

Transformation of the learning environment for children with special needs

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ABSTRACT

This study is devoted to the consideration of the issue related to the adaptation and adoption of such children in the Russian Federation. The study is based on the questionnaire method. It was attended by 120 parents of children with special needs. The results showed that the majority of respondents are familiar with inclusive education, its principles and goals; 59% of respondents believe that the psychological environment in their school is not good enough for the adaptation of children with special needs. According to 64% of parents, there are also problems with the infrastructure of schools. The minority of parents face the rejection of special needs children by teachers, but the majority face the rejection by their peers. In general, despite all problems and challenges, parents positively assess the idea of their special needs child learning and attending the same classroom side by side with healthy children. According to them, this has a positive effect on the intellectual and mental development of the child. To improve the process, the parents of such children were offered the following recommendations: constant research on the issue, cooperation with other parents of special needs children, attention to children and cooperation with specialists (psychologists and defectologists).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today dramatic changes in public attitudes towards special needs people and children is being observed. These changes occur both at the level of interpersonal communication and at the level of public policy. A number of terms that refer to a new approach to adapting such people to social life have been coined, for example, inclusive education. The term “inclusive education” has been contested since its inception. Some people have argued that this is a fashion. At the international level, there are four core ideas that relate to the ever-evolving path to inclusion: a human rights-based approach, response to children with special needs, response to marginalized groups, and transformation of education systems [1].

Inclusive education is the process of co-education and teaching children and adults with disabilities, as well as children and adults who do not have such disabilities. Inclusion in the modern world acts as the leading social idea of Western countries, which is based on the effort to eradicate discrimination based on individual differences. The human community is considered in the context of its diversity, which implies the coexistence of ordinary people and people with special needs [2]. Special education has been designed to meet the unique needs of each child with a disability (under 21) [3]. According to Deslia [4], international policies of many European countries promote inclusive education for students with special needs teaching them side by side with their healthy peers instead of placing such learners in special schools or classes. The implementation of inclusive education is characterized by significant differences from country to country. To meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms, teachers need ongoing advice from special education teachers, other experts, and support staff (assistants and volunteers) [5].

As inclusion relates to the presence, participation and achievement of all students should strive to involve all learners in the learning process rather than focus only on a few of them and must use collaborative transformative research approaches to facilitate the presence, participation and achievement of special needs children [1]. In addition to making changes in the educational process, there is a problem with the adaptation of such children to the school environment, their perception by the peers and teaching staff, the possibility of a comfortable stay at school and effective performance. School adaptation is the process of adapting to new school conditions, which takes place individually. There are three types of adaptation: social, physiological and psychological [6].

A number of problems related to the adaptation of children with special needs to the school environment served as a motivation for the study. A number of problems related to the adaptation of children with special needs to the school environment served as a motivation for the study. The purpose of the study is to consider and analyze the adaptation of special needs children to the school environment and identify the extent to which society is ready to accept them. The objectives of the research are to interview parents of special needs children, identify positive and negative aspects, problems and needs of special needs children, as well as develop recommendations for parents.

In the 1970s United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recommended that developing countries implement inclusive education [7]. Today many scientists and public figures consider disability from a new perspective. Historically, disability has been excluded from the discourse of social justice and diversity because it viewed “disability” as a pathology while adopting the traditional hegemonic perspective of medicine [8].

