THE IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract: The article discusses important parameters of the quality of inclusive education, among which the main place is occupied by high and stable academic performance in inclusive classes, both among children with special educational needs and among children without such needs. Also, special attention is paid to the rationale for the need and opportunities for the formation of social skills and self-esteem among students in inclusive classes. Based on the conceptual provisions of humanistic pedagogy, as well as considering the best practices of both Europe and North American inclusive schools, within the framework of the case study methodology, an outlining of promising areas for the development of inclusive pedagogical technologies was carried out to ensure high academic performance of all categories of students participating in the inclusive educational process .

Keywords: Inclusive education, Academic performance, Self-esteem, Diversity.

1 Introduction

Inclusion, thanks to the processes of adaptation of the educational environment, today has the opportunity to provide students with special educational needs with an adequate form of education. Significant changes have taken place not only in the legal status of this category of students, but a radical restructuring is taking place in the value orientations of education and upbringing of "special" children.

At present, we are witnessing the improvement of various national education systems in terms of convergence of special and general education systems, in "schools for all children", due to the official adoption of the idea of inclusive education by the Salamanca Declaration (1994), in the "inclusive school" as an educational institution, whose activities are aimed at introducing children with disabilities into the process of joint learning with healthy children in order to effectively socialize and rehabilitate them [18].

The relevance of the implementation of inclusive education in the development of the modern educational system is beyond doubt. Inclusive practice can be defined as a set of approaches and methods that provide all students with access to basic education [13]. Successful inclusion of children with special needs requires working together to ensure that all students feel welcome and valued and receive the right support to help them develop their talents and achieve their goals. When education is truly inclusive, it actually brings real benefits to all students, not just students with disabilities or special needs. But, t the same time, it should be noted that many difficulties are associated with the process of including children with developmental disabilities in mass educational institutions. One of the most significant and still unresolved problems is the problem of creating educational and methodological complexes for the successful inclusive education of all categories of children in general education preschool and school institutions. Linked elements regarding the same problem is the challenge of ensuring a consistently high level of academic achievement in inclusive classrooms.

In the research of scientists and social review project of regulators in EU, it has been established that, first of all, parents are interested in the development of inclusive education: 70% of parents of 'ordinary' children (those who do not have any special educational needs) do not object to joint (inclusive) education, because this will allow their children to become more tolerant, learn to help each other; however, they are convinced that teachers need to make special efforts for this. Also, 76% of parents of children with disabilities agree with the advantage of inclusive education, but understand that for this it is necessary to overcome a number of structural, social, regulatory, educational, and methodological barriers [14, 17].

At the same time, as broad practice 'in the places' show, there are contradictions in the modern educational practice of teaching children with disabilities and special needs in general education schools:

- The contradiction between the increase in the number of children with disabilities in general education schools and the lack of an integrative educational environment that ensures their joint education with healthy children, built on the principles of "unity in diversity" [7];
- The contradiction between the obsolete system of identifying and placing this category of children in educational institutions and the lack of the necessary psychological, medical, and pedagogical diagnostics for this, which would make it possible to implement in education an individual approach to a child with disabilities or special needs;
- The contradiction between the request of the parent community for the introduction of an inclusive approach to education and insufficient development of the conditions for its implementation;
- The contradiction between the need for special training of teachers to work with children with disabilities or special needs in a general education institution and the insufficient number of professional retraining and advanced training programs for teachers in this area.

These contradictions actualize the problem of studying the impact of inclusive practices on academic performance in elementary school.

2 Method

The theoretical basis of the study covers the conceptual provisions of humanistic pedagogy on the social value of the individual, on the need to include every child with disabilities in the educational space. Research methods involve the study of philosophical, sociological, psychological, pedagogical, and educational literature, logical and historical analysis of the problem under study, comparative analysis of approaches to teaching children with special educational needs, study and generalization of existing experience in the field of inclusive education. Some elements of the case study are used.

