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## **Inclusive Education in Ukraine: parents of Children with Disabilities Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Social and political transformations inevitably cause changes in people's mindsets and result in conversion of a national educational system. Ukraine, as a post soviet country, is still trying to put away its totalitarian past and adopt the latest human rights policies that have been successfully functioning in the "developed" world for several decades. This study evaluates the quality of inclusive education in Ukraine, specifically focusing on services provided to families of students with disabilities whose views and opinions are often neglected by governmental officials responsible for creating inclusive environments.

*Key words: inclusive education, students with disabilities, parents, opinions*

### **Introduction**

Research in the field of inclusive education in Ukraine, especially, of those aspects that deal with its methodology, practical implementation and evaluation of results, is now, doubtless, very acute. Scientists, whose professional interests lie in the field of pedagogical studies, pay their attention to the issues of engaging children with disabilities into mainstream education (Gudonis, V. & Klopota, Y., 2017), (Skrypnyk T., Martynchuk O., Klopota O., 2020). Governmental and non-governmental agencies, as well as public sector activists on all levels express their

concerns about effectiveness of psychological and pedagogical work, intended to make Ukrainian society more inclusive and educational settings ready to meet students' special needs. Although these activities are, generally, very positive, they often lack a profound systematic approach, and they are almost never based on a feedback from the main beneficiaries of educational inclusion – families who have children with disabilities (Romanova, 2017).

### **Problem of Research**

Most often, parents of students with disabilities (SD), or persons who substitute them, have to enforce opening of inclusive classes and groups at schools and kindergartens, to stimulate the state machine of social services, too slow in its actions, to publicly criticize mechanisms of implementing inclusive education developed by governmental officials, and almost never take part in decision-making nor have an opportunity to meaningfully participate in policy-making in order to create a holistic approach to solve problems these people face on day-to-day basis (Duda, 2011). This, partly, is due to the fact that parents of children with disabilities in Ukraine are not viewed as a powerful self-advocacy group, as the main stakeholders of inclusive education, because they are still, analogous to the Soviet Union practice, perceived as recipients but not partners in social, medical, educational and other spheres (Ticha, R. & O. Telna, 2020). On the other hand, the modern, human rights paradigm of public political sector development requires equal access and opportunities for all and everyone to participate in building an inclusive environment that is secured by international and domestic legislation functioning in Ukraine (CRPD Concluding Observation Ukraine, 2015).

### **Research Focus**

Careful analysis of the appropriate academic research gives evidence to emphasize the importance of deep involvement of families that have children with DISABILITIES into the process of solving problems of inclusive education at all levels (Turnbull, A., Turnbull, R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A., 2011). These authors, above all, provide evidence of the major expertise of parents in the field of their children's interests, needs and abilities, and, therefore, are of a great help when it is necessary to find the ways of engaging SD into mainstream education.

Other problems of involving parents of SD into collective decision-making in the sphere of creating inclusive environments, creating collaboration networks, developing inclusive strategies and practices have been discussed in the works of such researchers as Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J. A., Frankland, H. C., Lord

Nelson, L., & Begle, G. (2004), Ryan, T. G. (2009), Cobigo, V., Ouellette-Kuntz, H., Lysaght, R., & Martin, L. (2012), Day, C. G. (2016) and many others. All these authors prove the fact that considering parents' opinions and expectations can lead to substantial increase in academic progress of SD and enhance the quality of inclusive education on a large scale.

Numerous academic studies also suggest that one of the biggest advantages of inclusive education is close social interaction of SD and their non-disabled peers which provokes obtaining experience of human diversity, tolerant behaviors, building friendships, as well as obtaining communication skills, helping a person to be useful for and independent in the community (Cobigo, V., Ouellette-Kuntz, H., Lysaght, R., & Martin, L., 2012). This statement has been asserted and proved by widely cited and highly respected in Ukraine and many post Soviet countries scholar, L. Vygotsky, who emphasized the crucial role of community in personal development of children with disabilities (Gindis, 2003).

