

## Celebrating Diversity

### *A Person-Centered Approach in Inclusive Education*

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Diversity is a cornerstone of multicultural society in which every person is valued and respected. Ukraine as well as other Eastern European countries makes steps to enter global educational space adhering to the principles of humanization and democratization in all spheres of life. The right to obtain quality education irrespectively of race, gender, status or abilities is inviolable. Therefore, there appear new social trends contributing to respect and celebration of diversity in education. There is a worldwide tendency in changing attitudes towards people with disabilities considering their role and potential in global society, at the same time various barriers and profound behavioral patterns differentiating the inclusive paradigm in the light of mental stereotypes hinder this movement. To some extent, ethno-psychological features of perception determine the social and individual attitudes to persons with disabilities.

Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education opened the door of mainstream schools to students with disabilities. Inclusive education has become an alternative to special needs education, instead of segregated educational solutions the mainstream classroom should open up to diversity (Nilholm, 2021). Inclusive education is about rights, values and future, it is a civilizational progress towards a school for every child that includes everybody, appreciates diversities, supports learning, and responds to individual needs. Inclusive education provides for creating and maintaining such an educational environment that meets the needs and abilities of each child. It is not about increasing the educational budget; but about continuous, systemic, and sustained transformation of educational design, cultures, and values (Schuelka, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, to be successful in including students with disabilities, the system of education should not concentrate much on correctional work with a student (the term is still used in Ukrainian pedagogy), but on helping to develop and make progress. Also research shows that teachers' knowledge, understanding, skills, abilities and attitude in further enhancing the inclusive educational opportunities for students with special needs plays an important role (Adams et al., 2021).

The number of students with special educational needs and disabilities in inclusive classrooms in Ukraine is constantly increasing due to substantial changes in legislation and policy. The growth in congenital malfunctions and the ongoing military conflict in the east of Ukraine has resulted in a soaring number of children with disabilities. Often the integration is unregulated and spontaneous while inclusive education calls for more systematic development. Regional and local infant welfare offices (responsible for providing psychological, medical and pedagogical consultations for children and their parents) revealed a significant number of children with intellectual and physical disabilities, many of whom study in regular schools (Kolupayeva & Savchuk, 2011, p. 21).

The idea of a person-centered approach in inclusion lies on the principles of humanistic pedagogy and psychology: the ultimate value of a person, mutual respect and empathy, awareness of individual needs and demands. A person-centered educational model aims at inspiring and developing a child who lives in a changing world and is a subject of culture and his/her own life (Bekh, 2015, p. 15).

Humanistic principles in inclusive education are based primarily on:

- natural socialization, i.e. teaching a child locally without separation from a family;
- cooperation and individual choice, including parents in the multiprofessional team and enabling them to choose forms and methods of teaching; and
- government funding – financial allowances to be allocated to a child with disabilities rather than to a school, thus giving an opportunity for parents to choose educational services by themselves.

The person-centered principle in inclusive education manifests itself in considering alternative models of psychological and educational support, free choice of appropriate teaching methods, levels and ranges of educational services (Kolupayeva, 2009).

## **1 Person-Centered Approach in Social and Educational Interaction**

School life is multifaceted, because a student establishes a variety of social relationships. Most children have no difficulties in communicating and interacting with their peers, friends, teachers, whereas some may need assistance. Students with SEN require appropriate support and opportunities for interaction in an educational environment.

Pedagogical practice offers many examples of good adaptability of students with disabilities, high levels of positive interaction between participants of an inclusive process based on psychological support and cooperation. Students

adapt to learning and develop social and interpersonal relations better if they are motivated and supported. Hence, it is essential for schools to create conditions for developing positive qualities, social relations, and personal values in students. Inclusive education ensures emotional development, building self-esteem and learning to live in society. Friendship and cooperation in inclusive classrooms can awaken a number of positive feelings in students. A teacher should respect and treat all students in class as equals, use an individual, person-centered approach, and help students to master skills and set goals to develop character and value life, wellbeing and diversity.

