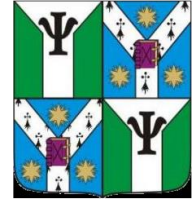**Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași**

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Doctoral School of Psychology and Educational Sciences

Ph.D. Thesis

ATTITUDES TOWARD DISABILITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES: EVALUATING THE PERCEPTION AND ROLES OF TOYS DEPICTING DISABILITIES

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The rationale for the Research Project

Undoubtedly, there is a growing interest in investigating disability and numerous related factors, concepts, and problematics. The present scientific approach is located on the border between moral psychology, social psychology, and special psychopedagogy, aligning with recent trends in research through its interdisciplinary character and, above all, through its extended implications both on a theoretical and practical level. Exploring the perceptual mechanisms associated with disabilities involves an organized and rigorous approach, all the more necessary when considering the examination of some associated variables from the area of moral psychology.

Disability perception is a crucial psychosocial factor that influences not only how society treats those who are disabled but also how the moral code of individuals and groups is oriented toward disability rights. We consider it crucial to promote positive attitudes toward people with disabilities in order to fight the stigma that may lead to their social exclusion. Thus, a deeper comprehension of the mechanisms associated with this emotional and cognitive evaluative process, as well as the factors that influence the perception of disability among children and adults, might support the reduction of prejudices associated with disability and, by extension, the promotion of social inclusion.

At the same time, a considerable proportion of people in our culture are motivated by the aspiration to achieve physical perfection, which emphasizes those who are successful, athletic, and appealing. The use of social media and other forms of sociocultural pressure are two of the many factors that contribute to the endorsement of ideal body stereotypes and the social standards for attractiveness. These factors also play a role in shaping people's perceptions of the physical appearance of others: having a physical impairment would not match this stereotype and it might cause a variety of unfavorable attitudes. Thus, in the present thesis, the focus is also placed on toys with some form of physical limitation (i.e., depicting physical disabilities), as well as the possible role these toys may play as instructional tools that are accessible to all children in kindergarten. This focus is especially motivated by the fact that, despite the growing number of disability awareness and inclusion programs, children with disabilities still face negative attitudes and social exclusion from typically developing children. The consequences of these negative attitudes affect various aspects of their lives, such as their academic achievement, essential mental health components, and overall quality of life. Thus, building on previous findings related to the role of play in inclusive education and inclusive

practices, we built and tested an integrative, multidimensional conceptual model to understand the factors influencing children's perceptions and attitudes toward disability.

In addition to the theoretical input concerning children's and adults' attitudes toward disability, the factors shaping and underlying these attitudes, and, more importantly, the interplay between children, parents, and teachers concerning inclusion, the results of the empirical findings from the present thesis might highlight significant practical implications. The current scientific approach is the first to experimentally and longitudinally explore the use of specific toys (special toys/ toys depicting disabilities/impairments) to promote positive attitudes toward disability. Given the multidimensional view of our findings, the results presented in the present paper might effectively shape inclusive educational and social programs aimed at promoting positive views on disability and the acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities.

Thesis Organization and Chapters' Overview

There are four major sections to this thesis. In the first chapter, we provide a broad overview of the core purpose of our study, focusing on the theoretical and practical contributions we made to the area of special education. In the second chapter, we provided a comprehensive literature review organized around five themes: Perspectives related to disability: theories and models, Disability and normative ethics, Attitudes and representations toward disability, Disability in Romania: a historical perspective, Inclusive educational means: toys depicting disabilities.

The first theoretical direction, i.e., Perspectives related to disability, i.e., theories and models of disability, comprises a discussion of five different theoretical models of disability, including a summary of each model's specifics and an explanation of how each model was constructed as a reaction to the model before it. We discuss the moral-religious model, the medical, the social, the identity, and the human rights models of disability and their implications regarding societal attitudes toward disability. Next, the second chapter discusses the dimensions related to morality in relation to disability, i.e., the utilitarian and deontological perspectives, and the ethics of care.

Next, the theoretical approach of the present paper continues with an overview of disability in Romania and the ongoing transition from segregation to inclusion. Finally, we discuss the attitudes and representations of disability, synthesized following two directions,

i.e., the theory and practice of inclusive education and toys depicting disabilities, the primary focus of this thesis.