Moreover, the latest developments in the deinstitutionalization reform, introduced by the Ukrainian government in 2017 (Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2017), show that educational officials and some parents of SD are not yet quite ready to accept the human rights paradigm and use the biosocial model of disability in providing educational services to persons with physical, sensory or any other impairment (Kryvachuk, 2018). That is why our main focus in this study was on getting truthful and sincere response from parents of SD, reflecting their attitudes towards inclusive education.

## **Methodology of Research**

### **General Background of Research**

The purpose of this study was to define the attitudes of parents of SD towards inclusive education in Ukraine by means of registering and exploring their opinions about the quality of educational services that their children receive.

Therefore, the survey was intended to get answers to two main research questions:

1. What are parents' opinions about the quality of inclusive education in Ukraine;
2. Whether parents of SD would like to meaningfully participate in making Ukrainian schools more inclusive.

### Sample of Research

800 people from 16 regions of Ukraine took part in the research (see Table 1). Those were parents of children with DISABILITIES aged from 2 to 15 years and attending either inclusive educational settings (63.75%), or special educational settings (25%), or learning at home (11.25%). This last category was constituted purely by children with severe forms of disabilities (mainly, disorders of autistic spectrum with hard speech, emotional and intellectual disorders) and the necessity to keep a strict diet. The group of students attending special educational settings was constituted by those with severe multiple disabilities (a child with sight and hearing loss on a wheelchair, some children with severe intellectual disabilities and emotional disorders.).

**Table 1.** Affiliation of Participants by Region)

Nº	Region	Number of Participants	Percent
1	Kharkiv	200	25
2	Lviv	160	20
3	Poltava	90	11.25
4	Ivano-Frankivsk	50	6.25
5	Rivne	50	6.25
6	Kyiv	50	6.25
7	Khmelnysk	40	5
8	Zakarpattia	30	3.75
9	Vinnytsia	20	2.5
10	Volyn	20	2.5
11	Sicheslaw	20	2.5
12	Zaporizhzhya	20	2.5
13	Sumy	20	2.5
14	Luhansk	10	1.25
15	Odesa	10	1.25
16	Ternopil	10	1.25

### Instrument and Procedures

In order to reach our goals, we have planned and conducted the anonymous internet questionnaire for parents of SD, in which our objective was to understand the level of satisfaction of respondents with the quality of educational services that their children receive, to see their expectations regarding inclusive education and willingness to participate in active self-advocacy campaigns.

Research was undertaken during the 2019, as the internet questionnaire was available for filling in during eight months in many related groups on popular social networks and open-access online resources where parents of SD could easily find it.

Methods, used in the study, include qualitative research methods of comparing expert evaluations, methods of mathematical and statistical data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

One important factor, indicating the level of inclusion of an educational environment, is quality and intensity of interpersonal communication and friendships among students with and without disabilities (Ferrel, 2012). Therefore, first of all, we wanted to know what our respondents thought about their children's participation in social life of the school / community, about their interpersonal communication and relationships with classmates and other peers.

The first question of the questionnaire was "To what extent is your child engaged in social life of the school / community? (E.g. has friends, participates in afterschool activities / social events, just is there with peers, etc.)", and answers, given by parents of SD, could be classified as follows:

- Has friends and participates in social events – 27.5% (mainly, students with partial sight loss or learning difficulties, attending inclusive schools, and all students, learning at special schools);
- Eagerly participates in afterschool activities and social events, but has no friends – 22.5% (all these students attend inclusive schools);
- Is hardly socializing, just is there with peers, taking no meaningful participation, "sometimes talks to other kids but not often" – 45% (all, who learn at home, plus some students of inclusive schools);
- Makes almost no social contacts, any attempt of communication with peers results in conflicts – 5% (mainly, students with autistic spectrum disorders).

