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The Teacher's Inclusive Culture: Assessing, Adjusting and Nurturing

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Abstract

The limited use of the potential of inclusive education may be attributed to an insufficiently high level of its participants' inclusive culture. The teacher's inclusive culture as a collection of values, attitudes, beliefs, motives, and notions regarding inclusion and actualizing them in pedagogical practice remains underresearched. There has yet to be developed tools for assessing the level of development of the various components of inclusive culture and exploring the ways in which it develops in practicing teachers. Accordingly, a study was conducted to achieve the following objectives – to develop a set of relevant assessment tools, assess the level of development of the various components of inclusive culture in practicing teachers, and identify ways to develop it. The following methods were employed: summarization of Russian and foreign research on inclusive culture; development of tools for assessing inclusive culture; surveying teachers by questionnaire and testing them; development of practical recommendations based on the assessment results. The research results showed that it is important to not only promote an inclusive culture in society and in schools but nurture an inclusive culture in teachers and other participants in the educational process. It may be advisable to assess with a set of special tools the level of development of the following key components in the structure of teachers' inclusive culture: motivation, emotional-axiological, cognitive, and conative.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusive culture, teacher's values, teacher's attitudes, teacher's notions, assessment, assessment tools.

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Introduction

The analysis of inclusive educational practice indicates that inclusive education often does not find personal acceptance with teachers, children, and parents and does not deliver the desired results in terms of the socialization and education of children with special educational needs. At the same time, intrinsically, inclusive education possesses quite high pedagogical potential. Currently, many schools lack the pedagogical conditions required to ensure the efficiency of inclusive education. One such condition is a high level of inclusive culture displayed by participants in the educational process. The teacher is the main actor in the educational process. Teachers ought to have high levels of inclusive culture, expressed in positive attitude toward inclusive education and its participants, the absence of prejudices and preconceptions, the willingness to embrace the values of this kind of education and to work with various categories of children with special educational needs, a high level of empathy, social and moral responsibility, deep understanding of the key concepts and ideas of inclusive education, a focus on implementing them in their pedagogical practice, and a constructive attitude toward difficulties and setbacks. The teacher's inclusive culture is a significant factor in fostering this kind of culture in other participants in inclusive education, i.e. children with special educational needs and their neurotypical peers, parents of such children, and a team of specialists working with such children.

Most of the research on inclusive culture has focused on promoting it in society and educational organizations (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Corbett, 1999, Polyansky & Martirosyan, 2018; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 2010). Research on inclusive culture in relation to teachers has been rare and inconclusive. For the most part, in this respect, researchers have focused on teacher qualities such as inclusive preparedness (Gaidukevich, 2015; Khitryuk, 2015), inclusive competence (Karynbaeva, 2020; Romanovskaya & Khafizullina, 2014), and being prepared for creating an inclusive educational environment (Karynbaeva, 2020). However, the above-mentioned characteristics of the teacher do not include teacher values and attitudes, which play a more crucial role in inclusive than in traditional education. As a quality that incorporates the above-mentioned characteristics the teacher's inclusive culture remains insufficiently explored in psychological-pedagogical research, and there have yet to be developed appropriate tools for the integrated assessment of the level of development of its components and has yet to be gained a proper insight into the ways in which it develops in practicing teachers.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to develop a set of relevant assessment tools, assess the level of development of the various components of inclusive culture in practicing teachers, and identify ways to develop it and ways to remediate teachers' poor notions, attitudes, and stereotypes.

The study's objectives were the following: (1) summarize the findings of previous research concerning inclusive culture; (2) refine its composition (components) and the metrics for measuring the level of development of its components; (3) develop a set of tools for assessing inclusive culture across the metrics; (4) assess the level of inclusive culture in teachers; (5) identify potential ways to nurture an inclusive culture in teachers.

