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GOING POSITIVE ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN RUSSIA: WHAT IS IN THE WAY?

Introduction

Segregated education for learners with special needs is gradually giving way, at least in theory, to inclusive education. In the author's understanding, inclusive education is a pedagogical framework of integrating students with a whole gamut of learning potential ranging from heightened aptitude to retardation, handicap, disorders and challenges other than socially unacceptable or dangerous in mainstream schools, for creating equal opportunities for learning, socialization and self-actualization. The concept of inclusive education remains unclear, though, whenever it descends from theory to practice. Without overstating the controversy of the problem, it is realistic to assert that the more inclusive the curriculum becomes at the start in practice, the less inclusive it becomes in the end on reflection. The principles in theory and practice appear to be different (Osberg & Biesta, 2010).

Statement of the problem

The issues of learner diversity came to the attention of academics, teachers, parents and learners in Russia years ago but inclusion of the challenged learners in mainstream classes is a recent development. The initiative is causing a shift in the paradigm of the “proper learner”, “proper classroom” and “proper teaching”. Unlike the concept of an “average student”, which the

teachers of previous generations considered just right for teaching last century, the modern approach to learner diversity consists in recognizing the reality, the challenge and the advantages of the heterogeneous class, in which the challenged learners are as welcome as the unchallenged or advanced. The legal status of inclusive education in Russia at all levels, starting at before-schooling age, has been confirmed by the Law on Education in the Russian Federation (Federal Law on education in the Russian Federation, 2015). Inclusion is therefore “officially recommended”, even though general attitude to it remains to be studied.

Research proves that inclusive classes have a number of advantages for both challenged and unchallenged students. Some experimental data prove that learners with disabilities show gains in performance on tests, on-task behavior and motivation to learn. Placement in inclusive classrooms does not interfere with the amount of instructional time to every student. It does not result in the interruption to planned activities or disruption of students’ achievements. It is necessary to add that students without disabilities gain important social skills of acting in a diverse community. Fewer absences from school and referrals for disruptive behavior are reported alongside better outcomes after school (Waldron, Cole & Majd, 2001). Additionally, challenged children’s self-worth is shown to be higher when integrated into the mainstream schools (Hotulainen & Takala, 2014).

Among successful instructional strategies of inclusive teaching are the following: peer tutoring in the lesson, tasks for cooperative learning groups, differentiated instruction in the lesson. There is successful experience of employing a teacher’s assistant to help the challenged students during the lesson. The supportive role of the family is also emphasized (Whitbread, 2005).

Despite positive experience, the implementation of the inclusive approach to teaching still remains an issue. There are more questions than answers as to the attitude of teachers to learners “with a difference” in their classroom, the mastery of pedagogical skills for addressing individual learning needs, and the awareness of the need to develop a humanistic set of social competences in students. If schools fail to address these and some other issues, the inclusion of diverse students may enhance the process of exclusion due to the contact of diversities (Hilt, 2015). Another aspect of the problem, which the managers of inclusive education often fail to recognize, is the willingness of the learners “with a difference” to become part of a homogeneous group where their divergence will be in lesser contrast to other classmates. In addition, inclusion in the classroom may only work on condition that school

environment replicates inclusion models on the societal scale. This explains the fact that acceptance of the inclusive environment by all sides requires a change in the collective mentality, which is a time-and-place dependent variable.

In dealing with the problems that are incurred by inclusive education, the commonly suggested solutions are teacher professional preparation, family and school support, provision of learner tutoring i.e. giving additional consultation time to individuals during, between and after classes. (Petriwskyj, 2010). Another step involves cultural dimension. There is a need to address educational culture, which is inflexible in adapting to learner differences, relies on the overly centralized control traditions, and lacks sensitivity to those struggling with their studies (Strogilos, 2012). Besides, it is essential to build upon learner social skills required for integration with the community of inclusive practices (Brandon & Charlton, 2011). Finally, giving students a gift of time is an ever resounding note and research emphasizes the necessity to vary learn-and-answer time for individuals, even though this may be taken as disruptive for the in-step lesson traditions (Lambert, 2015).

