

PROBLEMS OF FORMING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: *This article highlights the relevance of the issue of inclusive culture in educational institutions within the higher education system. Various approaches to defining the concept of an “inclusive culture in higher education institutions” are analyzed. The article summarizes and clarifies these concepts, allowing for a more precise understanding of the essence and structure of inclusive culture in higher education institutions.*

Keywords: *inclusion, inclusive education, inclusive culture, students, principles of inclusive education, inclusive policy, inclusive practice.*

Introduction. The evolving perception of the rights and opportunities of individuals with disabilities by both the state and society has highlighted the practical task of ensuring the maximum inclusion of all children and youth with special educational needs [1, 3]. The state's recognition of the value of social and educational integration of children and young people with disabilities necessitates the creation of an adequate educational process for them, both in general education institutions and in the higher education system [2, 4].

Inclusion helps typically developing children become more humane and broadens their worldview while simultaneously socializing and integrating individuals with special needs. In the developed world, this practice has existed for nearly 40 years. Despite certain challenges, the process of inclusive education is actively implemented in general education institutions, which is also reflected in the higher education system [4].

After years of silence regarding the very existence of people with disabilities in our society, we have finally begun to not only acknowledge them but also recognize their right to full-fledged higher education.

However, despite the high demand for inclusive education for young people with disabilities, its implementation remains challenging and, at present, is primarily at the stage of discussion. Analyzing the theory and practice of inclusive education in higher education institutions allows us to identify the barriers and contradictions in its implementation:

- Insufficient development of the theoretical and methodological framework for inclusive education;

- Lack of adequately trained personnel and insufficient human resources;
- Weak material, technical, and methodological support in higher education institutions for working with students with special educational needs;
- A deficit in the legal and regulatory framework for inclusive education in universities.

International experience in inclusive education demonstrates that its core principle eliminates discrimination against individuals with disabilities and ensures equal treatment for all while also creating the necessary conditions for the integration and inclusion of young people with special needs into the educational process.

The challenges faced by children and, in particular, young people with disabilities have attracted significant interest in foreign psychological and pedagogical research (A. Maslow, C. Rogers, E. Erikson, and others). Their works substantiate fundamental principles regarding the development of mental processes in children of all ages, the role of corrective education in school preparation, and the mechanisms of forming their social and communicative activity. Researchers have also examined the history of the establishment and development of various special education approaches for school-aged children with different psychophysical impairments, as well as the historical evolution of scientific views on various manifestations of abnormal development and the methods of psychological and pedagogical correction. However, an analysis of these studies reveals that inclusion in higher education remains insufficiently explored and represents a relatively new area for pedagogical science.

A review of contemporary research indicates that scholars are currently focusing considerable attention on studying the practical aspects of inclusive education. However, this field has yet to receive in-depth exploration, particularly regarding the development of a model for fostering an inclusive culture in educational institutions at different levels. In this regard, the objective of our study is to substantiate the essence and structure of the inclusive culture of higher education institutions.

First and foremost, we analyze the definition of the concept of “inclusive higher education”. In our view, it is a system of educational services that ensures an institution’s adaptability to meeting the special needs of individuals in the learning process, the readiness of the teaching staff to work professionally in an inclusive environment, and the presence of a specialized department within the institution.

Based on the results of our theoretical research, we define the following conditions under which a higher education institution attains the status of an inclusive university:

- Creation of a barrier-free architectural environment, meaning that the facilities must be adapted to ensure free movement for individuals with functional limitations.
- This includes the installation of ramps and doorways that comply with national building standards, the provision of assistive learning equipment in classrooms, and the proper arrangement of restrooms.

- Establishment of a positive psychological climate. This implies that individuals with disabilities can expect a welcoming and respectful attitude from faculty, students, administrative staff, and support personnel-the entire academic community. It is crucial that all members of the institution treat individuals with physical disabilities as equals, without emphasizing their special status. In an inclusive environment, tolerance is beneficial, whereas pity is harmful.

- Inclusive competence of educators. Faculty members should not only possess professional teaching skills but also be capable of performing their educational functions within an inclusive learning environment. Additionally, they should be prepared to provide assistance if a student with health issues experiences an exacerbation of their condition during a class.

