

## **Review**

From Prof.Dr.Sc. Valentina Milenkova

For dissertation work „**Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in the Relational Perspective**”

Of Stefano Cobello for awarding educational and scientific degree “Doctor“in Sociology

Scientific consultants: Assoc. Prof. PhD Maria Jeliaskova Prof. Dr. Sc. Bojidar Ivkov

### **I. General presentation of the dissertation**

The actuality of the presented dissertation is determined by the need for people with disabilities to become an active and equivalent element of public relations and structures. And disability should be considered, understood and perceived as a relational system in which the available symbols, values, resources, and individuals themselves, who are active participants in the social environment and relationships, interact. The multidimensionality of the situation with inclusive education correlates with the diverse set of factors that determine the unequal development of countries and regions, which affects all aspects of social life, including in terms of law, values and personality.

This dissertation is an attempt to consider in theoretical and practical terms the theme of the unity of policies for inclusive education in different national contexts; to assess the characteristics of the ongoing processes in the perspective of changing realities and practices, giving the analytical and historical perspective. The complexity of this problem is determined by different consequences for the communities of people with disabilities, the state and individuals, which are related to the insufficient levels of inclusion of children with some form of disability in educational structures, their heterogeneous level of opportunities and participation, arising at the family and school level, with personal and parental insecurity and the desire to create sustainability of participation.

In this context, the idea of rethinking existing models of disability is defended; critical analysis of national policies and practices of inclusive education is made, and this is where the specific research niche opens: to apply sociological approach to finding a working model of inclusion of children with disabilities in educational structures and relationships in the context of relational perspective.

The dissertation has a volume of 268 pages, with main text - 248 pages, and structurally includes an introduction, three main parts, five chapters, conclusion, appendix, references, consisting of 382 sources - 260 are in Italian, 117 in English, 2 in French, 2 in German, 1 in Spanish.

The subject of the dissertation is disability as a whole, as well as the people with disabilities and students with disabilities in the context of national education systems. The subject of analysis are the policies and practices applied by different educational systems for inclusion in school of children and adolescents with disabilities.

The thesis of the dissertation is the construction of a possible and realistic model of society, which gives priority to human values and sees man in his entirety, beyond the abilities and disabilities, as a basic and essential element of society itself. This model can be found in the inclusive education approach applied in the Italian education system.

The aim of the dissertation is to outline the school as a place where children with disabilities can become future citizens, with recognized rights, expectations and opportunities. In the relational perspective, the autonomy of the disabled person must be considered in interrelation, not only in terms of functional roles, but also as an existential state of the subject as a subject and a person.

The tasks of the dissertation are formulated, which fully correspond to the goal, as well as to the research thesis.

The main research question of the dissertation is related to the social identity of people with disabilities and the more specific questions are: What are the factors that shape their social identity? What are the factors that contribute to the diversification of their experience according to the type of disability? What is the role that social identity plays in favor or as an obstacle to their inclusion? What are the models for inclusive education today? What is the role and capacity of new technologies in inclusive education?

In order to develop an answer to the research questions, Cobello focuses his attention on the main participant in the primary socialization of the individual - the family and on the main participant in the secondary socialization - the school; focusing in particular on the networks and relationships in which the main events in the life cycle take place: births, teachers, the school class and peers. Thus, according to the doctoral student, the disciplinary contribution of pedagogy shows how the role of parents is complemented by that of teachers and classmates in order to create a reference

framework for care of children with disabilities so that the intervention includes family and education in a full and harmonious way.

The methodology used combines a theoretical and empirical approach to the studied social reality, complemented by an in-depth reflection on the dynamics of the socio-historical context.

The dissertation is developed in the interdisciplinary framework of the theoretical fields of sociology of education, pedagogy, special pedagogy, medicine, psychology, legislation and political practice. The dissertation is written with the conviction that innovative approaches to disability require a relational and humane vision, which excludes stigmatization and is based on understanding the other, the different, in terms of equality and personal significance.

Each of the chapters in the dissertation contains reflections, analyzes and conclusions showing the author's presence and research responsibility of the dissertation.

The analysis traces the different approaches to disability. The medical model is presented, which is related to the depersonalization of people with disabilities (in the 19th century), highlighting the disadvantages and showing the lack of certain skills that allow the performance of a task. The structural-functionalist approach considers the disability as a form of deviation due to disturbance in the normal functioning of the individual as a whole, not only on a biological but also on a social level; and since this condition is undesirable, the individual who has fallen into it seeks competent help for recovery and cooperation.

The interactive approach views disability as a stigma; as two situations are possible, depending on whether the stigma is visible or not; if it is visible - the stigmatized person will be discredited, if it is invisible the stigmatized person will act as discrediting. In this way, society, on the one hand, recognizes people with disabilities as equal to others, and on the other hand, their differences are constantly reaffirmed.

According to the role theory approach, disability sets a specific status that is crucial in terms of taking on or not taking on different roles. The social model presents a different approach and understanding of disability - as related to the erection of social barriers. Two versions of the social approach are presented - an English version, which emphasizes the dependence of people with disabilities; and an American version that emphasizes the creation of stereotypes and stigmatization that create disapproval of people with disabilities, similar to the treatment of minorities.

