



Reducing stereotypes towards people with disabilities – a fundamental condition for sustainable scholar and social inclusion

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Abstract

Nowadays, we are influenced by many stereotypes and prejudices that change the way we relate to those around us. The biggest risk we are exposed to by accepting these stereotypes is to marginalize or discriminate against a particular person or group, just because they are different from us. Therefore, in our paper, we are planning to analyze some stereotypes that can negatively influence the life of peoples about we consider that are different comparative with us. The sample of research was represented by 1131 persons from Romania and the instrument of research was a questionnaire composed from 25 multiple choice items which tried to investigate the level of possible stereotypes of typically society regarding persons with different disabilities. The obtained results proved that majority of respondents have a common attitude related to persons with disabilities and try to accept them according with their physical and psychological limitations.

Keywords: Discrimination, prejudices, scholar and social inclusion, stereotypes, vulnerable people.

Introduction

In our daily lives, we are influenced by many stereotypes and prejudices that change the way we relate to those around us. For example, we are tempted to judge a person by their ethnicity, the way they look, the way they dress, the presence or absence of a disability, and so on. The biggest risk we face in accepting these stereotypes is the marginalization or discrimination of a particular person or group, just because they are different from us. Stereotypes are the effect of simplistic thinking, which involves formulating the same response to different stimuli. They have a strong socio-cultural character and can be passed down over several generations (Gherguț, 2019). Interestingly, however, we are not born with stereotypes or prejudices, which appear in the life of each of us, sooner or later, as a result of the many social interactions and personal experiences to that we are exposed. Of course, stereotypes and prejudices are negative traits that influence our personality and generate altered social contacts with all those around us that we consider different and, most often, “inferior” to us. Therefore, the first to be exposed to discrimination are those from social backgrounds considered vulnerable, people who, by their individual or group characteristics, are exposed a priori to public disgrace (Blândul, 2015).

Problem statment

According to specialized literature (Szelmenczi & Szelmencz, 2013, p. 13), a vulnerable group represents that category of people who, due to educational, social, economic, demographic, cultural, health, etc. deficiencies, have limited access to the living conditions specific to the community in which he lives. In fact, the problems are not directly caused by the deficiencies cited, but rather by the limitation of opportunities to access normal living standards. For example, people with disabilities can be considered vulnerable to the extent that, due to the lack of accessibility, they encounter difficulties in benefiting from the facilities available to all other members of the community. Thus, the lack of access ramps in closed spaces can be an insurmountable obstacle for a person with physical impairments. The lack of acoustic messages at traffic lights located at the intersections of several streets or at pedestrian crossings, or from public transport can constitute important barriers to the orientation of visually impaired people in the environment. Such situations are the basis of the installation of the handicap, i.e. the social disadvantage that prevents the person from expressing his role in the community for which he has prepared (Blândul, 2021). Handicap is the one that limits the social independence of disabled people, preventing them from finding a job corresponding to the formal education received, starting a family, leading a social life at optimal parameters, etc. On the contrary, in cases where assistive technologies allow people with various impairments to express themselves independently, the problem of social vulnerability of these people is largely solved.

Stereotypes and prejudices can be a prelude to the production of discriminatory behavior. Discrimination occurs when, on the basis of an arbitrary criterion (race, ethnicity, gender, religious or sexual orientation, level of professional performance, etc.) a person adopts a different conduct in relation to another, compared to how he should under usual circumstances. For example, the category of discrimination includes situations in which a student with disabilities is denied enrollment in a school, just because that educational unit is not equipped with the assistive technology necessary for that student. Another example can be given by the refusal of some shopkeepers or taxi drivers to offer services to Roma people because they are "afraid" of possible aggressive or criminal behavior on the part of their customers. Of course, these examples can be considered anecdotal or, in any case, not impactful enough to interest too many people in the community. The reality is that such seemingly minor discriminatory behavior, ignored by most people, can be repeated, amplified and lead to extremist manifestations, with significant social impact. The Holocaust is the best example of a world problem starting from a point situation initially approached in a superficial way. In order to prevent such atrocities from happening again, most of the world's countries have promoted very clear legislation that vigorously combats any manifestations of discrimination, even from the early stages. But this is not enough, it is equally important for each person to fight against their own prejudices and try to avoid, at all costs, conduct that could be interpreted as discriminatory (Szelmenczi & Szelmencz, 2013, pp. 18 -19).