The analysis breaks the whole set of problems into three major issues, causing controversies and a varying degree of tension regarding inclusive education:

- teachers' attitudes to and strategies of teaching inclusive classes,
- learners' attitudes to and strategies of studying in inclusive classes,
- the educational culture of attitudes and strategies of teaching the challenged learners.

These issues are complemented by another major question of whether inclusive education is for the challenged learners only, or whether it should address the needs of every learner in the classroom whether challenged or leading in knowledge acquisition. Thus, a broader pallet of learners' expectations, attitudes and aptitudes, self-esteem and the level of achievement claim, challenges, disabilities and fears is to be considered in an attempt to conceptualize inclusive education as a practice of excellence.

Research shows that most practices are only concerned with the challenged and the disabled groups of learners, even though focusing on the unsuccessful students alone, rather than on all, goes contrary to the spirit and the letter of inclusive education (Messiou, 2016). Given the fact that all the diverse learners out of school live and function interactively in the inclusive world, there is a need to adopt a collaborative approach to inclusive education, setting out to change participants' attitudes, competences and practices in the educational environment and beyond.

Moreover, recent studies have shown that inclusive education in a variety of cultural contexts across the globe falls short of the idealized inclusion model. Practical attempts to implement inclusive education have to consider the biological reality of the challenged learners as a stern factor in tackling developmental issues in education. Decontextualized borrowing of attractive practices may compromise and discredit the idea of inclusion, which is often met with disbelief by professionals in special and mainstream education. To emphasize the complexity of the problem, the scope of implementing the ideology of inclusive education runs into at least three types of constraints: cultural, economic, and material (Naraian, 2016).

Hypothetical propositions

Based on the preliminary studies, the following hypothetical propositions have been formulated:

1. Positive perception of inclusive education depends on the perspective held by teachers, students and parents on what makes “proper teaching”.
2. The two views on “proper teaching” shaping the attitude to inclusive education are:
 - a) personality-oriented perspective takes inclusion as an asset unsuccessful teaching and relies on the principles of equal opportunities for every learner, open learners’ community, and students’ self-actualization through interaction and cooperation in inclusive groups;
 - b) norm-referenced perspective considers inclusion as a barrier to successful teaching, predicting learners’ lower outcomes considering their challenges and special needs, poor results of placement tests and the high level of commonly used classroom activities designed for exclusive but not inclusive classrooms.
3. The perception by teachers of inclusive education may be generally positive in principle and controversial in practice, the reason being norm-referenced approach and cultural traditions of judging teacher’s efficiency by benchmarking learners’ performance.

Methods of research

For the purpose of this research, we have reviewed the literature on the issue. We have conducted English language teachers’ opinion poll about the

reasons of private tutoring in Russia's schools. We have also polled the teachers about their perception of inclusive education as a concept and practice. The overall number of teachers questioned was 239 practicing professionals from across a variety of Russia's regions. Additionally, we have interviewed 10 teachers on their perception of implementing inclusive education principles in Russia's mainstream schools. Content analysis of the essays written by 10 English language learners about their school experience has also been made.

Literature review

Inclusion has now become a widely discussed educational strand in policy-making documents of UNESCO and UN (Inclusion in Education: The Participation of Disabled Learners. World Action Forum, Dakar, Senegal, Education for All. Assessment, 2000; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol. Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 2007).

At the very start, inclusion was viewed through a focus on certain groups of learners with a history of isolation or even social exclusion from mainstream schools. These were the students with a variety of disabilities, behavioral disorder or emotional instability (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

Inclusion was treated as a manifestation of social justice and this meant that a broader pedagogical agenda was necessary. The new agenda was drawn in favor of a school-wide reform of ideology and practices with flexible curricula. The difference was that such curricula were to respond to a whole diversity of learners (Ainscow & César, 2006). Inclusion-oriented transformations involved a school-wide process of addressing educational needs of all by raising school effectiveness and guaranteeing every student's full participation in school activities. It was also necessary to reduce exclusion of vulnerable learners from mainstream teaching (Vroey, Struyf & Petry, 2016).

A new concept of "school's inclusive culture" came into being, reflecting the shared values and beliefs, habits and rules, collaboration practices, responsibilities and behavioral boundaries that are accepted in the school community with regard to diversity (Carroll et al., 2011).

