

ON DEFINING AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction. Implementing inclusive education is a systemic innovation that covers major areas of educational organizations' activities. This innovation is based on the current social policy of the state, it is legislated as the one providing equal access to education for all learners, taking into account the diversity of their special needs and unique capabilities. However, inclusive education development is characterized by a high degree of instability and uncertainty of its semantic, conceptual, and technological components. The concept of inclusion itself has not yet been thoroughly investigated as a constructive idea in Russian society, both at the level of theoretical understanding and at the level of professional self-awareness of practicing educators. It can be said that this concept is being explored through trial and error. This arises from the lack of theoretical and methodological basis, absence of a unified approach, strategy and model for implementing inclusive practices with due regard to the unique ways the Russian education system develops. It is critical to shape an inclusive approach which would give a scientific and theoretical basis for studying and modeling a learning environment. It is also necessary to formulate reasonable, experimentally verified guidelines and ways to organize inclusive practices in educational organizations.

The research problem. In scientific and methodological literature, inclusion is mostly presented as a philosophical idea, a strategy of social and education policy, a set of features that characterize the idea of inclusion, but not as a well-defined category of pedagogy. "As inclusion is interpreted in different ways, it is difficult to formulate a universal definition, this is why different and often contradictory ways of its practical implementation emerge." [7, 1259]. In real life, all aspects of education are accumulated in the educational setting, and the changes are reflected there. Transforming learning environment in a way that would include children with special needs involves many aspects, some of which are discussed in the works by N. A. Myodova, L. E. Oltarzhetskaya, O. S. Panfyorova and others. However, the scientific definition of inclusive environment as an integral whole, a systematic object of study and a scheme to be implemented is yet to be provided.

Analysis of current research and publications related to the problem. The scientific sources show that inclusive education may be interpreted in a narrow way and broadly. In a narrow sense, inclusion is considered only as inclusion of children with special needs into the mainstream education process, with the necessary accessibility conditions provided (N. N. Malofeev, N. M. Nazarova, V. I. Lubovsky). In a broad sense, inclusive education is studied in the context of social justice, shared worldview, values of democracy and equal access to cultural legacy [8]. It is understood as developing a system of general education that overcomes labeling children according to their social status and abilities [1]; education with conditions that provide full participation, high-quality education and support for everyone [2]. We share the approach of L. Florian and N. Linklater who see inclusion as the development of alternative pedagogy which includes finding strategies to support each student in such a way that everyone can participate in community activities [5]. On the part of the teacher, this involves overcoming stereotypical attitudes towards children based on their abilities and giving flexible responses to situations of trust-based communication [4]. This can be achieved through implementing inclusive practices into learning environments and applying the main principles, requirements, and tactics that are necessary to let various groups of students participate in learning and social activities together.

The research purpose conducted within the framework of the article is to identify the key theoretical and methodological concepts of the inclusive approach to modeling the environment of an educational organization and to formulate a definition of an inclusive learning environment on their basis.

The scientific novelty of the research lies in offering methodological guidelines for researching and modeling inclusion in an educational organization and defining an inclusive learning environment at two levels (the level of values and concepts and the operational level).

Keywords: inclusive education, learning environment, inclusive learning environment, inclusive pedagogical process.

There are different approaches to studying the concept of learning environment. It can be seen as the network of global knowledge together with information and communication systems; the learning setting of a certain state or region; a way to characterize different levels of education; and the environment of an educational organization. Bearing in mind that these aspects are interconnected, the primary focus of this paper is on analyzing the environment of an educational organization.

The existing scientific definitions of learning environment are not controversial and can complement one another. Most of them are close to V. A. Yasvin's interpretation. He sees environment as "a system of influences and conditions of personality formation, as well as opportunities for its development that social, special, and content characteristics of the setting provides" [9]. Not only can environment become a resource for development, but it can also cause deprivation if some crucial social and psychological needs of an individual are not met (E. B. Laktionova, 2010). Therefore, the focus of this study is on the quality of the environment, its integral indicators include emotional well-being and emotional security of each individual, the capability of the environment to provide a successful personal growth.

