

Organization of an inclusive educational environment for the development of children with special educational needs

Organización de un entorno educativo inclusivo para el desarrollo de niños con necesidades educativas especiales

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Abstract

Recently in academic papers by educators and practical psychologists, the issue of searching for means and tools designed to make the life of people with disabilities full and independent has been increasingly raised. Many scientists point to the need for new forms of education that promote the integration of people with special needs into society. An inclusive education deserves special attention among them. This article aims to identify and characterize the benefits of an inclusive classroom for children's development and socialization. The article studies the academic papers on the work of inclusive classes from the perspective of their role in the development and successful socialization of education applicants. Also, it investigates the results of the questionnaire survey of teachers and parents of children studying in inclusive classes. During the research, we studied the content of the inclusive education concept and features of this educational process form, established the goals, and highlighted the most important aspects of creating an inclusive environment.

Keywords: inclusion, children with special educational needs, inclusive educational environment, socialization of children, benefits of an inclusive classroom for child development.

Resumen

Recientemente, en trabajos académicos de educadores y psicólogos prácticos, se ha planteado cada vez más el tema de la búsqueda de medios y herramientas diseñados para hacer que la vida de las personas con discapacidad sea plena e independiente. Muchos científicos señalan la necesidad de nuevas formas de educación que promuevan la integración de personas con necesidades especiales a la sociedad. Una educación inclusiva merece una atención especial entre ellos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo identificar y caracterizar los beneficios de un aula inclusiva para el desarrollo y la socialización de los niños. El artículo estudia los trabajos académicos sobre el trabajo de las clases inclusivas desde la perspectiva de su papel en el desarrollo y socialización exitosa de los aspirantes a la educación. Además, investiga los resultados del cuestionario de encuesta a profesores y padres de niños que estudian en clases inclusivas. Durante la investigación, estudiamos el contenido del concepto de educación inclusiva y las características de esta forma de proceso educativo, establecimos los objetivos y destacamos los aspectos más importantes de la creación de un entorno inclusivo.

Palabras clave: inclusión, niños con necesidades educativas especiales, ambiente educativo inclusivo, socialización de los niños, beneficios de un aula inclusiva para el desarrollo infantil.

1. Introduction

Integrating people with disabilities into the social community presents many challenges that require a comprehensive approach (Sharavara & Batsman, 2020).

When we consider the education of children with special needs, we are talking about a change in the basic educational principles in the community where these children are.

Today the whole world promotes the idea of full integration of people with disabilities into social life. That is why the term associated with these processes (inclusion means integration) is widespread. Accordingly, inclusive education allows people with special needs to have equal access to the educational process. At the same time, in the vast majority of countries, the situation with inclusive education is still in its early stages (Drach, 2020).

We should also note that in the learning environment, where children with special educational needs are raised, the socialization process, which takes place first in the family and then in school, is essential.

School plays the most crucial role in a child's adaptation to future adult life. Analysis and attention to a child's state of health, impairments of psychophysical development, parents' desire to provide an education at school, and effective family education give rise to national changes in the educational process. It is essential for every little person, especially for a child with special educational needs, as it contributes to her more effective development and the acquisition of socialization skills.

2. Literature review

Inclusive education is an educational model that allows children with special educational needs to learn with other students from the same school in the same classroom. Inclusive education aims to create conditions among peers for developing children with special educational needs and form tolerant attitudes of parents, teachers, and students towards children with disabilities (Drach, 2020).

The possibility of educating all children, regardless of the presence of developmental disabilities, in a mainstream school has long been a subject of research by scholars (Dell'Anna, 2021).

Over the past decade, such researchers as G. Porter, Y. Muñoz-Martínez, B. Francis, L. Archer, J. Hodgen, D. Pepper, B. Taylor, and M. Travers have devoted their studies to this problem.

Studies by teachers focus on the specifics of building the educational process for children with special needs in educational institutions, their rehabilitation, and social integration

(Muñoz-Martínez & Porter, 2018), (Francis, Archer, Hodgen, Pepper, Taylor & Travers, 2017).

