

Creating a tolerant attitude - a remedy for the social inclusion of young people with disabilities in academia

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Abstract

Inclusive education in academia has become a key concept worldwide. Inclusion in the academic environment does not start from scratch but is based on the principles and measures applied since the levels of previous stages of education (school, middle school, high school) with their specific adaptation.

In order to optimize the possibilities of access in university education, inclusive education in the previous stages of schooling remains essential, which should be complemented with effective transition strategies.

In order to achieve an effective socio-educational inclusion, it is essential to have coherence and concordance between the educational policy and the education system, on the one hand, and the practical ways of achieving it on the other hand.

Analyzing in dynamics the processes in society and in the educational system that have occurred during the last decades and are still taking place in the Republic of Moldova, a spectacular evolution of the attitude of social actors towards people with disabilities and their requirements have changed to unconditional acceptance and towards tolerance the attitude of the majority of citizens, of the representatives of various state institutions. At the level of authorities and civil society, legislative and normative acts have been adopted, essential for excluding discrimination and marginalization, new policies have been developed and implemented in the areas such as: human rights, including those of people with disabilities; educational inclusion; employment of people with disabilities, etc. In this context, we can speak clearly about a change of collective and individual mentality in relation to people in difficulty, so at the level of public attitude towards people with disabilities there are more negative manifestations, and even more discriminatory.

Discrimination factors generate issues that ultimately deter or jeopardize the adaptability and inclusion of people with disabilities, leading to intolerance and non-acceptance. (Wagner-Lampl and Oliver, 1994)

Analyzing the current situation in the area of addressing disability and the concrete efforts to integrate its carriers, we find some discrepancies between what is done de facto in this regard in our country and what advanced international standards propose in relation to the integration process.

The aim of the study is to identify difficulties and barriers in access to education for young people with disabilities in higher education and socio-professional integration through the broad participation of professionals and civil society.

It would be wrong to say that, until the declaration of independence and, consequently, until the rally to the international normative acts on disability, in Moldova there was, at state and society level, an assumed and conscious tendency of discrimination and marginalization of persons "invalids", in order to use an official term from that time in relation to the contingent of persons to which we refer. And until then at the level of authorities and society in general, there was a clear understanding of the special needs they have, only that the methods, the ways to meet

these needs often led to isolation, frustration and limitation of rights of people with disabilities. There is a set of beliefs about what is best for them (for example, it is considered that the education of children with disabilities in special institutions offers them the greatest benefits and ensures a future according to their potential). Over time, however, most of these beliefs have proven to be inconsistent and lack beneficial socio-professional and personal perspectives for people with disabilities.

Although sporadic cases of integration of people with disabilities into the education systems of European countries date back to the 18th century, the concerns of world governments about this issue intensified only after World War II, with the advent of the UN, an organization that has established itself as a leader of the world human rights movement from the beginning. A turning point for Western countries was the 60s of the twentieth century, when the mass closure of special schools for children and young people with special needs began, with their subsequent integration into general education institutions, along with their peers from the category of those with a normal course of development. Simultaneously with this process promoted at state level, the social movement of empowering people with disabilities for independent living, without outside support, intensified. These social currents were supported by the legislators of the respective countries who mobilized to elaborate the body of laws and norms meant to ensure the success of the civil society in the effort to normalize the life of people with disabilities. After the proclamation of independence (1991), this code of laws and regulations was taken as a basis for the elaboration of national laws in the Republic of Moldova on the rights of persons with disabilities and the mechanisms for the practical implementation of legal provisions adopted at the official level.

The first models of socio-educational integration / inclusion were promoted in our country with the active contribution of the UN and civil society representations. At their foundation was the idea of giving people with disabilities equal opportunities to study and, subsequently, to normal socio-professional activity, by creating special conditions that would favor their inclusion in the academic environment or in work teams. It is a universal principle, applied by practically all advanced countries through the enforcement of the rights of persons with disabilities. But, on the other hand, the methods of implementing this fundamental principle differ from country to country. These methods are determined by the economic, social, educational, human, traditional, cultural, etc. specifics from that country. Without taking this specific into account, no reform, no matter how well thought out theoretically, will be successful. And this even if other countries have registered conclusive achievements in this regard. The mechanical takeover, without adaptation to the domestic conditions of the practices that other countries have gone through, is likely to compromise the very idea of inclusion, bringing great damage to the possible beneficiaries of the reform.

In this paper, the authors referred to the defining areas for preventing the social exclusion of young people with disabilities by forming a tolerant attitude in the university environment.

Thus, as a result of the adoption and promotion of a policy of openness to the world, it has become clear that in other countries the approach to disability is approached from a completely different angle, namely from respecting universal human rights, which radically changes the vision of needs and the real benefits of people with disabilities. It was a serious impetus for change, but it took years for the chariot to move under the pressure of international structures and Moldovan civil society.