3 Results

Judging by studies carried out in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, social and family circumstances have the greatest influence on the results of schooling there, which subsequently determines the level of income of a person. The effectiveness of the educational process is affected by the social background of students, which determines "the inequality in which children are placed by their home, their neighborhood, their environment" [2]. These studies gave rise to a discussion about the need for the inclusive education of children from different groups and social strata, including the disabled.

Inclusive education suggests that the diversity of needs of students with special needs and disabilities should be matched by a continuum of services, including an educational environment that is most favorable for them. This principle means the following: all children should be included from the very beginning in the educational and social life of the school in the area in which they live; the task of an inclusive school is to build a system that meets the needs of everyone; in inclusive schools, all children, not only those with disabilities, are provided with support that allows them to achieve success, feel safe, value being together in a team. Inclusive schools aim for many educational achievements different than those most often recognized as mainstream education. The goal of such a school is to give all students the opportunity for the most fulfilling

social life, the most active participation in the team, the local community, thereby ensuring the most complete interaction, helping each other as members of the community [8]. This value imperative obviously shows that all members of the school community and society are interconnected and that students not only interact with each other in the learning process, but also develop when they make joint decisions about managing processes in the classroom [9].

In this context, it is advisable to digress a little from the topic and turn to the experience of the United States in the field of combating the low academic performance of African American school students. Throughout America, their academic performance, on average, is significantly lower than that of their white peers. According to psychologists, the poor academic performance of African-American schoolchildren is largely due to their low self-esteem, imposed on them by the stereotypical attitude of others. Experiments have shown that even a small intervention aimed at increasing self-esteem can improve the performance of black children, reducing the achievement gap between black and white students by 40% [5]. In this regard, a stereotype of racial mental differences between white and black Americans has formed. This stereotype negatively affects students' self-esteem. In addition, deliberately low expectations give rise to fear of a possible fiasco, which, of course, increases the likelihood of failure. As a result, the number of losers among African Americans is growing like a snowball: it is a self-sustaining system. Likewise, overweight children are not expected to achieve serious sporting success, and, following the stereotypical attitude, an obese child does not expect much from himself and does not try to succeed.

Experiments conducted in provincial schools in the American Northeast have shown that a vicious circle can be broken. The work of psychologists was as follows. Teachers of one of the subjects were asked to distribute personalized envelopes with a questionnaire to the students at the lesson. Seventh grade students were randomly divided into control (119 people) and experimental (124 participants) groups. The questionnaire of the students of the experimental group was supposed to increase their self-esteem, while the questionnaire of the control group was not. In the questionnaires of the experimental group, it was necessary to tick off the highest value for the student (a list of values was offered, such as "relationships with friends", "success in art", etc.), and write why this choice was made. In the questionnaires of the control group, it was necessary to mark the lowest value and write why it might be important to someone else. A second experiment was carried out a year later with another group of seventh graders. In the second experiment, it was proposed to choose not one, but several highest (for the experimental group) and lowest (for control) values [5]. The questionnaire of the experimental group was a standard method for improving self-esteem. Surprisingly, this seemingly minimal intervention led to visible results. Almost all African-American students improved their academic performance.

This example, seemingly unrelated to inclusive education, contains an important experience: improving self-esteem and overcoming stereotypes leads to better academic performance. For those students of the inclusive class who do not have special educational needs, this is also important, since in a diverse environment they can more clearly see their talents and abilities, which will also have a positive effect on academic performance.

Thus, inclusion is a shared responsibility. Therefore, the creation of an inclusive environment should be the responsibility of all stakeholders. Schools that are on the path to introducing inclusion share responsibilities between general education teachers, special education teachers, consultants, foreign language teachers. True inclusion engages all adults in the school community, from parents of children with SEN and teachers to support staff (counselors, therapists, assistants, psychologists and social workers). At the same time, all participants in the educational process receive a number of advantages [4, 5, 11, 15, 21]:

- Students gain invaluable communication and interaction skills. Inclusive practices in schools make learning and academic achievement more accessible to all.
- Inclusive education allows students with SEN to fully express the full range of their educational opportunities, including learning and practicing important social skills. In addition, inclusion promotes a variety of friendships and communication, thereby enriching the lives of all students.
- According to statistics, students in inclusive schools miss less classes, have fewer behavioral problems and have higher self-esteem. When all students feel included and important members of the school community and society as a whole, they are more interested in their own education.

