Social Inclusion Based on Non-Formal Education

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Abstract

Social inclusion is a process of assisting the full participation of vulnerable groups of people in the social and economic life of society. It is the unconditional right of every person. The practices of social work are aimed at providing conditions for such inclusion. The purpose of this article is to analyze and investigate the impact of non-formal learning activities on the social inclusion of children and young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The research group is a contingent of the International Youth Center in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria. The survey covers the period 2014-2017. The basis of the analysis is an empirical study of the "Social Inclusion Index", which is seen as a set of activities, based on the implementation of inclusive practices, the introduction of inclusive policies and the formation of inclusive values.

Keywords: social inclusion, non-formal education, vulnerable groups, index.

1. Introduction

In a situation of growing economic, political and social insecurity, looking for different forms and mechanisms for social inclusion of young people is not only very difficult, but also very important. The relevance of the issues, related to the topic is generally recognized at both national and international level, and is a challenge to any power that implements targeted policies on the social and educational system. Uniform actions to reduce the poverty of the old continent and to help build a knowledge-based economy, innovation and sustainable development are enshrined in the Europe 2020 Strategy, which envisages targeted measures by countries to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the European Union by 20 million by 2020. To achieve this goal, the European Platform against poverty and social exclusion was launched in 2010. The main aim is through economic, social cohesion and territorial cohesion, in order to provide conditions and prerequisites for a decent and meaningful life, to raise public awareness of the problems, leading to recognition of the rights of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, which will be summarized in the text as vulnerable groups. Responding to the need to implement an effective support strategy, non-formal education and activities based on it are needed. It enhances employability and personal development as a preventive model against social exclusion and social passivity of young people.

Different and debates are the definitions of the multi-aspect phenomenon “social inclusion”. It is inherently opposed to exclusion and is addressing a number of problems that are at the heart of the term “social exclusion”. Social exclusion in turn is associated with poverty and is a postmodern definitive sequel (Sizova, 2007). The problem of poverty and social exclusion is particularly sensitive.

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The term “social exclusion” that occurs during the study of poverty in processes such as marginalization and deprivation provokes the discussion: is it possible the group of “marginalized and excluded” to be seen as the subject of the actual mainstream integration processes of society, or they are only the first subjects of special policy, management and control of power in their own deprivation. In the modern concept of the European Union, “Social inclusion is a process that provides people at risk of poverty and social exclusion with the opportunities and resources needed to complete their participation in economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy the standard of living and well-being considered normal in the society in which they live. This process guarantees them greater involvement in the decision-making process that affects their lives and greater access to fundamental human rights” (2004 General Report on Social Inclusion, adopted by the European Commission). In this sense, the authors of the article embrace social inclusion as a process of creating conditions for equality and equal opportunities among vulnerable groups of people to facilitate their full participation in the social and economic life of society. It is a leading value of modern times, contributing to the full social, educational and economic development of the citizens. Looking at inclusion as a leading value in today’s democratic society, we assume that it is at the same time a fundamental term for the social model whose main idea is to accept difference as a value and resource instead of an obstacle and a deficit. (Mladenov, 2009)

Regardless of the continuing tradition in the Bulgarian society for social support of certain strata of the population, social work in the dimensions of the international standards for this profession can only be mentioned after 1989 (Vlaeva, 2018). Today, creating conditions for full participation in social and economic life and helping the personal development of young people from vulnerable groups is realized through many different mechanisms. In the search for successful models and forms to achieve inclusion, activities based on non-formal education are highlighted.

In its essence, non-formal education has a broad concept and practice, and engages with experience of socio-economic inclusion and fostering the direct involvement of those involved in the process. It is an organized, systematic, educational activity carried out outside the formal education system to provide selected types of training for different groups of adults and children (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974).

This article is part of a larger study according to which informal learning activities create a prerequisite for achieving social inclusion.

The choice of subject is provoked by the practice of social work, which puts ethics and values at the heart of its practice. The subject of analysis is community building, the establishment of inclusive values and their impact on the process of social inclusion through informal educational activities. For the purposes of the article, the two elements (values and community building) will be summarized with the term “Inclusive cultures”. In its history, the mission of social work has found justification and sense above all in what is fair and unfair, and from collective beliefs about rights and values in the social (K. Benkova, Ethics of Social Work, Stara Zagora, 2013). Social work with young people (youth work) aimed at effective social inclusion is driven by building common values that create a moral and ethical framework for private and public action. Inclusive cultures, the constituent parts of which are community building and the establishment of inclusive values, are at the heart of social inclusion.

2. Methods

The subject of analysis in this article is community building and the establishment of inclusive values and their impact on the process of social inclusion through informal educational activities. In the course of the survey, we assume that informal learning activities contribute to the
realization of social inclusion. As its main elements, we consider the creation of inclusive cultures, the development of inclusive policies and the introduction of inclusive practices. For the implementation of the empirical study, the methodology “Inclusion Index – Training Development and School Participation” was used (published by the Center for Inclusive Studies Education (CSIE) adapted to the needs and objectives of the study.