Those responses show that in most cases SD are hardly engaged into social interaction with their non-disabled peers, have no friends at all or feel lack of meaningful interpersonal communication with other children of their age. Fully satisfied with quality and intensity of their children's social contacts and friendships are only those parents, whose kids either attend a special school, or have a minor disability. This gives us evidence to claim that teachers and other professionals, who work in the field of inclusive education, do not pay enough attention to the problem of negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, still widely spread in the Ukrainian society (Duda, 2011) and should take more decisive steps in fighting with prejudice and stereotypes, making educational

environments inclusive really but not formally, in order to fulfill the need of SD in meaningful social interaction.

Secondly, we wanted to know what parents of SD in Ukraine expect from inclusive education. That was the focus of the next question: “What do you expect from inclusive education?” Respondents were encouraged to express their opinions freely, and often gave more than one answer.

Having analyzed answers to the second question, we have noticed that parents of SD in Ukraine anticipate that inclusive education will provide:

- understanding and inclusion of “an exceptional child” – 42.5%;
- better training for teachers and their assistants – 22.5%;
- “informing society” about disability related issues – 12.5%;
- “chances to learn, not just be there in the same school with others” – 12.5%;
- an opportunity to get a profession – 1.25%;
- “better health to a kid” – 1.25%;
- “I don’t have any expectations” – 7.5%.

The above cited answers give us evidence to claim that the majority of respondents had expressed a clear expectation for inclusive schools to provide social (not just physical) inclusion of SD, understanding and satisfying their special educational needs, increasing the quality of teaching, as well as having better material and human resources, paying more attention to personal development of SD in order to help them gain social and professional skills needed for successful living.

It is worth mentioning though, that only a very small part of respondents (3.75%) expressed full satisfaction with the present state of inclusive education in Ukraine, while a considerable number of respondents had shown lack of a clear view of the topic, expecting that inclusive education should give “better health” to their child (1.25%) or having no expectations at all (7.5%) which may be caused either by misunderstanding of the conception of inclusive education, or by a generally indifferent attitude to the issue.

Evaluating the quality of educational services is hardly possible without taking into account personal experience of respondents (Friend, M., & L. Cook, 2004), therefore, in order to monitor the effectiveness of governmental policies, that had being implemented into the Ukrainian educational system during the last five years, we asked parents of SD to tell us about achievements and advantages of inclusive education they have experienced in the recent time.

Respondents could express any thoughts on the topic, giving more than one answer, and their opinions could be classified as follows:

- some progress – 27.5%;
- minimal achievements (“inclusion only exists on paper”) – 25.3%;

- substantial progress – 18.75%;
- some positive change in people’s awareness – 8.75%;
- positive changes in legislation - 8.75%;
- individual cases of successful inclusion – 8.75%;
- minimal achievements in rural areas and more progress in big cities – 6.25%;
- everybody talks about inclusion – 5%;
- opening of the first inclusive schools in small towns – 5%;
- almost no achievements in comparison with the EU and USA – 2.5%;
- no answer – 2.5%.

These data show a wide range of opinions, views and experiences, expressed by respondents, most of whom had noted positive changes in the Ukrainian educational system, mentioning opening of inclusive schools in small towns, positive changes in legislation and people’s awareness, individual cases of successful inclusion etc. Even those parents of SD, who had complained with the minimal progress, achieved by the Ukrainian inclusive education, were comparing it to the EU and USA educational systems, which means that they know the history of human rights movement and the present state of inclusive education in the “developed” countries.

On the other hand, a considerable part of respondents had expressed more pessimistic opinions, stating that Ukrainian educational settings are inclusive “on paper” only with almost no achievements in rural areas. More precise analysis of the answers, given by parents of this group, has shown that almost all of them had children with severe or complex disabilities, either attending a special (boarding) school, or learning at home, or having no friends and often facing misunderstanding or even oppression in a local (inclusive) school.

Researchers, such as Begle, G., Blue-Banning, M., Day, C.G., Ferrel, J., Francis, G.L., Frankland, H.C., Gross, J.M., Haines, S.J., Summers, J.A., Turnbull, A.P. and many others, have proved the importance of strong collaboration between families of SD and educational professionals which is the necessary ground for successful team work at school and creation of truly inclusive environment. That is why our last, but not least, aim in this research was to define whether parents of SD feel ready to actively participate in self-advocacy work, intended to make Ukrainian educational system more inclusive and disability friendly. Therefore, we asked respondents to answer the question: “Do you personally feel ready to foster inclusion in Ukraine? If so, in what way?”