A distinct tendency is the use of empowering language to build up learner confidence, shared philosophy of acceptance at school, education programs for diverse learners, and the practice of learning from diversity beneficial to all. These and other changes are translated into inclusive practices with

mobilization of available resources and orchestrating supportive learning (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

The tendencies of inclusion in primary school collide with the disparity between the practice of equity and the criteria of excellence in secondary schools (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2002). This means that if the solution to the inclusion/exclusion issue comes to the choice between creating school and classroom of equal opportunities for all, the preference is given to the solution that does not jeopardize learners' average high scoring in the classroom. The reason is that teaching and learning community as well as parents and local education authorities pass their judgment on school's performance based on the learners' outcomes measured by the scoring at the examination (Graham & Harwood, 2011). This leads to the situation when teachers in general, and core curricula subjects teachers in particular, are performance focused for fear of losing their control over high standards of instruction in their classes (Ellins & Porter, 2005). This impedes the teachers' shift towards the values of inclusive classes. Behavioral problems also overshadow the general positive perception of inclusion.

Published research focuses on the three areas of inclusive school culture where the arising problems come to a head and become the most apparent: attitude to inclusion among the staff, attitude to inclusion among the peer learners/learners' parents, and self-perception of students in the inclusive environment. Staff attitude commonly ranges within a positive approach to the idea showing reservations when it comes to coping with a diverse class of students diagnosed with learning problems (Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010).

Peer attitude to inclusion and especially of those most vulnerable to mistreatment is hard to overestimate in defining the general perception of inclusive education in the teaching and learning community. Presumably, some challenged learners may feel more secure in the classroom of their own kind, being protected by the homogeneously unified collective. The problem generally refers to their general acceptance by unchallenged group mates in the inclusive classroom, who may put social preference to some learners and stigmatize others. Neglect, rejection or bullying cannot be excluded altogether in inclusive classrooms. Individual sensitivity, impulsivity and mercurial temperament, aggression and lack of social skills, anxiety and fears, alienation and loneliness are the main personal factors putting the challenged learners at risk (McDougall et al., 2004).

Research shows that contact by itself in the inclusive environment cannot improve the unchallenged learners' attitude towards their estranged students.

In contrast to idealistic expectations, inclusive environment makes classroom medium more competitive enhancing the risk of disappointments and mutual alienation (Wong, 2008). Proximity may improve peer attitudes towards diversity through enhanced social interactions but this requires purposeful pedagogical intervention, as well as psychological counseling and social service (Carter, Hughes, Gutt & Copeland, 2005).

Finally yet importantly, students' self-concept is of great importance in introducing inclusive education bottom-up and this depends on the phenomenon of friendship among the learners, especially, teenagers. It is worth mentioning that friendship as the key component in the experience of "all is well with meat school". This feeling in inclusive classrooms develops in the most difficult way. Instead of friendship, the challenged learners may go through resentment with further deepening the gap between the alienated and the accepted (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

Among the issues raised in the dedicated literature, inclusive practices have hiked to the top positions among others. The point is that alongside with the general attractiveness of the idea, students show higher achievements participating in inclusive programs (Olav, 2007). According to research, some categories of learners appear to benefit most from inclusive settings, while the beneficial effect on students with emotional instability and behavioral disorder looks less consistent.

A promising practice is the delivery of inclusive education in self-contained classrooms with a small number of students not exceeding 5–6 learners, close-knit environment and one-on-one attention to every class member. Under such conditions, children with special education needs feel safer and have a better chance for building their individual learning trajectory, and improving the rate of learning and creativity. Self-contained classrooms offer the students a permeating support system, especially for those with emotional and behavioral problems (Kane & Cogan, 2011).

Data presentation and analysis

One of the methods used for data generation pertaining to the inclusive education issues was opinion poll of secondary school teachers about the reasons of private tutoring. The teachers were to respond to one question "What makes the learner go to a private tutor?" by choosing from the list of statements or adding their own variants.