In the course of adaptation, special needs children may face a number of psychological problems. The situation in 2020-2021 has become an aggravating factor in this process. Statistics for 2016 show that the number of children with disabilities in Russia amounted to 617 thousand people. This number is still increasing. Thus, 4.5% of children living in Russia belong to the category of people with disabilities and need a special approach to education [9]. Consequently, the practice of inclusive education is rapidly developing in Russia, which changes the conditions of learning and the educational environment in organizations so that any child with any differences in health or development can study together with the rest [10]. For many years in Russia, the education of children with disabilities in physical and (or) psychological development was carried out in special schools where there were proper conditions for such training and correction of developmental disorders [11]. In the last 20–30 years, more and more attention has been paid to the education of people with disabilities and more attention in Russian society [12]. This is due to the fact that the social policy of the state in the education of disabled people is focused on the ideas of the world community and the national doctrine of education. Russian Federation, which proclaim the principle of equal educational opportunities for everyone. Also, the number of people with physical disabilities due to the deterioration of the financial situation, ecology, wars and conflicts, does not change significantly, which requires additional initiatives to creating the conditions for their formation [13]. It is proven by the previous statistics.

There was a study which aimed to compare the level of depression and anxiety among deaf people in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at the beginning and at the end of the first wave of coronavirus. The findings showed that living with parents has a positive effect on the ability of deaf people to cope with anxiety and depression. The number of fears among those who live alone was greater than among those who live with their parents. In addition, girls develop anxiety and depression levels faster than boys. According to the results, deaf people were susceptible to the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [14]. To make the learning process of special needs children more comfortable and effective, there must be more than one teacher in the classroom. Also, teachers should have special knowledge and qualifications to teach special needs children. The role of general education teachers: students with special needs need additional support from general education teachers compared to other students in order to achieve effective results. The role of special education teachers: the support of a special education teacher is vital for students with special needs and requires special assistance and adaptation in teaching procedures and student activities [15].

The data obtained by American researchers indicate that: i) Most adaptation was performed in the core general education classes; ii) Experienced teachers created more simplified curriculum adaptations while novice teachers developed more functional alternative adaptations; iii) Teachers are generally satisfied with the adaptation they created and believe that it turned out to be effective in teaching children; iv) Educators spent an average of 59.1 minutes creating adaptations; v) Teachers in rural areas and novice teachers provided adaptation options of a lower quality and clarity compared to experienced and urban teachers; and vi) General education teachers provided adaptation options that were of a lower quality and clarity compared to special education teachers and paraprofessional teachers [16]. Many scholars note the positive results of introducing inclusive education in schools. The participants in a study conducted in Turkey believed that children with special needs should study side by side with ordinary children. The teachers noted that they had difficulties in their inclusive classrooms, but still believed that inclusiveness was effective. The teachers did not think they had enough skills and knowledge to work in inclusive classrooms. They had conflicts and doubts, especially about their ability to control and prevent behavioral problems. There were also problems with good classroom management and setting educational priorities for children [17].

Some researchers have studied the behavior of special needs children in comparison with ordinary ones. Children with intellectual disability (ID) in the United States had much more behavioral problems as reported by teachers, a poorer student-teacher relationship, fewer social skills as reported by parents and teachers, and fewer self-regulation skills compared to healthy children. Social skills have largely determined school adaptation, even with regard to children's IQ and adaptive behavior. Children with ID had fewer positive experiences in primary school as evidenced by multiple indicators of school adaptation. The development of social skills in early childhood could be an important target to be achieved for improving positive school adaptation of young children, especially of those with IDs [18].

Israeli scholars have found that it is difficult to build relationships between teachers and special needs children. Strategies need to be developed to improve the relationship between teachers and students with disabilities who study in regular classrooms as part of integration programs. Research has documented the positive effects of an attachment-like relationship with teachers as a protective factor that minimizes disability-related limitations and improves student achievement [19]. Relationships within the team, in turn, also affect student adaptation and academic success. There is a connection between the environment and the behavior patterns (both individual and social) of residents as a form of individual and group response to the form of the environment [20].

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research design and sample

The research is based on a questionnaire method. Mulholland and O'Connor [21] relied on a similar research method. It was attended by 120 parents of children (6-18 years old) with special needs. The participants were invited to one of the schools in order to fill in a questionnaire and take part in an interview. The parents are 28-54 years old, 89% are women. The study involved 120 parents of children with special needs of the following age groups. The details of the participants are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants of the survey

Number of respondents	Children's age
71	6-10
39	11-14
10	15-17

2.2. Survey

The study was conducted on July 20-22, 2021. The research participants were invited to a school classroom, where they filled in the questionnaire (up to 25 minutes). The questionnaire contained 10 closed and 1 open question. The questionnaire questions are presented in Table 2.

