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Non-commercial Partnership as an Efficient Instrument of Inclusion of Physically Challenged People into the Educational Environment of a University (analysis conducted in Ryazan, Russian Federation)

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Abstract

The article addresses problematic issues of accessible high-quality higher education. Research reveals incongruity between legal guarantees and implementation of inclusive practices in Russia. The work describes use of low-cost and easily applied technologies (including mediaeducation) that facilitate involvement of physically challenged people in university studies, develop empathy towards such students, stimulate their socialization; provide students with practice-oriented education, and improve lecturers' competence in dealing with disabled students, through training and professional development system. The analysis discusses a 9-year-long research of inclusion of physically challenged people into tertiary academic environment, promoted by social partnership of educational institutions, businesses and NCOs, which jointly formed a platform to reduce maladjustment cases for students with disabilities; this is a key factor in development of inclusive education in Ryazan Region, Russian Federation. The investigated approach allows developing a comprehensive solution to inclusion problems.

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1. Introduction

According to World Health Organization, more than a billion people, that is about 15% of the world population (according to the global population estimates for 2010), have some form of disability. This index is higher than the previous estimate provided by the World Health Organization in the 1970s, which amounted to 10% (WHO, 2011). According to the Ministry of Healthcare and Social Development of the Russian Federation, in year 2011 the share of people with disabilities in Russia amounted to 9.3%, that is, 13,200,000. On the territory of the Ryazan Region alone, as of 01.01.2014, there were registered 153,500 people with disabilities (including 3,400 disabled children), and that is 13.5% of the total population of the region.

Accessibility of education for physically challenged people is one of the priorities in the Russian education reform. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation focuses on providing accessible high-quality education to all citizens with disabilities with consideration of their psychophysical abilities and health condition.

The right of the disabled to education is ascertained in a number of international and national acts. Among these, is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted on 01.12.2006 and ratified by the Russian Federation on 25.04.2012. In order to realize this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities, the member-states ensure an inclusive education system at all levels of education, and life-long learning.

Article 43 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation states the right of people with disabilities to free higher education on a competitive basis in a state-run or municipal educational institution.

On the territory of the Russian Federation, there is a special-purpose state program called *Accessible Environment*, aimed at creating conditions for the access of disabled people to the physical environment, transport, information and communications, as well as objects and services provided for the public.

Thus, state regulations of the Russian Federation stipulate the obligation of the state to support the education of the disabled. At the same time, experience shows that the state still cannot provide education convenient for all people with disabilities everywhere. Many students who leave schools, especially specialized ones, have no physical capacity to study at a university, because the infrastructure of the educational institution does not meet the requirements of people with disabilities; moreover, most people with disabilities cannot even leave their home without the help of others.

Inclusive higher education is a promising educational practice all around the world (Beckman et al., 1998; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Ryndak & Fisher, 2003; Cole, Waldron, Majd, 2004). There are several reasons, such as: prestige of higher education, job opportunities for people with disabilities, and, no less important, social adaptation (Reichrath, de Witte, Winkens, 2010). In Russia, inclusive higher education is in rather high demand. The *Overall Study of the Conditions of Life of the Population* conducted in 2011 by the Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation (GKS, 2015) showed that 23.9% of all disabled people aged over 15 hold higher education degrees, and 25.1% have received secondary vocational education. Yet, these statistics do not take into account those who got their disability after they had finished education. The same study showed that 25.3% of parents of disabled children or children with chronic diseases under 15 years old want their children to get higher education, no matter whether the disabled child studies at home, in a comprehensive or specialized school.

Traditionally, children with disabilities in Russia were taught in special schools or classes, or at home. The tendency remains unchanged, and 60% to 68% of young people with disabilities received their secondary education outside general public schools. Although, according to young people with disabilities themselves, they would prefer to study in a general school together with their peers (60 people out of 100). But nowadays general public educational institutions are still not accessible for people with disabilities. The research conducted by the partners of the Russian disability non-governmental organization 'Perspektiva' within the project *Education is a Right for All (Perspektiva Regional Public Organization for the Disabled, 2015)* in 8 regions of the Russian Federation has revealed a number of major problems related to educating children with disabilities.

