

IFTE 2016 : 2nd International Forum on Teacher Education

Faculty Attitudes Towards Students with Disabilities in Russian Universities: A Glance at Western Siberia

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.07.68>

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of faculty members of Russian state universities, in Western Siberia, towards inclusive education and students with disabilities. We revealed positive attitudes of regional academic staff towards co-education of healthy students and persons with disabilities. Three-quarters of the respondents agree that inclusive education has a positive impact not only on the development and socialization of people with disabilities, but also on their peers with normal educational needs. However, only a quarter of respondents feel ready to work with students with disabilities. The study revealed significant influence of gender, experience, age on the attitude towards inclusion. The lack of experience of working with students with disabilities is the reason for the psychological fear, on the part of academic staff members.

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Keywords: Inclusive higher education, students with disabilities (hereafter- SD), an inclusive educational environment, psychological willingness for inclusion, attitudes towards the inclusive education.

1. Introduction and problem statement

After the ratification of the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (2012, the process of forming an inclusive higher system of education, started in Russian universities. Inclusive higher education is an organization of training process that includes all students irrespective of their physical, mental, intellectual, cultural-ethnic, language, and other features in the higher education system, and are trained with their non-disabled peers; taking into consideration their special educational needs, and rendering necessary support (Ainscow, 2002). The aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion. In the accordance with Federal Law on the 29th December 2012 No 273-FZ “On Education in the Russian Federation”, SD are guaranteed an equal access to all levels of education.

Amendments to the 508 federal state educational standards (2014-2016) requires accommodations for SD including modifications to academic programs, a time extension for completion of degree requirements, the availability of electronic resources and adopted syllabuses, special procedures for admission and passing exams, and tutor assistance. The social context of the problem is that Russian students with disabilities face physical and mental barriers. The percentage of students with documented disabilities in Russian universities was only 0,32% in 2014. This is a very small number, in accordance to the World Health Organization's statement (2013): approximately 15% of the world's population is disabled.

Faculty attitudes towards SD include cognitive, behavioral, and value components, which are important components of higher school inclusion. It determines the success of students and quality of academic interactions. So the Ministry of education and social development of the Russian Federation has approved requirements to the inclusive special skills of teachers of higher education in September 2015.

The attitudes of teachers towards SD is an independent research topic in Humanities. According on the data of García-Fernández, 240 articles on the attitudes to people with disabilities and inclusion in education, had been posted into a peer-reviewed database of Social sciences citation index, Web of science, including 24 publication dedicated to the development and testing of measurement tools of inclusion from 2000 to 2011 (García-Fernández, Inglés, Juan González-Macià, Mañas-Viejo, 2013). The most cited article devoted to the description of the measurement tools of attitudes towards people with disabilities (50 citations) is the study by Antonak and Livneh (2002). The most common research instrument is a test- Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons Scale (ATDP) developed by Yunker (1966).

It revealed that 1) the positive attitude of faculty and staff toward students with disabilities is an essential condition of academic success determining the quality and effectiveness of academic communications (Florian, Black-Hawkins, 2011; Rao, 2004; Bagget, 1994). 2) factors influencing positive / negative attitude towards inclusion of persons with disabilities are based on; gender, age, experience with individuals with TDO, specialized training, position, and region (Bashir Abu-Hamour, 2013); 3) the gap between the positive attitude to inclusion of the majority of teachers of higher education systems in various regions of the world, and on the other hand, a low level of special knowledge and skills in this area (Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, Brulle, 1999, Williamson, 2000). These were the results of studies aimed at identifying the level of knowledge about legislation on the rights of persons with disabilities, published by Thompson (Thompson, Bethea, and Turner, 1997).

The Russian studies revealed that 1) the willingness of teachers to inclusion is the basic premise of real integration in a classroom (Alekhina, 2011); 2) the willingness of teachers to inclusive education is a complicated mental formation including cognitive, emotional and behavioral components (Alekhina, Agafonova, Alekseeva, 2012, Malyarchuk, Volosnikova, 2015, Pevzner, Petryakov, Shirin, 2014). At the present stage of studies, the main efforts of the Russian humanitarian science focuses on inclusive education in general schools; while there is a shortage of studies for the higher education inclusion (Karynbaeva, 2015; Kulagina, 2015; Iyubavina 2013; Yarskaya, Yarskaya-Smirnova, 2015).