As E. Miatto notes, engaging a child with intellectual and physical disabilities in the learning process plays a significant role in the education and upbringing of healthy children, fostering certain qualities in them, such as tolerance, mindfulness, ability to show care, and so on (Miatto, 2020).

According to J. Drach, a unique feature of this educational form is adapting a child with special educational needs to the school requirements (Drach, 2020).

V. O. Sukhomlynskyi (1976) noted that since there can be no collective without personality, there can be no learning of personality outside the collective. Children with developmental disabilities should not be left alone with their problems. Such children should develop in the same conditions as regular students. V. O. Sukhomlynskyi accurately noted that the collective could become an educational environment only if it is created through communication and joint activities that bring everyone joy and pleasure, develop the interests and skills of its members, and if there is an educated teacher who loves children (Drach, 2020).

Present-day inclusive education is based on the international legal acts of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the recognition of the children's rights, the priority of universal values, the harmonious development of the individual, non-discrimination of children with special needs on any grounds. Thus, Article 23 of the Convention states that "...a child with mental or physical disabilities should lead a full and dignified life under normal conditions, which promote self-confidence and ensure her participation in the life of society... A child with special needs has the right to special care, education, and support for a full and dignified life under conditions that ensure maximum independence and social inclusion...." (Bondar & Zolotoverh, 2019).

Numerous specialists in the social, penitentiary, special education, and defectology field have devoted their works to the issue of integrated education and the upbringing of children with developmental disabilities: A. Kefallinou, S. Symeonidou, C. Meijer, V. Bondar, V. Zolotoverkh (Kefallinou, Symeonidou & Meijer, 2020), (Bondar & Zolotoverh, 2019).

Certain aspects of the problem of educating children with special needs in general educational institutions are considered in the works by R. Sharavara, O. Batsman, G. M. Jessup, A. C. Bundy, N. Hancock, A. Broom (Jessup, Bundy, Hancock & Broom, 2018), (Sharavara & Batsman, 2020).

An inclusive school, according to D. Paulsrud and C. Nilholm, aims "to give all students the opportunity for the fullest possible social life and active participation in the community, thereby ensuring full interaction and care for each other as complete members of society" (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020).

We agree with S. Roldán, J. Marauri, A. Aubert, and R. Flecha that engaging in this form of learning allows children with disabilities to interact, observe, and imitate normal children. In other words, children with disabilities can have the same social experiences as their other peers (Roldán, Marauri, Aubert & Flecha, 2021).

Researchers note that communicating with disabled people is also suitable for regular children, their families, teachers, and the local community (Dila & Wijayanti, 2020).

At the current stage of educational development of children with special educational needs, creating an inclusive educational environment is a priority. In such an environment, all children learn together in the general education system with programs adapted to the specific needs of each child (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018).

Priority aspects for creating an inclusive environment are breaking down stereotypical perceptions of teachers, students, and the learning process itself, creating a school atmosphere based on the idea of inclusion, building the school as a community focused on cooperation rather than competition, fostering the confidence of each employee and student in their abilities (Haegele & Zhu, 2017).

3. Aims

This study aims to determine the specifics of inclusive educational environment formation and its benefits for all participants.

4. Materials and methods

Practical research on the benefits of an inclusive educational environment was conducted through a survey using the SurveyMonkey service.

82 respondents, namely teachers of inclusive classes in general secondary education institutions, parents of children with special needs, and parents of other children studying in inclusive classes in 9 institutions of public education in Ukraine, took part in the opinion study on the positive aspects of the inclusive educational environment.

The survey was conducted using questionnaires, where respondents were asked to answer questions. After that, we calculated all respondents' average value of answers during the results assessment process.

5. Results

During the survey, we found out the respondents' opinions on the benefits for children with special educational needs of studying in an inclusive classroom (Figure 1).

