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NEURO-ATYPICAL INCLUSION THROUGH WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING: HOW TO MANAGE NEURO-ATYPICAL INDIVIDUALS THROUGH WIL FOR AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE OF WORK?

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ABSTRACT:

Through WIL programs, many individuals work with invisible neuro-atypical conditions (e.g. autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit disorder, gifted...). Often, individuals do not tell their WIL supervisors at work and WIL support at the University about their neuro-typical conditions because they want to act, work and behave as other individuals. But they do not feel well. The lack of knowledge, open-mindedness or will around invisible neuro-atypical conditions often cause several issues for individuals (e.g. strange behavior, emotions out of control, bad feeling...) and for WIL support (e.g. lack of understanding, repudiation...).

For WIL community and for the future of work, these issues need to be addressed in order to develop inclusive WIL programs for individuals with invisible neuro-atypical conditions. This exploratory research, based on a multi-level qualitative (20 interviews) method in French context, examines how to propose specific HR, managerial and educational support to help WIL community to be inclusive for neuro-atypical student-workers.

Key-Words: perception of inclusion; neuro-atypical; peer-helpers; co-op;

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is one of the main issue for Human Resources strategy at work and an increasing issue for higher educational institution (Kele et al, 2022). Inclusion – which aims to integrate everyone despite singularities by erasing obstacles that could block individuals participation (Roberson, 2006) – is a powerful tool to fight stereotypes, discriminations and prejudices (Nishii, 2013). This concept – and practice – which overtakes the notion of diversity (Shore et al, 2018) might be a golden goal for each society for a better future at work, at school and for each individual through the overall society. Strategies of inclusion are now developed for all societal issues: disability, gender, LGBTQIA+, digital, work-life balance... At work and in higher education, inclusion is central. Social psychological or mental supports has been developed to help individuals to face diversity issues more and more in an inclusive perspective (Davies et al, 2019).

Through WIL programs, the notion of inclusion starts to be addressed (Itano-Boase et al, 2021), usually for gender (Walters & Zarifa, 2008) or disability issues (Cocks & Thoresen, 2013)). A promising path of research is however not well known: the inclusion of neuro-atypical individuals through WIL, in particular individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyslexia

and others, or gifted. Neuro-atypical individuals are defined as individuals having neurological conditions and developing specific behaviors. As neuro-atypical issues are mainly invisible (Siaud-Facchin, 2008), and as individuals with neuro-atypical issues often do not show them (Siaud-Facchin, 2008) nor their consequences (e.g. unusual behavior), research should investigate how to support neuro-atypical individuals to accept their differences (behavioral, emotional...) and to include them as efficient resources for WIL stakeholders.

Therefore, this research proposes to examine how to develop specific HR, managerial and educational supports to help WIL community to be inclusive for neuro-atypical individuals (ASD, ADD and gifted) in order to help them to socialize through work and education, in French context. This article first presents the theoretical background about inclusion and neuro-atypical individuals through WIL. Then, it defines the qualitative methods used in an exploratory approach, to finally discuss the results.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

Inclusion, as opposed as exclusion, is a notion on the edge of HR strategies and more generally, a strong demand from the society to respect individual differences and diversity. Inclusion is defined as a notion and practice aiming to acknowledge the unicity of each individual within a collective, a team, without judgment, stereotype or bias (Pennaforste, 2022). The notion of inclusion encompasses the notions of diversity and discrimination. Several studies focus on inclusion - HR and managerial practices (Chung et al, 2020), inclusion strategy (Meisenbach & Hutchins, 2020), conceptualization of inclusion (Shore et al, 2018) – showing the interest for research in all fields.

Fundamentally, WIL is an inclusion by making student-workers ready to work and strong enough to be included in the society. More specifically, through WIL, inclusion refers to the objective of each WIL stakeholders that is to support all student-workers despite their diversity in an inclusive way. Some studies focus on inclusion through WIL (Valencia-Forrester et al, 2019; Mallozzi & Drewery, 2020; Itano-Boase et al, 2021). However no one has examined the relationship between WIL community and the inclusion of neuro-atypical student-workers.

Neuro-atypical individual is a wide term used to define individuals who are not neuro-typical and suffer from neurological conditions as gifted, ASD, ADD or dyslexia and others. One neuro-atypical individual could have one or multiple neurological conditions. Research has shown that neuro-atypical are different because they do not behave as required in usual social life and their emotions are high or extreme (Siaud-Facchin, 2008).

Concerning their specificities, neuro-atypical student-workers may need more support from WIL stakeholders than neuro-typical student-workers. Through WIL, a large community supports student-workers: work supervisor, team-workers, other students, family, instructors... The perception of support, that is employees' global perception of the degree to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), is a strong mean to help student-workers to achieve their WIL goals (Pennaforste, 2016) and a way to include them (Bernstein et al, 2020 ; Shore & Chung, 2021). However, when it may be easy to develop perception of neuro-typical student-workers support, it might be more difficult to develop this perception for neuro-atypical student-workers because of their behavioral or emotional specificities.

Given these arguments, this research proposes to explore the following proposals:

Proposal 1: Neuro-atypical student-workers involved through WIL programs may have specific needs in order to perceive themselves as included.

Proposal 2: In order to develop neuro-atypical student-workers' perception of inclusion through WIL programs, WIL support community may need to develop specific guideline and management.

METHODS

Research Procedure

Due to the sensitivity of this research, the researcher was aware of the need of high caution while conducting his research (Condomines & Hennequin, 2013). This research is exploratory due to the lack of knowledge on inclusion and neuro-atypical individuals through WIL. Interviews were realized to collect data about inclusion at a managerial level (10 interviews with HR staff members and helpers) and to understand neuro-atypical perception of inclusion and support through WIL (10 interviews with neuro-atypical individuals involved through co-op).