The results are shown in diagram 1:

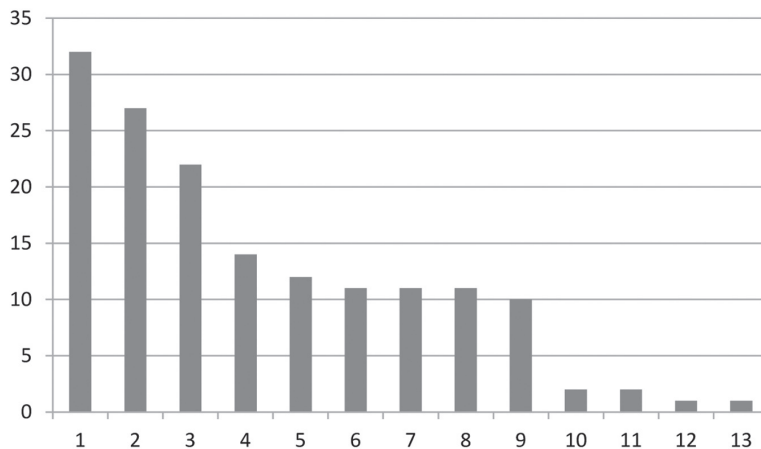


Diagram 1.

Teachers' opinion poll about the reasons of private tutoring.

Key to the diagram

What makes the learner go to a private tutor?

- 1) the need of individual training time;
- 2) aspiration to go to University;
- 3) parents' decision to hire a private tutor;
- 4) low school proficiency scoring;
- 5) lack of individual attention from the teacher in class;
- 6) individual disabilities and difficulties;
- 7) challenging home tasks;
- 8) difficult tasks in the course-book;
- 9) learner's desire to know more;
- 10) the forthcoming school examination;
- 11) Inability of parents to help the learner at home;
- 12) low level of teacher's professional skills;
- 13) absence of inclusion practices at school.

Source: own data source.

The order of items in the diagram reflects the order of their preferences and shows that the need of individual training time is the most likely reason why the learners go to a private tutor. The statement about poor implementation of inclusion program in schools scores lowest. This finding is important, leading us to assume that the absence of inclusive practices is accompanied by insufficient attention given to the learners during the teacher-centered lessons.

Teachers' views on inclusive education were studied with the help of the other opinion poll, in which the teachers were to select an answer from the list or to add their own statements to continue the phrase, "Inclusive education WILL...". The results in the order of preference are shown in diagram 2:

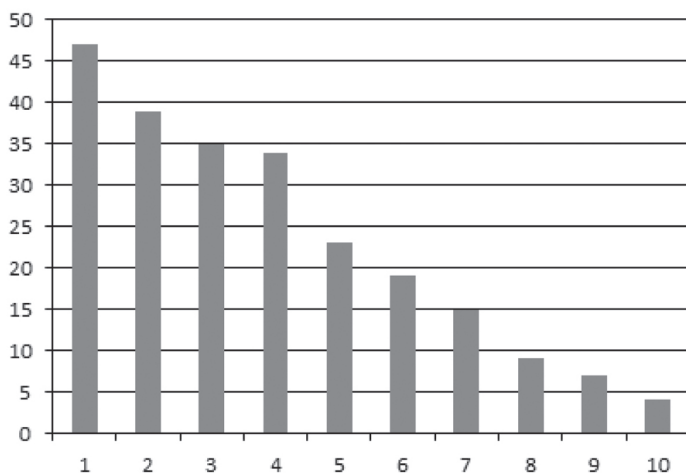


Diagram 2.

Teachers' views on the prospects of inclusive education.

Key to the diagram

Inclusive education will:

- 1) lower the achievement of the advanced learners in inclusive classrooms;
- 2) provoke parents' protests against inclusive classrooms;
- 3) provide individual curricula for every learner or group of learners in class;
- 4) make challenged learners feel second-sort in contrast to the high achievers;
- 5) involve advanced learners in assisting their challenged classmates during the lesson;
- 6) cause conflicts between the advanced and the challenged learners in class;
- 7) make learners rely more on private tutors hired by parents to help the challenged learners;
- 8) provide the challenged learners with individual teacher's assistant in the lesson;
- 9) successfully integrate the challenged and the advanced learners in one class;
- 10) let every learner in the inclusive class develop well.

