

METHODS FOR THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AMONG THEIR CLASSMATES IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This article examines effective methods and mechanisms for the socio-psychological adaptation and integration of children with special needs into their peer groups within an inclusive educational setting. The article analyzes the psychological barriers that arise in an inclusive environment and the role of educators and practicing psychologists in fostering positive relationships among classmates. It also provides practical recommendations for interactive methods and training sessions aimed at developing the social skills of children with special needs and creating a healthy psychological climate in the classroom.

Keywords

inclusive education, children with special needs, socio-psychological integration, adaptation, peer group, healthy environment, pedagogical and psychological support.

One of the most significant transformational processes in the global education system of the 21st century is the inclusive approach, aimed at ensuring the openness and equality of education for all. Inclusive education necessitates not only the physical placement of children with special needs in mainstream schools but also the creation of a socio-psychological environment for their development as full members of society. However, as practice shows, in many cases, children with special needs face serious psychological barriers when entering the environment of their typically developing peers, as well as problems of social isolation (exclusion from the group) and adaptation. Therefore, developing the scientific and methodological foundations for the socio-psychological integration of children with special needs among their classmates in an inclusive setting remains one of the most pressing challenges in modern pedagogy and psychology.

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, the development of the inclusive education system and the integration of children with special needs into society have been

designated as priority areas of state policy. Notably, the concept of inclusive education was enshrined at the legislative level for the first time in the new edition of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education"[1].

A pivotal turning point for reforms in this area was the Decree of our esteemed President Shavkat Mirziyoyev No. PF-6084, dated October 13, 2020, "On Measures to Further Improve the System of Education for Children with Special Educational Needs," and the accompanying Resolution No. PQ-4860, aimed at ensuring its implementation. These documents approved the "Concept for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Public Education System for 2020–2025"[2]. The Concept's primary objective is to ensure the right of children with special educational needs to receive a quality education in mainstream institutions and to foster a positive attitude towards them within society, including among their peers.

Furthermore, the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy, which defines the strategic direction of our country's development, places special emphasis on the fundamental expansion of the inclusive education system, the creation of a "barrier-free environment" for children with special needs in every school, and the formation of not only a material-technical but also a healthy socio-psychological environment. These legal and regulatory frameworks serve as a state-level guarantee for the systematic organization of the social integration of children with special needs – the subject of our study.

The issue of adapting children with special needs into the community of their typically developing peers has a long-standing scientific basis. The fundamental foundation of social integration in psychological science can be traced back to L.S. Vygotsky's "cultural-historical theory" and, within its framework, the theory of "social compensation for a defect"[3]. In his works, Vygotsky emphasized that the greatest problem is not a child's physical or intellectual impairment, but the resulting "social disability" and the risk of being alienated from society. Including a child among their typically developing peers is the most effective way to overcome secondary disabilities in their development.

Foreign and local researchers (including our country's scholars such as G.B. Shoumarov[4], E. M'mushonok, and L. Mo'minova[5]) have analyzed the psychological climate in inclusive groups, the level of tolerance among schoolchildren, and the mechanisms for overcoming stereotypes. However, in today's rapidly changing social environment, specific psychological technologies for implementing integration among classmates, considering new forms of communication between children and the digital space, have not been sufficiently modeled.

In practice, certain contradictions (paradoxes) are observed in the organization of inclusive education. On the one hand, school administration and teachers ensure the child's attendance in class; on the other hand, during breaks and in extracurricular activities, the child with special needs is often left alone. While typically developing children may sometimes be dominated by fear, misunderstanding, or a misguided sense of pity, the child with special needs may exhibit aggression or withdrawal (autization). This situation hinders the formation of a healthy sociometric structure in the classroom.

Successful socio-psychological integration requires a comprehensive approach. This does not mean working only with the child with special needs. It means enhancing the psychological culture of the class community, developing empathy (understanding the feelings of others) and tolerance skills in typically developing students, and establishing a triad (a three-way partnership) between the teacher, the school psychologist, and the parents.

