

ACCESSIBILITY OF CULTURAL EDUCATION IN ITS BROADEST SENSE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN LATVIA

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Abstract

Although Latvia can be justifiably proud of its many cultural achievements, there are still problems for people with disabilities to exercise their right to access culture both inside and outside the capital city. The purpose of the research paper is to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the cultural policy of Latvia with a scope on social inclusion. Various documents regulating cultural policy mention the need to ensure access to the cultural environment and to foster cultural diversity. However, those responsible for implementing cultural policy seem to either misinterpret the documents or are unable to implement the planned improvements due to other circumstances. Hence the article will first briefly outline the scope of cultural diversity in order to show that a cultural product created by people with disabilities is part of cultural diversity. The article will focus on the concept of “cultural education”, analysing the most common present usage of it by cultural policy actors, and considering whether this concept should not be used on a much broader sense. This would raise the awareness of the necessity of cultural education and thus of the necessity for accessibility to cultural education for people with disabilities in cultural institutions both in cities and in the countryside. The research paper provides an overview of the data collected from surveying cultural institutions of Latvia in 2017 and 2020, with a regard to the availability of cultural processes and cultural education in Latvia. The author strives to emphasize that participation in cultural activities has to be perceived as cultural education in a broader sense, as the participation process brings new cultural knowledge to people.

Probably the reason for the unsatisfactory environment and human resource accessibility is the fact that accessibility has not been emphasized in the currently most significant documents regulating cultural education.

The environment accessibility in the cultural institutions of Latvia is insufficient and does not stimulate the availability of cultural education opportunities for people with disabilities.

Keywords: *people with disabilities, cultural education, environment accessibility.*

Introduction

In the 21st century, cultural education and art are increasingly regarded as societal issues in a broader sense, also viewed from the perspective of social justice as a right to equal access to opportunities.

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity emphasizes that a factor for development is the fact that “Cultural diversity expands the range of opportunities available to everyone; it is one of the key elements of development, not only in terms of economic growth, but also as a means of achieving an acceptable intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence” [UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001].

This statement is particularly important for people with disabilities, as they are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Culture not only encourages the development of identity and a sense of belonging, but also reflects the diversity of coexistence. Cultural researcher Annamari Laaksonen in her work on cultural accessibility emphasizes that “While culture has increased its importance and presence in economic terms and in relation to the market, it has also manifested itself as an important element of social and economic transformation, social cohesion and education for civic democratic participation” [Laaksonen 2010: 8].

People with disabilities are only slightly different in terms of some aspect of their functional ability, but they crave for the same things as everyone: acceptance, respect, justice. This aspect has also been confirmed by the results of the survey carried out among the participants of the choir *Nāc līdzās!* (“Come along!”) after the Centennial Song Festival, where the answer “I felt equal” scored the highest.¹

There are different definitions of cultural diversity. Most of them name similar components that compose this diversity – ethnic, gender, racial, religious and socio-economic diversity etc. – that must be able to coexist in one social unit. Hereby culture plays a leading role in human life. Through intellectual development and personal growth, it helps to develop various skills for the development of creative activity, furthermore, it encourages not only personal development, but also the sense of first regional, then national identity and belonging.

Methodology

Three methods were used in the methodology of the research. The first method – content analysis of the texts of international and Latvian legal acts, in which a regulation was sought that would refer both to the concept of cultural education and to the implementation of rights to access cultural education for people with

¹ *Nāc līdzās!* choir survey took place in July 2018 after the XXVI Latvian Song and XVI Dance Festival, 19 choir singers with functional disorders participated in the survey.

disabilities. Two methods have been applied to collect data on the availability of environmental and human resources in Latvian cultural institutions – first, telephone interviews with the management of the cultural institutions located in Riga and, second, an Internet survey by e-mailing to the management of the cultural institutions located outside Riga. These methods were chosen because it was necessary to obtain data from all over Latvia, which is a wide geographical range that makes face-to-face interviews difficult. Both closed and open questions were asked in the survey. Telephone interviews certainly provided more accurate data, as it was possible to clarify questions if necessary. The advantage of the Internet method is the ability to collect as much data as possible. Disadvantage – in the open-ended questions, the interviewees could avoid objective answers if they did not understand the nature of the question.