2.3. Data analysis and statistical processing

The research methodology was based on an empirical approach-an exploratory survey using a data collection questionnaire based on closed-ended questions. The questionnaire data and interview responses were analyzed, including with the help of the SPSS software. For the quantitative analysis, the independent samples were conducted.

Table 2. Questionnaire questions

No.	Question	Type of question
Question 1	Are you familiar with the concept of inclusive education?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 2	Do you think that a child with special needs should attend a regular school?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 3	Does your child study side by side with ordinary children?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 4	Is the psychological environment in your school good enough to educate children with special needs?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 5	Is the infrastructure in your school good enough to educate children with special needs?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 6	Are you satisfied with the quality of teaching in your child's classroom?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 7	Are there any problems with the psychological adaptation of the child in the school environment?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 8	Do you receive help and feedback from teachers/school administrators regarding your child?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 9	Is your child rejected by other children?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 10	Is your child rejected by teachers/school administrators?	Closed question (Yes/No)
Question 11	Describe your opinion on ensuring the adaptation of children with special needs to the school environment.	Open question

2.4. Ethical issues

Before the study, the participants gave their written consent to participate in the research. They were provided with all the information about the research procedure and its objectives. They were handed out the copies of research rules.

2.5. Research limitations

The results of the study can be considered reliable, but it should be taken into account that it was conducted only in the Russian Federation and the number of participants was limited. Also, the study was not aimed at determining the specific characteristics of children. Only their age was taken into account.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey are displayed in Figure 1. There were 89% of respondents answered in the affirmative and 11% in the negative for question 1. This result suggests that parents of children with special needs have a general idea of inclusiveness, its development, and the opportunities that are provided to special needs children today. It should be noted that most of these parents have children studying at ordinary schools. For question 2, there were 73% of participants selected the "yes" option and 28% disagreed. This result suggests that the majority of parents of children with special needs believe that their children should study along with ordinary children. They probably think that such training will have a beneficial effect on their child and their further adaptation in society.

A positive response was obtained from 98% of respondents, while 3% had an opposite opinion for question 3. This shows the desire of parents to send their special needs children to ordinary schools, their awareness of current trends, and the benefits of such education. Question 4 was answered positively by 41% of participants and 59% responded in the negative. Despite the fact that the majority of the respondents' children attend a regular school, a significant part of them still sees the problems related to the adaptation of their children in the classroom. This issue must be solved with the help of complex measures (work of psychologists, teachers and other specialists with special needs learners and ordinary children).

There were 36% of the respondents answered question 5 in the affirmative and 64% in the negative. The number of positive responses is quite small. This shows that many schools in the Russian Federation are not equipped to meet the needs of special children. To improve the situation, it is necessary to allocate appropriate funds and equip premises. In answering question 6, there were 56% of respondents noted their satisfaction with the quality of teaching and 44% reported their dissatisfaction. This result indicates that often the teacher does not have proper skills to teach inclusive classes. To resolve the issue, teachers should be trained and those who have the appropriate knowledge and qualifications and are ready to do this job should be selected.

Most of the parents (78%) answered question 7 positively and another 23% answered negatively. This result suggests that special needs children often face problems with the psychological adaptation in the classroom (for example, bullying). In this case, teachers should pay careful attention to children and explain to ordinary students the rules of behavior and attitude towards children with special needs. A positive response was obtained from 35% of respondents, while 65% answered in the negative for question 8. This indicates rather poor attention of school administrators to children with special needs and their parents. It is necessary to keep in contact with such families and discuss the progress and achievements of the child on a regular basis.