- Parents of disabled children have limited information about accessible education.
- Most members of academic and administrative staff of public schools and universities are not very competent about issues related to disability.

- Only disabled children who can move and have a disability status due to a somatic (general) medical condition can study in general public schools.

Besides, persons with inborn disability or disabled from the childhood usually receive secondary education that does not meet the criteria of higher educational institutions. Home schooling, as well as education in specialized preschools and schools, does not meet the most lax requirements nowadays, and parents of disabled children cannot afford to hire private instructors in all subjects.

The level of education received in this way is below state standards and does not allow to proceed with further education on equal terms with common students, because according to “The Rules of Admission to Institutions of Higher Education of the Russian Federation” and the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation”, as of 29.12.2012, No. 273-FZ, to enter a higher educational institution on a state-subsidized basis, a child with disabilities must only reach the threshold level of the secondary education standard and get the minimum score at the unified state examination, while a common applicant, in order to be accepted on a state-subsidized basis, must get rather high scores (advanced level) in the university’s vocation-related subjects. So, being intellectually intact and even possessing rather strong abilities, such applicants need a special curriculum to compensate for the gaps in their schooling.

One of the major problems currently is the absence of free and convenient students’ access to classrooms, restrooms and other premises, as well as using these premises (the presence of ramps, handrails, broadened doorways, elevators, and other facilities).

Modern equipment is indispensable in improving the quality of education for people with disabilities, and its implementation requires special attention. Facilities and equipment necessary for students with musculoskeletal disorders, with different forms of sensory impairments and other conditions must be absolutely different (Kaye, Yeager, Reed, 2008). Most students with disabilities find it difficult to attend classes because the public transport and infrastructure are unequipped. To solve this problem, we either need special transport for each student, special companions attached to each of them, or to organize a special hostel for them to reside near the place where they have classes. All this is rather expensive.

Although there are legal regulations in Russia that give children with disabilities some privileges during application to universities, the problem of rejection of inclusive integrated education remains urgent.

When taught at home or in specialized institutions, people with disabilities often face such problems as losing touch with the world, lack of peer communication, lack of self-confidence, and low self-esteem. “Isolation of a remote participant” has special significance with a disabled student, whose social contacts are more limited than anybody else’s. And it is not enough to convince him that he can be an efficient distant learner working on his own. It is important to convince him that he can live a full life of a university community if he likes (Erath & Larkin, 2004).

Specialists say (Lidstrom, Granlund, Hemmingsson, 2012) that while studying for a degree and during further professional or scientific activity, people with disabilities need some extra skills, such as information processing. Even though these students have the experience of distant learning at school, most of them (75%) find it difficult to adapt while receiving further education. Students point out deficit and difficulties in communication with their peers and teachers, lack of time for independent work with literature, rigorous teachers’ requirements related to the acquisition of the higher education curriculum. At the same time, university teachers mention students’ inactivity and wait-it-out strategy, underdeveloped communicative and cooperative skills, poor self-organization of students with disabilities. It confirms the experience of The Open University in the United Kingdom (Tudor, 2000), where they analyzed major difficulties faced by students with hearing and visual impairments, musculoskeletal and CNS disorders in the process of studies. Jeffrey Tudor showed the important role a university can play not only in providing disabled students with the necessary resources, but in satisfying their humanitarian needs as well.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, only 40% of students with disabilities who were accepted at state higher educational institutions graduate.

Another important problem is the challenges the faculty faces while working with physically-challenged students. Among them are the following: teachers do not have enough knowledge about physical and mental capacities of disabled students, do not know the methods of working with them; there are no curricular that take into consideration special educational needs of every student with a specific disorder.

The main responsibility for the wellbeing of people with disabilities is traditionally placed upon the state, not on the society or the individual. Although social activity of non-governmental organizations of persons with special needs is growing, including that of protecting their right to education.

Let us focus on the problems of inclusion in regional universities and analyze the situation in Ryazan, the Ryazan Region of the Russian Federation. We will consider two federal state-funded educational institutions of higher professional education subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation: Ryazan State Radio Engineering University (RSREU) and Ryazan State University named for S. Yesenin (RSU named for S. Yesenin), which were the first institutions of higher education in the region.

