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The Inclusion Process of Students with Special Educational Needs in Grades 1–3 and Its Impact on Psychological and Social Well-Being. Perspectives of Students, Teachers, and Parents

Proces inkluzji uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi w klasach 1–3 szkoły podstawowej a poczucie dobrostanu psychicznego. Perspektywa uczniów, nauczycieli i rodziców

Abstract: This study aimed to examine the opinions of students, teachers, and parents regarding the inclusion process of children with special educational needs (SPE) in grades 1–3 of primary school. The research methodology was based on a diagnostic survey using questionnaires and interviews. The application of methodological triangulation contributed to obtaining a comprehensive view of the analyzed issue, which is crucial for drawing accurate conclusions and practical recommendations. This article presents an analysis of the obtained research results regarding the inclusion process, with a focus on the psychological well-being of students as described in the literature. The findings pertaining to the inclusion process in grades 1–3 of primary school enable a deeper understanding of the complex effects of this process and identification of areas requiring further support and improvement in educational practices. Due to the complexity of the issue, further research in this field is necessary.

Keywords: educational inclusion; special educational needs; psychological well-being; early school education

Abstrakt: Badania własne miały na celu zbadanie opinii uczniów, nauczycieli i rodziców na temat procesu inkluzji dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi (SPE) na etapie klas 1–3 szkoły podstawowej. Metodologia badawcza została oparta na sondażu diagnostycznym z użyciem ankiety i wywiadu. Zastosowanie triangulacji metod badawczych przyczyniło się do uzyskania wszechstronnego spojrzenia na analizowane zagadnienie, co jest kluczowe dla wyciągania trafnych wniosków i rekomendacji praktycznych. W ramach niniejszego artykułu przeprowadzono analizę uzyskanych wyników badań dotyczących procesu inkluzji w odniesieniu do poczucia dobrostanu psychicznego uczniów opisywanego w literaturze przedmiotu. Wyniki odnoszące się do procesu inkluzji w klasach 1–3

szkoły podstawowej umożliwiają głębsze zrozumienie złożonych efektów tego procesu oraz identyfikację obszarów wymagających dalszego wsparcia i doskonalenia praktyk edukacyjnych. Z uwagi na złożoność zagadnienia konieczne są dalsze badania w tej dziedzinie.

Słowa kluczowe: inkluzja edukacyjna; specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne; dobrostan psychiczny; edukacja wczesnoszkolna

INTRODUCTION

The psychological well-being of students plays a key role in the effectiveness of the education system, especially in the context of inclusion processes that seek to involve all students in school life, regardless of their abilities, background or special needs. In this context, students' psychological well-being represents not only a cornerstone, but also a condition for achieving the goals of school inclusion.

Mental well-being is a certain subjective perception of a person's satisfaction with his or her life, a sensation of happiness and prosperity. It is also a kind of cognitive and emotional evaluation of one's own existence in terms of satisfaction and spiritual peace. Well-being includes emotional reactions to certain events, as well as cognitive judgments that relate to fulfillment and satisfaction (Diener et al., 2004, p. 35). Thus, the achievement of psychological well-being can be referred to when positive experiences and pleasant sensations dominate in a person's life, and when the level of negative experiences and moods remains low (Kasperek-Golimowska, 2012, pp. 179–213). Such evaluation is influenced primarily by achievements, but also by events that give rise to positive emotions in the mind of a person, and give meaning to life (Porczyńska-Ciszewska & Kraczkla, 2017, pp. 101–117). Such a state causes the development of an affirmative attitude towards life and the events that occur in it (Tomasiak-Wyszyńska, 2021, pp. 9–10).

When considering the aforementioned concepts of psychological well-being in the context of a child's perception of early childhood, their positive state of mind is taken into account, both in the school environment and in other areas of daily life. In doing so, psychological well-being is determined by a sense of security, belonging and bonding with the group, but also by success and satisfaction with achievements (Tomasiak-Wyszyńska, 2021, pp. 9–10). These issues are particularly important in the case of dysfunctional children, for whom even small achievements are a great joy. The awareness of being a member of the school community gives them not only a sense of security, but also a sense of agency, while supporting their multifaceted development.

Inclusion, i.e. the inclusion of a child with special educational needs as an equal student, significantly supports their psychological well-being. In the educational context, it is important to define precisely the scope of the meaning of the term "inclusion", bearing in mind that inclusion should not be explicitly equated with integration. This is because the latter is usually associated with tolerance, while inclusion is based on

acceptance. And as such, it can be treated in terms of “a higher stage on the way to the normalization of the educational and social situation of people with special educational needs” (Grzesiak, 2019, pp. 21–46). Inclusion takes place, so to speak, “from the bottom up”, that is, at the level of functioning of the peer group itself. Inclusion of students with developmental deficits in mainstream schools is an extension of the basic educational functions of these institutions (Minczakiewicz, 2009, pp. 337–344). Children with dysfunctions who require special support learn and develop in the company of their non-disabled peers (Grosche, 2015, pp. 17–39).