As for question 9, there were 76% of parents noted the rejection of their children by other students, while 24% of respondents did not observe this. This result suggests that today many children are not ready to accept children with special needs. Children should be explained the peculiarities of interaction with special needs students and develop tolerance. In responding the question 10, there were 29% of respondents reported that their children are rejected by teachers/school administrators, while 71% responded in the negative. This result shows that there are still teachers who are not ready to teach children with special needs. To solve the problem, there is a need for cooperation between psychologists/medical workers and teachers, and appropriate teacher training.

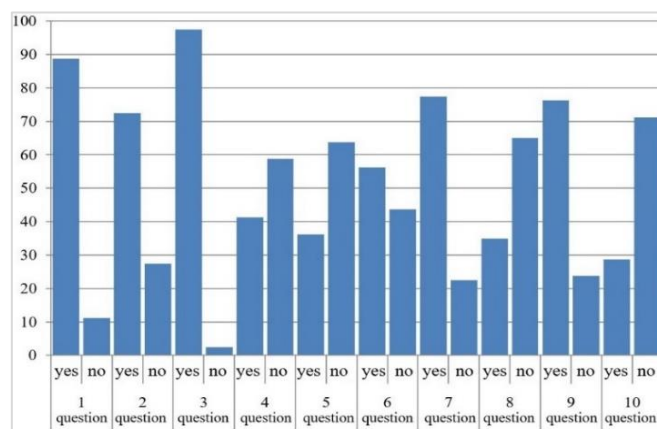


Figure 1. The answers of the research participants (%)

The results of question 11 show that parents whose special needs children go to regular school positively assess this experience and most problems can be solved. At the same time, there is almost no infrastructure that people with disabilities need. There is no doubt that inclusive education yields good results. Both parents and children are happy that there is such an opportunity. Communication and community affiliation have a positive effect on people, which is confirmed by the results of this study. The only question is how to choose the right school for your child and be ready to help him/her at all stages of adaptation. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that today most parents of special needs children are familiar with the concept and principles of inclusive education, as well as with the possibilities and problems associated with the adaptation of children to the school environment. To make the adaptation of a special needs child at school more painless, before entering school, parents of special needs schoolchildren should do some research and study recommendations, communicate with psychologists and work out their fears about the child's capabilities and success [6].

“There are very few children with special needs in my child’s school. Teachers are mainly focused on ordinary children. My child is treated like everyone else, there is no focus on his disability. Classmates do not offend him, but they are not friends with him either.” (Respondent 1)

“There is very little equipment for children with disabilities in my child’s school. The grandmother takes the child to school and helps him during breaks. I would like such children to be given more attention.” (Respondent 2)

“I am glad that my child goes to regular school. He studies well enough and interacts with other children. He is happy to go to school. We visit a school psychologist. The teacher is sympathetic and helps when needed. The school is not equipped to meet the needs of the disabled.” (Respondent 3)

“When my daughter went to school, she immediately became the object of ridicule from her classmates. There were conflicts and their parents were invited to come. We decided to change the school. The situation there is much better. There is no one at school to help my daughter move around, so I’m almost always with her. There is no equipment for the disabled.” (Respondent 4)

Not only special needs children but also ordinary students should be involved as the success of an inclusive approach also depends on them. The reduction of differences between students with special needs and their peers is an important tool for building the potential for inclusion, and collaborative practice is a must [21]. Most special needs children benefit from attending a regular school; however, it is necessary to

take into account the capabilities and needs of the child. Today, there are several types of inclusion developed for special needs schoolchildren. There are four types of integrated learning: temporary, combined, partial, and full. In the context of any type of integration, students with disabilities must be provided with correctional and developmental assistance from defectologists. This requires a system of psychological, pedagogical, medical, and social support for integrated education [22].