Literature review

There has been some research exploring the essence, content, and indicators of inclusive culture in society (Booth & Ainscow, 2007; Satarova, 2017). There have been numerous studies on inclusive culture in schools (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Corbett, 1999; Nind, Benjamin, Sheehy, Collins, & Hall, 2004; Kinsella & Senior, 2007; Polyansky & Martirosyan, 2018; Scott, 1987; Tarr, Tsokova, & Takkunen, 2011; Zollers et al., 2010). Researchers have differentiated between a traditional and an inclusive school culture, which differ in values upheld by the school community (in an inclusive culture, the primary focus is on the student and teaching them vital skills that will help them in the future, while in a traditional culture the focus is on the content of the educational process), standpoints toward inclusion (in an inclusive culture, the teacher strives to meet the various needs of the student), perception of cultural groups (in an inclusive culture, members of a particular cultural group are perceived as equals, as opposed to outcasts), and relationships within a class (in an inclusive culture, the primary focus is on a highly cohesive class, mutual support, and a non-judgmental attitude toward the student). It has been suggested that an inclusive culture is mainly manifested through nonverbal communication (e.g., rituals, symbols, design of the school building, dress code, informal groups of students and teachers, the way children and teachers look at each other, and body language), which is accompanied by verbal communication and actions that harmonize with it. According to Kinsella & Senior (2007) and Nind et al. (2004), not every school whose inclusive status is officially captured statutorily and financially is necessarily inclusive in reality.

There has been an insignificant amount of research attempting to define the term "inclusive culture" in relation to the teacher.

Hitryuk (2015) defines it as an integrative personal quality of the teacher that facilitates the creation and implementation of values and technologies related to inclusive education and incorporates the system of knowledge, abilities, and socio-personal and professional competencies that can enable the teacher to work efficiently in an inclusive education setting and determine the best ways to support every child's development. According to Kolokoltseva, Mubarakshaeva, & Grishina (2020), it is a collection of values, attitudes, and beliefs facilitative of the spread of the practice of inclusive education, as well as capacities for interacting and dealing with the various actors involved in the educational process.

Researchers have proposed various models for the content (components) of the inclusive culture of future and practicing teachers. Sinyavskaya (2017) has identified the following components of inclusive culture: axiological, ideological, personal, behavioral, and psychological. Yanusova (2018) differentiates between the axiological (embracing inclusive values as personally and professionally significant and striving to implement them), personal-communicative (communication and organizational abilities, a love for children, acceptance of children, tolerance, empathy, a humanistic orientation, and deliberate acceptance of the ideas of inclusive education), and cognitive (having profound, comprehensive knowledge and abilities that can help ensure the successful implementation of the practice of inclusive education) components. Researchers have identified the following qualities of the teacher working in an inclusive education setting as crucial components of inclusive culture: acceptance of the values (Khitryuk, 2016) and ideology (Samartseva, 2016) of inclusive education; emotional acceptance of children with various types of developmental disabilities (Alekhina, 2015); teachers' emotional-axiological attitude toward inclusion and people with limited health capacities (Kuzmina, 2020); teachers' social attitude toward joint activity in an inclusive education setting (Khomutova & Sarychev, 2016), tolerance, and empathy (Yanusova, 2018).

However, there has yet to be developed an integrated program for assessing and nurturing an inclusive culture in practicing teachers.

Methodology

This study drew upon an expanded understanding of inclusive education as joint (integrated) teaching of the various categories of children with special educational needs (e.g., gifted children, disabled children, children with limited health capacities (LHC), non-native speakers and migrants, members of minority groups, children with disruptive behavior, children from a deprived background, and other groups) and neurotypical children (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Corbett, 1999; Khitryuk, 2015); existing theories on a person's general and professional culture (Zimnyaya, 2006) and the teacher's professional culture (Kuzmina & Rean, 1993); Myasishchev's psychological theory of attitudes (1998).

Several key components of inclusive culture based on the set of special indicators and the set of relevant methods were assessed.

The teachers' willingness was used as the metric for assessing teachers' motivation component to work with the various categories of children with special educational needs. It was measured with the help of an author-developed questionnaire (previously tested for expert validity by 12 Sochi State University instructors specializing in psychology and pedagogy; the coefficient of correlation with the reference series was 0.812, indicating a solid match between the methodology and the assessment objective). The teachers were asked to assess the degree of their willingness to work with the various categories of children with special educational needs.