Chapter three comprises the empirical findings of four studies related to this thesis's primary, general theme, i.e., disability. The first study - Spontaneous representations of disability and attitudes toward inclusive educational practices: A mixed approach - aimed to (a) examine non-disabled adults' spontaneous representation of disability and the specific associations related to adults and children with disabilities and (b) examine participants' general perception of specific inclusive educational practices and the potential impact of disabled people on children. The second study - Are attitudes toward disability different when we refer to children versus adults?- investigated whether participants' attitudes toward children and adults with disabilities significantly differ. We also examined demographic factors (gender, age, educational level, parental status, contact with a friend or family member with a disability) and perceived morality in relation to attitudes toward children and adults with disabilities. Next, the third study - Toys with disabilities: factors associated with their acceptance as inclusive educational means – explored adults participants' perception of inclusive toys (i.e., toys with disabilities) and their opinion regarding their use and appropriateness as toys for preschool children, in addition to their willingness to buy such toys.

Finally, the last empirical investigation – the fourth study - is a longitudinal experimental study called Using toys as potential inclusive educational means: a longitudinal approach involving children, parents, and teachers. This was the most extensive research, and its primary aim was to test the Contact Hypothesis by using toys depicting physical disabilities/ impairments as the object of contact. The study involved children, parents, and teachers and two measurement moments. We explored whether the presence of specific toys (i.e., a toy in a wheelchair and one with a prosthetic leg) might contribute to the changes in children's attitudes toward disability. Additionally, we investigated the links between parents' and teachers' views on disability, empathy, their views toward the inclusion of children with disability, and children's emotions and cognitions regarding disability.

Based on the results of these four studies, the last chapter, i.e., Chapter IV, comprises a final discussion involving the summary of results, conclusions, and recommendations regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities (with a particular focus on children).

Empirical findings

Objective 1. Exploring the general perception of disability and toys depicting disabilities (adults)

Objective 2. Exploring the attitudes toward disability (adults)

Objective 3. Exploring how toys depicting disabilities might contribute to inclusive education (i.e., might work as inclusive educational means in kindergartens) – adults & children

All these objectives were translated into published research articles (i.e., two articles published, one accepted – currently going under production procedures, and one currently under review).

Study	Article title	Journal	Status
1	Spontaneous representations of disability and attitudes toward inclusive educational practices: A mixed approach	Postmodern Openings (WOS)	Accepted, published
2	Are attitudes toward disability different when we refer to children versus adults?	International Journal of Disability, Development and Education (WOS)	Accepted, published
3	Toys with disabilities: factors associated with their acceptance as inclusive educational means	International Journal of Disability, Development and Education (WOS)	Accepted, publishing process ongoing
4	Using Toys as Potential Inclusive Educational Means: A Longitudinal Approach Involving Children, Parents, and Teachers	Social Psychology of Education (WOS)	Under review

Study 1.

Summary of results

The present study's primary aims were a) to explore non-disabled adults' spontaneous representation of disability and the specific associations related to adults and children with disabilities; to investigate participants' general perception of specific inclusive educational practices and the potential impact of contact with disabled individuals on children. We used a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) approach in a sample of 628 participants aged 18 to 82 (M=28.59, SD=11.50). Our results suggested that most explicit representations of disability were negatively valenced, i.e., people generally used pessimistic and detrimental related words. Psychomotor deficiencies comprised the most frequent disability category associated with disabled adults, while autism was the most frequent disability related to disabled children. Participants considered that the inclusion of physically disabled children (compared to children with intellectual disabilities) in public schools has a more positive effect on non-disabled children. The previous contact with a friend or a family member with a disability significantly and positively impacted the general attitude toward disability and inclusive educational practices. Results are discussed regarding their practical implications for the educational system and specific strategies related to inclusive public policies.

Study 2.

Summary of Results

In the current research, we aimed to investigate whether there are significant differences in participants' attitudes towards adults with disabilities (AWD) and children with disabilities

(CWD). We also explored a series of demographical factors (i.e., gender, age, educational level, parental status, contact with a friend or a family member with a disability) and participants' perceived morality, and their potential associations with attitudes towards AWD and CWD. Our sample consisted of 667 adults aged 18 to 67 (M=28.71, SD=11.40), most of them with a university degree. Results suggested a generally more favorable attitude towards CWD compared to AWD. Younger participants with children and lower levels of education had more favorable attitudes towards AWD and CWD. We found no significant associations related to participants' gender or morality. Results are discussed within their relevance for inclusive social and educational programs designed to increase disability awareness.