Due to their specificity, people from vulnerable social backgrounds are, quite frequently, exposed to the stereotypes and prejudices of the majority of society and, implicitly, to some of its discriminatory behaviors. The consequences of such manifestations can be extremely serious and can lead to the deepening of the state of vulnerability in which the mentioned groups find themselves. In the following, we will try to briefly analyze some of the most common stereotypes and prejudices expressed towards people with disabilities, also pointing out how such limiting thoughts can be minimized (Macovei et. al., 2010, Szelmenczi & Szelmencz, 2013, Bradea & Blândul 2020, Bradea, 2022).

Thus, one of the most frequent types of discrimination is that of people with disabilities. For a long time, the term that denoted this situation was that of "handicap" which described a social disadvantage resulting from a deficiency or incapacity that prevented the person from exercising the social role for which he was prepared. Unfortunately, the concept was often used pejoratively, as a form of categorization of people suffering from a certain deficiency. Recently, the term has been replaced by that of "disability", denoting one or more physical, mental, sensory, language, etc. deficiencies. which, in the conditions of an insufficiently accessible environment, can diminish or even cancel a person's chances of leading an independent life. There are many forms of manifestation of disabilities, and the World Health Organization identifies according to the "International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps. A Manual of Classification Relating to the Consequences of Disease" several categories: intellectual impairments, other mental impairments, language and speech impairments, hearing impairments, ocular system impairments, other organ impairments, skeletal and organ impairments support, aesthetic deficiencies, deficiencies of general, sensitive functions or other deficiencies (Blândul, 2021).

The status of people with different disabilities has fluctuated throughout history, society looking at them either with fear, or with compassion, or with a concern stemming from the desire to help them or, simply, from "political correctness". Special concerns were expressed towards people with mental deficiencies, the most widespread category among the various types of disabilities. Thus, until the 19th century, due to the lack of epistemological benchmarks, we can only talk about sporadic approaches to the problem of mental deficiency. The mentioned interval is divided into two periods with two different mentalities towards these people. In the absence of a precise diagnosis, until around the 16th - 17th centuries, individuals presenting such disorders were regarded with fear and respect, feelings stemming from ignorance and the impossibility of explaining their manifestations. Therefore, they could be found as "jesters" at the royal courts. In the second period, the church paid special attention to these people, considering them to be "possessed by the devil" and, as such, marginalizing them. The technical-scientific revolution of the 19th century also left its mark on the problem of people with mental deficiency. Thus, doctor Pinel changed the optics on the subject and through the research carried out together with his descendants, they laid the foundations of medical therapy for these people. With the emergence of the current of "new educations" (end of the 19th century - beginning of the 20th century), pedagogical approaches also changed regarding the education of children with mental deficiencies, a series of authors (E. Key, M. Montessori and.a.) proposing several psycho-pedagogical strategies for recovery, education and integration of children with different disabilities in the mainstream school community. Finally, after the end

of the Second World War, the problem of mental deficiency began to be approached in a scientific way. A series of standardized tests were developed to investigate the intelligence quotient and other mental processes, a series of conferences and symposia on the subject of mental deficiency were held, a series of regulations and normative acts were promulgated to establish the rights of persons with mental deficiency and to create the appropriate framework for their integration into society (Petrovan, 2018).

Another category of people frequently encountered in the community are those with physical disabilities. At this level, people who move with the help of support tools (wheelchairs, crutches or support frames, etc.), people with impaired general or fine motor skills, people who are missing, totally or partially, an organ etc. can be mentioned. a. The problems in their case are, on the one hand, related to the difficulty of moving or performing some movements of the body or its various segments, and on the other, the alteration of the image and self-esteem caused by the lack or improper functioning of an organ. However, history shows that despite the difficulties they have faced, many people have succeeded in life, and examples given by A. Szelmenczi and M. Szelmenczi (2013, pp. 44-46) include Stephen Hawking, Aimee Mullins, Eduard Novak et al. A long list is added to them, containing Demosthenes, Homer, Louis Braille, Beethoven, Cristy Brown, Rey Charles, Stefan Luchian, etc.

