Organization of Distance Learning in the Ukrainian Practice of Inclusive Education

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Abstract. **This paper presents the issues of distance education, basic research on inclusive education and the current need for teacher training. The sudden «jump» from full-time distance learning has created a «collapse» in terms of inclusion. That is why our study considered: difficulties formation of inclusion and non-compliance and opportunities for all participants in the educational process; narrow orientation subjects and the lack of real practice for working with children with disabilities in the proposed training program for teachers; mismatch legal requirements and opportunities for schools to provide socialization and getting proper education of children with disabilities.**

During the collection and analysis of information, we used remote research methods, which included survey using Google forms; online meetings and interviews with teachers and teacher assistants; online discussions on the specifics of the proposed content and its adaptation to the needs of the inclusive class and for children with disabilities.

According to the results of our research, we found some contradictions between the requirements for the creation of an inclusive educational space, the forms offered for distance learning, and the opportunities of participants in the learning process. It is possible to design and develop specialized courses for teachers working with children with disabilities.

Keywords: children with disabilities, distance education, inclusive education, teacher training.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is worth noting that in contrast to Ukraine, global trends in the widespread use and implementation of distance education have been vividly discussed and tested since 1728 as «education by mail» [1] and since the 1960s as «e-learning» – learning through computers [2].

Thus, distance learning was in many cases seen as such, which was carried out with the help of postal communication or self-study with two sessions during the semester - one for receiving information and practice («lecture») and the other for examinations, which is practiced in Ukraine until now. But, we are more interested in a new type of distance education, which has become popular and is an effective substitute for the classroom-tutorial system of school education during the quarantine period - with the use of computer technology and the Internet.

According to our observations and taking into account the technological capabilities of Ukrainians and their computer competence in using information and communication technologies (ICT) and the Internet in Ukraine, the process of active involvement of educators in online education began in 2013-2014. At that time,

institutions of higher education began to practice working in the Moodle database [3, 4, 5], although it is still less «popular». The next step towards the implementation of the new format of distance education was the dissemination of information about the Coursera online platform created in 2012 through mass media and social networks. It became available in Ukraine in 2013. Also, the online platform of massively open interactive courses «EdX», founded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, which has been available in Ukraine since 2014.

Moreover, during the same period, Ukrainian specialists implemented the Prometheus project, which is still working with Ukrainian content. Also, a Ukrainian platform «EdEra» was created in 2014, but its popularity grew only in 2018 when the Ministry of Education and Science 'launched' its programs to prepare for external independent evaluation of students and to raise the qualification of teachers in accordance with the primary school reform and the transition to the «New Ukrainian School». The «Modern Stage» of 2018, which gave rise to an active educational propaganda - the activity of the platforms «To the Lesson» and «Vseosvita», which gave the possibility of interaction between teachers and specialists, and with students.

Turning to the issues of inclusive education in Ukraine until 2019 and afterwards, the education sector was faced with the problem of updating the system of educational services and the transition to distance learning, just like in the rest of the world. This has led to a series of «disadvantages», which required a quick response. Among these, the most serious were (according to our observations):

•   The transitional period in accordance with the established educational reforms and the existence of three parallel educational «innovations» in school practice;

•   The lack of technical capacity on the part of both education providers (educational institutions, teachers and specialists) and the receiving side (pupils, students);

•   The lack of ICT competence among some teachers and trainers, which made communication difficult and often reduced the teaching process to posting by e-mail;

•   The low motivation of the recipients of educational services due to the lack of a «herd mentality», the perceived «technical advantage» over teachers and the lack of well-formed skills in self-awareness, critical thinking and information retrieval.

Thus, while the practice of distance education in the world had positive trends, the transition to this form of educational services in Ukraine was opposed by both: educators and parents of children and young people enrolled in education. Inclusion in general was also an important issue, as the quarantine period did not simply disrupt the social contacts of children with disabilities, but in some cases deprived them of the opportunity to receive any social, rehabilitation or correctional services. Therefore, the establishment of inclusive education during

this period often gave priority to education and led to the 'neglect' of children's socialization.

Thus, the ***purpose*** of our research is to analyse the main provisions necessary for the quality implementation of distance and inclusive education, as well as the challenges in the sphere of their interaction. Since both forms of educational process organization are quite new and require search and presentation of modern inclusive practices in Ukraine, preparation for their implementation and integration into the process of distance education in practice, taking into account the needs of all participants in the educational process.

Therefore, while working on this topic, we identified the following tasks, some of which are presented in this review:

•   to identify difficulties in the formation of an inclusive educational environment in Ukraine, which will allow further revision of controversial issues and provide better opportunities for children with special educational needs in the process of socialization», for which this form of interaction in the educational process is provided;

•   to explore the availability of teacher training programmes that could provide the necessary knowledge in narrowly oriented subjects, as well as the skills to work in a distance learning format in an inclusive educational environment. This, in turn, was caused by a lack of real practice in working with children with special educational needs because of quarantine restrictions;

•   to explore the needs and capacities of schools in providing inclusive education, in particular through the relationship between legal requirements, the provision of socialisation in school and the provision of appropriate education for children with special educational needs through distance inclusive education.

In particular, in this review, we present the results of the second strand of our research on teacher education programmes.