Discussion

The article provides the analysis of the most important documents regulating the cultural policy of Latvia with regard to the people with special needs, alongside with the implementation practices of these documents. In Latvia the state policy on cultural education is developed by the Ministry of Culture. The document “Creative Latvia” issued by the ministry states the cultural policy guidelines for 2014–2020. Setting priorities for actions in the time period, the document implies the necessity: “to strengthen the existent and to promote the accessibility of **new cultural services** in cultural institutions without any discrimination, including promoting **social inclusion for persons with functional disabilities**” [Cultural policy guidelines 2014–2020 “Creative Latvia” 2014]. This sounds nice in theory, however, in real life the situation concerning people with special needs has not significantly improved as for the second half of 2020¹, although access to culture is a fundamental basic right for all citizens. The direction suggested by the guidelines could not be followed, because from the very beginning there were neither specific action plans, nor tasks set on how to do it. Likewise, it was not indicated which institutions would be responsible for the inclusion of people with disabilities in society in all spheres of life, thus also regarding access to culture and cultural education. The Ministry of Culture should have paid more attention to the environment and human resource accessibility in various cultural institutions in Latvia.

The Guidelines for the Cultural Education Strategy for 2014–2020 state that “cultural education is a component of the education system of Latvia, referring to

¹ This is factually confirmed by the data of the survey of Latvian cultural centers, cultural houses, community houses, meeting houses and other cultural institutions outside Riga conducted by the author in August 2020.

all the levels of education in the fields of culture and creative industries, including continued education, as well as general education in culture, developing an individual's creativity and talent in a lifelong learning perspective" [Cultural Policy Guidelines for 2014–2020 "Creative Latvia" 2014]. From the aforementioned it is possible to draw a conclusion that cultural education is a broader concept that shall be attributed to educational processes of all levels and duration. Particular attention should be paid to the final part of the statement – "developing an individual's creativity and talent in a lifelong learning perspective". This aspect referred to cultural education should receive more attention on the state policy level in today's ever-changing world, where individual identities may be threatened in the context of globalization. Lifelong learning is very important for the target group consisting of people with disabilities, as it is often not possible for people in this group to obtain a sufficiently high level of formal education.

Society is in the state of constant dynamic development, thus its value system and its attitude towards others is changing – where stereotypes used to prevail, the differences are accepted. With this in mind, the interests and rights of the various groups in society must also be respected, following the principle of equality and eliminating discrimination. Culture shall be applied as one of the tools or transformers that must promote social inclusion for people with disabilities. The right to participate, to get involved, to express one's opinions, help individuals to experience the sense of human dignity. Culture provides people with an opportunity to understand that they are part of a community, and therefore participation in cultural processes should become a high priority in cultural policy.

In the Latvian cultural policy guidelines for 2014–2020 "Creative Latvia", performing a SWID analysis of the situation in the Latvian cultural sector, it has been established that a relatively large part of the society does not participate in cultural activities and processes, remaining outside the positive impact of culture. One of the target groups, which largely remains outside these processes, is people with disabilities, because, according to the data of the survey conducted by the author, the environment and human resource accessibility in the cultural centres of Latvia are poorly developed. Unfortunately, the SWID analysis of the Ministry of Culture does not mention the poor accessibility of cultural centres as a weak point.

In order to study the environment and human resource accessibility in the cultural institutions of Latvia located outside Riga, in August 2020 all types of cultural institutions of Latvia – cultural centres, cultural houses, community houses, clubs and others enlisted by the cultural information site Kulturasdati.lv – were invited to participate in a survey. A total of 420 e-mails were sent out. It should be noted that the database of e-mails of cultural institutions unfortunately contained

mistakes, therefore it was not possible to reach some of the addressees. However, by repeated requests and response clarifications it was possible to obtain answers to the survey questions from 328 respondents. The aim of the survey was to assess the general situation of environment accessibility in cultural institutions, without analysing in detail either regional distribution or the affiliation of the surveyed cultural institutions.