Study 3.

Citation: Maftei, A., & Gherguț, A. (2022). Toys with disabilities: factors associated with their acceptance as inclusive educational means. *International Journal of Disability Development and Education* (in press).

Summary of findings

The primary aim of this research was to explore the participants' perception of inclusive toys (i.e., toys with disabilities) as suitable playing tools for preschool children and their willingness to buy such toys. Our cross-sectional design involved 738 Romanian adults aged 18 to 61 (M=29.72). We used ten images containing toys with and without disabilities and addressed three primary questions: 1) How suitable do you consider this toy for preschool children aged 3 to 6, regardless of their gender?; 2) Would you agree with introducing and using toys with disabilities (for example, dolls or stuffed animals in wheelchairs) in regular, public preschool classrooms? and 3) Would you buy (for your child or another child) a toy with disabilities, such as the ones described above?. Results suggested that participants who reported having a friend or a family member with disabilities were more willing to accept and buy inclusive toys. Overall, participants (with higher rates among the younger ones) seemed to consider toys with disabilities more suitable for preschool children than their regular versions (i.e., without disabilities). Results are discussed concerning potential effective inclusive education practices involving toys with disabilities in preschool settings.

Study 4.

Citation: Maftei, A., & Gherguț, A. (2023). Using Toys as Potential Inclusive Educational Means: A Longitudinal Approach Involving Children, Parents, and Teachers. (under review)

Summary of findings

Children with disabilities are frequently discriminated against by their peers. The Contact Hypothesis has been demonstrated to foster favorable views toward various social groups, including people with disabilities. Our longitudinal, experimental approach tested this hypothesis by using toys depicting physical disabilities/ impairments as the object of contact. The study involved children, parents, and teachers and two measurement moments. We explored whether the presence of specific toys (i.e., a toy in a wheelchair and one with a prosthetic leg) might contribute to the changes in children's attitudes toward disability. Additionally, we investigated the links between parents' and teachers' views on disability, empathy, their views toward the inclusion of children with disability, and children's emotions and cognitions regarding disability. Overall, our results suggested that (1) Regardless of the stimuli (toy/image, with or without disabilities), the children in the experimental group reported more positive attitudes compared to the control group; (2) The experimental condition, i.e., the exposure effect had a significant moderating effect on the link between children's attitudes at Time 1 and Time 2; (3) Parents' positive attitudes toward disability were significantly associated with children's attitudes toward specific disabilities; (4) Teachers' empathy (Time 2) was higher in the experimental groups. Finally, we discuss our results concerning their theoretical and practical implication for personal, educational, and social views on disability and inclusion. This is the first study to explore using toys depicting disabilities/impairments as potential inclusive educational means in a longitudinal approach involving children, parents, and teachers.

Summary, conclusions, and recommendations

The present thesis aimed to comprise theoretical and empirical data on disability and the potential ways of using toys depicting disabilities as inclusive education tools. The theoretical information presented in Chapter II aimed to offer a detailed perspective on various fields of knowledge and practice related to disability. Moreover, the details offered within the theoretical part comprised the basis of the four studies further presented in Chapter III, i.e., the empirical evidence.

The results from the first suggested an overwhelming majority of negatively-valanced explicit representations of disability (about 70%), as well as negative emotional cues and personal attributes associated with disability. Furthermore, when compared to older participants, younger participants expressed more favorable attitudes toward the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities; they also reported that children's contact with a child with disabilities would have a general positive impact and would also increase their positive related attitude toward disability. Our findings also indicated that participants who did not have children were much more supportive of the idea of enrolling children with intellectual disabilities in public schools than those who were parents. Finally, our data also revealed that psychomotor deficiencies, general physical disabilities, and intellectual disabilities were the most common disability categories linked with disabled adults. Autism, intellectual disability, and Down syndrome were the most common disabilities affecting children. These findings are specifically important when discussing inclusive policies and practices, especially within the public educational system.

The results from the second study highlighted that, generally, there are significant discrepancies in how people without disabilities see adults and children with disabilities. Our most significant result was related to the significantly more favorable attitudes toward disabled children vs. disabled adults. This raises an essential question: does this difference assist or hinder inclusive programs to enhance disability awareness and combat prejudice against people with disabilities? The answer to this question should be further determined in further, more extensive studies.

