



## Brief Report

## Knowledge and attitudes towards disability in Moldova: A qualitative study of young people's views



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## ABSTRACT

*Background:* People with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova continue to experience considerable discrimination and social exclusion. The Moldovan government recently affirmed their commitment to promote community integration. However, there remains limited evidence to facilitate understanding of these issues, and barriers to the integrative process.

*Objective:* This study explored the knowledge and attitudes towards disability of young people within Moldova.

*Methods:* A qualitative approach was adopted and 3 semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with schoolchildren (n = 12), aged 13–15 years. These interviews focussed on different aspects of disability, and community integration. Pictorial and written vignettes were used to stimulate discussion. The interviews were conducted and recorded in Romanian, and were subsequently translated into English to facilitate thematic data analysis.

*Results:* Identified themes included: (1) Knowledge and understanding of disability. The young people's knowledge was limited and framed by the medical model of disability; (2) Attitudes towards community integration. A bias against long-term care institutions, but differing views regarding integration; (3) Perceptions of barriers to community integration: (i) Cultural barriers. Negative, even hostile attitudes towards disability; (ii) Policy barriers. Poor support services; and (iii) Physical barriers. Ongoing issues regarding accessibility.

*Conclusions:* People with disabilities in Moldova experience negative cultural attitudes linked to an outdated conception of disability itself. There are inadequate community support services and infrastructure which act as barriers to inclusion. At present, there can be limited interaction and participation of people with disabilities within local communities, and so few opportunities to refute persistent stereotypes and stigma surrounding disability.

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For decades in Eastern Europe, the primary methods of care for children with disabilities have been either restriction to their home, or segregation within long-term residential care institutions,

isolated from the wider community.<sup>1</sup> There are currently more than 180,000 people with disabilities in Moldova.<sup>2</sup> (5.2% of the population), and over 1/3 of children with disabilities thought to reside in institutional care.<sup>1</sup> This is likely due to a lack of community-based support services,<sup>2–4</sup> alongside common acceptance of this practice.<sup>5</sup>

Moldova remains the least economically developed country in Europe, and has received increased scrutiny regarding human rights.<sup>2</sup> However, the government has recently affirmed their

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commitment to protect the rights of people with disabilities to legal capacity, and to promote community integration.<sup>6,7</sup> However, true integration is likely to be hindered through the persistence of restrictive Soviet era views on “defectives” or “invalids” following independence in 1991.<sup>8,9</sup> There remains a strong, pervasive stigma, likely perpetuated through the lack of visibility of and exposure to people with disabilities,<sup>10</sup> which was highlighted in the UN special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities recent report on Moldova.<sup>2</sup> However, there remains limited evidence available to facilitate understanding of these issues. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the knowledge and attitudes towards disability of young people within the local community surrounding a residential care institution in Moldova.

## Methods

### Study design

This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews to produce detailed data regarding the knowledge and attitudes of disability within the community surrounding a residential institution for children with disabilities in Moldova. The interviews utilised a topic guide with open questions, and vignettes to facilitate discussion (Appendix A). These were developed through review of the literature; input from local community members; and expert consultation.

### Recruitment

The study was conducted within the context of the local secondary school of a small town in Moldova. This location was selected based on its proximity to a residential institution, and the school management team were contacted to obtain their full and informed approval prior to the study. Recruitment packs were distributed to all 40 schoolchildren in the eligible age group (ages 13–15) during class. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents prior to inclusion. All written and verbal communication were translated into Romanian (the predominate language) throughout the study.

### Data collection

The final sample consisted of 12 schoolchildren, arranged into 3 focus groups. These were conducted between 16<sup>th</sup> May and 2nd June 2014 in a private room within the school, and lasted from 35 to 45 min. Open questions allowed participants to volunteer their own experiences with disability and to explore their understanding of particular issues. We adopted the vignette method as an appropriate tool for conducting research with children and young people.<sup>11</sup> One researcher facilitated each group, supported by a translator. All interviews were digitally recorded, with permission from the participants.

### Data analysis

The audio files were transcribed into English by a Romanian translator. These transcripts were anonymised and identifying details removed prior to being archived as digital word processed files.

The transcripts were read by two authors (KAM, SH), and a coding frame devised to comprise the initial themes identified. Relevant segments of text were selected and independently coded by the two authors according to these themes to facilitate thematic analysis.<sup>12</sup> The codes generated were discussed and collated in order to compare interpretations and identify common themes across participants' accounts.

## Ethics

Institutional ethical approval was obtained in advance from the University of Edinburgh. Informed consent was required from both participants and their parents prior to inclusion. Our interview questions were structured as to not explicitly require personal information to be given, and vignettes were utilised due to the age of participants.<sup>11</sup> We emphasised that participants could decline to answer any question, or withdraw at any point. Furthermore, we highlighted the availability of the guidance councillor within the school if they wished to speak about any personal issues that arose.

## Results

### Knowledge and understanding of disability

All participants were aware of people with disabilities within their community, although few had first-hand interactions. The broad categories of physical and mental disabilities were well known in all groups, and all groups were able to identify the first (“Vasile”) and second vignette (“Olga”) as descriptions of these, respectively. However, just one participant could state a specific condition (Down's Syndrome). The suggested causes of disabilities comprised traumatic injury or prenatal environmental factors (“radiation”, “alcohol”, “drugs”). Language used across the focus groups suggested a perceived dichotomy between people with (referred to as “abnormal”, “invalid”) and without disabilities.

Participants explained that factors considered as indicative of learning impairment were age-inappropriate behaviours (“40-something years old, but behaves like a thirteen year-old child”), or non-adherence to social convention (“does not control himself”). However, participants differed on the severity of “Olga's” learning disability, and its functional impact, with some suggesting “she would be able to do anything, because she doesn't have movement problems ... she can work”.

### Attitudes towards community integration

There was a common agreement that living with their family is the ideal circumstance for children with disabilities. The participants raised the importance of love and protection, contrasting this with life in an institution, suggesting “it's better if family love only surrounded him”, and that “[their] family can offer protection and help them ... they suffer [being institutionalised]”. In contrast, some participants felt that an institution could be beneficial for facilitating social interaction with other people with disabilities or when the family would not accept their child with disabilities (“If [they are] unwanted”). The other felt that the appropriateness of institutional care was related to the nature of the disability (“if [they] have a mental disability maybe is better for [them] to be in a special school with other people like [them]”).

Although there was a consensus that all people with disabilities could benefit from education, there were conflicting views on the appropriate educational context. Some participants stated all children with disabilities should be integrated into mainstream (“normal”) schools, and it was felt this could benefit all students. These included exposure to the “atmosphere of normal people” and promotion of social integration. One participant raised the broader point that the needs of people with disabilities require consideration whatever the educational context, and that there needs to be appropriate support provided.

### Perceptions of barriers to community integration

a) Cultural Barriers:

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