



Community perceptions towards disabled people and inclusion in Milagro State University

Percepciones de la comunidad hacia las personas con discapacidad y la inclusión en la Universidad Estatal de Milagro

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ABSTRACT

Including disabled people in the social, labor and educational fields has become a relevant topic throughout the last years. However, it still exists many limitations which do not allow a complete and effective inclusion of those persons, considering aspects like community's acceptance and attitudes, and the required adaptations within our systems and structures. In this sense, the aim of this research study is to explore how the community describes their attitudes towards disabled people and their perceptions in terms of social and educational inclusion. This research was applied collaboratively with four Ecuadorian universities and it is framed with a qualitative research method. Taking into account some features and concepts based on the symbolic interaction research epistemology, it was implemented a one-way case study. The data collection process was conducted using focal groups, and the information was analyzed through ATLAS.ti 8 and some coding and categorizing qualitative strategies like in-vivo and attributes coding. In order to deal with reliability and trustworthiness and to make our research wider we also applied some critical discussion circles as strategies to clarify and validate the information. This study will work as the base, being the first stage to propose tools and organizational structures that support a complete and effective inclusion of disabled people in our society.

Key words: inclusion, disability, attitudes.

Recibido: 20-01-24 - Aceptado: 13-03-24

RESUMEN

La inclusión de las personas con discapacidad en el ámbito social, laboral y educativo se ha convertido en un tema relevante a lo largo de los últimos años. Sin embargo, aún existen muchas limitaciones que no permiten una inclusión completa y efectiva de estas personas, considerando aspectos como la aceptación y actitudes de la comunidad, y las adaptaciones requeridas dentro de nuestros sistemas y estructuras. En este sentido, el objetivo de esta investigación es explorar cómo la comunidad describe sus actitudes hacia las personas con discapacidad y sus percepciones en términos de inclusión social y educativa. Esta investigación se aplicó en colaboración con cuatro universidades ecuatorianas y se enmarca en un método de investigación cualitativa. Teniendo en cuenta algunas características y conceptos basados en la epistemología de la investigación de la interacción simbólica, se implementó un estudio de caso unidireccional. El proceso de recolección de datos se llevó a cabo mediante grupos focales, y la información se analizó a través de ATLAS.ti 8 y algunas estrategias cualitativas de codificación y categorización como la codificación en vivo y de atributos. Con el fin de abordar la confiabilidad y la confiabilidad y ampliar nuestra investigación, también aplicamos algunos círculos

de discusión crítica como estrategias para aclarar y validar la información. Este estudio servirá de base, siendo la primera etapa para proponer herramientas y estructuras organizativas que apoyen una inclusión completa y efectiva de las personas con discapacidad en nuestra sociedad.

Palabras clave: inclusión, discapacidad, actitudes.

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Council for Equality and Disabilities (CONADIS), in Ecuador we have around 447.294 people with a disability who have the right to obtain equal opportunities on the social inclusion, equity, and justice within a legal framework; however, most of them are currently excluded, hidden – invisible, because of the community ignorance on how to help them. This is the main issue that drove us to conduct this research study, considering concepts and standards that allow our society to interact with this group of people in order to bring into discussion topics like diversity and integral commitment in public and private institutions. Thus, differentiation in terms of abilities does not limit the bio-psychosocial development of the people involved. This will support us to achieve that “*All people are the same and have equal access to the same rights, duties and opportunities. Nobody can be discriminated [...]*,” as it is stipulated in the Ecuadorian Constitution (2008), in the third section - Art. 11: numeral 2.

Before to go deeper into the inclusion discussion, it becomes relevant to have in mind that the rationalist epistemology, which is identified as cognitivist of the perception, finds its golden beginning during the XX and XXI century in Ecuador, and it became stronger when the ex-vice president (current Ecuadorian president), who is a disabled person, support the creation and application of some governmental policies that foster the inclusion in the economic, politic, family, social, cultural and educational field. In this sense, the Ecuadorian Constitution (2008) established in the sixth section, disabled people - Art. 4., that the government warrantee policies for the disability prevention, and that those policies influence in a growing process together with society and families.