The emotional-axiological component was assessed using the following metrics:

– one's attitude toward children with special educational needs; the methodology "A Teacher's Social-Perceptive Attitude toward Children with Special Educational Needs", developed by Dubovitskaya was employed (Dubovitskaya, 2014, 2015);

– acceptance of the values of an inclusive culture; the methodology "A Teacher's Attitude toward the Values of Inclusive Education" developed by Khitryuk was employed (2015).

The cognitive component was assessed using the metric "teachers' understanding of the substance and values of inclusive education"; the authors employed the methodology "Paired Statements" (Maznichenko, 2017).

The conative (behavioral) component was assessed using the metric "implementing the norms and values of inclusive education in building communication with learners with special educational needs and having the ability and aspiration to constructively resolve difficulties in communication"; the authors employed the methodology "Difficulties in Communicating with Learners" developed by Dubovitskaya (2014).

The sample comprised 130 teachers who provided the written consent to participate in the study. The conduct of the study was approved by the Ethics Committee at Sochi State University via Order No. 201 of March 3, 2021. A survey administration software Google Forms was used to collect the data.

Respondents were aged from 20 to 65 years, with varying length of service in the pedagogical profession (1 to 45 years), and holding different positions (e.g., special needs teacher, primary school teacher, subject teacher, tutor, counselor, social teacher, resource teacher, and educational psychologist). The largest share of the sample (5.8%) was constituted by special education teachers.

The participants represented the following types of educational institution: secondary general school (33.8%), preschool educational institution (25.4%), grammar school or lyceum (10.4%), institution of supplementary learning for children (3.4%), private educational institution (1.5%), and remedial school (0.8%).

Results

Results of the assessment of the motivation component of inclusive culture

The results showed that 91.5% of the teachers are willing to work with children with special educational needs and 8.5% are unwilling to do so. The authors ranked the intensity of teacher willingness to work with the various categories of children with special educational needs in an ascending order of motivation to do so (Table 1).

Table 1. Intensity of Teacher Willingness to Work with the Various Categories of Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Categories of children with SEN	Teacher willingness to work with children with SEN				
	No	Rather no than yes	Rather yes than no	Yes	Very much
Migrants and non-native speakers	16.9	34.6	27.7	20	0.8
Children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS	16.9	32.3	33.8	16.2	0.8
Children with disruptive behavior	16.2	43.8	27.7	11.5	0.8
Members of ethnic, religious, sexual, and other minorities	13.1	19.2	37.7	29.2	0.8
Children with psychophysical disabilities	5.4	17.7	45.4	30.8	0.8
Disabled children	5.4	14.6	38.5	40.8	0.8
Children in a socially dangerous situation	4.6	10.8	38.5	45.4	0.8
Children with limited health capacities	2.3	7.7	40.8	48.5	0.8
Gifted and talented children	4.6	10.8	28.5	55.4	0.8

Children from a deprived background	2.3	3.8	36.9	56.2	0.8
Orphans and children deprived of parental care	3.8	3.1	32.3	60	0.8
Neurotypical (healthy; socially well-situated) children	2.3	7.7	22.3	66.9	0.8

As evidenced in Table 1, teacher motivation to work with neurotypical children is greater than that to work with children with SEN. Respondents were found to be least motivated to work with migrant and non-native-speaker children, children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS, and children with disruptive behavior.

Results of the assessment of the emotional-axiological component of inclusive culture

Table 2 illustrates the teacher respondents' perceptions of learners with LHC. The characteristics were divided into those reflecting a positive teacher attitude and those reflecting a negative teacher attitude toward such children and were ranked based on attitude intensity.