The Inclusion Index Measurement Toolkit is a resource to support the inclusive development of educational institutions. It proposes to institutions supporting a process of self-assessment and development based on the views of all stakeholders. The index includes a detailed overview of how barriers to learning and participation can be overcome by each learner. Diagnosis is a collection of methods and ways to collect, analyze, and process information related to achieving inclusion in education. It was developed in England by a team of specialists and was approved in various schools from 1997 to 1999. After its piloting, in April 2000, the Ministry of Education issued and distributed it free of charge to all schools in England and among others interested organizations in the field of employment and health. English version versions are used in Australia, Canada, South Africa and the United States. Arabic, Chinese (Hong Kong), Finnish, French, German, Hindi, Hungarian, Maltese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, and Swedish are available. In Bulgaria, the Index has been officially translated and implemented by the Center for Inclusive Education, within the framework of the Social Inclusive Europe project and implemented in a total of 36 schools. For the purpose of this study, the Inclusion Index is adapted and used in three main dimensions relevant to:

- The creation of inclusive types of culture whose constituent parts are community building and the establishment of inclusive values;
- Preparing inclusive policies covering the development of education for all and organizing support for diversity;
- Developing inclusive practices based on the organization of learning.

(Inclusion Guide on Inclusive Process Management at School, Tony Bout and Mel Aynsow, 2000, UK)

The subject of this study is the International Youth Center in Stara Zagora, working with children and young people from vulnerable groups aged 15-29. The subject of the study is the informal educational activities and their influence on the realization of the social inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable groups.

The empirical study was carried out on the territory of the International Youth Center – Stara Zagora. The establishment and operation of the “International youth center for work with children and young people at risk” in Stara Zagora aims to increase personal development and promote the social inclusion of young people. The activities in the center are based on non-formal education and respond to the interests and needs of young people. The study analyzes the applied models of non-formal education regarding the social inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable groups presented as a result of a survey among the contingent of the International Youth Center of Stara Zagora Municipality.

3. Results
3.1 Sociodemographic characteristic of the contingent

This article presents the results of the study in a section on cultures and the importance of community building and the establishment of inclusive values for the realization of social inclusion. Participants in the survey are 150 young people and parents engaged directly or indirectly in the Center’s activities, and the selection of this group is related to:
(1) Participation in the activities organized at the International Youth Center;
(2) Commitment to the objectives, structure and operation of the center;
(3) Promoting the mission of the center.

The study has subjective and objective constraints related to the refusal of part of young people to participate in the study. Data on age in the categories: parents, young people aged 15-18, youth aged 19-29 and another age group not listed in the above are presented and analyzed. The gender and the social status of the contingent have been characterized, relative to the employment of the respondents. For the purposes of the survey, they are presented in four groups: learners, working, unemployed and those of the target group who neither study nor work (NEET’s) at the time of the survey.

The summary of these data is as follows: The survey subject is over 15 years of age, with males between 19 and 29 being predominant. Most of the students surveyed fall into the group of students - 33.33% of the total number of respondents, followed by the NEET’s group (do not study, do not work and do not study), which make up 26.7% of the contingent. The working and unemployed respondents are as follows: 24.00% and 16.00%. Regarding the social status of respondents, the finding is that the highest number of students is 33.3% of those surveyed, followed by the NEET’s (do not work, do not study or do not train), whose representatives are 40 or 26.7%, the employed – 24.0%, the unemployed – 16.0%. The large number of representatives of the group of socially active people involved in the activities of the International Youth Center proves that non-formal education is becoming increasingly important in expanding opportunities for young people and enriching their potential. This form of education is an equal partner of educational and social institutions in the implementation of social inclusion processes. By age, the surveyed group is most active in the range of 19 to 29 years - 67 of the respondents or 44.7% of all. The youngsters aged between 15 and 18 are 52, which is 34.7% of the total. Parents involved in youth center activities are 14.7% and 6% are those who enter another (older or smaller) age category. In view of the heterogeneous ethnic composition of visitors to the center, we emphasize the value of parent involvement in the activities, the activity and the interest they demonstrate. Activating parents and involving them in activities contributes to the effectiveness of the education process. The practice of the youth center, and in particular mediators, shows that trust in parents is key to attracting and retaining youth in the Center’s activities. The involvement of mediators in the Roma ethos offers the opportunity to promote the good example among this community and to multiply the idea of active young people to be part of a strong and united society in which ethnic diversity is viewed as a cultural asset. The created environment of continuity stimulates young people and their parents to overcome gender differences, based on gender, ethnicity and social status.

3.2 Analysis of the results of the study

In view of the focus of this article, the analysis presents the results of the average values of the indicators relevant to the creation of inclusion cultures. By analyzing the average values of the individual indicators and their distribution by socio-demographic indicators, it is monitored to create inclusive cultures through the activities of the youth center.