"The transformations that took place in the ex-Soviet space after the proclamation of independence by the union republics resulted, among other things, in concrete steps towards the decentralization of state functions, the affirmation of civil society, the democratization and humanization of the education system the paradigm of educational sciences as a whole. The old paradigm expressed by the formula "normal majority - abnormal minority" has been replaced by the new paradigm, the essence of which can be expressed by the formulas "unity through diversity" and "all different, all equal". People with disabilities were harmoniously included in the new paradigm, as full members of society "(N. Bucun, E. Lisnic, 2017).

Being a totally different approach from the traditions of our society, the new paradigm, based on the principle of human diversity and equal fundamental rights of all people, has raised a strong wave of discussions, often contradictory, both scientifically, didactically, intellectual as well as the usual. Eventually, the idea that the approach of people with disabilities must be framed in the state's policies towards officially recognized minorities was crystallized. We will specify that the idea in question was accepted, practically, at all levels. Moreover, the degree of tolerance towards people with disabilities is very high, if we compare it with the degree of tolerance towards other minorities, around which the controversies at the level of society are still kept at maximum levels.

Tolerance of distinct people against the background of the masses is a goal of paramount importance for all democracies, but in young democracies, such as the one in the Republic of Moldova, things have not yet settled in their natural area. Precisely for this reason, education in the spirit of tolerance and acceptance of human diversity, as a valuable element of social harmony, has become an imperative of both the state and civil society.

Forming a tolerant attitude towards people with disabilities is not the exclusive prerogative of educational institutions. The efforts of teachers to educate the young generation in the spirit of tolerance will be reduced to zero, if in society, in the labor market there will be a completely different reality, from which people with disabilities suffer from marginalization and exclusion. Education for tolerance must be transformed into a common cause, into an effective partnership between all structures of the state, spheres of life, levels of interpersonal communication, the media, civil society and, of course, the education system.

The tolerant attitude cannot be formed by the directive, "from above", but only by operating the changes at the level of individual and collective mentality. It is a plurivalent, difficult and complex process, the results of which are felt over time. It is important to establish clearly how this process should evolve, what are the expected finalities, where the limit beyond which the violation of the rights of other people can take place passes. Of course, errors, excesses and exaggerations can be avoided only if the process of forming tolerance towards people with disabilities will be based on scientific studies and elaborations, on deep sociological and psycho-pedagogical research, based on the concrete realities of the country, and in no case "borrowed" mechanically from different realities and foreign to us.

The basis of national programs for the formation of tolerant attitudes towards people with disabilities must be a multitude of factors, such as: culture, traditions, history, social and ethnic structure, the level of development of education and medicine, the economic status of country etc. Only the deep analysis of all the factors, which could influence the moods in the society regarding the respective issue, will allow the elaboration of viable models on the local field, able to contribute to the establishment of peace and harmony between the members of the society.

The word "tolerance" is a neologism in our common lexicon. Semantically, this notion represents an alloy of acceptance, patience, understanding, compassion, desire to help and many other noble human feelings and experiences. In the concentrated version, the notion of tolerance is defined by some researchers as "the art of living harmoniously in a world of people different from you and ideas different from yours" (Smolov A.). Therefore, you cannot become truly tolerant unless you recognize the value of human diversity and support it in all spheres with which you come into contact, in our case - at the level of university life.

So what does a tolerant academic environment mean without which educational inclusion is impossible? At the university level, tolerance involves the establishment and functioning of harmonious, mutually beneficial relationships between students with disabilities, on the one hand, and teaching and non-teaching staff, other students, specialists outside the university environment, with whom there are permanent partnerships, members of the university community and extra-university, on the other hand. These relations are constituted not on the criterion of difference, but on that of common similarities, interests and aspirations. Tolerance is acquired only through practical, concrete activities. Theoretical principles can only serve as a starting point and benchmark for achieving the proposed goals.

Being tolerant of all people with disabilities is not an easy task, because their community, like any other community of real people, is inhomogeneous. Regarding people with disabilities, myths often circulate in society that have nothing in common with reality. One of them refers to their inability to cope with life's problems, to cope without outside help, to withstand, at the place of study or work, the same burdens as colleagues without disabilities. Hence the attitude of compassion and pity for people with disabilities, the tendency to support and protect them at every step, to relieve them of certain obligations and tasks. Such an attitude usually displeases and even offends them. People with disabilities do not claim mercy, but only adequate conditions to cope on their own, within their potential. In fact, disability makes many of its bearers more determined, more resilient to life's problems, more persevering and more motivated to succeed in the field in which they work. These are qualities worthy of being taken over and developed.

