, psychologists, special educators etc.). Communication in professional relationships cannot be seen as something that is taken for granted, because there is a big difference between unconscious communication and communication with a specific purpose that is taught.

In this regard, an investigation of the level of assertiveness in the profession of special educators, as well as the connection between the level of assertiveness and socio-demographic and economic structure of the respondents, was conducted.

Research Methodology – it involved 70 special educators who work with deaf and hard of hearing people from the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The aim of the study was to examine the extent to which assertiveness is present in this specified group of respondents, and to examine the impact of socio-demographic and economic structure of special educators on the level of assertiveness. The following hypothesis was set: A greater representation of assertive respondents compared to those who are not assertive or assertive below average is expected. We expect the existence of differences in the level of assertiveness, depending on differences in gender, marital status, number of children in the family of respondents, age, and years of employment, housing situation and financial situations of respondents. Research instruments: According to the subject of the research a questionnaire measuring assertiveness – RAS (The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, Rathus, S. A. 1978) and a special questionnaire prepared for this survey, containing general information about the respondents was used in the study.

Conclusion – The findings of this study confirmed the first hypothesis, the greater representation of assertive respondents. This is not only extremely important, having in mind that the training of the deaf and hard of hearing people toward establishing better relations within the family and social milieu is a major challenge for a special educator working with these persons, but also presents a great success for our profession. With regard to gender, marital status, number of children in the family, years of service, financial situations, the results showed they are not correlated to the level of assertiveness. We can point out that all persons have equal chances to build their communication skills in life, keeping in mind that assertiveness, as interpersonal communication style, is being acquired, learned, improved and changed during the lifetime.

Key words: communication, assertiveness, special educator, deaf and hard of hearing persons

INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, many people easily communicate with others, creating good relationships, but when we talk about communication in professional relationships, it becomes the main tool for achieving professional goals. Its use is particularly significant for employees at jobs characterized by a direct contact with people in different kinds of trouble and suffering (health workers, psychologists, special educators etc.). Communication in professional relationships cannot be seen as something that is taken for granted. There is a big difference between unconscious communication and communication with a specific purpose that is taught. In modern life and work conditions, importance is increasingly given to the study and mastery of communication skills that include social skills, own thinking and self-communication, as well as communication with others, while recognizing emotional states.

A very important factor in effective communication is assertiveness. It is an interpersonal communication style that includes a set of characteristic patterns of behavior. It can be said that the verbal and non-verbal manifestation, our reactions to others, mirror our personal and professional relationships. This means that, if a person is behaving passively, other people feel pity and disgust for that person. If a person behaves aggressively, it makes other people mad and makes them want to get revenge. If a person is assertive, others behave with consideration and respect.

Non-verbal communication is a very important part of assertiveness. Bearing in mind that it is 4 times stronger than verbal. According to some authors, the effect of non-verbal communication is 78 percent, verbal – 13 percent, while only 9 percent belongs to the communication content (Kekuš, 2010).

The importance of implementation of assertive communication in professional relationships is indicated by the fact that basic postulates of assertive communication are included in all business codes of different work organizations. This indicates that communication should be open and clear with respect to the rights of others. There is no place for manifestation of anxiety and aggressiveness in the business communication. In case the client has extensive exposure, it is necessary to end the conversation politely and firmly. All this indicates that the assertiveness is necessary to achieve good business relationships, as well as for developing personal and professional reputation of the employees. That's why non-assertive styles of communication, on one hand, and assertiveness, on the other, are key concepts for understanding the origin of bad interpersonal relations at work, and possibly their improvement.