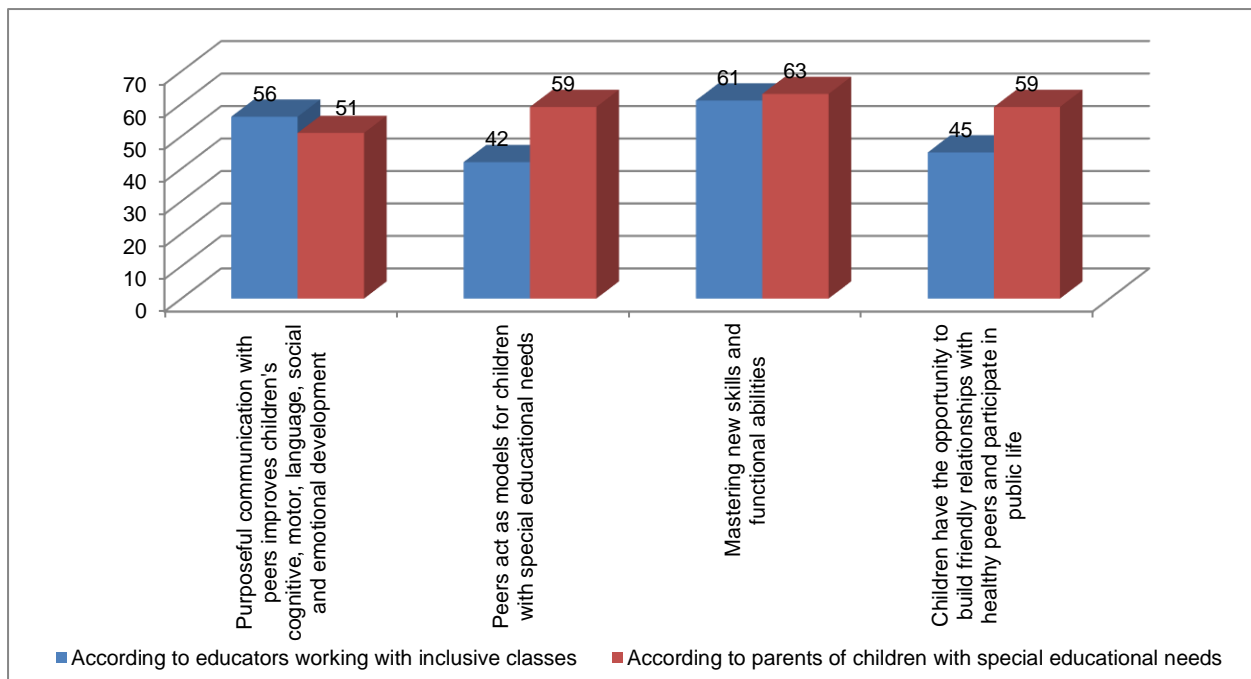


Figure 1. Benefits of inclusive education for children with special educational needs, %. Source: compiled by the authors.

As the survey results showed, in the opinion of teachers and parents of children with special educational needs, the most important benefit for children is mastering new skills and functional abilities. The survey participants estimated this aspect of inclusive education at 61% by teachers and 63% by parents.

The respondents also noted that purposeful communication with peers improves children's cognitive, motor, language, social, and emotional development. In addition, the fact that peers serve as models for children with special educational needs is a significant positive aspect of this educational process.

According to both parents and teachers, children with special needs must have the opportunity to build friendships with other peers and participate in the school's social life.

Respondents believe that a significant attention should be paid to the benefits of inclusive education for all children in the classroom (Figure 2).