Table 2. Teacher Perceptions of Learners with LHC

Ranking	Learner characteristics	All	Majority	About half	Minority	Only a few	None
	Characteristics that attest to one's positive attitude toward children with LHC						
1	They tend to react to praise and success and achievement recognition	40	43.1	13.1	2.3	1.5	0
2	They tend to evoke interest and a desire to help	34.6	46.2	13.8	3.8	1.5	0
3	They are capable of being a good student	4.6	38.5	33.8	17.7	3.8	1.5
4	They tend to readily respond to teachers' requests	4.6	37.7	36.2	17.7	3.8	4.6
5	They tend to strive to learn new things and	4.6	35.4	29.2	22.3	7.7	0.8

	show interest in the subject						
6	In working on their assignments, they may be creative and may well come up with something novel	3.1	29.2	33.8	17.7	14.6	1.5
7	They tend to persevere in achieving their academic goals and tend to be active in class	1.5	20.8	36.9	28.5	11.5	0.8
8	They can complete most of their assignments all by themselves	1.5	16.9	33.1	30	13.8	4.6
Characteristics that attest to one's negative attitude toward children with LHC							
1	They tend to be constantly dependent on adults for control, care, and guidance	25.4	44.6	19.2	6.2	3.8	0.8
2	They tend to act only based on somebody else's instructions or example	4.6	37.7	31.5	19.2	6.9	0
3	They tend to be unable to get a handle on particular elements of the curriculum	3.8	35.4	25.4	21.5	10.8	3.1
4	They tend to be unwilling to do anything in class; they will look for any excuse to get distracted in class	0.8	19.2	28.5	30	21.5	0
5	They do not want to study	2.3	16.2	31.5	25.4	20	4.6

6	They tend to react only to reproof from a teacher and the summoning of their parents to the school	1.5	6.9	16.9	30	31.5	13.1
7	They tend to not react to a teacher's requests	0	10.8	24.6	26.9	31.5	6.2
8	They tend to annoy a teacher with the way they behave	0.8	6.2	6.9	16.2	34.6	35.4

As evidenced in Table 2, the most common negative characteristic of learners with LHC stated by the teachers is their dependence (being constantly dependent on adults for control, care, and guidance), their lack of creativity (acting only based on somebody else's instructions or example), and their inability to get a handle on particular elements of the curriculum. The way among the positive characteristics was led by the following: "they react to praise", "they evoke interest and a desire to help", and "they are capable of being a good student".

Table 3 illustrates the degree to which teachers accept the values of an inclusive culture.

Table 3. Degree of Teacher Acceptance of the Values of Inclusive Culture

Statement	Agree	Rather agree than disagree	Rather disagree than agree	Disagree
Every person has a right to communication and to be heard	95.4	3.8	0.8	0
Every person is capable of feeling and thinking	89.2	9.2	1.5	0
Every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and educational needs	77.7	20	0.8	1.5
All people need each other	76.9	22.3	0.8	0
Diversity amplifies every aspect of a person's life	74.6	21.5	3.1	0.8
Regular schools ought to create the conditions for meeting the educational needs of every child	69.2	26.9	3.1	0.8
The value of a person does not depend solely on	65.4	20.8	7.7	6.2

their abilities and achievements				
True education can be implemented only in the context of real relationships	61.5	27.7	9.2	1.5
Inclusive schools are the most effective means of combating discriminatory practices and ensuring that genuine education is provided to all children	50.8	40.8	5.4	3.1
For all learners, progress is about what they can rather than what they cannot do	50	38.5	10.8	0.8
Children with developmental disabilities must have access to education in regular schools	36.9	42.3	19.2	1.5

As evidenced in Table 3, the share of teachers found to have embraced the values of inclusion as a whole is higher than that of those found to have embraced the values of inclusive education in particular.

Results of the assessment of the cognitive component of inclusive culture

Approximately a third of the teachers were found to have erroneous and naïve-mythological notions about inclusive education (Table 4).