In a global view, the term “inclusion” has become an international tendency because of some people’s irrational attitudes at the moment of dealing with this reality, which is demonstrated through their daily behavior that most of the time is not adequate and it is visible to the society especially in educational field. However, only few people go against it. The Ecuadorian Constitution, in its chapter VII - Art. 42, make an emphasis on the special education and warrantee the inclusion of disabled students, considering the possibilities of each institution; and in the Art. 44, it mentions the purpose of ensuring the right of including people with permanent or temporary disabilities in schools. In 2012, it was included at college levels throughout the Organic Law for Disability, chapter II – application - Art. 40, which established norms for its socialization among universities.

The National Secretary of High Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (SENESCYT), ensures that all universities and colleges incorporate the inclusion and disability as interdisciplinary aspects of every academic program of study in order to educate our students, our future professionals, in those themes.

This Research study requires us to question, what is understood as inclusion? this query is studied from five different focal groups including disabled people who have a clear picture about what inclusion is because of its needs. Disabled people consider that it is a cooperative work including all people in society, and not only the ones who have a close link with a disabled person. Most of them mention that inclusion requires visible processes in the society and active-participation in order to break the barrier. Echeita (2001) claims that inclusion is a process of perspectives within the

educational systems, which consider common and diverse aspects. The educational institutions have been looking for quality and excellence in complex eras. Pérez (2012) considers that education should be founded on values, principles and convictions; in the same way, Escudero (2011) claims that it depends on the level of inclusion and the type of specific needs attended.

The Ecuadorian Constitution, in its Art 47, 48 and 49, in the chapter III, made a reference on the rights of general people and marginalized groups, warranting policies for prevention and recognizing the rights to individualized attention as well as it creates opportunities for social integration. Moreover, Art. 61 – numeral 7- made an emphasis on the performance, employment and public functions with a base on merits and abilities, and on a fair system for work and educational selection; this article seeks to promote a true inclusion and to recognize the required abilities to achieve social wellness. For those reasons the society should be prepared to live together in an environment that celebrate respect and acceptance. Moreover, in section III - Art. 11., numeral 2., it is mentioned that all people are the same and they celebrate the same rights, duties, and opportunities.

One of the problems is that the community has a poor knowledge about how to include disabled people since from the socio-pedagogical and familiar context it has not been totally maximized or developed yet. It is needed the construction of an organizational structure that foster human diversity, guiding people to be aware and to understand diverse identities that allow the pursuit of alternative and contextualized realities including every person in the world. Vygotsky (1995) argues that those issue damage kids energy and increase the psychology of separatism, educating the antisocial attitude; several years has passed since this argument was made and it still exists poor knowledge about the special needs of the disabled people.

The aim of this study is to explore how the community describes their attitudes towards disabled people and their perceptions in relation to the social and educational inclusion. The results of this research will support us to document the place that people with disabilities occupied within the social structure in our communities, considering the level of acceptance and attitudes from the community towards them. This research study will be the base to propose some tools and organizational structures that support the inclusion system within the social and academic areas in order to reach a complete integration of disabled people in society. Thus, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the community attitudes towards disabled people?
2. What are the community perceptions towards inclusion?

Inclusion

Inclusion is theoretical founded on the special needs that are required by the people with disabilities. Stainback (1998) claims that society should be integrated in a single system, with the aim of knowing and learning to live all together – moreover, it should exist a single educational system which integrates traditional and special education in order to avoid difficulties at the moment of assimilating diversity. Only under this scenario, we can generate processes and changes in this area.

It is founded on the paws and mechanism that the man acquires knowledge to achieve an inclusive stage. The public policies have created a legal framework which emphasizes the importance and tendency of supporting equality and equity concepts in terms of gender and disabilities. In Ecuador, some of the governmental statutes that support these concepts are The High Education Law (LOES), The Law for Public Employees (LOSEP), and the Working Law (Código de Trabajo), which rule the disabled people’s rights and responsibilities at national and international levels through several policies and decrees. Those regulations also include some social interaction projects that attend different especial education needs. The negative aspect of this issue is the community’s poor

knowledge towards disabled people at the moment of attending and valuing diversity, equity, respect, and individual differences in order to develop integrative abilities, to plan adapted tools and structures, to break paradigms among society, to teach how to deal with limitations, to price efforts, to learn how to be tolerance, to concern about individual needs, to assess and eliminate prejudices, to know people’s rights, to be involved, and to have a positive attitude. According to UNESCO (2005), inclusion is a process that allow to approach diversity in term of individual needs through a higher participation. Having this as a foundation, it is claim that it is government, families, community leader and teachers’ responsibility to keep a correlation among all to plan and to implement strategies that support inclusion through collaborative and cooperative environments.

