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► To cite this version:

Antoine Pennaforte. Neuro-atypical inclusion: How to support neuro-atypical individuals through work-integrated learning for an inclusive future of work. WACE International Conference, WACE, Jun 2023, Waterloo (Ontario), Canada. pp.43-48. hal-04347062v2

HAL Id: hal-04347062

<https://cnam.hal.science/hal-04347062v2>

Submitted on 8 Jan 2024

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Neuro-atypical inclusion: How to support neuro-atypical individuals through work-integrated learning for an inclusive future of work

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusion is one of the main issues for Human Resources strategy in the workplace and an increasing concern for higher educational institution (Kele et al, 2022). Inclusion – which aims to integrate everyone despite their specificities by removing barriers that could block individuals’ participation (Roberson, 2006) – is a powerful tool to combat stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice (Nishii, 2013). This concept – and practice – overcoming the notion of diversity (Shore et al, 2018) could be a golden goal for any society for a better future at work, at school and for each individual through the whole society. Inclusion strategies are now being developed for all societal issues: disability, gender, LGBTQIA+, digital, work-life balance and so on. In the workplace and in higher education, inclusion is central. Socio-psychological and mental health support is being developed to help individuals face diversity issues from an increasingly inclusive perspective (Davies et al, 2019).

Through WIL programs, the concept of inclusion is beginning to be addressed (Itano-Boase et al, 2021), usually for gender (Walters & Zarifa, 2008) or disability issues (Cocks & Thoresen, 2013)). However, one promising avenue of research is not well known: the inclusion of neuro-atypical individuals through WIL, particularly individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyslexia and others, or gifted. Neuro-atypical individuals are defined as individuals who have neurological conditions and develop specific behaviors (AGEFIPH, 2019). As neuro-atypical problems are mostly invisible (Siaud-Facchin, 2008), and as individuals with neuro-atypical problems 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 the WIL community to be inclusive for neuro-atypical individuals in order to help them to socialize through work and education, in the French context. This article first presents the theoretical background on 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 to exclusion, is a concept at the forefront of HR strategies and more generally, a strong demand from the society to respect individual differences and diversity. Inclusion is defined as

a concept and practice aimed at recognizing the uniqueness of each individual within a collective, a team, without judgment, stereotype or bias (Pennaforde, 2022). The notion of inclusion encompasses the notions of diversity and discrimination. Several studies have focused on inclusion, such as HR and managerial practices (Chung et al, 2020), inclusion strategies (Meisenbach & Hutchins, 2020), and conceptualization of inclusion (Shore et al, 2018), showing the interest for research in all fields.

Basically, 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 goal of each WIL stakeholder to support all student-workers despite their diversity in an inclusive way. Some studies have focused 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 the WIL community and the inclusion of neuro-atypical student-workers.

A neuro-atypical individual is a broad term used to define individuals who are not neuro-typical and have neurological conditions such as giftedness, ASD, ADD or dyslexia among others (AGEFIPH, 2019). A neuro-atypical individual may have one or more neurological conditions. Research has shown that neuro-atypical individuals are different because they do not behave as required in ordinary social life and their emotions are high or extreme (Siaud-Facchin, 2008).

Due to their specificity, neuro-atypical student-workers may need more support from WIL stakeholders than neuro-typical student-workers. Through WIL, a large community supports student-workers: supervisor, co-workers, other students, family and instructors. Perceived 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 powerful means of helping student-workers to achieve their WIL goals (Pennaforde, 2016) and a way to include them (Bernstein et al, 2020 ; Shore & Chung, 2021). However, while it may be easy to develop perceptions of support for neurotypical student-workers, it may be more difficult to develop these perceptions for neuro-atypical student-workers due to 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, the WIL support community may need to develop specific guidelines and management.

METHODS

Research Procedure

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

interviews with neuro-atypical individuals involved through co-op). As WIL is defined as “a form of curricular experiential education that formally integrates a student’s academic studies with quality experience within a workplace or practice setting” (CEWIL, 2021), co-op refers to co-operative Education that “consists of alternating academic terms and paid work terms” (CEWIL, 2021).

