

REVIEW

Associated Professor Dobrinka Kostova, PHD

For the work to be rewarded

PHD in sociology

To Stefano Cobello

Thesis: Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities in
Relational Perspective

Scientific advisers: Associated Professor Maria Zhelyazkova, PHD and Prof.
Bozhidar Ivkov, DSc

1. General Description

I am appointed with an Order № ПД -09-543 from 17.11.2020 of the Director of the IFS, BAS as a member of the jury for the defence of the PHD thesis “Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities in Relational Perspective” as part of the requirements towards a PHD degree. The author is Mr Stefano Cobello, a PHD candidate in a free form of education at the department of “Public policies and social changes” at IFS, BAS. The consultants of the thesis are Associated Professor Maria Zhelyazkova, PHD and Prof. Bozhidar Ivkov, SCI.

The thesis was discussed and approved for defence at a meeting of the department of “Public policies and social changes” at IFS, BAS on November 3, 2020.

The publications on the topic of the thesis are 5, from which 4 are in English language.

2. Relevance of Topic

The discussed topic of the thesis is inclusive education of children with disabilities and is of scientific and applied relevance. The proposed work, on the basis of rich theoretical information, enriches the sociological *knowledge* in this field of research, clarifies *the concept* of disabilities through the theory of relational perspective, confirms the role of *school and education* as significant institutions in overcoming the stigma and barriers in front of the children with disabilities and

reveals *the dynamics* of these social issues in *historical and internationally comparative perspective*. This work presents needed information to define adequate theoretical models and educational and social policies.

The basic task of the work is noteworthy as it aims at describing the meaning of inclusive education as a resource to overcome inequalities. The emphasis is on children and this increases the importance of the work with regard to the social meaning and the relevant public policies.

3. Knowledge of the topic

The author shows a deep knowledge of the problem area and was able to evaluate the rich theoretical material he has collected. He appreciates what the scientific community before him achieved in a fair way and on the basis of the previous achievements creates his theoretical and methodological analyses.

4. Methodological approach

The chosen methodological approach allows the PHD candidate to achieve his goals and analyse in a scientific way the issues of the investigation. The analyses reveal the strong theoretical preparedness of Mr Cobello and his ability to investigate complex social relations.

5. Evaluation of the PHD Thesis

The PHD thesis consists of an introduction, 5 chapters and conclusions in the amount of 223 pages (of 49 lines). It includes additionally an appendix of 29 pages. The references are 382, from which 260 are in Italian language, 117 – in English language, 2 – in French, and 1 – in Spanish. There are 52 articles in English, 17 – in Italian. The Internet resources are 13 and 3 are conference papers.

The introduction includes the basic aims of the work, its main tasks and the challenges in revealing the inclusive education of children with disabilities in relational perspective. The *first chapter* reveals the sociological aspects of disabilities. The *second chapter* analyses the theoretical framework for socialization of disabled children. The *third chapter* presents the relational model of a family that has to deal

with a child with disabilities. In this part the characteristics of families with children with disabilities, the challenges they have, the barriers, the risks and the difficulties they face in dealing with disabilities are analysed in detail. In the *fourth chapter* the positive and negative sides of school are analysed as the institution that has a substantial influence on inclusiveness of children with disabilities. In the *fifth chapter* the comparisons between the inclusive education models in USA, Britain and Italy are revealed, analysing their positive and challenging sides. Based on these experiences a model is revealed that could allow a balance between disability and education, between social and human acceptance and the fulfilment of people with disabilities. The conclusions reveal the basic contributions of the thesis to the theoretical and applied sociological science.

The complexity of this work includes the interconnections between several basic areas of research – disabilities, education, socialization, and transition from individual to inclusive education of the children with disabilities. It is a dense task and it is appreciated that the candidate has not only understood the theoretical complexity, but has further described and analysed the proper interaction of each of these components and its place in their probability relations. The deep knowledge and ability to analyse turns the thesis into a theoretical tool for how to improve through inclusive education not only the abilities of disabled children, but how to change their identities and their and their families' satisfaction and human dignity. In this regard, the scientific task is not only the inclusive education of disabled children (although it is a very significant issue), but how this inclusive effort could contribute to the change in these young people and change positively their social, personal and community life. This is a work, devoted to the positive dynamics, analysed on the basis of much inclusive labour, devoted to educational, family and community development. The complexity of the process and the results variables are not one directional, they require many efforts and Mr Cobello does not idealise the process but tries to reveal the best social practices on the example of inclusive models from the USA, Britain and Italy and propose a model that can significantly contribute to the inclusive educational and social achievements and better understanding of the world of disabled children by the local communities.