It seems necessary to build the educational process in the inclusive school, mandatory starting from the primary school, on the basis of the principle of pedagogical optimism. The principle of pedagogical optimism is associated with a high level of scientific and practical knowledge about the potential of persons with special educational needs; modern pedagogical opportunities for habilitation and rehabilitation of children and adults with developmental disabilities, the right of every person, regardless of his/her characteristics and organizational capabilities of life, to be included in the educational process [12]. Children with special educational needs tend to learn more slowly, but they can learn and achieve high results. This principle is based on the idea of L.S. Vygotsky about the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and rejects the "ceiling" theory [20]. Modern special pedagogy claims that there are no unteachable children. A person with special educational needs in accordance with this principle is a successfully developing and socially valuable person, if society wants it or if it can provide the necessary conditions for this [20]. Thus, inclusive education is not only justified, but also useful for providing diversity, which is now considered among the most important means for self-realization, development, and continuous learning.

In one of the most innovative inclusive schools in Germany, a comprehensive project of experimental work was implemented. The following pedagogical conditions for teaching children by means of inclusive education have been implemented: adaptive educational environment, psychological, medical and pedagogical support for a child with disabilities, dynamic changes in organizational forms and methods of teaching children with disabilities, based on continuous feedback, scientific and methodological (educational) support for teachers based on training cycles according to Kolb's method.

The timely implemented psychological and pedagogical correction of learning difficulties has improved the qualitative performance of students in inclusive classes in mathematics by 4% and in English classes - by 6%. In children with disabilities, the performance in English improved by 4%, in literature by 5%, in mathematics - by 1%. Indicators of physical development, neuropsychic and somatic health of school students improved: the number of schoolchildren with high and above average physical development has increased; the number of students registered with the dispensary decreased from 301 to 67 children [3]. The attitude of participants in the educational process towards inclusion has changed. The number of children who agreed with the statement "Friends help me learn" increased from 62% to 77%. After the project completion, there are 2 times more teachers who believe that the teaching staff works in cooperation mode. The number of parents who agree with the statement that teachers try to make the lessons understandable to everyone increased from 18% to 71% [3].

Also, a regional project to strengthen social connections and improve emotional intelligence in the inclusive classroom was implemented in the Canadian province of Alberta. An analysis of personalized quantitative assessments of the achievement of the planned results (standard) of healthy children and students with disabilities did not reveal any significant changes in their academic performance during the period of participation in the regional project. The subject results of students with disabilities in the main academic disciplines appeared to be at a satisfactory

level. Teachers noted that in some cases, a temporary decrease in the progress of students (both healthy children and students with disabilities) is associated with traditional reasons (absences due to illness, family circumstances, lack of a sense of responsibility, etc.), and not due to the introduction of inclusive education [10]. Describing the dynamics of individual educational achievements, 99% of teachers indicated that "children with disabilities improve basic school skills and abilities"; 58% of the teachers surveyed noted that in the context of inclusive practice, children with disabilities learn the material better than with individual learning, and, very importantly, 21% of school teachers testify that after a year and a half of participation in the regional project to introduce inclusive education, "normally developing students have become learn better" [10]. The authors of the project pay special attention to the competence of teachers and note that teachers who have generally accepted the ideas of educational inclusion have a chance to become such, provided they master adequate pedagogical tools, which should not only correspond to the spirit (values, principles) of inclusive education, but also allow them to successfully solve specific problems of joint (inclusive) education of children with complicated development and healthy children. Only in this case, it will be possible not only to reveal the absence of negative effects of this innovative educational practice (children did not begin to study worse), but also, as evidenced by the findings of researchers, to note positive effects in the behavior of children, in the level of their educational motivation, and in progress, and in the development of the personality of students [8, 18].