However, in contemporary society, there are many prejudices and stereotypes about people with disabilities. The most common of these could be (Bourhis & Leyens, 1997):

- People with disabilities cannot leave a normal life, similar to other members of the community;
- A disabled person is not able to do what other people do, he does not manage in the same way as others, he always needs help;
- Disability is contagious;
- People with disabilities are worthy of the pity and compassion of the community because of the condition in which they live, inspiring the kindness and generosity of others;
- All types of disability are visible;
- People with disabilities represent a mono-dimensional group;
- People with disabilities are not reliable employees;
- People with disabilities are superheroes;
- People with disabilities have much more developed sensory skills than other people;
- Children with Down Syndrome are always cheerful and in a good mood;
- The image of the villain is often attributed in films to the person with a disability;
- People with disabilities are victims, inspiring the community's pity.

The main problem of these stereotypes and prejudices is that they constitute fragments of truth that appear against the background of ignorance and insufficient knowledge of the particularities of people in special situations. Such truncated information put in unfavorable contexts and interpreted subjectively can generate communication faults between people with typical development and those with disabilities and can amplify the state of vulnerability in which the latter find themselves. In addition, there is a risk that people with disabilities will be deprived of some basic rights such as education in mass schools, access to various services and opportunities offered by the community, employment in a job in accordance with professional training, representation in local and national decision-making bodies, etc. Many people still believe that disabled people should stay in their homes and let the "able" solve their problems. However, the reality is much more complex, and an important step towards inclusion is represented by the involvement of vulnerable people themselves in the management of their own problems. In this way, from part of the problem, they will become part of the solution (Gherguț, 2019).

Method

Method of the research

Starting from those analyzed in the previous paragraphs, the purpose of this research was to identify the degree to which certain social stereotypes work towards people with different disabilities. Concretely, the main objectives of the research were the following: (1) analysis of social perception regarding the rights and obligations of people with disabilities; (2) identifying the share in which people with various types of

impairments face certain prejudices from peers with typical development, respectively (3) evaluating the level at which the current community is prepared to accept the inclusion of people with disabilities. It could be considered that the assumption of these objectives can provide an ex-haustive picture of the degree of manifestation of stereotypes towards people with disabilities in contemporary society.

Population sampling

The sample selected for this research was made up of 1131 respondents from Romania (N=1131) who completed an online questionnaire regarding the degree to which they consider certain statements about people with disabilities to be true. The structure of the sample was as follows: gender: Male - 24% / Female – 76%; category: person without disabilities – 96% / disabled person – 4%; social status: student / college student – 30% / teacher in mass education – 34% / teacher in special education – 10% / hired in other work place – 23% / unemployed – 2% / retired – 1%; chronological age: under 25 years old – 27% / 25-35 years old – 27% / 36-45 years old – 28% / 46-55 years old – 15% / 56-65 years old – 3% / over 65 years old. It could be appreciated that such a sample is representative of the adult population of Romania, both numerically and of the selected social strata.

Data collection tools

The main method used to carry out this research was the survey based on a questionnaire, and the related instrument was made up of 25 objective multiple-choice items. The main categories of items retained for this research referred to possible social stereotypes regarding the rights and obligations of people with disabilities, the status of parents of children with different disabilities, the social perception regarding how people with different disabilities would behave, respectively the chances of that the typical society attributes to people with disabilities in succeeding in integrating effectively into the community in which they live. The instrument asked respondents to give a score from 1 to 4 depending on whether they disagreed or agreed with certain statements about people with special needs. The questionnaire was developed by a group of specialists in Educational Sciences from the University of Oradea and was statistically validated on the adult population of Romania.