The biopsychosocial model is a model that combines the positive aspects of the medical and social model, aims to show the value and importance of the individual who must

develop fully, like all other individuals, providing support, assistance and integration in the context of equality. In the new paradigm, disability is placed in the focus of social interaction, which contributes to the formation of social identity and individuality, because people with disabilities have a subjectivity that does not allow them to be confined to the narrow boundaries of dominant status.

An important thematic circle in the dissertation is the socialization and creation of social networks and interactions in which people with disabilities participate. Socialization is seen as a continuous, diversely articulated and differentiated process that leads to the individual participating in social reality in a competent and reflective way. That is a process that aims to build social connections, a sense of belonging and identity, to share values and norms and renew them at the individual and group level. Socialization takes place in the context of formal institutions, informal structures and different ways of communicating. The socialization of people with disabilities has been viewed historically, reflecting the way in which they have been perceived and evaluated in different eras and the type of explanations that have been given and stood behind their status.

The functions and stages (phases) of socialization are considered - specified as primary and secondary socialization. A special place is given to the family - as the main subject in the primary socialization, while at the same time showing its dynamics and development related to the phases of the family life cycle, which are a source of stress and involve reorganization of family functions. The situation of families with children with disabilities is monitored and the training that parents go through, summarized with words: meeting, accompaniment, empowerment, referring to the perception and understanding of the tasks and care that the situation – a child with disabilities requires. In addition, the Ph.D. student considers the specifics of parental involvement, which is described as: difficult tasks related to care, social isolation, the different role of the father, fears about what will happen in the future, etc.

A special place in the dissertation is given to the school and the inclusion of students with disabilities. The school is considered a formal institution as it is aimed at passing on culture and knowledge to new generations. The school is an agent of socialization, it transmits relational and intersubjective experience and in this sense, Cobello views it simultaneously as an institution, service and community. The functions of the school related to the various activities and engagements are traced. It shows how the school contributes to the development of social interpersonal skills, as well as integrative skills that allow the student with disabilities to activate significant relationships with the environment, such as: personal

protection, money management, time management, mobility and movement, use of public transport, personal service, coordination of activities, etc.

The role of teachers, who are models influencing the attitudes and perceptions of students, is traced. The ability of the teacher to protect, support, support the integration of the child with a disability or to sharpen the differences and to encourage even involuntary stigmatization is shown.

A key place in the dissertation is occupied by the considered school models of inclusive education, indicating the characteristics and specifics of each of the models.

The American model encourages cooperation between schools and families by stimulating the individual education program, which is a tool for identifying services in the context of general and special education. The mainstream learning design used in American education aims to implement support technologies in the context of learning; mostly information technologies are used to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities.

In Europe, there are three approaches to inclusive education for people with disabilities:

- full inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream schools, called the “one-way approach”;
- joint application of specialized and general services, this is the so-called "multidirectional approach"
- implementation of two separate educational systems; this approach is called "two-way".

The Italian educational system is considered as a model for a humane and integrative approach of children with disabilities. The special educational needs of the students are brought to the fore and in this way, the education becomes suitable for everyone. A "support network" is being developed to help students and teachers. A number of requirements are met regarding the size of the class, the number of children with disabilities included in the class, the qualification of the teacher for special needs, the adequate planning of activities, the application of an approach that enhances activity and initiative; the most important requirement is to put the child at the center of the information. This creates conditions for meeting the needs of children with disabilities - educational, health and social.

## **II. Evaluation of the dissertation**

Strengths of the dissertation are the systematizations of various concepts that represent the sociological meaning of the inclusive education - as a system, policies, practices and their

specifics. Disabilities are considered through the prism of the needs of children with disabilities who enter the school environment. The presented approaches to people with disabilities in historical and theoretical perspective emphasize the need for a progressive transition of the ability to understand and integrate social models to the needs of people with disabilities in different life phases.

In addition, I believe that the topic and reflections in the dissertation have a current and innovative sound, there is a strong authorial presence and assessments, various theories, views, models and ideas are presented, which emphasize the focus of the overall study. I would like to emphasize the application of a relational approach as a leading methodological strategy throughout the dissertation. The relational approach refers to the discovery of various factors - exogenous and endogenous, aimed at the psychological and social growth of children with disabilities, reflecting prosocial values and prospects for further development. The relational perspective is also aimed at showing the satisfaction, the opportunities for self-realization of a child or an adult with disabilities, which aim at full participation in the society of the person with a disability.

The self-assessment of the scientific and scientific-applied contribution of the dissertation has been confirmed by me.

I would recommend the dissertation to be published as a monograph, given the interesting and in-depth reflections and analyzes it contains.

### **III. Conclusion**

I define that the dissertation "Inclusive education for children with disabilities in a relational perspective", presented by PhD student Stefano Cobello is an interdisciplinary work, which with its implementation marks serious results.

**On this basis, I recommend that Stefano Cobello's "Doctor of Sociology" degree be awarded and I vote in favor.**

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