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PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND BARRIERS TO THE SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Annotation: This article provides a theoretical analysis of the psychological mechanisms underlying the social acceptance of children with special educational needs in inclusive educational settings. It examines the influence of social stereotypes, stigma, psychological barriers, and peer relationships. The article argues that the effectiveness of inclusive education depends not only on organizational and physical accessibility but also on fostering empathy, positive social attitudes, mutual respect, and cooperation among educational stakeholders. Individual, group, and institutional factors affecting social acceptance are discussed, and practical approaches to reducing psychological barriers are proposed.

Keywords: inclusive education, special educational needs, social acceptance, stigma, stereotypes, empathy, social adaptation, psychological barriers.

Introduction

In the modern educational system, the development of an inclusive approach is closely tied to ensuring the right to receive high-quality education, taking into account the individual abilities, educational needs, and personal characteristics of every child. Inclusive education is an approach that supports the participation of children with special educational needs in the general educational environment, their communication with peers, the demonstration of their potential, and their active integration into society. However, creating equal opportunities for all children in an educational institution does not always guarantee social integration. Although a child may study in a general classroom, they may still face non-acceptance by peers, exclusion from group activities, discrimination, or negative stereotypes. Such situations carry the potential to negatively impact their self-confidence, educational motivation, emotional state, and social adaptation.

From this perspective, providing psychological support for inclusive education—particularly studying the social acceptance of children with special educational needs by their peers and other educational participants—holds significant scientific and practical importance.

The relevance of the problem lies in the fact that, along with physical presence in an inclusive environment, it is necessary for the child to engage in social relationships, feel a sense of belonging to the group, and perceive themselves as an equal participant. For this purpose, it is essential to identify psychological barriers in the educational process, clarify the mechanisms of their occurrence, and develop scientifically grounded approaches aimed at reducing them.The aim of the article is to conduct a theoretical analysis of the psychological factors influencing the social acceptance of children with special educational needs in an inclusive educational environment, as well as to outline the main directions for reducing psychological barriers.

Theoretical foundations of inclusive education and social acceptance

The theoretical foundations of inclusive education are highlighted in international scientific literature in connection with issues of expanding educational opportunities, preventing discrimination, and eliminating barriers in the educational environment.

In UNESCO's approaches to inclusive education, identifying and reducing barriers that hinder the participation of all students in the educational process is indicated as an important task [1]. This approach does not limit inclusion merely to placing children with special educational needs in a general classroom, but envisages adapting the educational environment to the needs of all children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to education and establishes the necessity of developing an inclusive education system [2]. This legal framework reinforces the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and respect for individual dignity in the educational process.

From a psychological perspective, the issue of social acceptance is linked to stereotypes, social attitudes, and intergroup relations. G. Allport's work on the psychology of prejudice helps to understand the importance of social representations and intergroup relations in the formation of people's attitudes toward representatives of other groups [3]. According to his approach to intergroup contact, cooperation organized under appropriate conditions and equal-status interactions can serve to reduce prejudice.

Social acceptance is a socio-psychological phenomenon that reflects the recognition, respect, engagement in communication and cooperation, and acceptance of an individual as an equal member by members of a social group. In the context of inclusive education, this concept manifests through the interactions of children with special educational needs with their peers, their participation in collective activities, friendship ties, and a sense of belonging to the classroom community.Social acceptance cannot be equated with the mere presence of a child in the classroom. There is a distinction between physical participation in an educational institution and active inclusion in social relationships. For instance, a student may attend classes but be minimally involved in group assignments or lack stable friendship ties with peers.

Therefore, when evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive education, it is necessary to consider the student's social experience and group relationships along with educational access opportunities.

Important psychological indicators of social acceptance include:

- The presence of positive communication with peers;
- Opportunities to participate in collective tasks;
- Feeling like a part of the classroom community;
- The opportunity to express one's opinion freely;
- The absence of instances of discrimination and exclusion;
- Established mutual aid and cooperation with other students.

Although these indicators are interrelated, each expresses a distinct aspect of social acceptance. Consequently, it is expedient to study them comprehensively.

Manifestation of Psychological Barriers and Stigmatization

One of the factors hindering social acceptance in inclusive education is stereotypes and stigmatization.

A stereotype is a generalized perception formed about representatives of a particular social group, which can lead to insufficient consideration of individual characteristics. For example, evaluating the potential of certain children based solely on their disability or physical appearance, or considering them incapable of independent activity, can be a manifestation of a stereotypical attitude. Stigmatization, on the other hand, is a process associated with attaching a negative mark to an individual based on a specific characteristic, isolating them from others, or discriminating

against them. E. Goffman's work on stigma serves as an important theoretical foundation for understanding the impact of such social labeling on interpersonal relationships and social status [6].

In an inclusive educational environment, psychological barriers can manifest in the following forms:

First, cognitive barriers. These include incorrect or insufficient perceptions of the abilities and characteristics of children with special educational needs.