Table 4. Teachers' Erroneous and Naïve-Mythological Notions about Inclusive Education

Notion	Share of teachers, %
Inclusion reduces the quality of education of neurotypical children, as much of the teacher's time and energy is directed to dealing with learners with LHC, psychophysical disabilities, and alike	27.7
We may be better off having children with special educational needs attend special educational institutions or special grades. It is absurd to have all children attend the same kind of school; the best rule is "to each his own"	25.4
Inclusive education makes me wary as something unknown and vague	19.2
The teacher's key objective for working with the gifted child is to develop their advanced abilities	17.7
Inclusive education is a utopia – good intentions that cannot be implemented	16.9
Children with LHC are weak, injudicious, and ignorant; only adults can and must teach and educate them	15.4
Inclusive education hinders the professional and personal development of	14.6

teachers, consuming too much of their energy and time	
In some cases it is impossible to achieve productive communication between neurotypical children and children with special educational needs	13.1
I am convinced that inclusive education is detrimental for all participants in the educational process	10.8
Inclusive education is primarily focused on having one master the curriculum	8.5
Having children from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds learn together may be fraught with conflict	7.7
Children with LHC must be grateful to adults for the care they give them	5.4
Children must comply and stay in tune with school requirements	4,6

Results of the assessment of the conative component of inclusive culture

Table 5 lists some of the key difficulties faced by teachers in implementing the values of inclusive education in their practice of dealing with children with LHC.

Table 5. Difficulties Faced by Teachers in Implementing the Values of Inclusive Education in Their Practice of Dealing with Children with LHC

Key aspects of the teacher's implementation of the values of inclusive education in their practice of dealing with children with LHC	Degree of difficulty for the teacher		
	Very difficult, %	Difficult, %	Some difficulties, %
Accept criticism in a calm manner	0.8	8.1	44.4
Take responsibility for the student's failures and problems in school	0.8	4.8	38.7
Be strict and demanding	0	4.8	38.7
Display calmness and self-control	0	3.2	38.7
Have students interact in groups; have children with LHC interact with neurotypical children	0	7.3	37.1
Encourage active work in class	0	3.2	34.7
Acknowledge one's mistakes publicly	0	3.2	33.1
Be prepared to discuss all kinds of issues, including "uncomfortable" ones	0	3.2	33.1
Show interest in the learning material and the subject taught	0.8	1.6	32.3
Display self-control in difficult and conflict	0	4	31.5

situations

Manage one's mood, desires, actions, and emotions	0	6.5	30.6
Try to resolve conflict situations	0	4	29.8
Engage the student in work in class	0	0.8	29
Take into consideration the student's emotional state	0	0	29
Refrain from raising one's voice	0	1.6	27.4
Be understanding regardless of the student's actions	0	2.4	21
Try to earn the student's respect	0	3.2	18.5
Earn a positive attitude toward oneself through one's conduct and communication	0	0	18.5
Do one's best to make the student proud of their achievements	0	0.8	17.7
Maintain two-way communication (ask the student for their opinion)	0	0	16.9
Try not to assume airs of superiority to the student	0	2.4	15.3
Try not to say or do things that the student may take the wrong way	0	1.6	14.5
Try to cheer up the student when they are in a difficult situation	0	0.8	12.1
Notice, above all, the positive about the student, their successes, and their achievements	0	0	12.1
Believe in the possibility of the student being successful	0	0	12.1
Derive pleasure from working with the student	0	3.2	10.5
Display a positive disposition to the student	0	0	9.7
Listen attentively to the student	0	2.4	8.9
Openly express one's joy, gratitude, and praise	0.8	0	5.6
Encourage the student to voice their opinion	0	0.8	3.2
Call the student by their name	0	0	4
Be polite	0.8	0.8	2.4

The assessment revealed that not all the teachers had a high level of inclusive culture. 6.9 to 51.5% of the teachers were found to be unwilling to work with particular categories of children with special educational needs. 7 to 70% of the teachers provided negative or inadequate characterizations of children with LHC. Not all the teachers were found to be supportive of the values of inclusive education (79.2% and up). 4.6 to 27.7% of the teachers were found to have naïve-mythological and erroneous notions about inclusive education. 8.9% of the teachers were found to have significant difficulties in building pedagogical interaction and communication with children with special educational needs based on the values of inclusion, with 44.4% found to have some difficulty in doing so.

Discussion

The study found that the majority of respondents had an insufficient level of development of the various components of inclusive culture.