Some of the questions were in closed form so that the exact percentage of environment accessibility could be determined. But questions regarding human resource accessibility and being open to work with people with disabilities as team members were asked in an open form so that the answers could be analysed in detail.

It should be noted that the results of the survey revealed previous hypothetical assumptions. A relatively positive news is that regarding the question about the possibility to enter the cultural institution through the front door, respectively, to enter the building as such – there is a ramp, the door is wide enough, there are no doorsteps – 81% or 267 respondents answered positively. However, it is not possible to enter 19% or 61 cultural institutions at all. It is possible that this number could be slightly higher, considering the number of non-respondents. So almost one fifth of cultural institutions are inaccessible to people with disabilities!

Regarding the answers to the next question, in which the institutions provide answers about the independent access of people with disabilities to the audience halls inside the buildings – whether there are no doorsteps, the door is wide enough, there are elevators in case the hall is located higher than the ground floor, the number of positive answers is already decreasing – in 76% or 250 cultural institutions people with disabilities can enter the hall, but in almost a quarter – 24% or 79 institutions, this is not possible. In this case, if people with disabilities can enter the building independently, they still need help to be able to enter the hall, which is actually the main place of cultural activities in a cultural centre.

Considering that people with disabilities in Latvia have nevertheless shown a desire to be active not only as consumers of a cultural product, but also as its creators, as proven by their participation in the Integrative Art Festival *Nāc līdzās!* (Come along!) organized by the *Nāc līdzās!* Foundation, singing in the choir *Nāc līdzās!* and considering the fact that also on the stage of the Centenary Song and Dance Festival concerts as members of several choirs there were people in wheelchairs, the survey included the question about the possibilities of people with disabilities to access the stage independently. Unfortunately, the answers to these questions were remarkably negative concerning environment access. Only 10% or 34 cultural institutions have the opportunity for people with disabilities to get on stage independently. In 90% or 296 cases this is not possible. These data closely coincide with the research on

the survey data of Riga city cultural institutions. Even in the biggest cultural centres in Riga – *Iļģuciems*, *Ziemeļblāzma*, *Imanta*, *Ritums*, as well as in all the children and youth centres and music and art schools it is not possible to get to the stage without the help of an assistant. Exceptions are VEF Culture Palace, art space *Mākslas Telpa*, the National Library of Latvia, all of which have been recently built or renovated.

To continue, a totally unacceptable fact for the 21st century cultural institutions is posed by the data on the environment accessibility of toilets. For people with disabilities, it seems self-evident that when visiting a cultural institution, toilets are usually also visited. Unfortunately, in 52% or 171 cultural institutions this is not possible for people with special needs. This makes the majority of the surveyed institutions. And, in fact, this answer to a seemingly non-priority question is a possible key to why people with special needs avoid attending cultural events. Because one cannot deal without attendance to their physiological needs while being present at a cultural event or engaging in artistic activities.

This fact can also partly explain why only 11% or 38 cultural institutions in their amateur art groups engage people with special needs. We need to take into consideration that people with disabilities in Latvia are often unemployed because of difficulties in finding a job, which, in turn, means that they have more free time to spend meaningfully if the environment conditions are favourable. Nonetheless, there are no participants with disabilities in creative activities of 290 cultural institutions. Respondents who do not have any special needs participants in amateur art groups have mentioned that there are no people with disabilities in their region. This statement is unbelievable, because the official statistics show that there are people with special needs or disabilities in all the regions of Latvia [VDEĀVK uzskaitē esošās pilngadīgās personas ar invaliditāti pēc invaliditātes smaguma pakāpes un administratīvās teritorijas 2019]. Rather, it addresses the fact that there was no desire to approach these people and invite them to any activities in cultural institutions, or there is no environment access. The question of how intensely local municipalities and cultural centres that do not have environment access have invested or sought financial resources to make the environment accessible, still remains open.