In the context of forming an inclusive culture in higher education, it is essential to highlight the inclusive values of education, which define a new paradigm of educational relationships, emphasizing the humanistic nature of education. These values are reflected in eight principles of inclusive education:

1. A person's value does not depend on their abilities or achievements.
2. Every individual is capable of feeling and thinking.
3. Every person has the right to communicate and to be heard.
4. All people need one another.
5. True education can only take place within the context of real relationships.
6. Everyone requires peer support and friendship.
7. For all students, progress is better measured by what they can do rather than what they cannot.
8. Diversity enriches all aspects of human life [1, 3].

Through theoretical analysis, we also observe various interpretations of the concept of "inclusive culture". These include:

- A distinct philosophy, in which values, knowledge about inclusive education, and shared responsibility are accepted and embraced by all participants in the process.

- A component of an institution's overall culture, aimed at fostering inclusive values, where a high level of inclusion contributes to the overall effectiveness of the inclusion process.

- A unique climate of trust, facilitating strong relationships between students, families, and educational institutions, preventing conflicts and minimizing potential harm to any participant in the process.

- A specific inclusive atmosphere, in which modifications are tailored to the needs of a particular university and integrated into its structure, allowing educators to receive diverse support from both the administration and colleagues, thereby reducing contradictions and challenges.

- A foundational basis for developing an inclusive society, where diverse needs are welcomed, supported, and accumulated by society, ensuring high educational outcomes aligned with the goals of inclusive education. This fosters acceptance, collaboration, and continuous development within the pedagogical community and society as a whole [4].

Based on these definitions, the concept of “inclusive culture” can be considered in both broad and narrow senses.

To define the structure of inclusive culture as a multifaceted phenomenon, researchers propose using the iceberg model. This model distinguishes between visible elements-which are easily identifiable (“the tip of the iceberg”)-and underlying aspects that shape behavior within the inclusive education system. The latter includes unconscious behavioral norms, social values, hierarchical structures, and non-verbal communication patterns (“the submerged part of the iceberg”).

Thus, in our study, we identify internal and external structures of inclusive culture in higher education.

- External inclusive culture refers to organizing the educational environment according to principles of accessibility and safety. This includes adapted educational programs, specialized teaching methods, textbooks, learning materials, didactic resources, assistive technologies, and a team of specialists.

The internal structure of the inclusive culture of a higher education institution consists of the value-based and conceptual foundations of the institution’s inclusive policy and practices. It encompasses the norms governing relationships among participants in the educational process, including shared perceptions, rules, attitudes, values, and behavioral models that contribute to the stability of the academic community.

However, an inclusive culture cannot exist without the active integration of students with special educational needs into the broader culture of the educational institution. Professor Ulf Janson of Stockholm University argues that education can only be considered inclusive when an individual is fully integrated into the institution's culture. He identifies three key cultural dimensions that are essential for students:

1. Learning culture, which involves mastering classroom behavior norms, academic methods, and knowledge acquisition.

2. Care culture, which refers to understanding the institution’s behavioral norms, communication etiquette with faculty and staff, and adopting student-specific roles.

3. Peer culture, which entails familiarity with the language and norms of the academic student group, as well as having the necessary autonomy and freedom to interact with peers [2].

Conclusions. Through theoretical analysis, we have defined the concept of “inclusive culture in higher education” as a system of principles and values of inclusive education with a complex structure, consisting of:

- External components: the organization of the educational environment in accordance with principles of accessibility and safety, adapted educational programs, specialized teaching and learning methods, textbooks, study guides, didactic materials, technical aids, and a team of specialists.

- Internal components: a system of shared perceptions, rules, attitudes, values, and behavioral models that are common to an academic group and contribute to its stability.

One of the key strategies for fostering an inclusive culture in higher education is the establishment of a student tutoring center, which would help create the necessary conditions for supporting students from vulnerable categories and address the following challenges:

- Inadequate attitudes toward students with special educational needs.
- Lack of faculty awareness regarding the organization of inclusive education.
- Insufficient expertise among faculty members in implementing inclusive education, along with limited experience in teaching students with special needs.

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