Myths and realities in relation to the perception of disability speak the results of surveys conducted in the university environment, here are some conclusions in this regard: "... students without disabilities attribute to this community (students with disabilities) sets of general qualities, both positive, as well as negative. Most of the time they consider that all colleagues with disabilities are characterized by such salutary qualities, such as determination, perseverance, diligence, the ability to focus on the really important things, the ability to go hard to achieve the goals and so on. On the other hand, they see in students with disabilities and negative traits, such as frowning, aggression, self-confinement, speculation about their own disabilities to gain certain benefits, excessive nervousness, depression, inadequate reactions to the trials of others to communicate etc. As for the views of students with disabilities towards their teachers and colleagues without disabilities, they also differ on a case-by-case basis, but most often it comes down to dissatisfaction with excessive tutelage and condescending treatment, while the main expectation of students with disabilities from the university environment is the equal treatment, the exclusion of any manifestations of discrimination, both with the benefit and shortcoming. Attitudinal problems towards students with disabilities often arise due to suspicions regarding their favoring at admission, outside the general competition. Most people without disabilities are of the opinion that at enrollment and, subsequently, during their studies, students with disabilities should benefit from conditions common to others,

assuming both their rights and obligations specific to the university environment. Admission based on quotas, granting scholarships only on the grounds of disability are considered by many as an injustice in relation to students without disabilities. In general, in Moldovan society there is an opinion, shared by most citizens, that any person with disabilities, if he wishes, can attend a college, the only and most important condition being the intellectual capacity of appropriate level to acquire the subject of university studies. In this sense, the highest degree of tolerance is shown by teachers and students without disabilities in relation to people with locomotor disabilities, with cerebral palsy without intellectual disorders, and the lowest degree of tolerance - in relation to people with disabilities. Mentally on the grounds that they will not be able to meet the requirements and, in addition, will create problems for other students and teachers during classes...

Broadly speaking, at the level of both groups of respondents, there is a clear understanding and acceptance of the need to enroll young people with disabilities in education. But there is also a certain dose of skepticism related, in general, to the possible problems that will arise in the process of creating the right conditions for these young people to overcome their condition, becoming students in the full sense of the word, qualified and competitive labor market specialists after graduating from college "(N. Bucun, E. Lisnic, 2017).

Tolerance towards students with disabilities does not form "overnight" and even more so this process should not begin with their enrollment in university studies. It is a component of lifelong learning - from kindergarten to old age. An important part of this effort belongs to the educational system. But the contribution of other structures, such as civil society in the person of many NGOs, the media, cultural institutions, authorities of all levels, is not negligible. The effort is to be collective and concerted. Only in this case the results will not be expected (Racu A., Maximciuc V., 2016)

Respondents from both groups (students with disabilities and students without disabilities) believe that the problems and difficulties faced by young people with disabilities in the university environment can and must be solved centrally by people with special training, who know the situation inside, know who and how it could be involved in removing barriers of any kind it possesses, sufficient competencies to formulate and clearly expose to hierarchically superior courts the position of students in certain areas of academic activity. In the opinion of students with disabilities, they need an official representative in the university administration and consider that a specialized subdivision could successfully assume the role of author / co-author of university strategies and policies in the field of addressing disability.

We consider it necessary to continue the exchange of experiences and good practices between universities at national and international level in order to ensure the quality of socio-professional inclusion services for young people with disabilities and active involvement in programs of increased participation in the community; promoting the disability approach model based on valorizing social rights and roles; promoting the positive image and social roles of young people with disabilities in the media in order to promote positive practices of social inclusion of young people with disabilities. The impact of the research confirms the following:

- The study and generalization of the experience gained in our country and around the world by inclusive educational institutions is particularly important for in-depth knowledge of the problem, for the exchange of positive practices and effective working methods.
- The scientific substantiation of socio-educational inclusion in relation to disability allowed the determination of barriers to socio-professional integration of people with disabilities.

- Identifying barriers to social inclusion have contributed to the development of recommendations for improving national policies to ensure accessibility, participation and non-discrimination on the basis of disability.
- For the Republic of Moldova, this study is important for strengthening research efforts among universities, at national and international level, to build a sustainable partnership for the efficiency of democratic movements in socio-educational inclusion.

Therefore, we need sustained efforts, well thought out policies and adjusted to the reality of our country, goodwill and dedication, understanding and tolerance, love for our neighbor. Or, the most complicated change is related to the collective and individual mentality, to the relations between people, to the attitudinal reactions.

In the process of democratization of a state, the promotion of the ideals of inclusive education cannot be avoided, but only actively promoted at all levels, not only conceptually, but also empirically. Their effective partnership ensures success in implementing inclusive education practices. The lack of this partnership inevitably leads to failure and, implicitly, to the discrediting of the very idea of inclusion.

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