Over the last 5 years, the share of students with disabilities in RSREU and RSU named for S. Yesenin remained stable and did not exceed 1% of the total number of students.

The main problems people with disabilities come across in the course of studies in these universities are very similar:

- absence of students' free and convenient access to classrooms, restrooms and other premises, as well as using these premises (the presence of ramps, handrails, broadened doorways, elevators, and other facilities). The main university buildings were built long ago and initially were not developed for persons with disabilities. The first building of RSU named for S. Yesenin, built in 1916, is an architectural landmark of federal importance, which makes any building and installation works there problematic without long-term coordination with the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. The cost of this kind of works in such a building is above average, which also makes it more difficult to create an accessible environment due to the university's budget limitations. The building of another university (RSREU) was constructed in 1952 and was not meant for teaching persons with disabilities either;
- absence of a classroom assistant who provides technical support to students depending on their individual needs (taking a seat, moving around, reading and performing a task, communicating with the faculty). This problem is related to the established staffing schedule, which does not presuppose such positions and duties of educational support staff;
- absence of infrastructure that can provide people with disabilities with the necessary facilities according to their individual needs;
- incongruity between the level of basic academic achievement of applicants with disabilities and the university's requirements to applicants without disabilities;
- low competence of applicants with disabilities in using technologies (only 3 1-year students out of 24 in 2014 had some experience in using technologies for distant learning);
- low level of socialization and social integration, which is caused by both disabled students' underdeveloped communication skills and by other students' low empathy that should be duly developed;
- professors' and lecturers' low competencies in teaching students with disabilities.

Solving the above-mentioned problems requires a complex approach. One of the practical tools for overcoming the challenges is cooperation (social partnership) between educational institutions, businesses, and non-commercial organizations. Social partnership is a key factor in the development of inclusive education. The term underlines the importance of cooperation and experience sharing (Dislife.ru, 2015).

Thus, the driving force of our research is the discrepancy between the human right to acquire accessible, high quality education, which is stipulated by law, and actual possibilities of acquiring it in the Ryazan Region of the Russian Federation.

Our research focuses on the process of ensuring inclusive education by means of non-commercial partnership on the basis of higher education institutions.

2. Objectives, methodology and research design

The key obstacle to ensuring inclusive education is shortage of financial and infrastructural resources. Thus, the hypothesis of our research is the following: since inclusive education cannot be ensured solely by education institutions, it is essential to pool educational resources (staff, methodology, software) and social resources (local governing bodies, social security organizations, society-oriented non-profit organizations, associations of parents of children with disabilities) in the task of developing a learning space that will fully guarantee rights and meet

requirements of students with disabilities. This is supposed to ensure the main methodological principle of inclusive education, i.e. diversity and freedom of choice concerning the place, language, pace and content of learning.

The objective of our research is to develop a model of an education network which will include students with disabilities through non-profit partnership.

In our research, we mainly relied on the project method.

The general hypothesis is the following:

Inclusion of disabled students in professional education can be secured by means of non-profit cooperation of educational institutions, cultural organizations, social organizations, and society-oriented non-profit organizations aimed at developing a barrier-free learning space on the basis of innovative technologies (including distance education technologies and media pedagogical technologies).

The specific hypotheses are the following:

1) Cultural organizations that have developed barrier-free learning spaces, additional education organizations, and socially-oriented non-profit organizations (they can introduce and test innovative foreign technologies outside the educational standard of the Russian Federation) should co-operate with higher education institutions to reduce risks of disabled students' maladaptation.

2) Non-profit partnership should be aimed not only at the adaptation of university entrants with disabilities to a new learning space, but also at encouraging lecturers to design educational technologies that will meet the methodological requirements of inclusive education. Non-profit partnership should promote overcoming stereotypes, teachers' didactic, psychological and personal incompetency.

3) Non-profit partnership between higher educational institutions and non-profit organizations promotes involvement of student volunteers in work with students with disabilities.