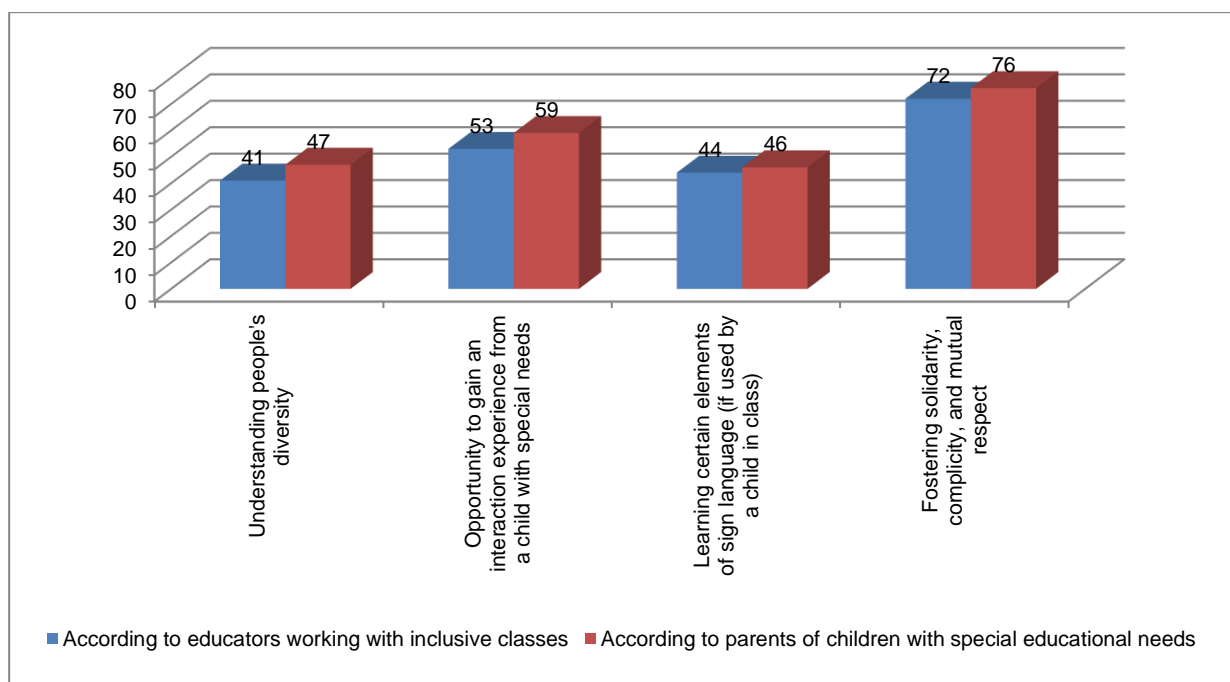


Figure 2. Benefits of inclusive education for all children in the classroom, %.

Source: compiled by the authors.

As noted by respondents, education in an inclusive classroom positively impacts the development and socialization process of all children. In particular, the most positive impact is stated in terms of fostering solidarity, complicity, mutual respect, the opportunity to experience communication with a child who has special needs, as well as understanding people's diversity, and learning certain elements of sign language (if a child uses it in class).

According to the respondents, the child's socialization is one of the most critical aspects of the educational process. Therefore, taking into account the topic of this study, respondents believe that the advantages of inclusive education, which contribute to a more effective process of socialization of children in inclusive classrooms, are (Figure 3):

- public awareness of the problems faced by children with special developmental needs;
- solidarity between children with special educational needs and their peers;
- effective social adaptation of a child with special educational needs;
- development of skills and personal strengths of a child with special educational needs;
- practical realization of educational role in building a more tolerant society.