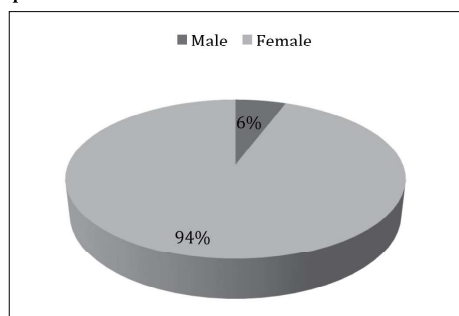
Many studies have shown that assertive people progress much faster in their careers than their equally expert colleagues with the dominant non-assertive communication style. Employees with higher levels of assertiveness establish better interpersonal relationships. It is easier for them to adapt to changes within the working system, they are more willing to take responsibility, they speak clearly, specifically and directly, they better tolerate discomfort, have higher self-esteem, self-respect and respect for others, they have a better developed ability to self-assess their own feelings in relationships with others. In contrast, assertiveness contributes to the elimination of irrational beliefs, reduces anxiety, lack of confidence and social shyness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In accordance with theoretical concepts an investigation of the level of assertiveness in the profession of special educators, as well as the connection between the level of assertiveness and socio-demographic and economic structure of the respondents was conducted. **The study sample** involved 70 special educators who work with deaf and hard of hearing people from the territory of the Republic of Serbia. **The aim of the study** was to examine the extent to which assertiveness is present in this specified group of respondents, and to examine the impact of socio-demographic and economic structure of special educators on the level of assertiveness. **Research variables:** dependent variable – assertiveness; control variables – gender, marital status, number of children in the family of respondents, age, years of experience, financial status, housing situatedness. **The following hypothesis was set:** A greater representation of assertive respondents compared to those who are not assertive or assertive below average is expected. We expect the existence of differences in the level of assertiveness, depending on differences in gender, marital status, number of children in the family of respondents, age, years of employment, housing situation and financial situatedness of respondents. **Research instruments:** According to the subject of the research a questionnaire measuring assertiveness – RAS (The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, Rathus, S. A. 1978) and a special questionnaire prepared for this survey, containing general information about the respondents (gender, marital status, number of children in the family of respondents, age, years of employment, financial situatedness and housing situation), were used in the study.

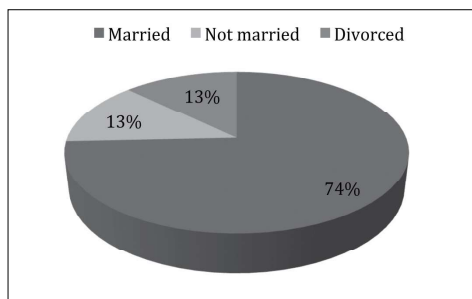
RESEARCH RESULTS

The following graph shows the distribution of control variables, which are followed by a Questionnaire on personal data.



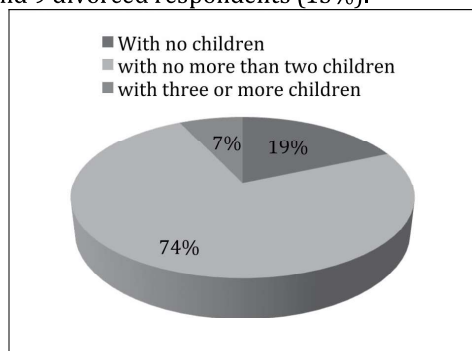
Graph 1 Representation of the sample with respect to gender

Graph 1 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the gender of respondents. The sample consists of 4 male (6%) and 66 female (94%) respondents.



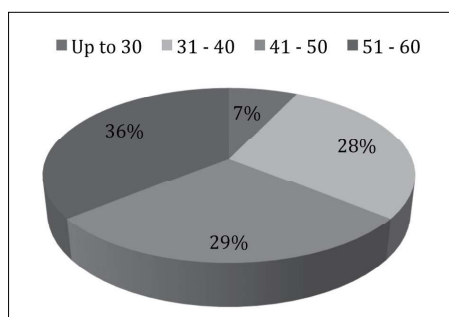
Graph 2 Representation of the sample with respect to marital status

Graph 2 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the marital status of respondents. The sample consists of 52 married respondents (74%), 9 not married respondents (13%) and 9 divorced respondents (13%).



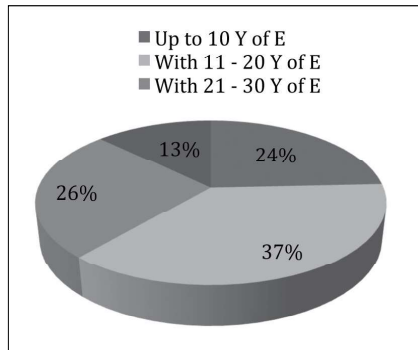
Graph 3 Representation of the sample with respect to the number of children

Graph 3 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the number of children respondents have. The sample consists of 13 respondents (19%) with no children, 52 respondents (74%) with no more than two children and 5 respondents (7%) with three or more children.