The purpose of this study is to identify optimal forms, methods, and psychological intervention programs for the socio-psychological integration of children with special needs into their peer group in an inclusive education setting, and to develop practical recommendations based on these findings.

To achieve this goal, the following systematic tasks have been defined:

1. To analyze the scientific and theoretical foundations of student interrelationships within an inclusive educational environment, as well as advanced international practices;
2. To determine the level of social attitudes and stereotypes towards children with special needs within the peer group using empirical methods (e.g., sociometry, questionnaires);
3. To develop a system of psychological training sessions aimed at fostering empathy and an inclusive culture among students without special needs;
4. To define mechanisms for enhancing the psychological competence of parents and educators within the inclusive process.

The socio-psychological integration of children with special needs into group activities within an inclusive educational space is not merely about being physically present in the same room; it is a multi-stage process encompassing complex subject-to-subject relationships, group dynamics, and personal psychological transformations. The fundamental basis of this process relies on L.S. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, which posits that the most significant negative impact on personality formation is not the primary biological defect in a child's development (e.g., problems with vision, hearing, or the musculoskeletal system), but rather the resulting secondary social defect – the limitation of communication with others and

isolation from society. Modern special psychology and remedial pedagogy necessitate a shift from a medical model to a socio-psychological model to address this problem. The social model implies that the primary focus of the integration process is not solely the child with special needs, but the entire class collective, i.e., their micro-society. To create a healthy psychological climate and eliminate alienation within the peer group, it is first necessary to deeply analyze the principles of socio-psychological adaptation and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Scientific and empirical research, particularly experiments based on J.L. Moreno's sociometric methodology, demonstrates that in inclusive classrooms without specially organized psychological intervention, children with special needs often fall into the status of "isolated" (rejected) or "neglected." The reason for this is the prevalence of the "halo effect" or cognitive stereotypes in the initial interactions between students. Children without special needs tend to generalize the physical or speech-related peculiarities of their peers to their intellectual and personal qualities, which creates a sense of social distance. Gordon Allport's "Contact Hypothesis" serves as a fundamental scientific principle for breaking down these stereotypes and ensuring genuine social integration. According to Allport's theory, for contact between members of different groups to be effective and reduce stereotypes, four key conditions must be met: equal status among group members, cooperation towards common goals, the absence of intergroup competition, and systematic support for this contact by formal institutions (e.g., school administration, educators, psychologists).

One of the most effective and scientifically-backed methods for ensuring socio-psychological integration among classmates is the use of Cooperative Learning and Peer-Mediated Intervention technologies. In this approach, the educational process is structured so that success can only be achieved through collective effort. For example, within the framework of Elliot Aronson's "Jigsaw" method, each student, including a child with special needs, completes an essential part of the common task assigned only to them and then explains this information to the other group members. In this situation, the child with special needs is elevated from the status of an "object in need of assistance" to that of a "subject who is an important carrier of information and ensures the team's success." This dramatically and positively changes their self-esteem and sociometric status. Scientific experiments confirm that such systematic cooperation rapidly develops emotional intelligence – namely, empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of others) and reflection – in typically developing students.

Another important psychological approach is the "peer tutoring" mechanism. In this model, leading and active students in the class are assigned as tutors to help children with special needs master academic and social skills. However, this process is not automatically successful; the school psychologist must conduct special training on tolerance and effective communication for these key students. From a neuropsychological perspective, children involuntarily copy each other's behavioral models during communication through their mirror neuron systems. The positive social behavior and emotional stability of a typically developing child help a child in an inclusive setting to master socially adaptive behaviors more quickly. At the same time, this process is a two-way street: the students who are tutoring develop altruism, social responsibility, and leadership skills, which in turn prevents the formation of cliques and instances of bullying within the group.