Source: own data source.

The diagram indicates that quite a few of those polled hold a cautious view on inclusive education in Russian schools. The fear is that teaching inclusive classes may result in lowering the indicators of the teacher's success. This may

also provoke parents' protests. Conversely, the parents of the challenged learners may protest against their children feeling second-sort among the unchallenged class members. Potential bullying and conflicts between the advanced and the challenged learners may aggravate the situation. At the same time, the teachers without practical experience of inclusive programs hope that this practice will provide the learners with individual curricula, may involve advanced learners in helping the challenged classmates, and, ideally, let every learner in the inclusive classroom develop well.

Essential evidence about teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education came from the teachers' interviews. The material of 10 interviews with the teachers was subject to content analysis by breaking it down into the meaningful rubrics. The frequency of the rubrics in the interviews is presented in diagram 3:

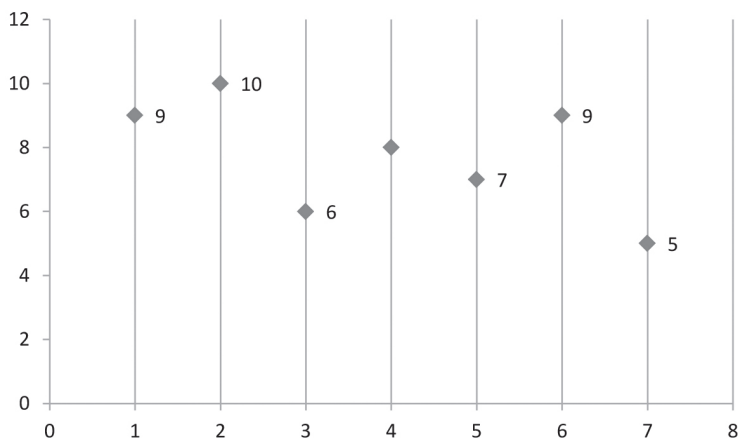


Diagram 3.

Content analysis rubrics of teachers' interviews.

Key to the diagram:

- 1) lack of experience in inclusive classrooms;
- 2) lack of training on inclusive practices;
- 3) insufficient skills of simultaneous multitasking;
- 4) vulnerability of challenged learners in inclusive classrooms;
- 5) compromising the average scoring of learner performance in mainstream classrooms;
- 6) lack of course-books for challenged learners;
- 7) overgeneralized clauses of the adapted programs.

Source: own data source.

The issues raised by the teachers in their interviews are plotted unevenly in the diagram. Lack of training in inclusive practices takes the upmost position. Insufficient classroom experience and inadequate course-books for diverse learners rank second. There are concerns about lower average learner scoring in the inclusive classroom because the challenged learners allegedly “spoil the general picture”. Teachers mention potential vulnerability of the challenged learners in the company of their unchallenged peers and the incomplete system of scaffolding the challenged learners in inclusive classes. They also complained about the absence of dedicated course-books and other support materials. In addition, the teachers made a few complaints about the overly abstract language of the adapted educational programs and the scarcity of concrete recommendations and available working sheets.

Of special interest were unchallenged learners’ reflections on their study experience in mainstream classes. The students wrote their essays “My school experience on reflection: the good and the bad of it”. There was no prior focus whatsoever regarding our research target. The following three quotes out of the ten essays were of particular interest:

- “because of low achievers highly motivated pupils don’t learn the subjects as deeply as they are able to”;
- “I had a conflict with my desk-mate because he chattered and fidgeted all the time, and was on pins and needles”;
- “I was not good at math and the teacher once gave me an easier word problem which I solved but felt humiliated.”

The above topics of concern reveal at least three aspects that problematize inclusive education: advanced students feel robbed of the teacher’s time in the lesson; learners with behavioral problems may distract their peers from studies; adapted low-level study programs can be the source of frustration for the learners with a vulnerable self-esteem.

Discussion

Glancing back at the hypothetical propositions in this research, going positive about inclusive education among teachers depends on their interpretation of “proper teaching”, whether it is personality oriented or norm-referenced. Depending on the choice of values, the teachers may either uphold or repudiate inclusive practices.