Aspects that shape people’s perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion

The conception that the community has towards the inclusion depends on their attitudes which are grounded on the following aspects:

- The internal and external spaces in which people with disability move
- The lack of information, social adaptations, and structures like inclusive bus stops, ramps, signs, among others.
- Few programs or events to socialize inclusion
- Differentiation and limitation when participating in social, cultural, or sport activities.
- Poor inclusive resources
- Poor application of technological tools to scaffold and to foster inclusion
- The poor knowledge or socialization of the regulations and norms that support inclusion within the Ecuadorian Constitution
- Poor involvement and concern of the society in terms of inclusion

Tools and organizational structures that support the inclusion system

Some of the tools are mentioned belong:

- Effectively apply the rights and duties that support disabled people
- Implement strategies that allow society to support the social, personal and emotional development of people with disability
- Support the development of physical, cognitive, social, and cultural abilities
- Demonstrate how people foster the respect to diversity
- Involve different teamwork configurations including people with and without any type of disability to promote community participation and productivity
- Promote dialogs and social meeting to diminish verbal and non-verbal discrimination or marginalization
- Create and promote an enjoyable environment involving the community in order to establish social relationship and the development of emotional and cognitive abilities
- To create study circles using inclusive resources that scaffold disabled people to an effective learning
- Value diversity and engage people in cooperative and collaborative activities
- Evaluate actions and performance considering individual strengths and weaknesses
- Create an academic major that deal with inclusive education to train teachers to be able to support students with disabilities

METHODOLOGY

This study finds its roots in the qualitative research methodology, which because of its nature provides us the necessary tools that will permit us to understand the place that disabled people occupied within our society, using community’s voices and opinions as the main source of information. The qualitative methodology provides researchers and authorities a solid base to make changes in emergent problems (Sallee and Flood, 2012), obtaining information directly from the involved communities. This type of research methodology is appropriate for our study taking into account two of its main

characteristics: qualitative research finds its foundation on the inquiry and exploration of real context, and the second, it is inductive in nature, supporting researcher to find characteristics of a concept or phenomena from the participants’ voices (Patton, 1990). Considering the purpose of the first stage of this study and the main goals to achieve with this project, some qualitative studies will help us to frame it (Olivia et al., 2014; Perez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2012).

In addition, this research study is grounded on the symbolic interaction epistemology, which is highly influenced by the work conducted by George Herbert Mead (1883 – 1931) in constructivism. This research epistemology is the most appropriate to our study considering that Blumer emphasizes that symbolic interaction informs and explains the decisions and perceptions that human beings have created taking into account the meaning of their own worlds and events. The symbolic interaction also provides us a solid base to achieve the main objective of this research considering that the process to create meaning and context is an interpretative one which is shaped by the constant modification, understanding, and analysis of situations based on the interaction with the society including: language, dialogs, regulations, perceptions, experiences, among others.

Participants and data Collection Process

The selection of the participants and the collection of the information were conducted through an open social-cultural event, in which it was conducted diverse plenaries and lectures that discuss the inclusion of disabled people within the educational, labor, and social system as the main theme. In other words, the selection of the participants was made taking in mind some techniques of random selection, in which all participants have the same opportunities to be chosen. This type of sample selection techniques helps us to avoid discrimination and the intervention of aspects or variables that may influence a study such as: stereotyping, disabilities, previous experiences, age among others.

During the event, participants were encouraged to express their perceptions towards inclusion, and their descriptions and attitudes towards any type of disability, which were documented in a mural using sticky notes and markers. This type of data collection tools, aligned to focal groups, allow us to diminish the tension on participants that may cause the application of a personalized questionnaire; it creates a safe and enjoyable environment to express, so we can obtain much sincere and direct information, avoiding biases. This event was conducted in Universidad Estatal de Milagro.