The basis of our research and a positive example of social partnership in dealing with the challenges of inclusive education in the city of Ryazan is the experience of the implementation of two international society-oriented projects.

In order to test our hypotheses, we have implemented inclusive education on the basis of the Research Center for Applied Psychology and Psychological Services at Ryazan State University named for S. Yesenin:

- together with Ryazan-based independent non-profit organization *Obeshchaniye (Promise)* and with support of British welfare organization *The Promise* (London, Great Britain) (*Portage* project),
- together with the International Education Center *Bürgerhaus Bennohaus* (Münster, Northern Rhine-Westphalia, Germany) and with support of the Department of Education of the Ryazan Region (*Navigator for the Future – Zukunftsnavigator* project).

Target audience:

The research has its primary and secondary target audiences. It primarily concerns partner organizations. Their staff members and volunteer workers are our primary target group. Among them there are educators, pedagogues, social service workers, student volunteers, specialists who work with disabled people and young people.

Another important target group is the community, which is concerned with young people's (especially young disabled people's) social and political integration. Our research also concerns children and adolescents, as well as their parents, who should receive long-term benefit from the results of our work.

To ensure stable results of our research, we have attempted to establish efficient long-term partnerships with economic and political bodies on the local level.

The *Portage* project phases:

Initiation phase (2006) focuses on the organization of non-profit partnership between Ryazan State University named for S. Yesenin and the British welfare organization *The Promise* (London, Great Britain) (*Portage* project), state child healthcare institution The Orphanage for Babies and Toddlers, Elatma State Orphanage for Mentally Disabled Children (Elatma, Ryazan Region, Russian Federation), Ryazan Center for Families with Gravely Disabled Children. The aim of the partnership is to test methods of teaching children with disabilities essential skills.

Implementation phase

- (2006) involves building basic skills required of the *Portage* project participants (22 people receive training, including 5 student volunteers);

- (2006-2009) involves project testing performed by the social workers and the student volunteers in health centers, social security centers, Ryazan Center for Families with Gravely Disabled Children (over 50 student volunteers and over 30 social workers receive training). More than 100 children with disabilities have benefited from our work;
- (2009-2010) focuses on the project adjustment to Russian reality, and on the project replication on the basis of state educational institution Yasenevo Center for Psychological and Pedagogical Rehabilitation and Correction (Moscow, Russian Federation) (5 social workers received training).

Closure phase

- (2010) involves assessment of implementation results. Project viability is assessed and project results are presented to the public at seven international theoretical and practical conferences.

Replication phase

- (2010) involves the establishment of a Ryazan-based autonomous non-profit organization aimed at assisting children with disabilities (*Obeshchaniye*);
- (2011 to present) involves annual receipt of regional subsidies intended for individual assistance to children, parent consultation, preparing development of methodological resources, staff and volunteer training, training social workers from other regions of the Russian Federation (Voronezh and Leningrad Region); we have participated in various all-Russia social forums and regional competitions. The *Portage* project has received repeated aid provided by the Department of Social Security of the Ryazan Region, Ryazan Region Committee for Youth Affairs, Ryazan City Board of Education and Youth Policy;
- (2012) the Ryazan *Portage* project of rendering assistance to children with disabilities is entered into the catalog of best Russian social projects and is recommended for proliferation.

We have managed to describe structural and technological aspects of rendering assistance to gravely disabled children at social security centers and in their homes. We have also managed to test and implement the social workers' training project.

The *Portage* project has manifested the importance of the expansion of contacts, inter-departmental cooperation of different specialists, consolidation of material, technical, and staff resources for the solution of disabled people's problems.

We have created an international non-profit cooperation aimed at promoting social inclusion of people with disabilities (the joint Russian-German Future Pathfinder project). On the German side the project was initiated by the Bennohaus Center, a non-profit organization that employs media technologies to educate various age groups in different spheres (Bennohaus Bürgerhaus, 2015).

The *Navigator for the Future* project phases (Social-unit.ru, 2015):

Initiation phase (September 2011- May 2012) focuses on joining the efforts of over 40 organizations and on creating a site. At this stage participants acquire PR skills and are taught to make promotional products aimed at acquainting society with the organization's social activity and disabled people's interests.