Likewise, the expressed claim that people with disabilities have not expressed a desire to participate in amateur art groups cannot be regarded as a valid excuse, because the data of the survey clearly indicate the extent to which cultural centres are still inaccessible, and it should be clear that a person with disabilities, if he/she does not have an assistant during the day, might not feel the desire to participate in the local cultural life actively if there is a lack of basic facilities in the cultural centre, such as specially equipped toilets, the opportunity to enter both the building and the audience hall.

Responses confirming the participation of people with disabilities in amateur art groups also name the number of participants ranging from 1 to 3; only two responses provide either 8 or 10 participants. Thus, some of the answers to the question “Would your amateur art group leaders be willing to accept and work with people with disabilities – both physical and mental disabilities?” are similar to those of other cultural institution management representative responses: “It depends on the attitude of the rest of the group members. Unfortunately, there are different reactions. Some people would refuse to work together with a special needs person.” In Latvia, high goals have been set in amateur art, the achievement of which can be hindered by the people with disabilities: “I think that people with physical disabilities – yes. Of course, given the type of amateur art group involved. If dancing, then it would be difficult, even impossible, because accordingly it is necessary to form such a group with more than one participant. If singing and playing a musical instrument, then it is possible. With mental issues, I do not think it is possible. It may differ in a very specific way. More specified answer can be provided by the leaders of the amateur art groups, who must have the appropriate knowledge and qualifications. In our institution, each group has its own task and goals to be achieved during the season. There are Song Festival groups, for which the achievement of the set tasks requires a lot of input, certain skills, physical fitness, quality, etc., which is not always easy to access, not all the groups meet the selection criteria and can participate in the Song Festival.”

Regardless of the difficulties, people with disabilities want to be involved in cultural processes, as proven by the practice of the Foundation *Nāc līdzās!* that has been serving the development of the culture of people with disabilities in Latvia for 24 years. Being aware of the fact that cultural activities of people with disabilities in the country are neglected, the Foundation has for several years expressed a wish to receive a command from the Ministry of Culture to perform this work. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Culture has not supported this request, considering that the functions of cultural education for people with disabilities are already executed in various music and art schools. However, these are only a few distinct cases where teachers are ready to provide tuition for children with special needs, such as in Jugla Music School, which admits blind and visually impaired children because it is located near Strazdumuiža boarding school that grants access to general education for blind and visually impaired children. An individual case is Dace Milzere, a teacher at the Liepāja 2nd Music School, who provides guitar classes for a blind student. Anyway, checking, for example, the accessibility of Riga music and art schools¹, it can be concluded that

¹ In October 2017 telephone interviews were conducted with leading officials of 40 cultural institutions inside and outside Riga (receiving state or local municipality grants) – concert halls, theatres, cultural centres in Riga, art schools and Children and Youth centres in Riga.

accessibility is weak, because 4 out of 9 music schools cannot even offer people with disabilities a possibility to enter the building, in 8 out of 9 schools, children with disabilities do not have access to the stage, in 6 schools there are no toilets for people with disabilities.

Knowing that the proportion of persons with disabilities among the permanent population is gradually increasing (at the beginning of 2016 it was 8.8%, at the beginning of 2017 it was 9.3%, but at the beginning of 2018 – 9.7%) [Nacionālais attīstības plāns 2020: 107], the survey involved a future development-oriented question regarding readiness of the amateur art group managers to accept in their groups and to work with people with special needs – both physical and mental disabilities. The answers to this question were both ambivalent. In many cases, respondents mentioned that they could accept participants with a physical disability in their groups, but not with a mental disability, as this would require both additional knowledge and an additional person – an assistant to the manager. Some respondents have not thought about this issue at all so far. But in some of the answers there was a misunderstanding how to connect the performance goals set for amateur art groups (shows and competitions where high results are expected) with the participation of people with disabilities in the groups.

These answers suggest that there is difficulty to include people with disabilities in the cultural process, as long as amateur art is only focused on high results. Shouldn't it be rather regarded as a high-quality leisure time and investment in the development and education of one's personality? Is it a cultural education process in the first place?