Interviews took place online in September 2022. They were recorded with the agreement of each participant and after transcription, interviews were deleted. Interviews were from 1h15 to 1h55. A guideline has been used to conduct the semi-structured interviews with 6 themes (strategy of inclusion, perception of inclusion, management of inclusion, perception of support, inclusion of neuro-atypical individuals, issues and perspective about inclusion through WIL). Thematic content analysis were run.

RESULTS

General results

Results show two main specificities in order to propose an appropriate management to help neuro-atypical student-workers to feel include through WIL programs. First, they feel the need to be supported by WIL community as « usual » individuals and not as “different” neuro-atypical individuals. Second, organizations with inclusion strategy already in place for specific community (e.g. visible disabilities, LGBTQI+) are able to increase individuals' perception of inclusion by considering differences as an opportunity to boost performance and not as a brake.

Specific results

Proposal 1: Neuro-atypical student-workers involved through WIL programs may have specific needs in order to perceive themselves included.

« For example, for the Aspi [Asperger], the sense of justice is so high that they can't understand “bullshit talk” or coffee break culture in order to network. More important, they are unable to act with empathy and it often causes misunderstanding with neuro-typical individuals », *Lucrece, Job coach for ASD.*

“Last year, I had a co-op student. She was HIP [gifted] and she acted in a very uncommon manner. Team rules, interactional skills were not followed because she did not understand the purpose and the legitimacy of them. Because one of my child is also gifted, I knew that her strange behavior was due to her gifted condition and not to be mad at me. I was a kind of peer-helper because of my family history”, *Artemis, HR manager.*

Proposal 2: In order to develop neuro-atypical student-workers' perception of inclusion through WIL programs, WIL support community may need to develop specific guideline and management.

"My job is to be the point of contact for all individuals with disability. As soon as a neuro-atypical co-op student comes to see me with a RQTH (recognition of the status of disable worker), I put several actions to support him or her in order to compensate the disability. We have legal guidelines mandatory to implement but individuals need to tell us they have a neurological condition", *Euphrasie, Point of contact for disable co-op students at a University.*

"The key with invisible disorder is to communicate and to explain to all people at work and around the neuro-atypical co-op student that he or she wants to work and be included, but the way he or she behaves or interacts is unexpected and different than neuro-typical individuals. We have to do a lot of pedagogical work but it works, when supervisors take good care of every individuals. Often these kind of supervisors are the ones with disabilities around them in their personal life!", *Marie-Antoinette, neuro-atypical (gifted and ADD) and Head of the Unit for disable in a huge company.*

DISCUSSION

Theoretical implications

Managerial level :

At a managerial level, there is a strong need to develop organizational support by the supervisor, coworkers, HR and academics for neuro-atypical student-workers as well as in the literature on neuro-typical workers (Pennaforte, 2015). However, results showed that these needs of supports are very dedicated to the specificity of neuro-atypical. Everywhere student-workers are involved, they need a « mate » to help them with well being and care. These helpers – the peers helpers – play a huge role in their inclusion because they know how neuro-atypical behave and they can explain to other individuals the particularities and how to react to them. These peers helpers, often found to manage handicap (Niard & Franck, 2020), on a voluntary basis, could be a great support for neuro-atypical.

Neuro-atypical student-workers level

At the student-workers level, this research showed that neuro-atypical student-workers involved through WIL programs develop a specific approach of support:

- They want to be supported as if they were not neurologically different, as in the literature on discrimination (Bertrand, 2022),
- They want to be supported as person with a specific name and skills but not as stereotypes associated to neuro-atypical, as in the literature on talents (Thevenet et al, 2012),
- They want to be supported in order to develop their professional identity as their golden goal.

Inclusive level:

At the inclusive level, this research showed that WIL community should consider inclusion foundations at all stage of WIL programs for neuro-atypical individuals. WIL programs should be based on the strong basis of inclusion, moral aspect and equity (Shore et al, 2018) as we know that neuro-atypical student-workers are very sensitive to justice and equity (Davies et al, 2019)

Practical implications

For WIL community, this research proposes several practical implications as shown below:

- To develop inclusive strategy in each university or school doing WIL programs in order to provide a guideline for WIL students and industrials,
- To define indicators of inclusion to manage neuro-atypical student-workers,
- To train all WIL stakeholders on inclusion and neuro-atypical specificities,

To succeed in this challenge, WIL stakeholders should provide practices of recognition for the differences and develop a new way of working based on one strong inclusive principal : turn your specificity into an asset !

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Several limitations in this research could be specified. First, samples for interviews are too small to generate strong hypothesis for future research. Another exploratory work should be developed to fill this gap. Second, samples should try to balance gender between male and female. Third, neuro-atypical student-workers were not directly interviewed. Fourth, the quantitative sample did not contain a lot of neuro-atypical student-workers. Five, literature from all fields should be scanned in order to develop a specific approach to study neuro-atypical student-workers through WIL.

Future research are needed in order to understand how to develop the inclusion of neuro-atypical individuals through WIL, particularly in France with almost 800 000 WIL students a year. Future research could examine:

- The exact understanding on how neuro-atypical individuals behave through WIL programs at work and in educations comparing them to neuro-typical individuals,
- The perception of inclusion by neuro-atypical student-workers through WIL programs and the building of a scale on this perception of inclusion,
- The perception of justice and trust by neuro-atypical individuals through WIL programs,
- The relationship between neuro-atypical individuals and the development of organizational socialization and work commitment through WIL programs,
- The construction of neuro-atypical student-workers professional identity.

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