We have established cooperation with the Ryazan Region State Budgetary Educational Institution Secondary School and Distance Education Center. The school's architecture and information space fully comply with the educational requirements of physically challenged children with intellectual abilities. Many of the school's graduates enter regional higher education institutions.

Implementation phase

- (2012) involves acquainting Ryazan specialists with Münster experience. Our participants learn how to implement media facilities, find people who share their views and establish partnerships;
- (2012) focuses on training of media instructors at various workshops and master classes at Ryazan and Munster;
- (2012 – 2013) involves testing media pedagogical methods at partner organizations of the Ryazan Region;
- (2013) involves assessment of the participants' media pedagogical activities.

Broadcasting phase

- (2013) involves the photo exhibition "Special Children of Ryazan and Munster" (22 participant organizations);
- (April 11-12, 2013) involves the international theoretical and practical conference at Ryazan State university named for S. Yesenin "Join – Understand – Implement: Inclusive Pedagogy in Münster and Ryazan", timed to *German Days in Russia* and supported by the German Embassy in Moscow.

The phase of implementing results into correctional education and social rehabilitation space of the region supported by the Department of Education of the Ryazan Region

- (December 12, 2013) involves an impulse workshop *Medial Engine for Pilots of Education* to implement inclusion practices. Heads of education institutions are asked to fill out questionnaires concerning the content of programs of professional development aimed at media pedagogical competence formation;
- involves the *Medial Compass of Cities* international project workshop, organized to commemorate the 25th anniversary of partnership between the two cities. The workshop (in Munster and in Ryazan) includes the following activities: professional development programs, media pedagogical work with children with special needs, master classes on the following topics: *Photography, The Internet, Radio*;
- (September – December 2014) focuses on the implementation of a professional development program (50 people) concerning the use of media pedagogical technologies in correctional education and rehabilitation.

Closure phase

- (December 2014) focuses on the GRIM German-Russian media pedagogical festival.

Replication phase

- (January 2015) focuses on the formation of the Navigator for the Future resource center, which serves as a common ideological space for partner organizations, as a secure platform for expression and protection of disabled people's interests and needs.

We have proved that media pedagogical methods can be used by people who create didactic manuals, organize correction and development programs, work on forming empathy in the process of disabled children's communication with their healthy peers.

During the project's implementation, it became clear that physically challenged people are able to get involved in communication through media-based learning.

According to Dr. Joachim Musholt (Ph.D., Executive Director of the Bennohaus Buergerhaus International educational center in Münster, Germany), the outcome of such impact of the media is the changes that take place in the personal thinking of the participants, and in their self-awareness; ability to change one's opinion; readiness for cooperation and teamwork; ability to manage conflicts and establish contacts; self-assertiveness.

3. Discussion of the research outcomes

Following the completion of the *Navigator for the Future* project, the coordinating mediacenter and its partners will autonomously implement the projects and programs.

At the research and implementation stages, we brought about a reform environment where issues of inclusiveness were addressed innovatively with a view to obtaining specific outcomes.

Currently, these are available in detailed documentation, with records of all themes discussed and step-by-step procedure of teamwork that was used for non-commercial partnership in inclusiveness as a component of a university-level academic process.

The structural and functional model of noncommercial partnership is implemented via the *Navigator for the Future* media-learning resource center; this center was set up for interactive coordination of informative, methodological and media-related assistance for agencies rendering services to physically challenged people and various age groups with disabilities, in Russia and abroad. The center employs low-cost and easy educational techniques to involve physically challenged groups in the university's programs. We encourage empathy for challenged peers and facilitate their social involvement. Through cooperation with the autonomous non-commercial organization *Obeshchaniye*, the *Navigator for the Future* resource center multiplies the outcomes of the Portage project. Its volunteers have gained recognition among professional educationists who work for children with special academic needs and their parents. This work is important not only for the families involved, but for the volunteers as well, as they stand to gain professional competencies in childcare and self-development. Thus, through a system of events such as workshops, master classes, conferences, photo exhibitions, in-service courses and festivals (organized by partners), we ensure two-directional inclusiveness (from the socium to disabled people and from the latter to the socium).