Data Analysis Process

The analysis of the information was conducted through an inductive process of codification, taking the raw information that was provided by the community during each event. The analysis process begins by typing participants insights to a digital document for then to be analyzed using the coding method in-vivo, as the first step to determine words or phrases that could be relevant (Saldaña, 2016). During this first stage of the codification, it was looked for relevant words or phrases that express the community’s perspectives and attitudes towards inclusion. Some of the words found in this coding stage were: *equality*, *diversity*, *legal norms*, *models to follow*, among others. This stage also included the analysis of the information using the software, Atlas.ti 8, which allows us to obtain a general map of the results with the most repeated words. This graph is portraying in figure 1:

Figure 1.
AtlasTi Analysis: Word cloud



The second stage of the data analysis required a deeper revision, so it was implemented some techniques like analytical memos, in which the researcher write down their emerged ideas and emotions while reading the raw data. Considering these new standards and emerged ideas, it was applied a second revision of the data using the attributes coding method, which supported us to be more specific in the assignation of codes taking in mind common themes and ideas that are repetitively mentioned along the data. Some of the participants were contacted to discuss the findings, clarifying interpretations. This process of analysis, which is called critical discussion circles, supports to measure the validity and trustworthiness of our results since it compares, contrasts, and integrates several individual analysis criteria and perspectives from diverse researchers, avoiding incorrect interpretations or that researchers’ own experiences or feelings influence the outputs of the study. The final stage of the codification process of the collected data was through the descriptive coding method, which is greatly useful to summarize in a single word or short phrase the basis ideas or concepts of a group of ideas (Saldaña, 2016).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

After the data analysis process through different methods of codification and methodologies, it has emerged some ideas and concepts that contribute to the creation of a framework for this study and to propose them as preliminary findings. These preliminaries results support us to effectively answer the research questions that guide our study. The outcomes of the research are presented taking into account the opinions express by the community during the events, which were transcribed, coded, analyzed, and categorized according the aim of the study. It presents participants’ perceptions towards inclusion and their attitudes towards disabled people.

One of the main categories assigned after the analysis of the information was the perceptions of the community towards people with disabilities, which is presented below: CATEGORY I: PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS DISABLED PEOPLE	A. Attitudes	Positive
	B. Descriptions	Positive

According to the analysis of the data, it was only perceived positive attitudes and descriptions from the community towards disabled people; it means the community mostly shared a feeling of empathy and admiration. Some of the participants mentioned ideas like: “*they are models to follow,*” “*we need to accept and love them,*” “*respect them,*” “*we need to learn one from each other,*” “*they are amazing,*” “*they are gifted and capable,*” among others, those phrases helped us to build a referential idea about the environment and attitudes, in which the community accept disabled people within their social structural and it is conceptualized in the following paragraph:

The community receives disabled people with a feeling of empathy, respect and a high admiration. The community considers them as an essential part of the society and observes them as a model to follow. Disabled people are admired because of their way to be, to behave, and to face the life.

Moreover, phrases like: “*emotional people,*” “*fighters,*” “*commitment,*” “*facility to recognize words,*” “*they used to be more productive,*” “*persistence,*” “*no matter their condition they reach their goals,*” “*great at communicating things,*” among others, helped us to recognize how the community describe this group of people. We conclude that,

Disabled people are human beings guided by their emotions; they are defined as people who are committed, fighters, perseverance, they achieve their goals no matter their limitation, they are gifted in a different way and because of its conditions and limitations they develop so much others abilities like effective communication and the recognition of situations and objects.

Basing on the results, we can perceive an open attitude from the community towards disabled people. We can notice that the community has a great predisposition to accept this specific group of people. The community has clear that people with disabilities can highly contribute to our society and because of its way of life they also have a lot to teach us. It means, considering the participants’ voices and opinions, society can integrate the people with disabilities in the social and educational structures without any limitation in terms of stereotyping, discrimination, or marginalization because of its condition.

Nevertheless, the community also expressed that in order to achieve this goal it is necessary to analyze other variables which limit an effective and complete inclusion. An additional category and idea that constantly emerged during the data analysis process and which contribute to this study was the changes we need to make in the political system and the scaffolding structures we need to develop or incorporate to support disabled people. Those changes are portrayed in the following chart.

