Autism Awareness Day: Being unique

Written by Miriam Dalli on 2 April 2020 in Opinion
Opinion

The EU needs to do more to empower people with disabilities and give them the opportunity to learn and excel in their own way, argues Miriam Dalli.

In a world replete with discriminatory acts, there is one group of people that constantly faces widespread discrimination - whether at school, at play or in their professional lives.

I have now been working closely with the parents of children with autism for several years. It was one of the causes that I pledged to prioritise during my mandates as an MEP.

Everything I do on the matter is done in close cooperation with parents and with individuals with autism themselves.
This is essential, because to propose policy actions that can improve things, you have to either live the reality or make sure that your policies are guided by people who live this reality.

I believe in active participation, be it in political life, at school or socially. I emphasise this because discrimination here generally refers to negative attitudes or stereotypes, sometimes even people reacting in an uncomfortable way when faced with a disability.

Ignorance and a lack of information and understanding makes others wary of people with disabilities, not knowing how to act around them.

It starts in the playground and classrooms. Even today, there are many educators who are not adequately trained to help children with autism.

I’m proud of Malta, my home country, where children diagnosed with autism receive learning support assistance (LSA).

“Although it is illegal to discriminate against a person because of a disability, this doesn’t mean that discrimination doesn’t exist. It happens all the time”

There have been several success stories of students who subsequently go on to graduate, thanks to an education system that identifies and addresses their needs.

To cite just one example, the University of Malta had adapted its entry requirements for students with autism. I remember sitting down with ambitious young people, who were asking me why action wasn’t being taken on something that was easily rectifiable.

This was the experience of young students who, due to autism, could not get a pass in the Maltese language when they did not necessarily need it to further their studies.

Sometimes, they ended up joining university as mature students at 23, essentially denying them of the opportunity to attend university alongside their peers.

The amazing thing with children is that they look at someone and appreciate them for who they are; they look at the person, not the disability.

However, the same is not always applied to adults; discrimination against people with autism continues at their workplace and in their social life.

Although it is illegal to discriminate against a person because of a disability, this doesn’t mean that discrimination doesn’t exist. It happens all the time and you literally feel it around you. It all boils...
down to a lack of information.

This is not about disabilities; it is about abilities, because everyone has an ability or skill that they can contribute to society. It’s about giving a person the space to grow.

Change can happen but for this to occur, there needs to be investments where positive adjustments can be delivered.

These can include funding adult day programmes, sheltered workshops, supported work programmes and subsidised work programmes to meet the employment needs of people with disabilities.

The same applies for their recreational and leisure need; these have to be provided and catered for.

Ultimately, independent living is crucial, and this must be supported through supervised and subsidised apartments for people with disabilities, empowering them and giving them the opportunity to learn and excel in their own way.

There are so many lessons to be learned and experiences to be shared. All we have to do is sit down and listen.

**About the author**

Miriam Dalli (MT, S&D) is a cosignatory of Parliament’s Written Declaration on Autism

**Tags**

Health [7]

Justice and Rights [8]

**Categories**

Health and social care [9]

Society and welfare [10]