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Not another article on social inclusion: youngsters with disabilities, the hidden gem of youth work

By Adrian Hristescu

Introduction

When I was asked 3 years ago to be a group leader for 7 Romanian youngsters with visual impairments that were participating in a youth mobility in Greece, I felt quite anxious. Even if I was supposed to be accompanied by two resource teachers who were working in what is politely called a 'special school' for the visually impaired, the feeling was still there. 'How should I handle the logistics?,' 'What can they do there?,' 'How will they deal with the activities?,' 'Will they really enjoy this experience?' All these questions were popping into my head. But then the project happened and "Wow!" the work I had to do was not so different than with other groups. I can honestly say that it was actually less stressful than usual.

Looking back to my previous youth work experiences, both as trainer and participant, I could only find 2 occasions in which a person with disability was also present. This was 2 occasions out of more than 40 which means 2 persons out of more than 700, to offer you the full context. Statistically, taking into account that about 3% of all young people in Romania are facing some disability, to keep these proportions there should have been close to 20 persons. But it was just one tenth of this. Clearly, there was something missing and this made me and one association from Arad, Romania, start looking for what exactly it was it and how to deal with it.



Image 1 - Participants in the 'Peers for Inclusion' training programme

The unexpected of working with people with disabilities

As is logical, we began by asking different stakeholders about their position on the topic. The project addressed young people with visual impairments, so first we needed to know if they were even interested in getting more involved in non-formal activities? And, if true, in which kind and how could this be facilitated? On the other hand, were NGOs or other institutions addressing youth willing and capable of including participants/beneficiaries with disabilities in their current activity? And were other young people comfortable with working in the same team as persons with disabilities?

Some of the answers we received kind of confirmed our initial assumptions. There are few opportunities for youngsters with visual impairments and NGOs are not really active in improving this. Still, some other findings came as a surprise.

First big surprise: 'It's not babysitting!' We, just like most of the other youth workers we were interviewing, lived under the impression that if we were to involve one participant with visual impairments we should more or less have a 'shadow' person always by his or her side, to guide and do everything for that individual. And this was totally discouraging for most, as it seemed like too big of a challenge. What we failed to realise was that by the age they would participate in a youth project, most persons with visual impairments would have already learned to be autonomous. Yes, being blind or partially sighted does not mean you are dependent on another person! Of course, sometimes you would need some guiding or some little help in the tasks, but in more than 90% of the time no assistance is required.

Second surprise: 'We are so overthinking it!' It just doesn't have to be perfect! Persons with visual impairments are aware of the fact that some activities will not be accessible to them and they are fine with this. While there are a lot of assistive technologies that make participation more accessible, the reality is that not everyone can afford them and people are happy enough with the situation. Yes, it is natural to want the best and one should aim for this, but not being able to provide the perfect experience should not be a reason not to do it at all. In practice, this perfectionist way of looking at things led to one of the two behaviours we noticed, neither of which is desirable in the context: people were either

avoidant on the issue, and they just didn't involve people with disabilities in their activities, or they were overprotective, which created also a form of exclusion, by emphasising that the person with disability is different and needs so much special attention, which was again quite uncomfortable.

The big 'A-Ha!' moment: we should not be doing activities 'for' those with disabilities! We should be doing activities 'with' those with disabilities! Even if they are often considered to be synonymous, integration and inclusion are different concepts. There is quite a big difference between organising an activity solely with people with disabilities and organising an activity in which persons with and without impairments are participating together, being equally engaged. Unfortunately, what we noticed was that typically NGOs think about involving persons with disabilities just in terms of organising projects that target them exclusively. Most consider that this is the only way in which these persons can be involved, as they lack the capacities to perform in a mixed group. As a consequence, many of the organisations don't do anything because this would mean switching from their main activity. And even if they do decide to do something, by involving solely those with disabilities they still perpetuate a form of exclusion. Humans are social beings and they need social interaction. Participation in different non-formal education or volunteering activities is not just about learning, it is equally about being social and not feeling so different and excluded. Organisations should not think about inclusion in terms of changing what they are doing! This is not the point! Rather, organisations should improve what they are doing by making their regular activities more accessible. It is true that for most this seems difficult to achieve, but as we found out, it's not at all complicated!