CATEGORY II: REGULATIONS AND ADAPTATION FOR AN EFFECTIVE AND COMPLETE INCLUSION	A. Political Regulations	Norms and policies
	B. Adaptations in structures and systems	1. Concrete Material 2. Guiding and communicative systems 3. Integrative environment

“*Help*” was one of the most repeated words mentioned by the community, making an emphasis on inclusion. We have a general knowledge that some of the political, institutional, labor and social systems do not have solid regulations that foster inclusion, and also by simple observation we can notice that many of our structures: building, transport system, among others, do not have the required adaptations to scaffold people with disabilities.

According to the data analysis, we can also perceive that the community know and understand those needs and they say that it is highly important to make adaptations in our political regulations as the first step to achieve a complete inclusion. Some of the participants’ ideas were: “*political changes,*” “*they also have rights,*” “*legal norms,*” “*governmental support,*” “*rules,*” “*university regulations,*”

etc. Considering the information provided at the beginning of this paper, we can assume that the first step to make such a big change within the inclusion area is to socialize with the community all the rules and legal norms that support disabled people. We think that is a lack of knowledge in the community in relation to this field. Thus, we conclude that this is one of the main reasons the legal norms are not effectively applied.

Moreover, during the event the participants expressed that it is not only necessary changes in the legal statutes and norms, but also it is essential to make an emphasis in the structures of our building and communicative systems. Some of the ideas provides by the community were: “*systems*,” “*guiding pets*,” “*signs*,” “*braille*,” “*safe environment*,” “*being a human*,” “*a good treatment*,” among others. Those ideas guided us to conclude that it is important to propose changes and adaptations in some areas based on concrete material, guiding and communicative systems, and the creation of integrative environment. As it was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the outcomes of this research will serve as great foundation in the following stages of this project, which main objective is to propose new legal norms and adaptation to achieve a complete and effective inclusion in the social, labor and educational field.

Basing on the outcomes of this study, Milagro State University in Ecuador has started working on some processes and activities to deal with educational inclusion. The university has designed the academic major “*Inclusive Education*.” The objective is to apply some modifications in terms of content, instructional strategies, inclusive resources among others in order to attend diversity, opportunities and the challenge to keep a bilateral education. According to López (2006) it is necessary to train teachers based on diversity in order to foster social cohesion and to break stereotyping.

It has also been applied some inclusive activities, developing social and cognitive abilities among people with disabilities. The methodology applied to approach disabled people allowed us to know, through a qualitative view, the level of the performance and socio-cultural abilities developed at the moment of participating in the following activities:

- Inclusive Olympic games: developing physical abilities
- Multidisciplinary activities, involving people with and without any type of disability which allow the development of mental health.
- Collaborative work, helping disabled people to work on productivity and confidence.
- Teamwork in which people acquired personal autonomy and cognitive abilities.
- Two-ways learning among people with and without disabilities, developing social integration and a humanist spirit.
- Working with leaders; this activity fosters moral and ethical values as interdisciplinary axes which are portrayed in the social and family areas.
- Changing mindset; integrating themselves in the society, accepting, adapting, and valuing their capacities
- Multidisciplinary work, helping disabled people to be more emphatic and communicative
- Being active, which diminishes the barriers that limit learning
- Using resources, creating new inclusive resources considering individual needs
- Being a group leader, helping people with disabilities being stricter, innovators, and creative.

CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of this research study permit to diagnose the current situation in terms of inclusion structure in our community in Ecuador; thus, it is very gratifying to conclude that:

- The community shared a feeling of empathic and admiration towards people with disability, but it is necessary to continue conducting events based on intercultural issues which respond to inclusion and the implementation of inclusive multidisciplinary activities

- The society has a great predisposition and openness to welcome people with disability; however, it is necessary to know the educational especial needs of each person.
- Inclusion is framed by disability issues; but it responds to the diversity which requires the integration of disabled people in our social and educational structures without limitations
- The research methodology applied using ATLAS.ti and the coding analysis allowed us to conduct a descriptive study to go deeper on the processes in relation of inclusion, and community’s attitudes towards disabled people collecting information directly from community’s voices.
- It does not exist a standardized formula to effectively promote inclusion
- Society is strongly attached to the political and social demands; however, they need to be active participants to foster equality, equity, and access.
- The current strategies, organizational structures, and infrastructures do not always respond to diversity
- Poor knowledge about inclusion and regulations guide community to discrimination, marginalization, and overprotection.

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