The general stance towards inclusive classrooms among the teachers is positive and consistent with the concepts of mercy, compassion and other similar

values in Russia's spiritual culture. The problem lies in the collision of the positive perception of humanistic values guaranteed by inclusive education on the one hand, and the dubious value of excellence in the norm-referenced pedagogical reality on the other. The practice of norm-referenced learner assessment means that rigid boundaries between achievements and failures are set and these are measured against the benchmark of top achievers. Orientation to high scoring takes attention away from developmental aspects of surplus gain in the knowledge of the challenged learners whose starting point is by definition considerably lower than that of their unchallenged and capable peers.

Potential risk of compromising inclusive practices lies in possible conflicts among the challenged and unchallenged learners and their subsequent mutual alienation. This may give rise to parents' protests.

Research shows that the key aspect of the problem in dealing with the learner needs is insufficient individual training time during the lesson that pushes the learner towards going to a private tutor. This means that inclusive practices have to provide the necessary amount of individual teaching time for every student during the lesson or otherwise.

In sum, among the reservations concerning inclusive education we should mention teachers' misgivings about lower performance rate of their advanced learners, parents' protests and conflicts between the challenged and the unchallenged classmates, and injured feeling of self-worth of the learners with special educational needs. Negative experience of teachers without adequate training, insufficient level of competence and skills and inability to provide pedagogical support to the learners with special needs strengthens the feeling of resentment against inclusive classrooms. Little attention given to the development of social competence in learners may further tarnish the perception of inclusive education.

Conclusion

The research into the perception of inclusive education in Russia has shown that there exists a culturally consistent positive view on the idea of integrated, collaborative and supportive teaching of the challenged and the unchallenged learners together. At the same time, the idealized strong version of inclusion stumbles over a number of hurdles. Some teachers still need professional competence and experience to deal with the inclusive classes. The challenged and the unchallenged learners are in need of adequate social competence to

interact in the inclusive environment. Inclusive education requires efficient programs, concrete recommendations and working sheets as well as multi-level course-books meeting the educational needs of students with a whole variety of aptitudes, claims and aspirations. This will remove the barriers towards positive perception of inclusive education in Russia.

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GOING POSITIVE ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN RUSSIA: WHAT IS IN THE WAY?

Summary: Inclusive education carries in itself a positive message of humanistic pedagogy, equal opportunities and personality self-actualization for both challenged and unchallenged learners. Yet, the implementation of its basic tenets is currently running the gauntlet of critical reevaluation in Russia's teaching community. The study reveals controversial relationship between traditional societal values of mercy and compassion on the one hand, and the "ideals vs. reality" ambivalence on the other. The collision of humanistic values and competence resources as well as organizational issues interferes with the full acceptance of inclusive education. The research draws on questionnaire studies in Russia's educational environment.

Keywords: inclusive education, challenged and unchallenged learners, special needs, pedagogical scaffolding, personality, self-actualization

POZYTYWNE PRZYJĘCIE EDUKACJI INKLUZYJNEJ W ROSJI: CO STOI NA PRZESZKODZIE?

Streszczenie: Edukacja włączająca niesie ze sobą pozytywne przesłanie pedagogiki humanistycznej, równych szans i autorealizacji zarówno dla osób zagrożonych wykluczeniem, jak i pozostałych. Wdrażanie jej podstawowych założeń jest obecnie zalecane przez Komisję Europejską. Przeprowadzone badanie ujawnia niespójność pomiędzy tradycyjnymi wartościami społecznymi, takimi jak miłosierdzie i współczucie z jednej strony, a odzwierciedleniem tychże ideałów w rzeczywistości z drugiej. Zderzenie wartości humanistycznych i kompetencji, a także kwestie organizacyjne przeszkadzają bowiem w pełnej akceptacji edukacji włączającej. Przedstawione badania opierają się głównie na badaniach ankietowych przeprowadzonych w rosyjskim środowisku edukacyjnym.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja inkluzyjna, uczniowie zagrożeni wykluczeniem, uczniowie niezagożeni wykluczeniem, specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne, osobowość, autorealizacja