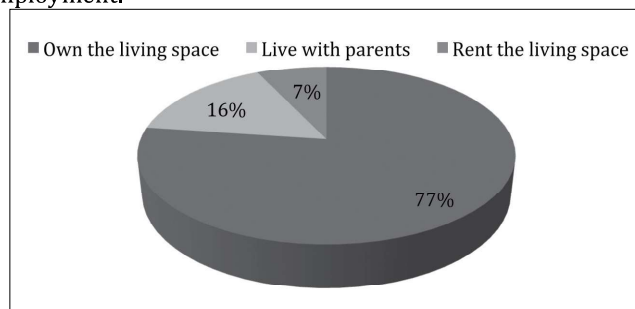
Graph 4 Representation of the sample with respect to age

Graph 4 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the age of respondents. The sample consists of 5 respondents (7%) under 30 years of age, 20 respondents (28%) from 31-40 years of age and 25 respondents (36%) from 51-60 years of age.



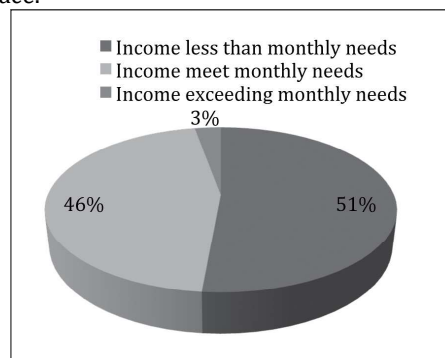
Graph 5 Representation of the sample with respect to years of employment

Graph 5 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the years of employment of the respondents. The sample consists of 17 respondents (24%) under 10 years of employment, 26 respondents (37%) with 11-20 years of employment, 18 respondents (26%) with 21-30 years of employment and 9 respondents (13%) with 31-40 years of employment.



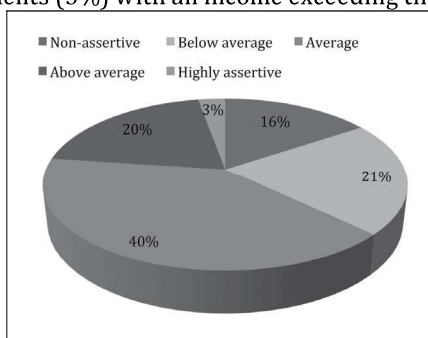
Graph 6 Representation of the sample with respect to housing situation

Graph 6 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the housing situation of the respondents. The sample consists of 54 respondents (77%) who have their own living place, 11 respondents (16%) who live with their parents and 5 respondents (7%) who rent the living space.



Graph 7 Representation of the sample with respect to financial situation

Graph 7 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the financial situation of the respondents. The sample consists of 36 respondents (51%) with an income less than their monthly needs, 32 respondents (46%) with an income that meet their monthly needs and two respondents (3%) with an income exceeding their monthly needs.



Graph 8 Representation of the samaple with respect to assertivness level

Graph 8 shows the structure of the respondents in relation to the level of assertiveness of the respondents. The sample consists of 11 persons (16%) forming a group of non-assertive respondents, 15 forming a group (21%) of respondents who are assertive below average, 26 (37%) with an average assertiveness level, 16 (23%) who are assertive above average and two respondents (3%) who are highly assertive.

Examining the Relationships between Assertiveness and Socio-Demographic and Economic Structure of Respondents

Table 1 Parametric Correlations of the Scores between Assertiveness and Observed Characteristics

	ASSERT	AGE	YE	CHLDR	GENDER	MARITAL	HOUSE	FINANCIAL
ASSERT	r	,199	,134	,031	-,050	,046	-,140	,028
	p	,104	,267	,796	,684	,708	,249	,821
	N	68	70	70	70	70	70	70
AGE	r	0,199	,920**	,497**	,054	,335**	-,372**	-,066
	p	0,104	,000	,000	,662	,005	,002	,591
	N	68	68	68	68	68	68	68
YE	r	0,134	,920**	,473**	,049	,273*	-,345**	,013
	p	0,267	,000	,000	,688	,022	,003	,915
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70
CHLDR	r	0,031	,497**	,473**	,068	,456**	-,273*	-,046
	p	0,796	,000	,000	,578	,000	,022	,704
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70
GENDER	r	-0,050	,054	,049	,068	,121	,021	-,105
	p	0,684	,662	,688	,578	,317	,865	,388
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70