2. The purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of faculty members in 9 Russian state universities of Western Siberia, towards the inclusive education of SD. The main issues to be explored: 1. What are the attitudes of the academic staff towards inclusive education and SD? 2 What factors (gender, age, experience, training in teaching SD) significantly impact the positive/ negative attitudes towards inclusive education and SD? 3. How do you evaluate the willingness, knowledge, and skills of inclusive education of university teachers?

We invited all 3876 faculty members of nine universities in Western Siberian Tyumen region, Russia, to participate in the study: State agricultural University of North Ural, Tyumen state Institute of culture, Tyumen state industrial University, Tyumen state medical University, Tyumen state University, Surgut state pedagogical University, Surgut state University, Yugra state University, Nizhnevartovsk state University. We have received 2081 completed application form.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of faculty members

Demographic characteristics	%
<i>sex</i>	
female	30
male	70
<i>age</i>	
less than 25-30	13
31-40	34
41-50	26
51-60	18
61- 70 and over	8
<i>academic rank</i>	
assistant, teacher, senior teacher	42
docent	43
professor, professor holding an administrative post	15
<i>teaching experience (years)</i>	
less than 10	28
11-20	40
21-30	19
More than 30	12

3. Research methods

The study was conducted in April-May, 2016. Letter from the head of Council of Rectors of Tyumen region was sent to University rectors. To improve the research's instrument, the authors reviewed prior published instruments used to assess attitudes to DP (Booth, Antonak, Thompson, Bethea and Turner, Rodríguez Martín and Álvarez Arregui). The instrument contained an explanation

of the purpose, and included 30 questions in 5 blocks: attitude, willingness, knowledge, skill, and evaluation of the inclusive environment at the University. The survey included 4 pen-ended questions that asked to justify the attitudes of respondents towards SD. A survey was carried out through distribution of an email link to the survey. The measurement error is 1, 5% according to the formula of V. Paniotto.

4. Results

4.1. Attitudes towards inclusive education of SD

Of the total number of participants, 86% of respondents expressed a positive attitude towards inclusive education of SD (answers "positive"-42% "rather positive"- 44%); 7% expressed negative attitude towards inclusive education of SD (answers "rather negative" – 6%; negative –1%, and 6% of respondents omitted this question.

Respondents were asked an open question about the positive effects of inclusion. Of the total number of participants, 89% of respondents formulated positive effects of inclusion for students and for the society as a whole, 6% of respondents omitted the question, 5% of respondents did not see any positive effects of inclusive education. The ranking of the most common key words used to describe the positive effects of inclusive education are presented below: tolerance – 829 references (29.1%), socialization – 259 (13.9%), adaptation - 187 (9.0%) communication- 133 (6.4 %), mutual aid - 88 (4.2%), interaction - 44 (2.1%), empathy - 42 (2.0%), social support -24 (1.2%), and respect - 23 (1.1 %).

4.2. Willingness for the inclusive education of SD

Of the total number of participants, only 25, 7% of respondents (571 people) note their total willingness to work with SD; 37,6% had psychological willingness, but an insufficient level of special skills, 36,2% noted total unwillingness to work with SD., 98% of respondents were ready to help SD (responses of "always" -67, 2%, "sometimes"-30,8%), 2% of respondents chose the answer "never". Of the total number of participants, 95,3% of teachers understand the social significance of inclusive education of SD("always"- 74, 2%, "sometimes"- 21,3%, 4,4% - "never").

4.3. Experience of work with SD and special training for inclusive education students

Of the total number of participants, only 8% of respondents (184 people) have received special inclusion-focused training. At the same time 66% believe that training of teachers for inclusive education of students with disabilities is the most important condition for effective inclusion. Of the total number of participants, 46,9% of teachers had experience of teaching students with disabilities, and the rest had no experience. The study revealed a correlation between the presence of training experience of SD and willingness to inclusive education of SD. Only 19,4% of the respondent group «total unwillingness to work with SD» had experience of teaching SD.

4.4. Knowledge of the laws on the rights of persons with disabilities and the experience of inclusive education.

Of the total number of participants, only 15 % of respondents know Russian legislation on the rights of SD; 56% chose the answer "partly", 31% reported complete lack of knowledge(the answer is "no"). Only 8% of respondents know the international law on the rights of persons with disabilities; 40% chose the answer "partly", 52% chose the answer "don't know." Finally, 36% of respondents noted a total lack of knowledge about the national experience of inclusive education; 45% -lacked total of knowledge on foreign practices of inclusive education (the answer is "no").