The answers received were as follows:

- Yes. I will do everything I can – 27.5%;
- Yes. I feel ready to share my knowledge and experience with those who might need them – 22.5%;

- Yes. I have been doing it for some time already – 20%;
- Yes, but I don't know what to do – 13.75%;
- I feel ready to actively participate in everything that helps my child to learn successfully – 3.75%;
- No. I don't feel ready to do that. "That should be done by professionals who are paid for that".
- "I have neither time, no desire to do that." – 12.5%.

Those opinions show that the majority of respondents feel ready to actively participate in self-advocacy work because they either "have been doing it for some time already" (20%), or express a clear will to be engaged in such work (50%), or would like to but hardly know what to do (13.75%). However, a considerable part of respondents pointed out that they only feel ready to actively participate in tackling those problems that create obstacles for their child's inclusion (3.75%) or have no desire to be involved in self-advocacy work at all (12.5%).

## **Results of Research**

Correlative analysis of the answers given by parents of SD, who participated in our study, has shown that about 15% of respondents (mainly, those, whose children learn at home or attend a special educational setting) expressed clearly negative attitudes towards inclusive education in Ukraine, claiming that "Inclusion is not for every child", that it is the responsibility of governmental bodies to provide all students with educational services of a high standard, that inclusive education in Ukraine has reached "the minimal achievement". However, almost 40% of respondents pointed out rather positive and optimistic perspectives of inclusive education, they clearly understand its meaning and know all the details of the required proceedings, can freely define weaknesses and strengths of the Ukrainian inclusive educational system, and feel a strong desire to actively participate in self-advocacy campaigns intended to make educational settings in the country more inclusive; all the others (slightly less than a half of respondents) seem to be interested in discussing the problems of inclusive education and feel ready to participate in decision and policy-making only as far as it is necessary for their child's involvement. These parents complain about poor legislation, bad financial provision and lack of support and information in inclusive education but hardly try to find the ways of tackling the problems they face.



## **Conclusions**

Summing up: our research has given the evidence to state that parents of SD in Ukraine express generally positive attitudes towards inclusive education, putting their own child's needs and interests on the frontline, and expecting that society would understand and respect their family, that other students would like to communicate and make friends with their kid, that educational services would be more accessible and inclusive. Although most respondents complain about poor financing, rather low level of teachers' competence, and lack of appropriate informational and material resources in inclusive education, they, in most cases, appear to be ready to personally participate in any team work intended to foster educational inclusion, in general, and of their own child, in particular, however, often hardly knowing what to do, when and how. Almost all parents of SD, who took part in our study, have claimed that the Ukrainian society is badly informed about human rights of people with disabilities and is mostly not ready to understand and respect a child with disability on the basis of equal participation. Although a small part of respondents expressed a clearly negative attitude toward inclusive education, qualitative and quantitative data analysis has shown that most parents of SD acknowledge "some success", remarking, however, poor provisions for inclusive education in many small towns and villages, stating that "in big cities schools are more inclusive".

These results, in our opinion, not only demonstrate the attitudes of parents of SD toward inclusive education in Ukraine, but also show a great necessity to work out some effective strategies of close collaboration, intended to reinforce person-to-person talks and collective decision and policy-making and taking into account thoughts and opinions of all participants. Regular evaluation of the effectiveness of inclusive educational practices is also needed, as honest feedback from the main stakeholders can improve the quality of service provision.

It is also worth mentioning that this study does not cover all the aspect of inclusive education in Ukraine and its perception by parents of SD, hence, its results should not be seen as fully objective or those that reflect the current situation, as now, when most educational settings in Ukraine have switched onto online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need in doing the similar research in future to monitor changes in the respondents' opinions.

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