In a study conducted in Russia, with the help of an experiment, a number of actual problems of inclusive education were identified [23]. Among them are the lack of educated teachers; financial difficulties; moral motivation of teachers to support students with disability is very low. There was also a taboo on discussing disability issues in the field of media, but some changes are currently taking place in Russian public consciousness. Thus, changes in this area are expected in the coming years. Another study with Russian students showed that the development of a blended learning environment has a positive effect on them, since allows students with limited educational opportunities to integrate into the educational and social life of the university and carry out all types of rehabilitation along with the educational process [24]. At the same time, the negative aspects are: relatively high the cost of medical and rehabilitation support, the need for special equipment and the lack of full inclusion in public life [25].

To make inclusive education effective, the work of teachers in the classroom should be properly structured. It is quite difficult for children with disabilities to adapt to the school environment that has no conditions for people with disabilities. According to Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprabhan [15], each type of practice (traditional classroom practice, one-to-one support outside the classroom, one-to-one support within an inclusive classroom, small group outside the classroom, variety and flexibility of classroom activities) has its own advantages and disadvantages in teaching children with special needs. The results of the traditional classroom practice show that those students who need support to improve their learning do not receive it. In the context of one-to-one support, the students received the support they needed to improve their learning and they interacted positively with the teacher during the learning process. The same results were obtained in the context of one-to-one support in the classroom [15]. In small groups, students received more support and there was a closer interaction with the teacher compared to traditional practice. The researchers concluded that varied and flexible classroom practice met all the criteria listed by the researchers and the learning needs of children with disabilities. At the same time, the other four practices helped children with special needs to a certain extent. According to the researchers, general education teachers do not have enough expertise to ensure an adapted learning and teaching process in an inclusive classroom [15].

The results of this study showed that inclusive education is beneficial for children with disabilities. Russian scholars note a number of benefits of inclusive education. Children's disabilities are directly related to their physical and mental impairment, difficulties in taking care of themselves, communication, education, and the acquisition of professional skills. The benefits of inclusion are very important for children with disabilities: children with disabilities demonstrate a higher level of social interaction with peers in an inclusive environment compared to children in special schools; social competence and communication skills of children with disabilities are improved in an inclusive environment; children with special needs have a more intensive curriculum in an inclusive environment. As a result, skills and academic performance are improved [26]. In general, special needs children who attend a regular school will be more adapted to life in society than those who prefer home schooling or boarding schools.

In many countries, the principles of inclusion have not yet been achieved, but they are being developed. The principles of inclusive education in South Africa with a focus on increased access to regular classes, acceptance of learners with diverse educational needs, and the maximum participation of every child in all activities within the integrated school have not yet been polished. Thus, there is a clear and significant gap between the idealistic concept of inclusive education in South African education policy and its implementation [27]. Students who face various barriers to learning continue to experience significant inequalities despite the attempt of some teachers and policy guidelines to bridge the gaps in their acceptance and participation and create a fairer school environment [27]. A similar situation can be observed in the Russian Federation, where the theoretical principles of inclusive education are not always implemented.

Special needs children find it very important to receive support and care from their relatives. In order to better understand the situation and use all the methods of adaptation that are available today, a number of actions are required on the part of relatives [28]. British researchers found that parents of children with disabilities and special needs found membership in peer support groups beneficial. The quantitative data showed that parents who were members of such groups did find them very helpful and were very pleased with the support they received.

The qualitative data showed that the groups were useful in the socio-political, interpersonal, and intraindividual contexts [29]. Not only children but also their parents will benefit from joining such groups as they also face a number of psychological problems in the course of raising a special needs child. American scholars emphasize the close relationship between the basic functional capacities of a person and the characteristics of positive development as displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Basic functional capacities and features of positive development source [29]

Capacity	Development circumstances
Life	
Physical health	Physical and psychological safety
Bodily integrity	
Feelings, imagination and thoughts	Skills development opportunities
Emotions	
Belonging 1. Living with and in relation to other people	Supportive relationship
Belonging 2. Having a social basis for self-respect and non-humiliation	Opportunities to belong (meaningful inclusion)
Practical reasons	
Control over the environment 1. Political	Maintaining efficiency and relevance (empowerment, autonomy)
Control over the environment 2. Material	
Game	
Other types	
	Suitable structure (age appropriate)
	Positive social norms
	Integration of family, school and society