The success of socio-psychological integration directly depends on the school teacher's psychological position and attitudes (facilitation skills). According to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, students carefully observe and internalize all of the teacher's verbal and non-verbal reactions. If a teacher shows excessive pity or hyper-protection (over-caring) towards a child with special needs, or conversely, neglects them, the other class members will adopt the same model of behavior. Through their own conduct, the teacher should focus not on the child's weaknesses, but on their strengths (resources), objectively evaluating even their minor successes and acknowledging them in front of the class. From a psychological standpoint, this increases the child's social value in the eyes of their classmates and creates cognitive balance in interpersonal relationships.

Working with the internal psychological defense mechanisms of a child with special needs (such as compensation, hypercompensation, aggression, or regression) also plays a crucial role in the integration process. In many cases, these children are in a state of constant frustration due to the awareness of their own limitations. This anxiety manifests as either defensive aggression towards the external environment or complete withdrawal from the group (shyness, negativism). When working individually with a student, the school's psychological service must focus on reducing this level of anxiety and helping the student accept the limits of their own body and personal capabilities (forming a positive "self-concept"). To this end, methods such as art therapy, fairytale therapy, and corrective games are widely used. Only after the child begins to feel safe within the community will their social motivation for external communication emerge.

In-class integration cannot be limited solely to lesson hours. According to psychological principles, an informal environment (extracurricular activities, excursions, clubs, team games) breaks down communication barriers more quickly

than the classroom. Group cohesion is strengthened in an environment of free activity. For example, by correctly assigning roles during role-playing and narrative-based games, it is possible to bring out the intellectual or creative potential of a child with special needs (for instance, through the role of a team strategist, idea generator, or judge), even if their physical abilities are limited. This, in turn, satisfies the need for group affiliation, which is characteristic of adolescents and primary school-aged children.

In conclusion, it should be noted that implementing socio-psychological integration in an inclusive education setting requires a systematic, dynamic psychological intervention that encompasses all participants. When the integration process is successful, it not only ensures the social adaptation of the child with special needs but also fosters high socio-moral and psychological qualities such as tolerance, empathy, and humanism—which are extremely important for a civil society—in typically developing children. It is this dual positive impact that defines the true scientific and practical value of the system.

Conclusion: A scientific and practical analysis of the socio-psychological integration of children with special needs among their classmates in an inclusive educational environment reveals that this process is not merely a pedagogical task, but a profound socio-psychological transformation that defines a society's level of humanity. As substantiated during the study, the key to successful integration lies not in the physical placement of a child in the classroom, but in ensuring their recognition as an equal, active, and valued member within the microsocium of their peers. The ideas of L.S. Vygotsky on the social compensation of defects, as well as the results of modern empirical research, confirm that the psychological barriers arising in an inclusive environment can only be overcome through a systematic and comprehensive approach.

In this regard, technologies such as collaborative learning, peer-mediated intervention, and interactive psychological training serve as the most effective mechanisms for dismantling traditional cognitive stereotypes in the classroom and positively changing the sociometric structure (social status within the group). Through these methods, the levels of constant anxiety and frustration in children with special needs decrease, fostering a positive "self-concept." Meanwhile, typically developing students rapidly develop empathy, emotional intelligence, and a sense of social responsibility—some of the most critical soft skills of the 21st century. Thus, inclusive integration has a dual nature: it serves not only the social adaptation of a child with special needs but also the elevation of the psychological culture of the entire class community and the prevention of negative phenomena such as bullying.

In this process, the teacher's role as a facilitator and the close collaboration of the school's psychological service with parents are the foundation for ensuring the system's stability. As a final conclusion, the implementation of reforms within the framework of the concept for developing inclusive education, carried out in our country under the leadership of our President, requires creating not only a "barrier-free environment" for children with special needs in school buildings but also a space of tolerance in the hearts and minds of their classmates. These scientific approaches serve as the practical basis for this goal.

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