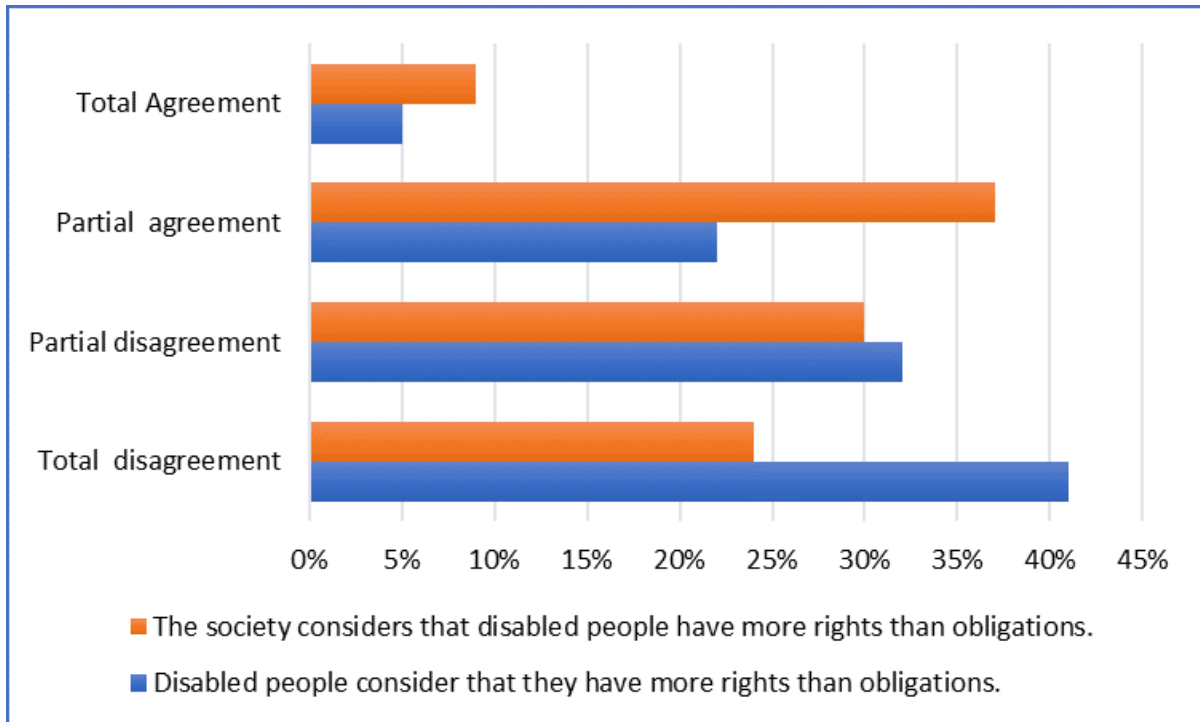
Analysis techniques

The respondents were asked to give a score from 1 to 4 depending on their disagreement or agreement regarding the items of the questionnaire, items that describe a series of stereotypes present in Romanian society regarding people with disabilities. The quantitative interpretation of the obtained results was made by calculating the statistical frequency of the answers given to each item, and the period of online administration of the questionnaire was between March and May 2023.

Findings

The results of the research are presented in the following Picture and Tables, where on the rows are recorded the stereotypes related to people with disabilities, and on the columns the extent to which the respondents expressed their agreement or disagreement with these statements

Picture 1. Social perception regarding the rights of people with disabilities



The results presented in Picture 1 are extremely interesting and prove the existence of important differences in the way society, respectively, people with disabilities perceive the rights they have within the community. Thus, 37% of respondents believe that, in the general public's perception, people with disabilities have more rights than obligations. On the other hand, 41% of respondents empathize with people with disabilities and believe that, from their point of view, they would have no more rights than obligations within the community. Although the views presented seem contrasting, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, the media overexposure of disabled people often creates the impression that they are always asking for something, and satisfying these needs induces the idea that they would benefit from certain advantages within society. On the contrary, disabled people defend themselves and believe that these advantages would not be at all additional or undeserved in the community. However, it is important for the whole society to understand that meeting the needs of all its members is not a favor received by them, just as an unfavorable diagnosis should not bring a person special advantages in relation to other people. The concept that should dominate in this case would be that of "social equity", according to which each person should receive exactly what he needs to have an equal chance in social competition. In this way, possible stereotypes of "favors" being bestowed on some members of the community simply because, at some point, they face a problem that makes them different from their typical peers could be eliminated (Vogel et. al., 2021).