The assessment of the motivation component revealed that more teachers are willing to work with neurotypical students than with students with special educational needs. In the authors' view, the low motivation of teachers to work with migrant and non-native-speaker children has to do with linguistic and cultural barriers which are faced by both students and teachers in an inclusive classroom. Teacher unwillingness to work with children with disruptive behavior may have to do with the unruliness of such children and a high risk of their actions affecting the safety and health of other students and the teacher. Based on the findings from a study by Gidlund (2018), which engaged teachers from 15 different countries, some teachers believe that letting such children attend mainstream schools may create issues that it will not be possible to resolve without proper conditions being created for that (e.g., engaging other specialists, reducing the number of students per class, reducing teacher workload, and other measures.). It may be suggested that some of the conditions necessary for letting children with disruptive behavior learn in an inclusive classroom should be created by teachers themselves (e.g., organizing fun group activities that such children will like; putting one's charisma to use giving the child as much positive attention as possible; engaging the child in managing discipline in the classroom; engaging the child in drawing up rules of conduct). The willingness to create such conditions is an important manifestation of inclusive culture.

The assessment of the emotional-axiological component revealed that students with limited health capacities are perceived by many teachers as individuals who cannot think for themselves ("constantly dependent on adults for control, care, and guidance"), are not creative ("can act only based on somebody else's instructions for example"), are not motivated ("don't want to study"), and have a low intellectual level ("unable to get a handle on particular elements of the curriculum"). The results harmonize with the findings from the study by Kozhanova (2021). There is a risk that this kind of attitude could turn into a "self-fulfilling prophecy". Oftentimes, pinning the "unable to/cannot" label on students is associated with the actual teacher's reluctance to understand "what needs to be done to make them able to do it", to think about it, and to look for new ways of having a positive teaching impact on students. Resolving this issue requires both changing teachers' attitude toward students with special educational needs and altering methodologies for working with them. Some teachers will not accept the humanistic values of inclusive education, as evidenced by studies by Khitryuk (2015; 2016).

The assessment of the cognitive component revealed that some teachers have erroneous and naïve-mythological notions about inclusive education. The phenomenon of mythologization of teachers' notions about various aspects of education (not only inclusive education) has been explored in studies by Efremova (2013; 2016). Mythologized notions about inclusive education may require psychological-pedagogical adjustment using methods such as the use of myth (Elfimova, 2011) and the use of cinema (Bystritskiy, 2007).

The assessment of the conative component of inclusive culture revealed that many teachers have difficulties in building communication with learners with limited health capacities based on the humanistic values of inclusive education. Such difficulties could be overcome via teachers exchanging best practices, visiting each other's classes, and attending teacher reflection workshops (Gureev, 2001; Vinogradova, 2016; Weyns, Preckel, & Verschueren, 2021).

The primary focus in cultivating an inclusive culture in participants in the educational process ought to be on accepting the humanistic values of education, rectifying one's erroneous and naïve-mythological notions, which hinder the acceptance of such values, overcoming estrangement, building constructive, friendly relations, and striving for productive communication.

The level of development of the components of inclusive culture in respondents (except for the motivation component) was assessed without differentiation as to the various categories of children with special educational needs (e.g., children with limited health capacities, disabled children, non-native speakers and migrants, gifted children, children from a deprived background, etc.).

Some of the respondents noted the need for such differentiation. This is an important consideration for future research. Given this limitation of the study, a researcher planning to make use of its findings may need to take account of the composition of the student body in an inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

The research reported in this paper substantiates the significance of not only promoting an inclusive culture in society and in schools but nurturing it in teachers and other participants in the educational process as well. It may be advisable to assess with a set of special tools the level of development of the following key components in the structure of teachers' inclusive culture: motivation, emotional-axiological, cognitive, and conative. The assessment conducted as part of this study revealed a low level of inclusive culture in nearly a third of teachers working in an inclusive education setting, which signals the need to implement appropriate measures to nurture this kind of culture in teachers and, where needed, remediate inadequate teacher attitudes, notions, and stereotypes.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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