Definitions of environment usually emphasize the features that can be observed in the actual world, such as the objects that physically surround individuals and mediate their social development. Becoming involved into an environment, people absorb its culture, are influenced by it, and use the objects and resources it contains. At the same time, they determine its values, its content and the processes it includes. They change the environment so that it reflects the goals they set and develop themselves through actively interacting with the environment. Thus, understanding the concept of an "acting individual" becomes essential to the interpretation of environment.

In this respect, it is important to consider the definition of environment given by E. I. Isaev and V. I. Slobodchikov. According to them, "the very emergence and existence of a learning environment is driven by acting individuals who are involved in the educational process as bearers of the culture" [6, 420]. The environment is not something set in advance and never changing since. It begins "where a teacher meets a student. At this meeting, the acting individuals begin to design and build the learning environment together as a subject and a resource for the learning process" [6, 90].

The issue of the acting individual is particularly relevant for defining an inclusive learning environment. Implementing inclusive practices is currently associated with significant difficulties that even highly experienced teachers face. Educators need to overcome the existing behavioral patterns and absorb flexible and versatile techniques adapted to a wide range of special needs that students may have. Teachers are acting individuals who "build" the learning environment, so they need to master new ways to solve the issue of tailoring the individual "learning routes" for students in an inclusive social community.

These ideas help to outline a set of theoretical approaches to defining an inclusive learning environment:

- The learning environment of an educational organization is incorporated into that of a region and, consequently, that of a country. Its functioning depends on external factors. This means that only a systemic change will make the implementation of inclusive practices in individual educational organizations successful. However, it also has to be borne in mind that acting individuals shape the environment. Therefore, a qualitative change in the environment is caused by adopting inclusive values and focusing on internal transformation.

- An inclusive learning environment cannot be established without forming a culture where each person's distinctions are respected. The acting individuals' commitment to accepting dissimilarities and uniqueness of each person is crucial to foster the sense of identity, openness, and positive attitude towards oneself and others. Dissimilarities are understood as characteristic features of a person that need to be taken into account in the course of interaction of any type. They are not perceived as obstacles to participating in activities or communicating with others, but as a resource for everyone's development.

- The inclusion of heterogeneous groups of students into the learning environment initiates flexibility, variability, and adaptability of its parameters if the acting individuals share suitable values and concepts. For all that, the environment not only satisfies the needs of an individual; the individual's educational and sociocultural needs are also shaped and transformed in the process of interacting with the environment and actively overcoming difficulties.

- The environment has to contain resources available to each of its members. The resources are mobilized by acting individuals through their actions for the sake of personal development. Interacting with each other, these individuals modify the environment according to their needs and ambitions.

- The environment contains resources that supply several types and levels of support for students, parents, teachers, and specialists, depending on the difficulties that arise. This support is aimed at unlocking each individual's potential, launching the process of self-improvement and thus solving any problem. Additional healthcare demands are made of the inclusive learning environment as physical and mental conditions of the students may vary.

- An environment is an intrinsically valuable, stable, and cohesive structure that is bound to time and space. However, it is also open to self-modification, and therefore it is an ever-evolving and dynamic system. Changes in the environment need to be correlated with established conventions. A balance needs to be found between the long-standing principles that have proven to be effective and innovation introduced in response to the challenges of our time and the needs of the environment's members, both social and personal. In practice, this means identifying how inclusion should be regulated in a learning environment and what its boundaries are.

Thus, the issue of determining the essence of an inclusive learning environment has at least two interconnected levels: the level of values and concepts (comprises the worldview, the culture and the inclusive values) and the operational level (comprises the practice of inclusive teaching). The first consists in implementing inclusive teaching strategies. The second specifies the criteria for an inclusive environment, according to which it operates and can be organized and evaluated.