Our own research, on which this article is based, was aimed at studying the opinions of students, teachers and parents on the process of inclusion of children with SEN, at the stage of early childhood education. The results that were achieved were collated and confronted with the literature on the mental well-being. This allowed the formulation of conclusions on the incidence of mental well-being in children undergoing educational inclusion.

MATERIAL AND RESEARCH METHODS USED

Educational inclusion, especially research on the school's cooperation with families of children with special educational needs, is a relatively new and under-researched issue, especially in the context of students' psychological well-being.

The research procedure carried out at Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński Elementary School No. 107 with Integrative Branches in Kraków was carefully planned and implemented, in such a way that its results could be considered representative on a broader scale, and its conclusions useful for schools across the country. The study included students in grades 4–8 at this institution, their parents and teachers. A total of 53 students, 23 teachers, 25 parents (survey) and 5 parents of students with SEN (interview) participated in the study. In addition, as an active participant in the inclusion process, the school counselor also took part in the research procedure. The study was conducted in a retrospective form, which made it possible to analyze the experiences of students in grades 4–8 of elementary school their parents and teachers in the context of their previous participation in the inclusion process at the early school stage.

The large and diverse selection of the research sample allowed a holistic approach to the analysis of the inclusion process. The research method used for the study was a diagnostic survey, using both survey and interview techniques. The research was based on the triangulation method, i.e. combining data collection through two methods (Wieczorek, 2014, pp. 15–34), i.e. a quantitative one – a survey, and a qualitative one – an interview, in order to ensure a higher quality of the research conducted, as well as to reduce measurement error.

The retrospective approach made it possible to better understand changes in students' experiences and perceptions of inclusion at different stages of education. As

a result, the research took into account the short- and long-term effects of the process, which is crucial for evaluating its effectiveness and its impact on the comprehensive development and psychological well-being of students.

INCLUSION PROCESS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN GRADES 1–3 OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL – RESEARCH RESULTS

The process of inclusion of students in the investigated educational institution was organized in a comprehensive manner, including a wide range of support and adaptations. It took place in multiple stages, taking the form of: assigning a support teacher who provided individual assistance in the classroom; adapting the curriculum to the requirements of students with deficits; introducing individualization of the curriculum, adapting the program's material to the students' skill level, shortening tasks and allowing additional time for their completion, as well as the possibility of using technological aids. In addition, the institution planned outreach and developmental support activities, included SEN students in cooperation with an educator and a speech therapist. These activities were aimed at multifaceted support of the student and defining his or her deficits and adaptation difficulties.

Inclusion as a process is not just a means to improve a student's educational achievement in the early years, nor short-term integration and social adaptation among peers, but is primarily aimed at enhancing their activity in the long-term educational process. The study also focused on determining the significance of inclusion activities undertaken in grades 1–3 of elementary school on the functioning of students in the next stage of education. The opinions of the respondents here were basically unanimous. Respondents unanimously stated that inclusion education had a positive impact on the functioning of students with dysfunctions at the next educational stage, enabling them to attend inclusion classes, where they developed social skills and established contacts with non-disabled peers. Thus, students with SEN had the opportunity to develop educationally and emotionally, regardless of the spectrum of disorders, which undoubtedly had a positive impact on their psychological well-being.

In light of the above, it is evident that the studied institution has achieved significant educational results through the implemented inclusion program. The individualization of school requirements in accordance with the perceptual needs of children with deficits contributed to an increase in their ability to understand teachers' instructions and an increase in the level of focus and concentration during classes. Both the majority of teachers and the students themselves expressed positive opinions about these benefits, which became an important factor in supporting their learning progress. It should be emphasized that the educational effects were not limited to the acquisition of new

information, but also included the development of social skills, where the inclusion proved particularly helpful.

After all, it would be a manifestation of a lack of scientific objectivity and neutrality to address the issue of school inclusion only in terms of the benefits and advantages that this modality of education undeniably demonstrates. Therefore, in order to create a full picture of the studied domain, it is also necessary to mention the barriers and obstacles that exist with regard to the process of inclusion of students with SEN. The difficulties that we were able to diagnose were primarily in the personal, administrative, logistical, but also in the parental and social fields. The teaching staff particularly emphasized the fact that a significant problem is the provision of optimal learning conditions for individual students, who by their very nature are very closed-minded. There is also a lack not only of appropriate teaching resources, but also of trained teaching staff with a specialized body of knowledge and experience in the context of SEN. It is also difficult to ensure proper cooperation with therapists, psychologists and other specialists to help develop individual educational plans and provide the necessary therapeutic support. Adapting the curriculum and methodology to meet the diverse needs of SEN pupils and provide them with the necessary support should also be considered problematic.