Conclusion

The involvement of people with disabilities in cultural processes in Latvia is very weak. The explanation for that is the underdeveloped environment access. There is also no initiative from cultural institutions to involve people of this target group, as it requires additional resources – acquisition of new knowledge to work with people with disabilities, possibly additional people – assistants, possibly breaking stereotypes in the minds of the employees of the cultural sector. Involvement in cultural activities as an added value also sustains the development of interpersonal skills, develops feelings of empathy, openness, and ultimately gives feelings of happiness and being recognized as equal regarding the opportunities to participate.

Recommendations

Regarding the cultural processes involving people with disabilities, the Ministry of Culture should acknowledge that the cultural product created by these people has to be considered as equal to others, that the state and local authorities should

think more about the accessibility of culture for this group. There must be examined a closer cooperation with the non-governmental sector, which has been working on developing cultural processes for people with disabilities on its own initiative for many years. The Cultural Policy Guidelines for 2014–2020 also state that “an underused resource in improving governance is the opportunities for cooperation between the state and the non-governmental sector, strengthening self-government and developing effective cooperation models” [Cultural Policy Guidelines for 2014–2020 “Creative Latvia” 2014]. By improving cooperation with the non-governmental sector, the Ministry should improve tools that ensure equal access to cultural education opportunities and cultural product, thus contributing to the achievement of vital goals for individuals and society.

The term “cultural education” is mostly used by the Ministry of Culture to refer to the processes in cultural and art schools that children and young people attend to obtain professional art or music education. In the final report of the study “Cultural Education in Latvia: Accessibility, Demand, Quality” we cannot find information about the accessibility of cultural education for people with disabilities. In fact, the study only analyses professional cultural education at different levels, although the definition says that cultural education is also general education in the fields of culture, the development of each individual’s creative abilities and talents from a lifelong learning perspective [Klāsons, Tjarve, Kunda 2018]. Professional orientation could be only one aspect to be taken into account, because this concept should definitely be used in a broader scope today – in the 21st century. Cultural education is part of lifelong learning that receives increasing attention in the world today. In cultural education, too, it occurs in every activity when a person – a child or an adult – participates in a cultural activity by creating a cultural product or participating in the process as a consumer. A user of a cultural product must also be educated in order to be able to perceive, analyse and experience culture emotionally. Emotions are vital to human wellbeing, and music and other creative activities give them. In turn, education would promote the development of cultural understanding and expression competence.

Meanwhile, as a positive recommendation should be regarded the one suggested by the authors of the aforementioned study: “Accredited educational institutions that implement professional cultural education programmes by subordination are in the management of local authorities. Given that all municipalities have both children and adults with disabilities, wouldn’t it be time to develop and accredit programmes that are suitable for both children and adults with disabilities?” [Klāsons, Tjarve, Kunda 2018]. This recommendation should be taken into account, as it would change the future situation and the ratio of students with special needs in the total

number of students in arts-oriented and professional secondary cultural education institutions could increase.

In each of these processes, an individual educates oneself in one of the fields of culture. It is in this cultural education process that people with disabilities are especially supported, as they, due to the unavailability of the environment and human resources, do not have access to professional cultural education or have difficulty to follow a high level of education, such as people with intellectual disabilities. The functional impairments or disorders of people with disabilities often slow down their perceptual speed what refers to their vision, hearing, inability to move quickly and involving the whole body, intellectual abilities, often making it difficult to complete various tasks. However, for people with disabilities, participation in various cultural education processes improves their mental health and quality of life in general.

Access to various rights and freedoms – to be able to participate, to join, to express one's opinion – helps us to feel the respect that is important to us as human beings. Culture gives us the opportunity to understand that we are part of a community, and therefore participation in its processes should become a high priority.

“In 2027 Latvia is a country where everyone feels good. People are united by similar values and understanding of the order of things in the world; this is a society in which people care and support each other, and everyone is provided with sufficient living conditions and opportunities to improve them. People are able to maintain their psychological and emotional health, to balance professional and personal life, to enjoy the richness of cultural life and spend their free time to the fullest” [Nacionālais attīstības plāns 2020].

People with disabilities must have basic needs provided, including cultural education and equal participation. A society cannot be united, secure and open without strengthening social inclusion and developing empathy at the societal level.

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