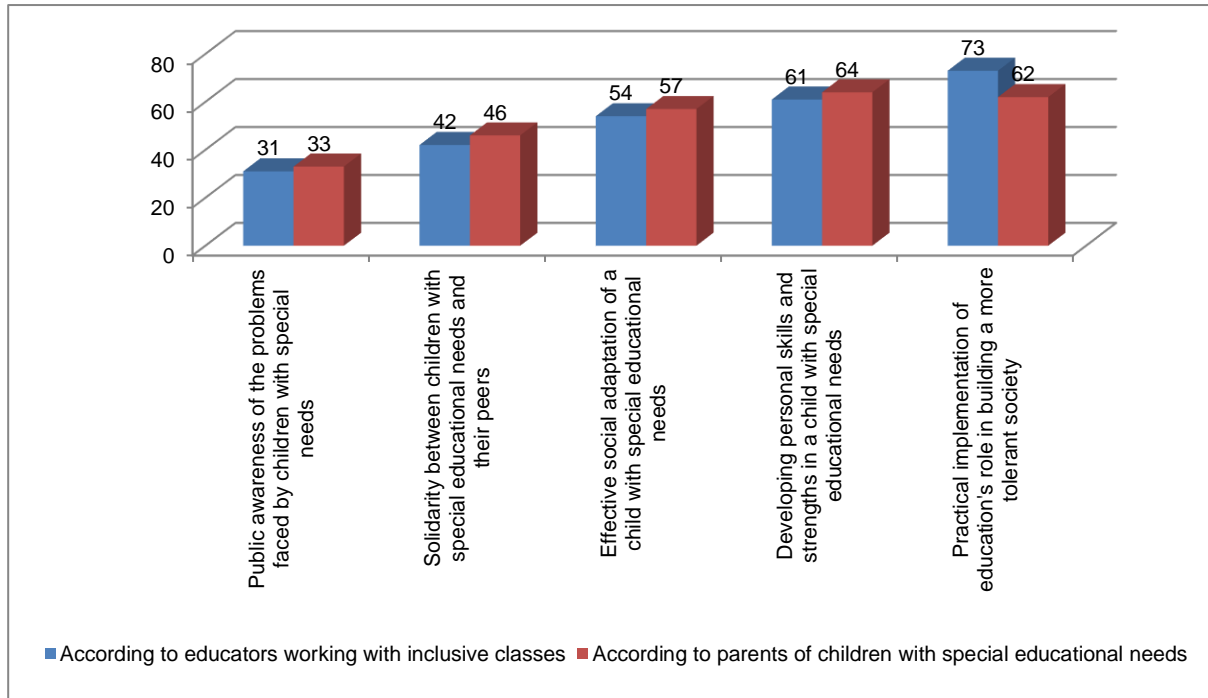


Figure 3. Benefits of inclusive education that contribute to a more effective socialization process for children in inclusive classrooms, %.
Source: compiled by the authors.