Analyzing the average values of the dimension related to the creation of inclusive types of culture and comparing the significance of the component sections will trace the inclusion of cultures through the activities of the youth center and, if this assertion is confirmed, it will be proved that the creation of inclusive cultures promotes social inclusion based on informal learning activities.
In the sense of the methodology used, the creation of inclusive cultures is formed by two basic elements relevant to community building in the youth center and the establishment of inclusive values. Their presence is a prerequisite for the practical implementation of social inclusion of vulnerable groups in the youth center. The first diagram shows the averaged values of the results of the conducted survey, where for each statement the respondents respond with a degree of agreement from 0 to 4 where 4 is “full consent” 3 - “both consent and disagreement” 2 – “disagreement” and 1 – needs more information “or is not aware of the details of the statement made”.

Graph 1. Comparing the average dimensions of dimension “Creating Inclusive Cultures”

The high levels of all indicators are a prerequisite for concluding that the youth center is identified by the contingent as a tolerant and secure place encouraging multicultural participation in which young people are supported. Positive but relatively low are the levels of satisfaction of indicators relevant to staff-parent cooperation and expectations of success for all young people. The development of positive and supportive relationships between the parents and the youth center team is crucial for the social inclusion of young people. Considering the contingent profile, building trust in the organization by the family environment is a prerequisite to minimizing parental anxiety and affirming the feeling that the youth center is a safe place for their children. Working with parents is an opportunity for their direct engagement and inclusion in the Center's activities – a condition of great importance for maintaining and strengthening family ties and relationships. Low values are observed in the indicator related to expectations for young people. Underestimating the opportunities of young people is a prerequisite for their demotivation and social apathy. The efforts of the Youth Center team should aim to support and stimulate all young people regardless of their gender, age, social status, ethnicity and religion. Creating Inclusive Crops requires a drive to raise all the components of the Community Building and Inclusion of Inclusive Cultures sections - Efforts in practice should focus on poorer values.
The analysis of the average values of the “Building a community” and “Entering values” sections by gender indicator indicate that the levels of agreement with the proposed claims are equal for men and women. Regarding the practice, data show that gender does not influence respondents’ views on the presence of inclusive communities and values. Regardless of the socio-demographic characteristics and differences in the total number of men and women, both genders express a positive opinion on building a tolerant and inclusive community in the youth center.

Serious differences are not observed when comparing the averages of the age divisions – the levels of agreement are high in all groups surveyed and are high and suggest satisfaction with the introduction of inclusion cultures among youth groups. It is clear from the diagram that parents’ levels are lower. The results are due to the fact that a large part of the young people’s families are not sufficiently involved in the training process in the youth center. Once again, the need for active inclusion of parents, which will have the opportunity to strengthen family relationships and engagement with the interests of their children, will be highlighted. On the other hand, they will be involved in community building processes in the youth center.
The graph, comparing the average values of social status shown by attribute, indicates that it has no direct impact on the levels of satisfaction of indicators relevant to community building and the introduction of inclusive values. Regarding the practice, we can summarize that all groups, regardless of their social status, agree with the indicators listed in the section.

4. Discussion

By its very nature, the creation of inclusive cultures requires the existence of a built community and the establishment of inclusive values. The analytical view of the data provided confirms the positive assessment of the respondents regarding the two elements that determine the presence of an inclusive culture in the youth center, from which we can draw the following conclusions:

- The results show that the average responses of the respondents on the indicators constituting dimension A “Creating Inclusive Crops” are positive and statistically significant.
- The comparison of the average values of the gender pointers indicates that the levels of agreement with the proposed claims are equalized among men and women.
- Serious differences are not observed when comparing the averages of the age and social status sections – the levels of agreement are high among all young people surveyed. The results place a focus on the participation of parents who are not sufficiently involved with the youth center.
- The positive responses to the proposed statements regarding the activities in the youth center and the perception of respondents to them indicate that there are inclusive cultures based on the building of inclusive communities and values.

The study and analysis of the results of the average values of the dimension “Creating Inclusive Cultures” partly confirms the hypothesis that self-creation of inclusive cultures helps to achieve social inclusion based on informal learning activities.

5. Conclusion

The insufficient focus of the educational and social system on building inclusive societies and establishing values that underpin the improvement of the educational process necessitates the increase of the commitment of the social and pedagogical specialists in this aspect.

Activities with an informal educational profile held at the International Youth Center build up cultural types and create a secure, welcoming, mutually supportive and stimulating environment. In this way, they incorporate values passed on to employees, young people, parents and local communities. Principles and values in inclusive culture direct policies and educational practices to the development of the learning process.

The results of the study imply the need for an in-depth analysis of the relationships between the different sub-dimensions (community building and the establishment of values) that have a direct bearing on the creation of inclusive types of culture, the preparation of policies and practices that will be addressed in further developments of the authors.

It is necessary to conclude that the establishment of youth centers in Bulgaria, whose activities are subject to non-formal education, has a high degree of success in realizing the social inclusion of young people from vulnerable groups. Despite the lack of regulatory regulation and targeted measures to validate the knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal education, insufficient efforts to promote the profession of youth workers and the shortage of qualified specialists in the field necessitates a new direction for the development of social work with young people, impact on the creation of inclusive culture types based on community building and the
establishment of inclusive values. As a result of the research carried out, the thesis is preserved that the informal educational activities create a prerequisite for achieving social inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable groups and its activities are effective in preventing the social exclusion of this category of Bulgarian citizens.

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