4.5. Gender

Of the total number of participants, 30% were males and 70% were females. Differences in attitudes towards inclusive education of SD on the basis of gender were unstable. Of the total number of respondents, 84,4% of men and 87, 1% of women expressed a positive attitude towards inclusive education, 72,8 % of men and 78,4% of women believe, that inclusive education impacts positive effects for the students and the society as a whole. Of the total number of respondents, 59,7% of men and 70, 5% of women are always ready to provide assistance to persons with disabilities; 77,3% of women and 67,1 % of men were constantly aware of the social significance of working with SD; 57,4% of women and 42,4% of men chose the answer "always show empathy"; 46,2% women and 30,5% men constantly feel the need to improve special skills. On the topic "Knowledge of the Russian legislation on the rights of persons with disabilities" of 38,9% of men and 35,7% of women chose the negative answer. Lack of knowledge about inclusive education - 35,% men and 29,6% women.

4.6. Age

The survey involved teachers age group "under 30 years" (13%) "from 31 to 40 years"(34%) , from 41 to 50 years" (26%), «from 51 to 60 years" (18%), "older than 61 years" (8%). Of the total number of participants, a high level of positive attitude to inclusion is expressed "from 41-50years (81,2%), and younger than 30 years (80%), the lowest level is "from the age of 61 and above" (72%). The lowest level of willingness to teach SD: only 20,4% of the category "older than 61 years" chose "full readiness" (in the sample it is 25%). The analysis of the data revealed a fact: a positive attitudes of teachers towards SD increases from decade to decade, however, once respondents are 60 years and older, there is a "fracture" followed by the reduced willingness to work in inclusive educational space.

5. Discussion

Analysis of research results allows formulating the following conclusions. Inclusive education in Russia began recently, so the Russian universities have to go through the difficult level of developing different strategies and models of successful integration of students in higher education, and accommodations for promoting their success.

The positive attitudes of teachers towards SD is an important component of the university environment, as a well as special knowledge and skills. The attitudes of majority of teachers of the

state system of higher education (Tyumen region) to collaborative learning of non-disabled students and SD is positive (86%). In their opinion, inclusive education will have a positive impact not only on the development and socialization of individuals with disabilities, but also on their peers with normal educational needs. A limitation of this conclusion is that the study was conducted based on self-evaluation, and the respondents could choose answers that they believe are socially desirable.

Every fourth respondent found it difficult to define the term "inclusive education. The study revealed a considerable gap between positive attitudes towards inclusion and low levels of willingness to inclusive education: only a quarter of respondents feel total (professional and psychological) readiness to work with SD. 38% of respondents are psychologically willing, but complain about insufficient professional skills. The main reasons of fears of inclusion are; lack of work experience with SD, and lack of special training and instructions. Academic staff members consider professional development and special training as the main priority for the development of an inclusive academic environment. A review of foreign literature allows to conclude that the problems experienced by teachers in the transition to inclusive education, is also encountered by Russian teachers.

Of the total number respondents, three quarters of respondents (74,2%) are fully aware of the social significance of work with students with disabilities in terms of inclusive education. Women demonstrate a higher level of positive attitude to inclusion than men. Experience with students and special training impact on the positive attitude towards inclusive education.

This review implies the need for the development of positive attitude towards the successful implementation of inclusive higher education. Further, there is a need to intervene on negative attitudes, and control factors contributing to negative attitudes in implementing successful inclusion. It is necessary to form these capabilities in academic staff members for effective work in conditions of inclusion, and maintaining these competences at a high level for the development of tolerant attitudes towards SD. " It is possible to form an inclusive civil society in which people can co-experience, co-feel and help others in the context of inclusive education . "Only when all children are learning together, can they understand how to tactfully and tolerantly to treat others" (cited from a respondent's form).

Acknowledgements

Finally, the authors thank the European Project TEMPUS IV/VI "Initial and Further Education and Training for Educationalists and Managers in Education in the field of Diversity"543873-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-DE-TEMPUS-JPCR, and the rectors of Tyumen universities, ' for support of the research.

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