The third study is, to our knowledge, the first to explore how individuals perceive toys with disabilities and whether they consider them appropriate for kindergartens' use. We focused on this specific research topic due to its potential to change teachers' and children

without disabilities' attitudes and perspectives regarding disability. Our results suggested that younger individuals and those without children preferred toys with disabilities (instead of regular toys) more than those older and with children. Also, our findings suggested that previous interaction with a family member or a friend with disabilities fostered more favorable views regarding the use of inclusive toys in preschool classrooms, in line with earlier studies on disability attitudes. The present results are crucial for future disability perception and inclusive education research, but especially for inclusive policies that may include such playing tools in preschoolers' daily activities.

Finally, the fourth study was built on a framework that included cultural norms and traditions, parental attitudes and practices, variables related to the educational environment, in addition to the variables related to the (typical) child's personality and attitudes. Our results suggested that, regardless of the stimulus (toy/image, with or without disabilities), children in the experimental group expressed higher positive attitudes than the children in the control group. When they were shown photographs depicting a child in a wheelchair or a child with a prosthetic limb, the children in the experimental group were more willing than children in the control group to participate in everyday interactions or friendships with these potential classmates. Our findings also revealed that authoritative and permissive parenting styles were significantly associated with more negative parental views regarding disability. On the other hand, more empathetic parents had more favorable views on disability, and more positive views on disability were significantly related to the perceptiveness of more empathic children.

The results from the fourth study also suggested that, overall, teachers' empathy in the experimental groups was higher, as were teachers' perspectives on children's empathy. The children in these classrooms expressed considerably more favorable attitudes toward the toy in a wheelchair and the picture of a child with a prosthetic limb than those in the control groups. However, classrooms with children from the control group and teachers with the highest scores (i.e., the most positive) regarding attitudes toward inclusion and disability had the lowest scores regarding children's attitudes toward the typical child (image), the child with a prosthetic leg (image), and the wheelchair toy.

However, our fourth study is the first to examine inclusive kindergarten education using toys depicting disabilities. We tested our assumptions (built on the integrative framework previously described) about children, parents, and teachers using a longitudinal, experimental method. Overall, our results suggested two important outcomes:

(1) Toys with disabilities might effectively work as potential inclusive educational means since they seem to foster more positive attitudes toward disability;

(2) It might also mean that regardless of the valence or the nature of the stimuli we use (positive or negative), children develop more positive attitudes toward that object.

Thus, our findings suggested two outcomes of exposing children to the toys and images that we used. The first is the positive side of mere exposure or the contact effect, which increases favorable attitudes toward a desirable attitude/perception/behavior, in our instance, disability. However, the dark side of the mere exposure/contact effect suggests that negatively-valenced stimuli also affect children's emotions, cognitions, and behaviors. In other words, it might be possible that if we used undesirable/negative stimuli in our study, children might have positively perceived them since they would also become familiar.

As a general conclusion, the present thesis highlights important aspects of the complex mechanisms underlying Romanian adults' attitudes and knowledge related to disability. Additionally, this is the first research to explore the potential effect of using toys depicting disabilities in kindergarten settings using a scientific, experimental approach. Though in need of further research – using more extensive and diverse samples of participants, the results of the present studies may open significant novel research pathways that would help us understand the complexity of disability and effective inclusive education practices. We believe that introducing toys with disabilities into regular, preschool public classrooms, regardless of the kindergartens' status (whether they integrated children with disabilities or not), would help decrease the stigma associated with disability by familiarizing the educational staff and typical children with the characteristics and knowledge related to various disabilities. Based on the mere exposure effect as well as the Theory of Persuasive Communication, we believe that by including toys with disabilities in their everyday play, children will be more acquainted with the characteristics of physical disabilities, will ask teachers related questions, and will thus increase their knowledge of disability.

In addition to theoretical input on children's and adults' views about disability, the mechanisms forming and supporting these attitudes, and, most significantly, the interaction between children, parents, and teachers regarding inclusion, our observations have important practical relevance. This is the first research to experimentally and longitudinally examine the use of special toys (toys depicting disabilities/impairments) to promote positive disability attitudes. Our extensive research of the associated factors showed their practical impact. Our

multidimensional findings may help create inclusive educational and social initiatives that promote positive attitudes toward disability and the acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities.

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