Before starting school, parents of special needs children are advised to familiarize themselves with the conditions for disabled people in different schools and choose the one that is most suitable for their child. In international inclusive practice, the Montessori method is recognized as one of the important tools for integrating healthy children and children with special needs. It is based on mutual assistance, that is students with better competencies help those who have the poorer ones. In the course of joint activities and mutual assistance, children begin to accept the individual differences of their peers, understand their learning needs, and act in accordance with the common capabilities and goals of each participant [30]. Based on the explanation, parents of special needs children can be offered the following recommendations: i) To study information regarding both the individual needs of the child and the opportunities that inclusive education provides today; ii) To communicate and share experience with other parents; iii) To be attentive to the physical and psychological state of the child; and iv) To communicate with teachers, psychologists and defectologists on a regular basis.

A proper and conscious approach to special needs children and their upbringing will make their adaptation to the school environment and the learning process easier and more effective. The results of the study suggest that today special needs children can adapt to the school environment, but there are a number of difficulties that must be overcome. The results obtained showed that 89% of parents of children with disabilities are familiar with the term “inclusive education”, its principles, and advantages. Most of these adults understand that studying at regular school side by side with healthy peers has a positive effect on the development of their children and their adaptation not only to the school environment but also to social life, as well as helps them find their place in life. However, it is necessary to adequately assess the capabilities and needs of the child and choose the type of education that suits them.

At the same time, 47% of parents believe that the psychological environment in their children's school is not good enough for the adaptation of children with special needs. It is necessary to expand cooperation with psychologists and educators and increase the level of acceptance of such children in school and society. It is necessary to identify the causes of child aggression and try to eliminate it. There is also a problem with the school facilities that are not equipped to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Thus, 64% of respondents assess this situation negatively. A similar situation is observed not only in the Russian Federation but also in other countries (South Africa and Slovenia). To solve the issue, it is necessary to provide schools with such equipment and allocate budgetary funds. 78% of parents note problems with the adaptation of their special needs child to the school environment. Such problems may include bullying, lack of attention, inability to meet children's needs, and lack of support from specialists (psychologists, defectologists, and doctors). Today, the governments of most states (including the Russian Federation) are taking a number of measures to improve the situation, but most of these efforts have not yet found or almost never found application in practice.

Special needs children are more accepted by teachers than by their peers. It is difficult for children to understand all aspects of the situation and to treat special needs classmates with sympathy. This requires explanatory work on the part of teachers and parents, as well as tracking the psychological problems of children (causes of aggression, level, and source of stress). Social acceptance and sympathy are the main factors in the effective integration of special needs people and children into society. Therefore, efforts are needed not only on the part of families with special needs children but also on the part of other members of society.

4. CONCLUSION

Generally, it can be concluded that inclusive education has a positive effect on the mental development of children with special needs, contributes to their adaptation to society, reveals their talents, improves the quality of life, and much more. A special needs child should attend a regular school whenever it is possible. The child's adaptation to the school environment, the learning process and peers should be accompanied by appropriate specialists (psychologists, defectologists, and medical personnel). To make the child's adaptation smoother, parents are offered a number of recommendations, for example, to study the relevant information, cooperate with other parents, be attentive to the child, and not neglect the help of specialists. The results of the study can be considered reliable, but it should be taken into account that it was conducted only in the Russian Federation and the number of participants was limited. Also, the study was not aimed at determining the specific characteristics of children. Only their age was taken into account. The research is a contribution to the study of various aspects and problems of adaptation of special needs children to society and the school environment and will be of interest to teachers, parents, psychologists, defectologists, as well as to a wide range of people interested in the problems of inclusive education.

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