The main hypothesis of the work is the assumption that the successful integration of the children with disabilities depends mainly on their inclusive

education. This depends on the rules and policies of the local and national authorities and institutions with the objective to help the children with disabilities and to change the negative attitudes to them by eliminating the stigmas in societies. Mr Cobello defends the theory that only a sociological approach to the issues of children with disabilities could help overcome the obstacles and barriers in the process of their inclusion. The focus in the work is not on disabilities but on how to use the sociological approach and to include institutions such as school, family, community to increase the chances of children with disabilities to have a normal life – education, family, activity. As a consequence, comparing with a historical perspective the inclusive education of various countries with different educational, financial and social resources, Mr Cobello proves that the inclusive education contributes to the increased performance of children with disabilities and increases the likelihood for a better life. This process also increases the probability for the development of more humane and fair relations in society as a whole. On the basis of the analyses of the inclusive educational models, Mr Cobello reveals that under specific conditions the children with disabilities could achieve fulfilment that leads to a change in the negative stereotypes of society toward people with disabilities.

6. Main theoretical and applied contributions

With regard to actual problem solving, ability to work independently, punctuality and scientific quality of the work, the assessment for the thesis is positive.

The thesis enriches the knowledge on inclusive education of children with disabilities. It has a contribution to the theoretical development of the problem in the sociological field. Applying theoretical and second hand empirical data Mr Cobello analyses new sides of the inclusive education of children with disabilities and enriches the scientific information on the topic.

Combining theoretical and applied new methods in inclusive teaching methods, Mr Cobello reveals various models of education of children with disabilities and describes the ones that could contribute to the development of a more inclusive society.

The various barriers in front of children with disabilities and their families are revealed and the work proposes approaches to overcome these barriers. The analyses

show the conditions and environment, which could contribute to the decrease of these obstacles and defines the tasks needed to reduce the practices of discrimination towards children with disabilities.

Mr Cobello reveals that the family and its social capital (cultural, educational and material resources) are of prior importance for the children with disabilities. However, he confirms that the the inclusive education of children with disabilities show that education is the mechanism that contributes to a large degree towards overcoming the uncertainties and achieving educational and social abilities that contribute to the positive dynamics in the increasing role of community support and solidarity towards children with disabilities in their life expectancies and fulfilment.

Mr Cobello coins the term “inclusive education in relational perspective” to characterize the dynamics and the adaptation of the children with disabilities to education, that is modern and inclusive. He analyses the impact of this model not only on the children with disabilities, but also on their families and the communities they have interactions with, describing their positive development.

Mr Cobello defends convincingly the idea that on the basis of this research the inclusive education is the bridge for social inclusion for the children with disabilities.

The thorough investigation of the models of inclusive education in the USA, Britain and Italy reveals in historical and comparative perspective the positive and negatives aspects of the models. From this standpoint a solution is proposed that is applicable to both the theory and the practice of inclusive education.

The very rich analyses of the institutional, legal, social, medical, and pedagogical aspects of the inclusive education enhance the theory and methodology of studying these issues. In addition, it can be a practical device for families with disabled children as well as a tool to increase public awareness and sensitivity towards the issues of inclusive education.

7. Publications

The presented 5 publications are representative for the work. Four of them are in English language and this allows broader audience to be able to read these ideas and analyses.

8. The Abstract

The abstract is prepared according to the rules and adequately reflects the main ideas, analyses and conclusion of the thesis.

9. Critics and questions

In the introduction and the conclusions, Mr Cobello clearly reveals the interrelations between the analysed issues – disabilities, education, family, socialization, and inclusive education. At the same time the five chapters are presented as independent parts. There is a need for a smoother transition from one chapter to the next revealing the interrelations between the topics discussed in them. Additionally, it is recommended to revise the chapters to increase the clarity. The author shows a desire to be very comprehensive on the subtopics and relies on a very detailed descriptive approach to the analysed issue but this disrupts the continuity of the main topic of interest.

The basic characteristics and tendencies of inclusive education of children with disabilities are clearly stated. At the same time, the work will tremendously improve if the candidate reveals examples of the model of inclusive education of children with disabilities in relational perspective and illustrates its practical and original value.

I appreciate the analyses of the second hand empirical data, but I consider that with the practical knowledge that Mr Cobello has, he could have included some of it in the work and this could be a great contribution to his deep theoretical considerations.

Although it is understood that if Mr Cobello does not speak Bulgarian language it is difficult to analyse the Bulgarian case, but I consider it a shortfall not to include some notes on the Bulgarian experience of inclusive education of children with disabilities.

Conclusion

I consider that the thesis meets the degree requirements and vote Mr Stefano Cobello to be awarded the degree of“ Doctor of sociology”. The thesis“ Inclusive

Education of Children with Disabilities in Relational Perspective” has scientific achievements that are original. The thesis fulfils all the requirements of the Law for the development of the scientific staff in Bulgaria and the Regulations to this Law. The thesis reveals that Mr Stefano Cobello has deep theoretical knowledge and practical professional abilities in sociology. He shows qualities and skills to develop scientific research, to analyse theoretical readings and to evaluate empirical data.

I give positive mark for the thesis, the abstract, the achieved results and contributions and I propose to the honourable jury to award Mr Stefano Cobello the requested title of PHD in the scientific field of sociology.

17.12.2020.

Reviewer: Dobrinka Kostova