The interviews were conducted online in September 2022. They were recorded with the consent of each participant and the interviews were deleted after transcription. The interviews lasted from 1h15 to 1h55. A guideline was 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 perspectives about inclusion through WIL). Thematic content analysis was carried out.

RESULTS

General Results

The results show two main peculiarities to propose an appropriate support to help neuro-atypical student-workers feel included by WIL programs. First, they feel the need to be supported by the WIL community as « normal » individuals and not as “different” neuro-atypical individuals. Second, organizations that already have an inclusion strategy for a specific community (e.g., visible disabilities, LGBTQI+) are able to increase individuals’ perceptions of inclusion by viewing differences as an opportunity to enhance performance rather than a hindrance.

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 the coffee break culture in order to network. More importantly, they are unable to act with empathy and this often leads to misunderstandings with neurotypical individuals. (Lucrece, Job coach for ASD)

Last year, I had a co-op student. She was HIP [gifted] and she acted in a very unusual way. Team rules, interaction skills were not followed because she did not understand the purpose and the legitimacy of them. Since one of my children is also gifted, I knew that her strange behavior was due to her giftedness and not to be angry with 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 guidelines and management:

My job is to be the point of contact for all people with disabilities. As soon as a neuro-atypical co-op student comes to see me with an RQTH (Recognition of the Status of a Disabled Worker), I put in place several measures to support him or her in order to compensate for the disability. We have legal guidelines that have to be implemented, but individuals have to tell us that they have a neurological condition. (Euphrasie, Point of contact for disabled co-op students at a University)

The key with an invisible disorder is to communicate and explain to everyone in the workplace 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 from neuro-typical individuals. We have to do a lot of pedagogical work but it works, when supervisors take good care of each individual. Often these kind of supervisors are the ones with disabilities around them in their personal lives! (Marie-Antoinette, neuro-atypical (gifted and ADD) and Head of the Unit for disable people in a huge company)

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Managerial level

At the managerial level, there is a strong need to develop organizational supports by supervisors, co-workers, HR, and academics for neuro-atypical student-workers as well as in the literature on neuro-typical workers (Pennaforde, 2015). However, the results showed that these support needs are very specific to the neuro-atypical specificity. Wherever student-workers are involved, they need a « buddy » to help them with well-being and care. These helpers – the peer helpers – play a huge role in their inclusion because they know how neuro-atypicals behave and they can explain to other individuals the peculiarities and how to respond to them. These peer helpers, often found in disability management (Niard & Franck, 2020), on a voluntary basis, could be a great support for neuro-atypicals.

Neuro-atypical student-workers level

At the student-workers level, this research has shown that neuro-atypical student-workers involved in WIL programs develop a specific approach to 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 a person with a specific name and abilities, but not as stereotypes associated with neuro-atypical, as in the talent literature (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 the WIL community should consider inclusive foundations at all stages of WIL programs for neuro-atypical individuals. WIL programs should be based on the strong foundations of inclusion, moral aspects 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 the WIL community, this research proposes several practical implications as shown below:

Develop an inclusion strategy in each university or school that runs WIL programs to provide a guide for WIL students and industry,

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 of the differences and develop a new way of working based on a strong inclusive principle: turn your specificity into an asset!

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are several limitations to this research. First, the samples for interviews are too small to generate strong hypotheses for future research. Further exploratory work should be developed to fill this gap. Second, the samples should try to balance gender between male, female, and gender diversity. Third, literature from all fields should be reviewed to develop a specific approach to studying neuro-atypical student-workers through WIL.

Future research is needed in order to understand how to develop the inclusion of neuro-atypical individuals through WIL, especially in France with almost 800,000 WIL students per year. Future research could investigate:

- The accurate understanding of how neuro-atypical individuals behave through WIL programs at work and in education compared to neuro-typical individuals,
- The perception of inclusion by neuro-atypical student-workers through WIL programs and the construction 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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