Obviously, to ensure the sustainability of the positive results obtained, constant monitoring is necessary based on specially developed KPIs, which involves monitoring the effectiveness of the educational process in the context of inclusive practice in terms of some parameters of the processes studied in it:

- The learning process (dynamics of academic performance of all groups of children),
- The process of socialization of students (social well-being, psychological comfort and safety in the classroom and the educational environment as a whole),
- Attitudes towards the practice of inclusive education on the part of teachers, administration, parents, and children themselves.

The task of inclusive education is the creation of appropriate pedagogical conditions for children with disabilities and special needs, which requires reliable approaches and criteria that allow for the correct assessment of learning outcomes, taking into account an individual approach. Many variants of pathologies in children and a significant variation in the level of educational abilities put forward the requirement for a differentiated assessment, the methodology of which has a different essence, which does not fully resemble the marking of healthy children and the rules of a mass school.

With regard to the problem of academic results in children with disabilities, the theoretical provisions of the above mentioned famous pedagogical scientists L.S. Vygotsky about absolute and relative success in learning are rational. Absolute success as a traditional assessment of school results is built on the basis of the knowledge gained by the child at a particular moment (for example, after studying a particular topic or the entire course). Absolute success allows ranking students of the same class (or parallel) and to determine a more or less high position for each student, depending on his knowledge of the school curriculum. Relative success shows the individual progress of each child in comparison with his previous results, but not with the results of classmates. When comparing the absolute and relative success in one child (healthy or with psychophysical disabilities), a paradoxical situation is possible: children with high academic performance may demonstrate low relative success, and poorly performing children - high relative results. This fact was also studied and described by Vygotsky. He wrote that a well-performing and successful child in school may make little progress in further mental development and not exceed his previous educational achievements. Other students who are

poorly performing and do not show high academic results (an unsatisfactory picture of absolute success) can demonstrate good relative success: reading speed has increased, the number of errors in dictation has decreased, more correctly solved tasks in mathematics, etc. [16]. When discussing the issue of the quality of inclusive education, it is possible to extrapolate the views of L.S. Vygotsky on modern theory and practice of inclusive education and learning. Information about the special educational needs of students and the use of the pedagogical category "relative success" allow drawing reliable conclusions about the actual educational results of children with disabilities (not necessarily in comparison with the results of other, healthy children) and give a reliable assessment of the quality of inclusion at school in the areas of organization and didactics of education.

Based on all the criteria mentioned in the article, that make up a high-quality inclusive education, one can point out the multidimensionality and systemic nature of this pedagogical phenomenon. Inclusive education is a specially organized interaction of teachers with ordinary (healthy) children and children with disabilities in the space of a general education institution, which allows, firstly, to overcome contradictions in the educational practice of teaching children with disabilities, and secondly, to implement the basic principle of inclusive education as a principle of joint education of ordinary children and children with disabilities, thirdly, to ensure the use of special organizational and pedagogical conditions for the education of children with disabilities or SEN. Inclusive education, unlike integrative education, adapts the educational environment to the individual characteristics of the child, and not vice versa. Moreover, it implies the availability of education for all categories of children with disabilities, uses the educational resource of adult-children and children's joint activities in heterogeneous groups, for which the teacher builds special actions and not just allowing a child with a disability/SEN to be with healthy children in classroom premises.

The system of inclusive education itself is an effective mechanism for the development of an inclusive society, i.e., by developing an inclusive education system, we contribute to the development of an inclusive society - a society for all / a society for everyone. This is the key value of inclusive education.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the assessment of the success of inclusive education should be based not only on the analysis of the individual components of this process, but also on its final result, the high quality of which is possible only if inclusive education is seen as a continuous process in which, starting from the very first stage of life of a person with disabilities /SEN - infancy and early childhood - and throughout the life vertical, each new life and educational stage is built on a solid educational foundation of the previous stage.

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