It is important to establish friendly and cooperative contacts among students while focusing on psychological and cultural aspects when including students with disabilities. It is not a good idea to force students to display exaggerated attention and treatment of their peers with disabilities. If a teacher excessively emphasizes that there is a student with SEND, who desperately requires help, friendship, positive and emotional atmosphere, such actions can fix and strengthen negative stereotypes towards establishing equal and mutually beneficial social relationships. The person-centered approach in an educational process lies primarily in maintaining respectful attitudes. It is important to teach children to respect the diversity and dignity of their classmates with disabilities, therefore, regardless of his/her physical or intellectual development.

Psychology and pedagogy have proved that children with SEN improve their cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral skills while interacting with their healthy peers, whereas a presence of students with disabilities in a classroom positively affects a formation of human values and empathic abilities in healthy children. Introducing best international practices of inclusion (universal design for learning, systems of support, instructional strategies) and changing the philosophy of education when the progress of an individual student is important can help to change stereotypes that many Ukrainians have concerning cognitive abilities of children with disabilities. The person-centered approach in inclusive education is not only an effective factor in improving social and emotional interaction; it also promotes differentiation and individualization of learning.

*The personality of a teacher* as a role model for students is very important in forming an inclusive learning environment. A teacher is a key organizer of children's activities and cooperation. Therefore, he or she should strive to create such an environment where all students have equal rights as well as opportunities for development. A favorable educational and developmental environment enables students' initiative, creativity and ensures successful learning. The role of a teacher also manifests itself in an innovative professional activity, which provides opportunities to realize creative potential. Inclusive education requires relevant approaches, interactive teaching methods, various forms of group work combined with active cooperation of all students.

It is advisable for a teacher to create educational conditions that ensure “such level of consciousness development that will motivate a child to self-knowledge and self-activity in order to become a creator of its own rich spiritual life” (Bekh, 2015, p. 42). Thus, an inclusive classroom should be a place to cultivate such situations where students build cooperative relationships among each other and learn to respect diversity. While communicating with students with disabilities it is important to support their freedom and willpower. The most important thing is to do so honestly and openly. A teacher should avoid hidden emotions, as these students are sensitive to hypocrisy in society.

*Semantic and pragmatic analysis of disability terminology* is another important aspect of the person-centered approach in an inclusive classroom. There can be pedagogical situations when a teacher should explain to students a content and appropriate use of certain concepts that are present in their active vocabulary. The unacceptable, offensive and derogatory terminology must not be used as it reinforces negative associations and stereotypes. Such words as “invalid” or “confined to a wheelchair” evoke an image of helplessness and uselessness. They hurt students making it impossible to achieve and make progress (Budnyk, 2015, pp. 38–39). It is reasonable to stimulate tolerant, free and creative cooperation in learning and establish a united emotional and sensory range of educational interaction.

Promotion of inclusion is connected with changing the language and mindsets to build just and equitable society; sometimes it is a long process. In Ukrainian pedagogy, the term *tolerance* denotes optimizing relationships between teachers and students on the one hand and students with SEND on the other. This term differs from *toleration*. According to Y. Kleptsova, *toleration* means the increase of sensitivity towards an object (increased tension, irritability) and *tolerance* implies reduction. T. Margolina notes that in the past *tolerance* implied a passive attitude to the object or subject against one's benefit, while in recent years it has become a conscious active position of a person (Davydenko, 2015, p. 118). It is worth mentioning that in the Western tradition using the word *tolerance* with respect to individuals with disabilities can be seen as derogatory and the terminology has moved toward “inclusion”, “celebration” or “appreciation” of disability and diversity.

## 2 Person-Centered Techniques in Inclusive Education

They are based on a developmental effect of learning and optimization of a student's cognitive activity taking into consideration reflexive and volitional mechanisms of a pedagogical interaction.

Bekh (2015) distinguishes the following principles of personality-centered techniques:

- creation of emotionally enriched educational situations;
- personality-developing communication;
- building empathy skills as a psychological mechanism in educating a person; and
- systematic analysis of students' relations and actions (pp. 127–131).

These principles are fundamental in inclusive education as they primarily involve elements of psychological influence on a developing personality.