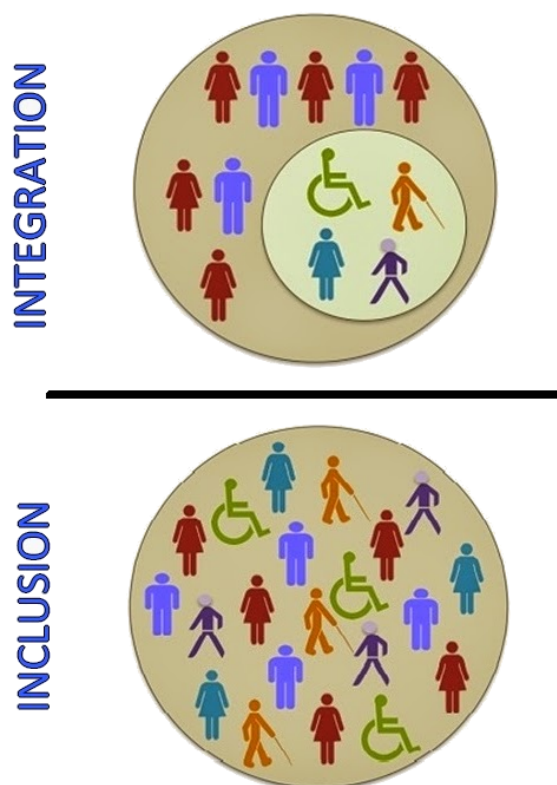


Image 2 - Integration vs. Inclusion

Changing attitudes through peer education

Ok, so that was the easy part! The most difficult part: what can be done about it? How can others be helped to realise the same thing? There are guides on mobility and orientation, the internet is full of resources, most of the grant opportunities encourage and fully support participation of persons with disabilities, but still, not much is happening. Therefore, the main problem is obviously not the resources but the mentality, as a large share of the youth workers are either not considering the subject at all or are thinking of it in the wrong way. And if there is something that people working in education know, it is that attitudes are often the most difficult to change.

Fortunately for us, there was one solution within reach that answered the needs above perfectly: 'peer education.' For those unfamiliar with 'peer education,' I should say that this concept refers to persons teaching their 'peers' or 'equals' in the sense that the traditional 'teacher,' 'trainer' or 'expert' is replaced by a person with whom you have something in common. In our case, youth workers (rather than experts in special education) would train other youth workers. We were not professionals in the field, but we had learned something very valuable about working with persons with disabilities and we wanted to teach the same things to others like us.

The reason for which a peer-to-peer approach can be a proper solution in contexts like this is that in some situations people change their perspective based not only on the information they get, but also on the opinions and actions of others like them. And this was clearly one of those situations. Yes, we were no professionals in teaching 'mobility and orientation' and we had not mastered the Braille alphabet. But we could refer to something more important – actual experiences. We could talk about 'what was done and how you can do it also' rather than 'what can be done?' And, especially in the youth field where 'action' and 'doing' are key words, this often has a greater impact.

Moreover, Ofensiva Tinerilor, the association that initiated the programme, is an active member of the European Peer Training Organisation (<http://www.epto.org>). E.P.T.O. has been committed for 10 years to promoting anti-discrimination education and, up to a point, there are strong connections between discrimination and the lack of opportunities that people with disabilities face. As previously stated, the first barrier for youth workers is not really their lack of knowledge, but their low awareness on the issue and, often, their reluctance to work with young people with special needs. Given this, the first priority is not teaching about accessibility but rather making the youth workers more open to getting involved. And then, the rest would follow: guiding techniques, assistive technologies, improving accessibility, hands-on experiences.