At the level of values and concepts, an inclusive learning environment can be defined as follows: it is a part of the sociocultural environment which is actively created by the acting individuals involved in the educational process; it comprises a variety of existent and potential resources for engaging everyone in shared activities; it suggests communication adapted to specific needs and opportunities of each individual aimed at mutual development and the creation of a community based on shared culture and values.

At the operational level, the definition of inclusive learning environment involves indicating its features as a system: accessibility on the level of building construction; sufficient supply of the necessary materials and equipment for the educational process and availability of assistive technology to meet the needs of the students; constant professional support provided to the students; curriculum adaption and the use of adaptive approaches to teaching and communication; encouraging involvement and participation and ensuring that events in the environment are accessible; methodological support provided to educators; proper execution of relevant local laws that protect the rights of children and their families to fully participate in the educational process, to get the necessary support, etc.

Both levels of analysis are interconnected and aimed at identifying significant factors and objectives to adequately organize the learning process and activities that the members of an environment are engaged in. They also help to assess the degree of inclusion that an organization has achieved. In practical terms, developing methods for diagnostic assessment of inclusive practices implementation is particularly relevant. Its results will be key to moving the process forward. Today, forming global approaches to understanding inclusion in education and developing tools for its assessment are a major issue that the expert community seeks to tackle [3].

Conclusions, prospects for further research suggestions. The issue of inclusion in education is related to social justice, and its novelty and complex systematic nature require profound research into both methodological foundations for the process and its practical implementation techniques. The prospects of this study lie in rationalization of the inclusive approach to learning environment design. This approach makes it possible to develop a framework and strategies for flexible response to shifts in social situations and students' diverse needs.

К ПРОБЛЕМЕ ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЯ СУЩНОСТИ ИНКЛЮЗИВНОЙ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЙ СРЕДЫ

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются теоретико-методологические аспекты образовательной инклюзии. Отмечено, что среди многочисленных ракурсов исследования данной проблемы, вопрос методологического обоснования остается наименее представленным. Цель публикации – выделить методологические установки к определению инклюзивной образовательной среды как объекта научного исследования и моделирования. Акцент ставится на субъектном подходе к трактовке среды, согласно которому субъекты не только испытывают влияние объективных средовых факторов, но и совместно конструируют среду, определяют ее ценностно-содержательные и процессуальные характеристики, развиваются сами в процессе активного взаимодействия. Особое значение субъектный подход приобретает в ситуациях освоения инновационных процессов. Инклюзивное образование требует системных изменений всех параметров среды на основе следующих методологических установок: стратегия развития инклюзивной культуры, в которой различия участников уважаются и ценятся; положения о гибкости, вариативности, адаптивности параметров среды, что обусловлено гетерогенным составом обучающихся; понимание ресурсов среды как системы многоуровневой поддержки, направленной на раскрытие потенциала личности; утверждение активности самих субъектов в организации возможностей для безбарьерного взаимодействия.

Исходя из проведенного анализа, в статье дано определение инклюзивной образовательной среды: это часть социокультурной реальности, конструируемой субъектами образования как многообразие актуальных и потенциальных ресурсов для вовлечения в совместную деятельность и общение каждого согласно индивидуальным особенностям и возможностям в целях взаиморазвития, достижения культурно-ценностной общности ее участников. Данное определение требует операционализации на основе выделения параметров и критериев инклюзивности среды, в соответствии с которыми она организуется, функционирует, оценивается. В статье сделан вывод о необходимости разработки инклюзивного подхода как теоретико-методологической основы исследования и моделирования инклюзивных процессов в образовании, практическая значимость которых обусловлена потребностью практики в формировании научно выверенных стратегий и технологий достижения реальной включенности в среду участников с различными образовательными потребностями.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивное образование, образовательная среда, инклюзивная образовательная среда, инклюзивный педагогический процесс.

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