		ASSERT	AGE	YE	CHLDR	GENDER	MARITAL	HOUSE	FINANCIAL
MARITAL	r	0,046	,335**	,273*	,456**	,121	1	-,047	-,102
	p	0,708	,005	,022	,000	,317		,697	,402
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70	70
HOUSE	r	-0,140	-,372**	-,345**	-,273*	,021	-,047	1	-,078
	p	0,249	,002	,003	,022	,865	,697		,520
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70	70
FINANCIAL	r	0,028	-,066	,013	-,046	-,105	-,102	-,078	1
	p	0,821	,591	,915	,704	,388	,402	,520	
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70	70

** Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level

* Correlation is significant at the 0,05 level

Table 2 Nonparametric Correlations of the Scores between Assertiveness and Observed Characteristics

		ASSERT	AGE	YE	CHLDR	GENDER	MARITAL	HOUSE	FINANCIAL
ASSERT	ρ		,236	,168	,023	-,064	,068	-,243*	,109
	p		,052	,164	,852	,599	,574	,042	,368
	N		68	70	70	70	70	70	70
AGE	ρ	0,238		,923**	,478**	,038	,326**	-,406**	-,028
	p	0,049*		,000	,000	,757	,007	,001	,823
	N	68		68	68	68	68	68	68
YE	ρ	0,168	,923**		,473**	,058	,277*	-,361**	,037
	p	0,164	,000		,000	,634	,020	,002	,761
	N	70	68		70	70	70	70	70
CHLDR	ρ	0,023	,478**	,473**		,066	,467**	-,289*	-,032
	p	0,852	,000	,000		,588	,000	,015	,790
	N	70	68	70		70	70	70	70
GENDER	ρ	-,064	,038	,058	,066		,121	-,002	-,059
	p	0,599	,757	,634	,588		,317	,986	,627
	N	70	68	70	70		70	70	70
MARITAL	ρ	0,068	,326**	,277*	,467**	,121		-,108	-,081
	p	0,574	,007	,020	,000	,317		,371	,504
	N	70	68	70	70	70		70	70
HOUSE	ρ	-,243*	-,406**	,361**	-,289*	-,002	-,108		-,098
	p	0,042	,001	,002	,015	,986	,371		,421
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70		70
FINANCIAL	ρ	0,109	-,028	,037	-,032	-,059	-,081	-,098	
	p	0,368	,823	,761	,790	,627	,504	,421	
	N	70	68	70	70	70	70	70	

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Assertiveness score was statistically significantly associated with the age of our respondents (higher score values in the elderly, and conversely, lower in younger respondents), and with the categories of housing. Hence, the respondents with worse housing situation (tenants) had higher values of assertiveness score compared to those who live with their parents.

Table 3 The Frequency of Respondents in Relation to Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Not Married	9	12,9	12,9	12,9
Married	52	74,3	74,3	87,1
Divorced	9	12,9	12,9	100,0
Total	70	100,0	100,0	

Table 4 The Frequency of Respondents in Relation to Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	4	5,7	5,7	5,7
Female	66	94,3	94,3	100,0
Total	70	100,0	100,0	

Table 5 The Frequency of Respondents in Relation to Housing Situation

Housing Situation	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Property Owners	54	77,1	77,1	77,1
With Parents	11	15,7	15,7	92,9
Tenants	5	7,1	7,1	100,0
Total	70	100,0	100,0	

Table 6 The Frequency of Respondents in Relation to Financial Situation

Financial Situation	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Income Below Needs	36	51,4	51,4	51,4
Income Meets Needs	32	45,7	45,7	97,1
Income Exceeds Needs	2	2,9	2,9	100,0
Total	70	100,0	100,0	

Table 7 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Gender

	Gender	N	Average	SD	SE
ASSERTIVENESS	Male	4	102,50	9,94	4,97
	Female	66	98,93	17,16	2,11

There was no statistically significant difference in the mean values of the assertiveness score in relation to gender ($t = 0,409$; $p > 0,05$).