International experience proves that people with disabilities often are capable and gifted in various areas (in arts, for example). They may show aptness to activities that require concentration, perseverance, processing a significant amount of information, scientific research, ICT and so on. As the results obtained by Davydenko (2015) show,

people with intellectual disabilities display abilities to certain cognitive activities – memorizing, researching, processing data and so on. Students with sensory disabilities show intensification of compensatory functions: students with visual disabilities show high sensitivity to acoustic phenomena (music, listening comprehension, communication), hard of hearing students are skilled in visual and tactile areas. (p. 23)

Hence, the person-centered approach is important to identify creative abilities, talents and preferences of children with SEN and their conscious application in an educational process of comprehensive school.

The person-centered approach in inclusion enables a teacher to meet diverse needs of students determined by a level of their development, abilities, interests and other features. To do so it is important to adapt methods and forms of learning, school settings, teaching materials and so on. These changes can be carried out keeping in mind special needs of students via adaptation (changing the nature of training without changing the content of educational objectives) or modification (changing both the nature of instruction and the level of learning objectives) (Budnyk, 2015, pp. 45–46).

A prerequisite for ensuring efficient teaching of a student with SEN is *the individualization of the educational process*. This is reflected in designing an individual education program which aims at: (1) elaborating a comprehensive program for development of a child with SEN; (2) adapting environment to the needs of a child; (3) providing additional services and forms of support in

a learning process; (4) monitoring the dynamics of a student's development (Zayerkova & Treytyak, 2016, p. 24).

The person-centered approach in inclusion is also present in composing individualized plans and teaching curriculum for students with SEN by a support team.

An effective means of the person-centered approach in evaluating educational achievements of a student with disability is a portfolio. Being composed in a particular research topic, it creates a situation of success, builds a student's self-esteem and self-confidence, develops educational interests and willingness to make progress. On the other hand, a portfolio facilitates self-evaluation and mutual evaluation of study results. Consequently, students develop skills to understand and pursue their own interests, values, needs and abilities and to relate them with existing opportunities. It is important for a student with SEN to build an adequate self-esteem to help develop positive personality traits.

Inclusive education gives an opportunity for students with SEN to socialize and participate in various activities, their self-esteem increases and the range of interaction expands, which means a dynamic progress and development. However, there are some challenges in introducing inclusive education, especially concerning children with SEN. They are not always equally perceived and treated in a school community and can lack sufficient support and other special services. If an inclusive school has a position of a teacher's assistant, the parents usually are content that their child develops intellectually, spiritually and socially. However, some parents are too sensitive to perceive unacceptance of their children by their healthy peers or inadequately treat students with typical development and their significant differences in obtaining education (Kolupayeva & Savchuk, 2011, pp. 34–35).

Insufficient financing is another negative aspect in post-Soviet countries. Today's Ukraine faces closures of small schools and consequent creation of so-called hub-schools in educational districts. From 2016 and onward, the government is to provide financial support to local communities to equip hub-schools with modern educational and material resources. To some extent, this applies to an inclusive school, as its important task is to ensure equal access and quality education. It is primarily about removing barriers and adapting schools for students with SEN as the person-centered approach requires both human resources and appropriate financial support.

Progressing towards innovative inclusion, one should focus primarily on a person in training and educating students. We are certain that an individual approach in developing skills, talents, culture of professional pedagogical communication and cooperation among students and teachers will enable effective implementation of inclusive education and form a diverse and tolerant society.

### 3 Conclusions

Ukrainian educators seek to humanize relationships between teachers and students, including those with disabilities, so it is worth overcoming social stereotypes and working to improve teacher's professional culture. Let us remember about pedagogy of goodness (I. Zyazyun), a concept of humanocentrism (V. Kremen), child-centered pedagogy (O. Kvas), teaching ethics (H. Vasianovych) and other conceptual trends in theory and practice.

Person-centered education means respect for each student being the highest value of society – we consider it the cornerstone of inclusive education. This approach employs humanization of social and educational interaction in teaching. Recent psychological and pedagogical studies show that communication and interaction of children with SEND with their healthy peers promote effective socialization in the educational environment. Children with disabilities establish and maintain social contacts and form cognitive, emotional and behavioral skills. Simultaneously, the presence of students with disabilities in mainstream schools has a positive effect on cherishing human values: empathy, kindness, tolerance, compassion.

Based on the fact that children with SEND often are gifted in peculiar activities (arts, sports, etc.) it is essential to practice person-centered strategies based on personalization and differentiation in teaching and equitable evaluation of all students.

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