Table 1. Social perception regarding the functioning of disabled people in society

ITEM	Total disagreement		Partial disagreement		Partial agreement		Total Agreement	
	SCORE		SCORE		SCORE		SCORE	
	1		2		3		4	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
People with intellectual deficiency will never be able to face the challenges of the society in which they live.	284	25	444	39	335	30	63	6
People with visual impairment are permanently dependent on the help of those around.	308	27	413	37	333	30	72	6

People with hearing impairment can communicate only by lip reading or sign language.	203	18	309	27	439	39	175	16
People with motor impairment cannot move around without the help of a companion.	264	23	396	35	373	33	93	9
People with Down Syndrome are always cheerful and happy.	346	31	342	30	367	33	71	6
Bully students come from dysfunctional families.	227	20	330	29	468	42	101	9
Bully students will become criminals in their adult life.	285	25	473	42	333	30	35	3

The results presented in Table 1 demonstrate a number of highly interesting things about how people with disabilities are perceived at the common sense level. Thus, opinions are divided about the chances of people with mental impairment to cope with social challenges. The obtained results following the administration of the questionnaire indicate that 30% of the respondents do not give these people a chance to succeed in social life, while another 39% believe that people with intellectual problems can face social challenges, despite the deficiency encountered. Opinions are equally divided when it comes to the need for support felt by visually impaired people, with percentages varying between 30% who support this idea and 37% who contest it. Somewhat clearer are the opinions of the respondents regarding how they believe that people with hearing impairments can communicate with the environment, 39% appreciating that the only communication channels would be lip reading or sign language 33% of the respondents believe that people with motor impairments do not they can move only with the support of a companion, while 35% do not support this idea and believe in the possibilities of independent movement of people with such problems. Opinions are equally divided about the emotional disposition of people with Down syndrome, with almost a third believing that they are always cheerful and carefree, while around another third believe the opposite of this statement. Finally, 42% of respondents believe that students with aggressive behavior come from dysfunctional families, but only 30% believe that they could become criminals in adulthood. There are several explanations for the absence of polarization of responses around a single variable. First of all, the large number of respondents, the diversity of the social environments from which they come, respectively their cultural and educational background make their opinions varied, and even more difficult to outline around a definite answer. Secondly, the rather vague and imprecise nature of the questionnaire items (expression of the generality of stereotypes circulating in society) created problems for many respondents who had difficulty choosing between logical reasoning and convictions based more on emotions. Finally, Romanian society shows signs of maturing in terms of accepting people with disabilities, which is why a large part of the respondents reject defamatory statements about them.

Table 2. Social perception regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the community

ITEM	Total disagreement		Partial disagreement		Partial agreement		Total Agreement	
	SCORE		SCORE		SCORE		SCORE	
	1		2		3		4	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Disabled people always need specific therapy.	58	5	200	18	441	39	427	38
Disabled students should learn in special education schools because they will never be able to face mass education.	326	29	365	32	349	31	86	8
Disabled people do not succeed finding a job according with their vocational training.	184	16	322	29	487	43	133	12
A disabled person cannot participate to social life.	755	67	257	23	100	9	14	1

Disabled people are helped and put in favorable context.	196	17	424	38	446	40	60	5
Disabled people should be given much more support from their community.	35	3	48	4	255	23	788	70

The results presented in Table 2 somewhat confirm those analyzed in the previous paragraph. Thus, opinions are divided regarding the opportunities for students with disabilities to study in mainstream schools, the percentage of those who support this idea being sensibly equal to those who dispute it. However, stronger opinions are expressed regarding the chances of people with disabilities to find a job in accordance with their professional training, with 43% of respondents stating that this is perfectly possible. Moreover, 67% of respondents believe that people with disabilities can and should actively participate in the social life of the community in which they live. Finally, most research subjects agree that people with disabilities must continue to be supported and receive appropriate therapy in order to have a chance of effective inclusion in society. It is noted, further, the absence of an obvious polarization of the answers around a certain variable, and the possible explanations are given, as in the previous situation, by the large number of people involved in the research, their social, cultural and educational diversity, respectively by the increasing openness of communities to the problems of all their members.