Table 8 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Marital Status

	N	Average	SD	SE	95% CI		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower	Upper		
Not Married	9	94,88	7,92	2,64	88,79	100,98	80,00	106,00
Married	52	100,09	18,03	2,50	95,07	105,11	69,00	150,00
Divorced	9	97,88	16,54	5,51	85,17	110,60	68,00	121,00
Total	70	99,14	16,81	2,00	95,13	103,15	68,00	150,00

There was no statistically significant difference in the mean values of the assertiveness score in relation to marital status ($F = 0,390$; $p > 0,05$).

Table 9 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Financial Status

	N	Average	SD	SE	95% CI		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower	Upper		
Income Below Needs	36	97,66	17,76	2,96	91,65	103,67	72,00	150,00
Income Meets Needs	32	101,90	15,23	2,69	96,41	107,40	68,00	150,00
Income Exceeds Needs	2	81,50	17,67	12,50	17,32	240,32	69,00	94,00
Total	70	99,14	16,81	2,00	95,13	103,15	68,00	150,00

There was no statistically significant difference in the mean values of the assertiveness score in relation to income categories ($F = 1,707$; $p > 0,05$).

Table 10 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Housing Status

	N	Average	SD	SE	95% CI		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower	Upper		
Property Owners	54	100,90	15,95	2,17	96,55	105,26	69,00	150,00
With Parents	11	90,63	21,96	6,62	75,87	105,39	68,00	150,00
Tenants	5	98,80	7,39	3,30	89,61	107,98	92,00	109,00
Total	70	99,14	16,81	2,00	95,13	103,15	68,00	150,00

There was no statistically significant difference in the mean values of the assertiveness score in relation to housing categories ($F = 1,743$; $p > 0,05$). If we compare only those that own the property, and those who live with their parents, the difference becomes significant ($t = 1,833$; $p < 0,05$).

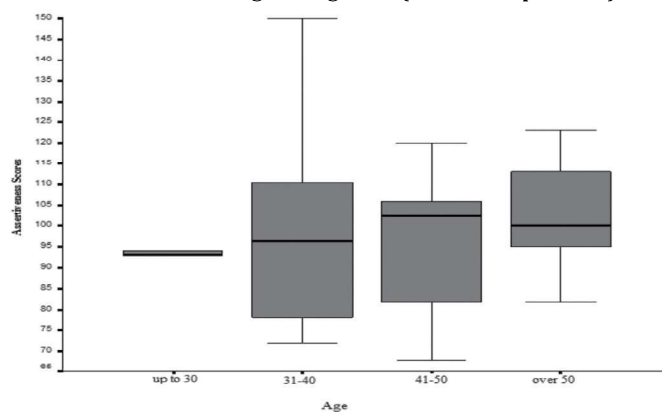
Table 11 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Housing Status Regrouped in two Categories

	HOUSING	N	Average	SD	SE
ASSERTIVENESS	Property Owners	54	100,90	15,95	2,17
	With Parents	11	90,63	21,96	6,62

Table 12 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Age

AGE (years)	N	Average	SD	SE	95% CI		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower	Upper		
up to 30	5	93,60	9,91	4,43	81,28	105,91	80,00	108,00
31-40	20	99,35	22,60	5,05	88,77	109,92	72,00	150,00
41-50	18	95,72	16,65	3,92	87,43	104,00	68,00	120,00
over 50	25	102,90	12,74	2,54	97,69	108,22	82,00	123,00
Total	68	99,29	17,03	2,06	95,17	103,41	68,00	150,00

There was no statistically significant difference in the mean values of the assertiveness score in relation to age categories ($F = 0,830$; $p > 0,05$).

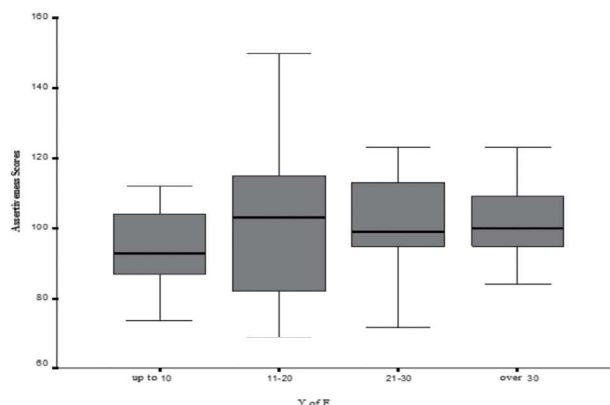


Graph 9 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Age

Table 13 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Years of Employment

Yof E (years)	N	Average	SD	SE	95% CI		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower	Upper		
up to 10	17	93,29	11,83	2,86	87,21	99,37	74,00	112,00
11-20	26	100,76	21,26	4,16	92,18	109,35	69,00	150,00
21-30	18	101,16	15,55	3,66	93,43	108,90	68,00	123,00
over 30	9	101,44	11,59	3,86	92,52	110,35	84,00	123,00
Total	70	99,14	16,81	2,00	95,13	103,15	68,00	150,00

There was no statistically significant difference in the mean values of the assertiveness score in relation to years of employment ($F = 0,906$; $p > 0,05$).