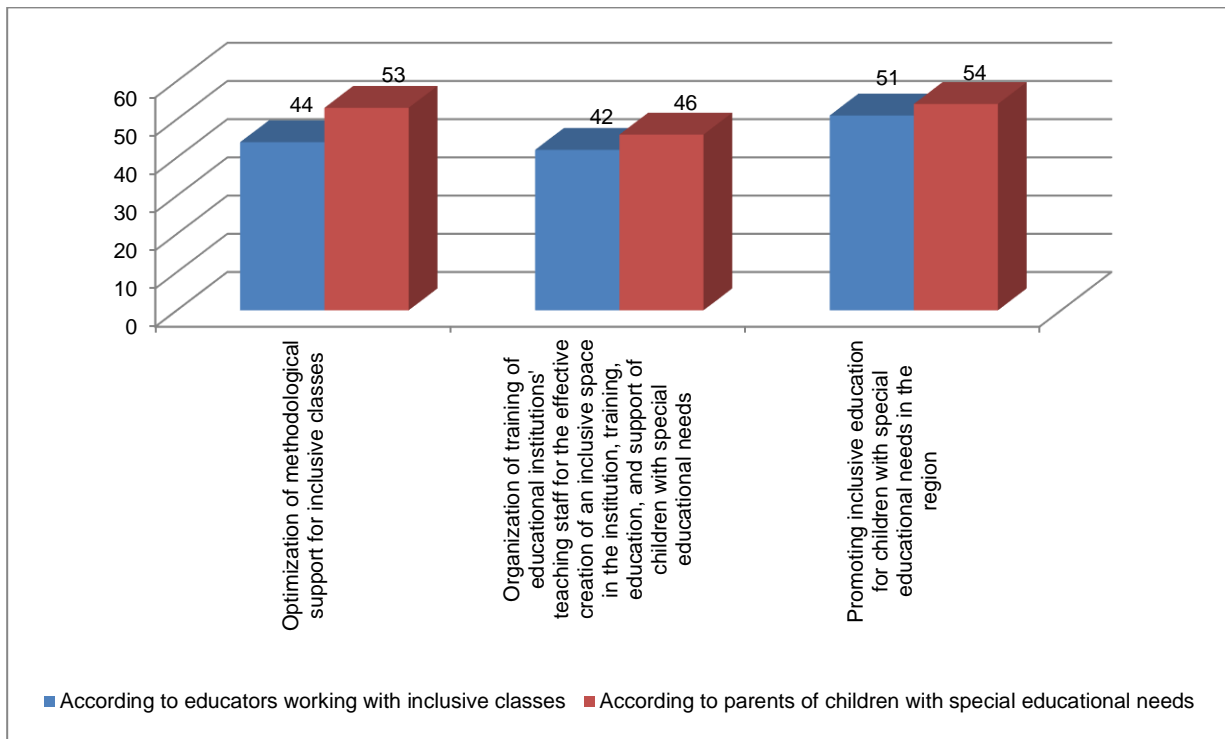


Figure 4. Main prospective tasks for the development of inclusive education, %.
Source: compiled by the authors.

Respondents believe that the main promising tasks for the development of inclusive education are (Figure 4):

- optimization of the methodological support for inclusive classes;
- organizing training of pedagogical staff of educational institutions for effective creation of inclusive space in the institution, training, upbringing, and support of children with special educational needs;
- advocating for the organization of inclusive education for children with special educational needs in the region.

6. Discussion

The academic research and findings of this study proved that all children benefit from inclusive education.

It provides the opportunity to:

- develop children's strengths and talents;
- include all applicants for education without exception in public schools and other community organizations;
- work toward a child's personal goal, taking into account their participation in the life of the classroom;
- involve parents in the learning process and the educational life of the institution;
- develop skills for learning about the world around them and respect the different abilities of others;
- develop friendships with other children;
- promote a positive image of the institution and spread respect for diversity and inclusion (Muñoz-Martínez, Vergara & Carrasco, 2021).

As H. Miyauchi notes, the constituent models of inclusive education are:

- a team approach;
- meeting the individual needs of children;
- cooperation with parents;
- creating a positive atmosphere in the children's team (Miyauchi, 2020).

A. Boza-Chua, K. Gabriel-Gonzales, and L. Andrade-Arenas support this viewpoint. They also note that inclusive education in public education institutions is an alternative to education in specialized institutions and has many advantages, among which the main one is that a child with special needs learns to live in society, forms an orientation to every day, complete life in close cooperation with the family. In contrast, the child creates an idea of their exceptional development features not as painful circumstances but as a way of life (Boza-Chua, Gabriel-Gonzales & Andrade-Arenas, 2021).

The inclusive education practice is based on accepting the individuality of each student and planning the education and learning process to meet the needs of each child with a disability. Inclusive education emphasizes the personalization of learning, developing individualized learning pathways (Opie, Deppeler, & Southcott, 2017).

The main difference between the processes of integration and inclusion is that the inclusion of all participants in the educational process changes the attitude toward children with disabilities, and the ideology of education changes in the direction of increasing the educational process harmony and its pedagogical and social orientation. Inclusive education contains resources that promote equality for all students and participation in all aspects of collective life.

In an inclusive learning environment, all children can succeed.

Based on a comprehensive literature review on this issue, Y. Muñoz-Martínez and G. Porter identify the following benefits for children with special educational needs:

- in an inclusive environment, children with disabilities demonstrate a higher level of social interaction with other children who do not have such disabilities;
- in an inclusive educational environment, the social skills and communication skills of children with developmental disabilities are improved;
- children with special needs learn a more challenging and in-depth curriculum, which leads to more effective skills acquisition and improved educational outcomes;
- social learning for children with special needs is enhanced through inclusive schools, where it often takes the form of group work. While working in small groups, children learn to see the person rather than the disability and begin to see that they have much in common with children with disabilities;
- friendships between children with and without disabilities tend to develop more in inclusive environments.