Results, conclusion and recommendation

A first aspect that should be analyzed refers to the identification of the possible causes that lead to the construction of stereotypes against people with disabilities. The results obtained from the administration of the questionnaire are extremely interesting and reflect a multidimensional reality. In the opinion of the majority of research subjects, stereotypes originate from the lack of correct information about the characteristics of people with disabilities. Another surprising result of the research concerns the fact that the most exposed to discrimination are individuals with physical impairments who, due to the fact that they are also the most visible disabilities, attract the most attention. The effects of stereotyping are extremely dangerous and include discriminating against, rejecting, stigmatizing or marginalizing anyone who is different from the majority. Also, many people still believe that people with disabilities "profit" from their problems, trying to get all kinds of benefits from the state or various generous people. Finally, another obstacle to the inclusion of students with CES is the school environment in which they could learn, and, in particular, the unfavorable attitude of the parents of children with typical development in inclusive classes. Indeed, in mainstream education, parents of typical students play an important role in accepting children with disabilities. They are the ones who largely influence the attitude towards their integration in the classroom, and if they don't accept them, teachers can hardly do anything. It is enough that a few parents in a school class are initially against the integration of a disabled child, that they will negatively influence the others as well until he is transferred to a higher level. Parents of typical children believe that students with disabilities create more problems than others and disrupt the smooth flow of class with their questions and inability to concentrate 50 minutes per class. On the other hand, they require more attention from teachers, thus being "unfair" to typical children. At the same time, many parents refuse to let their children sit in the classroom with a colleague with different disabilities, considering that it will disturb him in the learning process (Luna, 2018).

On the other hand, the aspects regarding limiting the effects of stereotypes and prejudices have concerned the Romanian and international society extremely strongly in the last decades. One of the first objectives of such an approach is represented by people's awareness of the existence of these stereotypes, as well as the fact that each individual may have, at a given moment, to a lesser or greater extent, certain prejudices. Concrete actions to prevent and combat stereotypes and prejudices regarding people with disabilities include the following examples (Shih et.al., 2007):

- ❖ informing public opinion about the specific features of people with special needs through an approach as objective as possible, emphasizing both their qualities and their shortcomings;
- ❖ the honest and transparent discussion of all the problems faced by both vulnerable minorities and the majority, insisting on the needs of each group, respectively the ways in which each individual can get involved in order to solve them;

- ❖ open collaboration between the typical majority and the minority of people with disabilities, in which the first group has the duty to know the problems of the dialogue partners and insist on what they can and want to achieve good, and the second group has the responsibility to communicate more effectively and to promote ways to engage constructively in the community;
- ❖ the involvement in carrying out common activities of both typical and vulnerable people, in which the focus falls on the task, not on the person who performs it, so that everyone understands that together they can achieve things superior to individual or competitive work;

A first conclusion that emerges from the above would be that an open and honest attitude on the part of both parties is a sine-qua-non condition for the success of inclusion and the reduction of discriminatory behaviors towards peers with disabilities. The process of forming such attitudes is a complex and long-lasting one and begins with the cognitive moment (information on the particularities of vulnerable groups), then continuing with the tensional-affective moment (the "struggle" between producing or combating limiting judgments), the decisional moment (formulating a clear option in a certain direction), respectively the instrumental moment (the implementation of the made decision) (Blândul, 2014). But making any effort in this direction is worth the entire investment when the end result is a better society, in which every person has a decent place (Marinescu, 2021).

The second conclusion that emerges from the previous paragraphs refers to the fact that, in order to be sustainable, a community must be based on full equality of opportunities for its members. Thus, it is important that, regardless of the status they hold within that community, all its members benefit from equal rights, such as the right to education, healthcare, identical conditions for employment, social protection, civic involvement, etc. However, it is fundamental to remember that where there are equal rights, there must also be identical obligations, which each individual must fulfill, within the limits of his objective possibilities. This could translate into the fact that, if a minority considered vulnerable wants equal rights to those of the typical majority, then it must also assume the responsibilities arising from this. In order to eliminate discrimination, it is important that each group participates actively, since when a series of grievances are formulated, it is necessary to assume some responsibilities by which these demands can be "redeemed". The active involvement of all parties is an essential condition of normalization, a principle which, in turn, is the basis of the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (Levine et. al., 2010).

Finally, it is necessary to mention that the most effective way to prevent the manifestation of stereotypes and prejudices towards people from vulnerable social backgrounds is information about their characteristic features, education in the spirit of tolerance and intercultural openness, respectively honest and open communication regarding the problems and expectations of each group (Guțu & Vicol, 2014). In this way, it will be possible to create a "bridge" of connection between the typical majority and the minority of people with disabilities, a fact that would allow the two structures to better know their values, respect them and even promote each other, in a context multicultural. Thus, Romanian society will become one open to authentic social inclusion, a basic condition for Romania's European integration.

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