It is also important to take into account architectural barriers and physical needs, such as handicap-accessible toilets, elevators or ramps for students with mobility limitations. In addition, the school environment should be adapted in terms of accessibility for students with various hearing or visual deficits. Equipping school facilities in an appropriate manner is time-consuming and costly, especially on a limited budget, which may also involve some disorganization of the facility's work. Some of the teachers' views, relating to barriers to inclusion, were also shared by non-disabled students, pointing in particular to: disruption of the accepted course of lessons by their SEN peers, constituting an uncomfortable and distracting situation for them. On the other hand, children with deficits mentioned problems with concentration, excessive volume of material, as well as a sense of alienation and rejection by the class, or part of it, and the impression of excessive monitoring by teachers.

Diagnosis of all the mentioned problem areas and deficits provides a certain added value to the entire research process. This is because it can be a substantive basis for taking corrective measures and optimizing the process of school inclusion, so that the identified barriers do not limit the positive effects and indisputable advantages of this form of education in the future.

The study also included the impact of the inclusion process of students with SEN on the development of their social interaction with their peers, with the aim of collecting relevant information in this area. Respondents were unanimous in their position that inclusion has a significant positive impact on changes in the area of social development. Thanks to it, the students began to understand and accept each other much better, became open-minded, cooperative and empathetic, gained skills in caring for others and giving

and receiving help. There was a significant improvement in peer relationships and their openness of SEN students to interaction and socialization, especially through group games. These students then did not feel alienated, and knew how to express their opinions and defend them. They also gained negotiation and acceptance skills for themselves and others. The author conducted the research in question as part of her master's thesis entitled. "The inclusion process of students with Special Educational Needs in grades 1–3 of elementary school: Perspectives of students, teachers, and parents" within the course of Pre-school and Early Childhood Pedagogy at KAAFM, 2023. The study has not been published before (Klimowicz, 2023).

EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION AND STUDENTS' SENSE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING – A DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results of the study indicate that school inclusion implemented as an innovative strategy for the integration of students with deficits in mainstream educational institutions, has measurable effects not only in the context of comprehensive development of students, but also, and perhaps most importantly, in the field of their social interaction. Among students in grades 1–3 of elementary school, the ability to adapt socially is a key element in shaping their psychological well-being.

The development of these skills, which are particularly important at a young age, is fundamental to the formation of an individual's psychological well-being. Relationships with other people, the ability to establish, maintain and properly nurture interpersonal ties, the ability to feel satisfaction from contact with people, to establish friendly relations with others, is one of the basic conditions for experiencing psychological well-being (Niśkiewicz, 2016, pp. 139–151). School inclusion undoubtedly accomplishes such a postulate. It is also worth adding that studies conducted by other authors confirm the existence of a correlation between acceptance among peers and perceived psychological well-being (Farnicka & Liberska, 2015, pp. 77–91; Liberska, 2014, pp. 11–21).

Psychological well-being is, in this way, a resultant of such elements as positive emotions, involvement, relationships with others, and achievements and their appreciation (Porczyńska-Ciszewska & Kraczla, 2017, pp. 101–117). All these elements are included in inclusion, which is the leading premise for the conclusion of its fundamental importance for psychological well-being in children with SEN. The social life of the school, of which they become a part, also satisfies the natural need to belong, which in itself contributes to a measurable increase in the level of psychological well-being, as well as eliminates feelings of anxiety and loneliness (Jach, 2012, pp. 58–76).

Commitment to fulfilling the roles of being a student, a colleague and a member of the community involves a significant amount of diligence, which, when crowned with success, builds self-esteem in the child (Liberska, 2011, pp. 71–126). The author's re-

search shows that such a state is significantly shaped by early childhood inclusion. Students subjected to it strive to match their peers, are more aware of their value, and their higher self-esteem is a form of “response” to achievements and accomplishments, the natural benefit of which is perceived psychological well-being.

In the psychological and pedagogical literature, it is noted that often adaptation difficulties to school requirements particularly manifest themselves in the form of emotional withdrawal, sadness or anxiety (Nurmi, 2012, pp. 177–197), which significantly reduces psychological well-being. Such problems usually result from the child’s psychological or social immaturity, or inadequate strategies for functioning in the school environment (Farnicka & Liberska, 2014, pp. 36–50; Bee, 2004, p. 282). The conducted studies have shown that the process of inclusion eliminates these obstacles, which leads to the formation of a state of psychological comfort in children with dysfunctions, which gradually transforms into well-being.

The considerations presented on the relationship between inclusion and the perceived psychological well-being of children with SEN, legitimize the claim of their multifaceted interconnectedness. The school is not only an educational institution, but also an important part of the educational and socialization system, which should have a decisive impact on the psychological well-being of all students, including those with deficits. The educational inclusion program is a key tool to support the implementation of this postulate.

The study of the relationship between educational inclusion and the mental well-being of students is a novel approach in pedagogy, taking into account the existing scarcity of literature addressing this issue. The collected data has significant practical value for institutions implementing inclusion programs, enabling them to benefit from existing experience and eliminate difficulties associated with a novel school inclusion program for SEN children.

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