Studies have shown that children in inclusive environments have safer and more lasting relationships with friends than children in segregated environments. It is especially true when children attend a local school nearby and have more opportunities to meet with friends after school (Muñoz-Martínez & Porter, 2018).

It is good that children with special needs go to the same schools as their peers, in the same class as other children, live in a family, having the same rights and responsibilities. However, it is also essential that a child's personality is formed not in a closed circle of similar children - the deaf among the deaf, the blind among the blind, the mentally disabled among the mentally disabled - but in an environment that requires a higher level of communication, social interaction, provides mutual support, socialization, and adaptation in society (Szumski, Smogorzewska & Karwowski, 2017).

The studies show that inclusive classrooms focus primarily on developing students' strengths and talents rather than addressing their physical or mental problems. Interaction with other children promotes the cognitive, physical, speech, social, and emotional development of children with special educational needs. At the same time, children with normal developmental levels demonstrate appropriate behavior to children with special educational needs and motivate purposeful use of new knowledge and skills. In inclusive classrooms, interactions between students with special educational needs and other children help build friendly relationships between them so that children learn to accept and tolerate human differences and naturally become more responsive (Rueda, Muñoz-Martínez & Porter, 2021).

The arguments in favor of students in inclusive learning environments are indisputable. Therefore, the controversial claim that other children in inclusive environments receive a worse education or are in less favorable social circumstances can hardly be said to be proven.

Other children benefit in many ways from an inclusive environment, as do children with special educational needs. For example, having children with developmental disabilities in the classroom does not affect the performance of other students (Muñoz-Martínez & Porter, 2021).

As H. Miyauchi notes, children with disabilities can increase their self-esteem and strengthen their place in the learning process by mentoring others. Other children also have the opportunity to learn additional skills, such as learning Braille or communicating in sign language. Learning these skills can take place in a situation where everyone involved understands their importance and can put them into practice.

All children in an inclusive environment can learn to appreciate and respect children with special needs. They learn to see a person as a talent rather than a handicap and disregard the social labels associated with them (Miyauchi, 2020).

The strategic educational and upbringing goals of children with special educational needs are full integration into society, the ability to bear the social load with other peers, perceive intellectual and aesthetic values of society, and master moral and ethical norms of human relations. The achievement of this particular goal is possible only when the proper conditions for the development and education of this category of children are created in society (Kefallinou, Symeonidou & Meijer, 2020).

Currently, there are many problems in the implementation of inclusive education. Still, the state persuasively seeks to ensure that every child, regardless of health conditions, has the same opportunities to realize their right to education and develop the potential for a socially meaningful career in later adult life (Szumski, Smogorzewska & Karwowski, 2017).

Currently, the issue of children with special educational needs development, their education, and upbringing in educational institutions is one of the priorities in public policy of many countries worldwide. As a result, the system of upbringing and education is improved to ensure the comprehensive development of "special" children. Also, the best conditions are created for their integration into society. However, the educational organization, which focuses on the problems and needs of these children, requires more time and severe corrective actions aimed at a comprehensive approach to solving this problem (Opie, Deppeler & Southcott, 2017).

7. Conclusions

Hence, inclusive education is an environment where all students, regardless of their educational needs, can learn more effectively, improve their social skills, improve their communication abilities and feel a part of the community.

All the necessary measures are taken worldwide to preserve and expand the acquired experience of inclusive education and develop a new strategy of corrective and educational work with this category of children.

Education in inclusive classes according to already developed and approved particular standards, programs and textbooks will provide the highest level of general educational training and students' readiness for independent life. Thus, inclusive education may become a leading trend at the present stage of modernization of the education system for children with special needs. Educating children in inclusive classes, guaranteeing the right of the child to equal access to education, the choice of the volume and form of learning, thus taking into account the high social requirements for the education of students and the potential of each child, which is the key to preparing children for independent life and work.

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