

OPINION

from

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on

dissertation on "Discrimination or Equality of Children with Disabilities in Bulgarian Schools" by Polya Todorova Hristova

to obtain the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences

The dissertation consists of an Introduction, three Chapters, a Conclusion, a List of Literature used, an Appendix and has a volume of 173 pages. Polya Hristova clearly defines the object and the subject of her work: her object is the inclusion of children with disabilities / with special educational needs in the educational system and her subject are the conditions, relations and practices that show the presence / lack of equality / discrimination against these children.

From the beginning of the text impresses the logic and good methodological and theoretical training of the doctoral student, who clearly and consistently determines her goal, tasks and hypotheses. The aim of a dissertation is on the base of an analysis of the situation in Bulgarian schools to establish whether there is equality of children with special educational needs or there are discriminatory practices in relation to them. The objective thus formulated is decomposed to the corresponding tasks, which are generally related to: construction of a relevant conceptual apparatus and theoretical framework of the study; analytical overview of the existing legislation; presentation of policies and activities to ensure equality of the studied group of children; on the basis of the collected empirical material to describe discriminatory practices, their objects, subjects and determining factors; preparation of recommendations related to practical actions to prevent, reduce and overcome the adverse effects of discriminatory practices for social adaptation and personal recognition of children with special educational needs. Already in this part of her work stands out the well-balanced combination between the aspiration to build a precise theoretical apparatus and model and her desire to achieve a practical-applied result of the study. Polya Hristova has analyzed: scientific publications in the thematic area; normative documents; policies on children with disabilities conducted in Bulgaria. She has studied several cases on the basis of

documents of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, conducted her own research using in-depth interviews with teachers, resource teachers, psychologists from schools with children with special educational needs and with parents, she has also carried out a secondary analysis of information from an already conducted empirical legal-sociological study of discrimination in the education system.

The thesis defended in her dissertation is that in Bulgaria there is the necessary legal framework that ensures equality of children with disabilities in the educational system, but despite the progress made in their integration into the educational system, due to material, information and personnel deficits and existing stereotypes, the degree of correspondence between their needs and the proposed by educational institutions are different from those of children in the norm, i.e. there are discriminatory elements.

The Chapter One is devoted to the theoretical framework that studies people with disabilities in society, various interpretations of disease and disability, starting with the "medical model", in the creation of which Talcott Parsons, conceptualized the disease in sociological aspect, plays an important role. Andrew M. Gordon's interpretative model is discussed, as well as the Goffman's understanding of stigma. The peculiarities of the "social model" are pointed out by analyzing the concepts of Vic Finkelstein, Colin Barnes and Mike Oliver. Attention is drawn to the essential difference between "impairment" and "disability", with the first term fixing violation of mental, physiological and anatomical structure or function, and the second expresses the result of the attitude of others, placing barriers to the realization of the disadvantaged individual. The author also presents the biopsychosocial model that provides people with disabilities with an opportunity for a more active role. The author's attention is directed to children with disabilities and those with special educational needs, presenting the basic concepts defined in some or other relevant normative or administrative acts in Bulgaria. Poly Hristova points out as a major factor hindering the integration of children with disabilities and special educational needs and explores it both as a social phenomenon and as a legal concept.

The Chapter Two studies the socialization and education of children with disabilities, focusing on the question of what the essence of socialization is and what is its specificity for children with disabilities. Since education is an important moment of socialization, the doctoral student highlights the specifics of education and socialization of children with disabilities. Some of these specifics are systematized, among which they stand out as more significant the following

ones: the perception of the surrounding environment as hostile, aggressive and rejecting, which leads to the formation of multiple defenses objectified in withdrawal and distancing; the difficulties in observing the mandatory rules governing teacher-class relationships; own pace of understanding and learning; sensitivity to mistakes and remarks. The features of integrated and inclusive education of children with special educational needs are indicated, as well as the differences between them. The dissertation presents in detail the institutional and regulatory framework and education policies for children with disabilities at international, European, national and local level.

In Chapter Three, the dissertation student studies the situation in Bulgarian schools on the basis of rich empirical material. Information from various sources was analyzed: conducted in December 2018, a nationally representative for state and municipal schools in the country, an empirical legal-sociological study on problems of discrimination; files kept at the Anti-Discrimination Commission; interviews with educators (principals, teachers, resource teachers) and psychologists. The doctoral student poses the question of equality in the education of children with special educational needs, analyzing the problems that have arisen before its achievement, indicates the possible and necessary measures that can support its realization, as well as good practices. Poly Hristova reaches the important conclusions that for the inclusion of children with special education in mainstream schools it is necessary to provide them with a supportive environment that includes: appropriate technical infrastructure; trained personnel resources; adapted teaching and training methodology; positive climate and good relationships.

In the Conclusion, the author summarizes the main results of her study, reaching the conclusion that they confirm the thesis of the dissertation.

The six contributions formulated by her are fully in line with what has been achieved, and I would define them as an enrichment of existing knowledge, while at the same time some of them are also of a practical-applied nature. As contributions are indicated: the analytical overview of the concepts of disability and their impact in policies on the education of children with disabilities; the follow-up in a social context of the development of the normative and institutional framework of the inclusion of children with disabilities in the educational system; a real situation in the education system in Bulgaria is outlined on the basis of rich empirical information. The developed model for the analysis of the situation regarding the discrimination/equality of children with disabilities, which enables the conduct of empirical research, as well as the identification and systematization of the challenges and problems faced by social subjects in relation to the educational process and

their determinants are among the most the important theoretical achievements of the doctoral student. The formulated systematized proposals for management actions with a view to optimizing the learning environment for children with disabilities are a practical-applied contribution that proves the significance of the dissertation work for social practice.

I have no critical remarks and questions to the PhD student, but rather a recommendation for her future research work. In her text, she repeatedly compares the laws and normative documents in Bulgaria with those of other countries within and outside the EU, which is important and useful for her analysis. I would recommend her to continue her research in comparative terms, which would only enrich her already interesting results and conclusions. It would also be good to consider conclusions about how the communication of the majority of children in the class and at school with children with disabilities and special educational needs affects the first group of students, what is their educational impact in moral terms, how it affects the development of their personalities and characters. For example, does it make them more compassionate, more combative, more motivated, more independent, etc.

The dissertation student has three publications on the topic of her work. Her activity fully meets the requirements of NACID. The author's work and contributions are entirely hers and there is no evidence of plagiarism.

In the course of the presentation, in a reasoned and convincing manner Polyana Hristova follows the set goal and tasks and defends the thesis of her work. The author knows well the research related to the issues on which she works; the goals and tasks of the dissertation are successfully fulfilled.

In conclusion, bearing in mind everything that has been said so far, with full conviction I call on the respected members of the Scientific Jury to vote "for" awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences of Polyana Todorova Hristova.

12. 06. 2023

Prof. DSc Maya Keliyan

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