Second, emotional barriers. These include discomfort, unfounded fear, insecurity, or negative emotional attitudes when communicating with other children.

Third, behavioral barriers. These may manifest in the form of non-involvement in group activities, avoidance of communication, mockery, exclusion, or discrimination.

Fourth, institutional barriers. Inadequate organization of psychological support in an educational institution, limited preparation of educators, or the lack of clear anti-discrimination mechanisms can negatively impact social acceptance.

These barriers may manifest not in isolation, but in mutual interaction. For example, incorrect perceptions can reinforce negative attitudes, which in turn can lead to the child's exclusion from group activities.At the same time, it is incorrect to explain every social difficulty solely through stereotypes. Limitations in communication opportunities, unadapted environments, communicative needs, and individual differences must also be taken into consideration.

Psychological Mechanisms Influencing Social Acceptance

To explain social acceptance in an inclusive educational environment, it is necessary to examine individual, group, and institutional factors together.At the individual level, empathy, understanding mutual differences, emotional regulation, and communicative skills are of great importance. Understanding another person's state and considering their perspective can support cooperation among children.

At the group level, social norms in the classroom, peer attitudes, informal groups, and forms of collective activity are significant. If values of mutual assistance, respect, and cooperation are supported in the classroom, the opportunities for children with diverse needs and abilities to join the group can expand.

At the institutional level, the educator's attitude, psychological service activities, internal rules of the educational institution, and cooperation with families play an important role. Within G. Allport's intergroup contact theory, it is established that interactions among representatives of different groups can reduce prejudice under certain conditions [3]. In inclusive education, this approach can be applied through collective assignments oriented toward common goals, equal participation, and cooperative activities. However, simply bringing children together in one classroom does not guarantee positive relationships. Interactions must be safe, based on respect, and meaningful for all participants.

On this basis, social acceptance can be explained through the following conceptual sequence:

Information and understanding -> Positive attitude -> Meaningful interaction -> Cooperation -> Social acceptance.

This sequence is a theoretical framework proposed in the article and should not be interpreted as an empirically tested causal model. Its scientific value can be determined in subsequent studies by verifying the relationships between variables.

Practical directions for reducing psychological barriers

To foster social acceptance in an inclusive educational environment, it is necessary to organize systematic psychological-pedagogical work.

First direction — Developing psychological enlightenment. Students should be provided with age-appropriate information about individual differences, equality, respect, cooperation, and the consequences of discrimination. A key approach here is one that explains common human needs and possibilities rather than separating children from one another.

Second direction — Organizing collaborative activities. Group tasks, team projects, role-playing games, and joint problem-solving expand communication opportunities among children. Tasks should be structured so that each participant can contribute according to their abilities.

Third direction — Developing empathy and social skills. Through psychological training, situational exercises, story analysis, and reflective questions, students can be taught to realize their attitudes and take into account the feelings of others.

Fourth direction — Strengthening the psychological preparation of educators. Educators must be trained to account for individual differences, respond to instances of discrimination, manage group conflicts, and support the participation of every student.

Fifth direction — Psychological monitoring and individual support. When social exclusion, lack of friendship ties, or communication difficulties are identified, assistance must be organized taking into account the child's personal characteristics and needs. In doing so, listening to the child's opinion, ensuring confidentiality, and not blaming them for the problematic situation are essential.

Sixth direction — Family and educational institution partnership. Through discussions, consultations, and joint events with parents, inclusive values can be supported, incorrect perceptions reduced, and children's social development facilitated.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed directions, methods such as initial and final diagnostics, systematic observation, age-appropriate interviews with children, and studying the opinions of educators and parents can be utilized. In analyzing results, social acceptance, sense of belonging to the group, mutual cooperation, and instances of discrimination should be examined as separate indicators.

CONCLUSION

Social acceptance of children with special educational needs in an inclusive educational environment is one of the crucial psychological conditions of the educational process. A child's physical presence in a general educational institution and their acceptance by peers are not identical phenomena. Therefore, when evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive education, along with organizational and pedagogical conditions, interpersonal relationships, a sense of belonging to the group, and psychological safety must also be taken into account.

Based on theoretical analysis, the necessity of examining factors influencing social acceptance at individual, group, and institutional levels was identified. Stereotypes, stigmatization, negative attitudes, and social exclusion can create psychological barriers in an inclusive environment. At the same time, empathy, meaningful intergroup contact, cooperation, pedagogical support, and positive social norms can serve to foster social acceptance.Reducing psychological barriers in inclusive education should not be limited to a single exercise or event; rather, it must encompass the general psychological climate of the educational institution, the professional readiness of educators, peer relationships, and cooperation with families.

In subsequent empirical research, identifying psychological indicators of social acceptance, verifying their interrelationships, and evaluating the effectiveness of psychological support programs constitute a promising scientific direction.

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