So, we went for it and after 3 months of work, all of the above were combined in a peer-training programme which was designed to determine and help youth workers to improve their regular activities such that they would be accessible for persons with visual impairments. Reaching the testing phase, the results were amazing! More than 70 persons followed the programme, out of which 7 were either blind or with low vision. About 90% of the participants declared that after the training course they were more open to working

with persons with visual impairments. Later they also proved that they have the will and skills to make their activities more accessible, as during or following the programme each participant actually organised events involving persons with visual impairments. Their response to this was great! It was like a new world had opened up to all of them!



Image 3 - Participants in the 'Peers for Inclusion' training programme

In addition to these encouraging results, the fun part about the training was that, as mentioned above, it was conceived to be a peer education activity. The methodology was simple enough to be used in teaching by other youth workers who had some experience of working with youngsters with visual impairments but who were not necessarily experts in the field. Actually, none of the trainers who worked with this methodology and achieved these remarkable results were resource teachers. They were simple youth workers. And this is extremely important, as in the long term, this essential feature makes it fairly easy to multiply the results we got. Unlike traditional training programmes, we don't need to limit the multipliers to the professionals in this sphere of work. Anyone with some skills in facilitation can potentially be a multiplier, as long as they are willing to share their experience of including persons with disabilities in their regular activities.

It is true that by not being an expert in the field you might be limited in what you can teach others and may not be able to go very deep into explaining everything related to the subject of accessibility. On the other hand, again, as we found, this was not really necessary. The small things that we were not able to provide in the experiences we created were insignificant in comparison to the sheer joy of the persons with visual impairments of being involved, either as participants or as beneficiaries of the later activities. Plus, in terms of teaching, going for peer education had one more advantage: the fact that youth workers helped others like them understand what it takes to be more inclusive and that they could relate to actual personal experiences rather than to theoretical information inspired those who were trained a lot. It showed that what was on the table was real and actually achievable.

Lessons to be learned

I started this article promising it would not be your typical one about social inclusion and I don't want to finish it without explaining why, especially as it is strongly connected to maybe the most important lesson we learned in this project. If you google 'social inclusion' most of the results you get will be connected to policies, things different governmental agencies could or should do, and abstract definitions of concepts related to the field. Going off-line you will see the same attitude: 'we need to have it, but the government is not doing anything!' Social inclusion is typically seen as something abstract, that should come from above, too complicated for the average individual. Most ignore the 'social' in 'social inclusion' and fail to achieve that it is society that is the main actor in this. Well, this change in mindset is exactly what the activities I presented are trying to promote: social inclusion, much like many of the other changes needed in our society, should also start from the bottom and go up!

Simple people can be more inclusive, even in the absence of fancy policies, just with an open mind and simple actions, which they can learn from others like them. And later they can help their own peers understand how easy it is to be more inclusive. You don't have to wait for the experts and policymakers to initiate change, you can become yourself the initiator of change! Because the credibility you have with your peers can often mean more than elaborate methodologies.

With this pledge on peer education, I end my article before it gets too long, hoping it was appealing enough to get you to read it to this final section. Having you here, I will also confess that I really hope this experience will inspire you to research further into accessibility and help you discover, like we did, that it is actually not so difficult to involve persons with disabilities in your regular work, whatever it may be. It will not be a big effort for you but it will bring a lot of joy to people who, for reasons beyond their control, are wrongly denied a typical life, often because we are too anxious to try something outside our imaginary comfort zone. And last, but not least, I end this article by encouraging you to explore peer education. For sure you have some interesting and motivating experiences that you can share and for sure there are plenty of people out there who could use them. Much like what I was trying to do now!

The project that was presented is called 'Erasmus 4 VIP' and is co-founded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission. For more information about this project, you are more than welcome to write us at: office@ofetin.ro

Author

Adrian Hristescu is trainer and youth worker, based in Arad, Romania. He is a board member of the European Peer Training Organisation and works locally and internationally as a consultant for private and public youth organisations in the field of non-formal education and international cooperation.