Graph 10 Descriptive Values of the Assertiveness Scores of Respondents with Respect to Years of Employment

Methods of Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed and presented in tables and graphs, accompanied by a discussion, depending on the nature of the observed variables.

Description of numerical characteristics in our study was done by classical methods of descriptive statistics and the arithmetic mean and median of the mean values, with a measure of the variability of the standard deviation and standard error, and minimum and maximum value. Distribution of numerical variables in our study was checked by the Kolmogorov Smirnov test, while the normal distribution was tested. For variables that met this criterion (had a normal distribution), parametric methods were used in their further analysis, and if there was no model of normal distribution, we used nonparametric methods.

For comparison of the average values of the parametric features we used Student's t-test for two groups of data, and the Fisher analysis of variance (ANOVA) for three or more groups. As nonparametric amendments in independent samples we applied the rank sum test and for the dependent – the matched pairs test.

In the analysis of the correlation of our characteristics we used methods of the single parameter correlation and regression, as well as nonparametric correlations, depending on the distribution of the data.

In all the applied analytical methods, the level of significance was 0,05.

DISCUSSION

The obtained results confirm the hypothesis. Given that 2/3 of the respondents belong to the group of average, above average and very assertive, THAT IS GOOD, bearing in mind that the verbal and non-verbal communication is a major tool in the work of special educators working with persons with hearing impairments. For these reasons, special educators are faced with the need for continuous improvement of

their communication skills in order to provide adequate support and achieve the best possible results in the social integration of deaf and hard of hearing people.

Given that 1/3 of the respondents belong to the group of non-assertive or assertive below average, bearing in mind that non-assertiveness is followed by two extremes – aggressive or passive behavior, as well as the inability to adequately resolve conflicts and establish healthy interpersonal relationships, we can assume that special educators who exhibit lower levels of assertiveness have greater personal experience of stress at work and less potential and capacity to make good interpersonal relationship with a deaf and hard of hearing person. They also have less potential to adequately overcome conflict situations in their work.

The link between the level of assertiveness and socio-demographic characteristics (gender, marital status, work experience, number of children in the family and financial situation) has not been confirmed, but the relation between the level of assertiveness and housing situatedness is statistically significant. Respondents who live with their parents belong to the group of below average assertive, as opposed to respondents who are tenants or property owners, who mostly belong to the group of average assertive ones. Bearing in mind that establishing clear boundaries in communication with other people is one of the most important characteristics of assertive people, we can understand that those living with their parents and showing a lower level of assertiveness compared to those who do not live with their parents, have greater difficulty in establishing clear boundaries with their close ones, because of the strong emotional charge in the relationships with important figures from their immediate environment. These relationships are further compromised by living with parents at a time when it is necessary, both mentally and physically, to become independent. Assertiveness score was statistically significantly associated with the age of our respondents. The score values were higher in older people and vice versa, lower in younger. These findings point to the fact that the older and more experienced colleagues mastered communication skills better, compared to the younger ones. This is understandable considering the fact that the communication skills are built and improved during the lifetime.

CONCLUSION

Greater presence of assertive special educators is extremely important, given that the training of the deaf and hard of hearing people toward establishing better relations within the family and social milieu is a major challenge for special educators working with these persons. This also presents a great success for our profession. Given that gender, marital status, number of children in the family, years of employment, financial situatedness are not correlated to the level of assertiveness, we must point out that all persons have equal chances to build their communication skills in life, keeping in mind that assertiveness, as interpersonal communication style, is being acquired, learned, improved and changed during the lifetime.

It would be important to examine the correlation between the level of assertiveness and professional stress, as well as the impact of education on skills of assertive communication, in some future studies.

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