Drawing the conclusions of our research, we put forward the following priorities for the *Navigator for the Future* resource center:

- coordination of work conducted by agencies and organizations that are involved in policies of inclusion practices and in support of physically challenged people;
- participation in the development and implementation of federal, regional and individual programs to provide support for the physically challenged and network implementation of occupational training and in-service training programs for professionals;
- scientific conventions, workshops, study courses and panels with research agencies and aimed at furthering of inclusiveness and social support of physically-challenged;
- informational, organizational, technological and methodological assistance in implementation of media technologies;
- implementation of programs of international exchange that involve physically-challenged and disabled participants.

All the projects described are stable and long-term in their implementation, due to the fact that the organizations form a network, receiving training, informational and methodological support (the underlying principle is *Help plus self-help*), and this network is currently a solid influential group ready to defend its interests, and those of its members.

The development of stable networks and efficient use of resources, including human resources, will ensure positive long-term outcomes, and expertise in educational media will broaden the educators' awareness of the life conditions and needs of disabled people, as well as build up practical skills in teaching them.

Thanks to educational media used in teaching children with disabilities, in addition to distance education technologies, social contacts of such pupils have expanded, too, within their schools and outside, enhancing the scope of their communicative and research skills, and this is going to be essential for their successful social adaptation in future. The participants in the project consider it as a major task, to develop a model of adaptive support for graduates of the *Secondary School – Distance Education Center* for tertiary education at universities.

4. Conclusion

Among the results of this research, it has to be noted that the nature of social partnership of regional government bodies, research institutions and public organizations is not limited to pooling together their respective financial, professional and methodological resources for the purpose of providing services to specific members of the community; for ensuring high quality of such services is a priority, too.

In contracts of social partnership, state financing of auxiliary services that are delivered by non-commercial organizations will contractually establish control procedures that specify the scope of services, details on their recipients, and quality parameters.

The advantages of involving non-commercial organizations are as follows:

- innovative mechanisms in problem-solving, which state authorities cannot always afford;
- flexibility in the implementation of specific tasks;
- prompt responses to new issues (reduced red-tape);
- targeted assistance;
- uniqueness, since state programs cannot be replicated;
- cost reduction, due to minimum administrative overhead expenditure; high-class experts can often be involved as volunteers or part-time employees.

Another obvious advantage of social service delivery by non-commercial organizations lies in the consideration that community participants are closer to the target group members, and they have fewer formal obstacles in choosing work methods and other options.

The advantages of social partnership are huge: it provides ideal opportunities for gaining work experience and enhancing staff professionalism, they bring about better in-company procedures, efficiency of lobbying work, setting further goals, development of priorities, et al. With these considerations, we continue to develop non-commercial partnership through various means of communication, such as informal sharing of experience in multi-

expert work teams, mutual workshop participation on various issues, as well as consultancy and assistance, conducting joint academic events and project implementation, etc.

Among useful methods and favorable results of this research, we can mention implementation of such adaptive inclusion activities (both academic and recreational) as educational media products (an interactive talking map of the Ryazan Region, an audiotactile daily routine organizer for visually challenged pupils, picture and video manuals, and a video blog on behavior tips for children with disabilities, video presentations in pantomimic singing and dance for hearing-challenged children, websites of school associations, thematic Google-maps, and interactive educational electronic manuals in various subjects for distance learning, etc.), as well as informational services for parents, development of social tolerance towards people with specific needs, etc.

As a result, the university stands to become a key partner and launcher of skill-oriented research, as well as an agent in experience analysis and sharing, staff development and in certification of service quality control. In their turn, public organizations get to be practice fields for field practice of undergraduates. Students' volunteer work will help them in developing the skills (professional, cultural and personal) required in their Specialist Standard as essential for work with various community groups.

Through employing non-commercial partnership for the development of an accessible educational environment, we can deliver such services to physically-challenged people as are necessary for their development and reception of knowledge, and improvement of life quality at minimum expenses of the educational institutions.

The experience of such project development can be transferred onto a regional tertiary school field for inclusive education provisions.

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