II.   MATERIALS AND METHODS

From 2019 to 2020, we used data and literature review as well as data from the experiment to collect and analyse information. Thus, in the preparatory phase, we identified the main challenges of distance and inclusive education and the need to regulate their interaction, which was presented in the introductory section. Further, we came to the need to obtain data experimentally, which was realized in a distance format on the basis of the project of interaction with the participants of training in the Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi State Pedagogical University, specialization «Inclusive Education». The solution of the tasks of this research was conditionally divided into three stages with the expansion of the audience:

•   Thus, in the first stage we involved 64 students of the Valentina Voloshyna Faculty of Preschool and Primary Education. Part of the respondents, 42 were primary

school teachers and teaching assistants with an additional qualification in Inclusive Education and 22 were students studying or completing their first degree (7 were full-time students and the remaining 15 were part-time in-service students). So, all 64 respondents were enrolled in the courses «Teaching in an Inclusive Environment» and «Pedagogical Technologies of Inclusive Education» in 2019 and 2020, which allowed us to identify the needs for adapting the content of the educational process to the needs of the inclusive classroom and for children with special educational needs. In order to achieve the aim and objectives of this study, we used a discussion-style interview with the participants;

• In the second stage we used the same groups of students after 4 months of training to work with the questionnaire «Anketuvannia vchyteliv» (2020) [6], which gave us an opportunity to analyse teacher training issues presented in this article;

• The third phase involved interaction with the previously involved participants in the project (64 respondents, participation in the survey), participants in the Weber messenger group (7168 participants, participation in the survey) and participants in the focus group on «Inclusion in Education» (20 participants, participation in the survey).

In this article, we present some of the results of questionnaires and discussions that relate directly to the issues of preparing teachers to work in inclusive distance learning and the available online materials on this topic.

III.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To determine the level of awareness of educational staff about the organisation and implementation of inclusive education, we conducted a Google Forms survey on the main professional development offers on open platforms.

In total, there are three platforms that are most often used by primary school teachers in Ukraine («To the Lesson» [7], «Vseosvitaya» [8] and «EdEra» [9, 10, 11, 12]), though there are many more platforms available on the Internet as we mentioned earlier. So, choosing the ones that have been working at the Ukrainian educational sector for quite some time, we found that two of them have English content translated into Ukrainian and / or Russian language: «Prometeus» [13], «Coursera» [14] and one more «EDX» [15], which has only English content. It turned out that there are not so many professional development programs in the field of inclusive education (Table 1). Only 102 courses, of which 7.8% are in English and 3.9% have Russian-language content, which is not conducive to a wide use of this information due to the low language competence of the users (according to the respondents). And, just as importantly - only 5.9% of them are completely free of charge, while others have conditionally free access to the viewer with paid certification. Regardless of this, among the identified paid platforms, most practitioners often use the «To the Lesson» and the «Vseosvita» Web platforms.

Table 1: Online professional development platforms for teachers available in Ukraine

Platforms	Number of training courses for inclusive education, pcs.	Number of webinars for training for inclusive education, pcs.	Language	Cost of courses	Note
To the Lesson	0	42	UA	Paid / conditionally free of charge	
Vseosvita	23	19	UA	Paid / conditionally free of charge	
EdEra	4	0	UA	Free	Two courses only partly concern inclusive education
Prometeus	2	0	UA	Free	Two courses are only partly concerned with the organisation of inclusive education
Coursera	8	0	UK / RU	Paid / conditionally free of charge	Only four courses are translated in Russian
EDX	4	0	UK	Paid / conditionally free of charge	

At the same time, we added to the questionnaire the questions about taking courses on the EdEra platform, which were recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. According to the recommendations and the need to form social acceptance of inclusive education by teachers, we selected the following courses for the survey: «Working of primary school teachers with children with special educational needs», «Online course for primary school teachers» (module 6), «Participation of parents in the organisation of inclusive education», «Non-discriminatory approach to learning» (Fig.1). The survey results showed that most of the practicing teachers (84%) followed the Ministry's guidelines by completing the Working of primary school teachers with children with special educational needs course, and 16% of them, including 3 practitioners and 7 students, are currently in the process of the course evaluation.
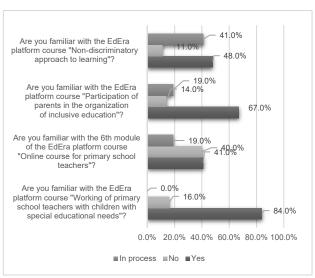
Fig. 1. Analysis of respondents' awareness of EdEra content.

We find it striking that another course recommended by the Ministry of Education and Science – «Online course for primary school teachers», where only the 6th module covers the subject of inclusive education, was evaluated by only 41% of the respondents. On the other hand, the course is recommended and necessary for teachers who are beginning to work in the New Ukrainian School system. That is why there is such a high percentage of those who are not aware of the course (40%).

We recommended the other two courses. So, the number of those who have read them varies greatly. However, while 86% of students did not encounter any problems with the Participation of parents in the organisation of inclusive education and its relation to the issues raised at our meetings - of whom 67% completed the course and 19% were still in the process. The course's Non-discriminatory approach to learning was widely debated. This was also reflected in the indicators: 48% were familiarized and taking into account the results of discussion during the online meeting, we received another 41% of those who began to get acquainted with the course.

Also, it should be noted that of the courses and webinars offered on all Ukrainian platforms, only a few webinars had a practical orientation and were related to the organisation of distance education. It is: «Electronic educational game resources are new opportunities for Inclusive Education», «Online services for the organisation of distance and blended learning for children with SEN», «How to organise effective speech therapy work in the conditions of distance learning», «Features of distance learning of children with special educational needs».

This leads us to believe that the problems we identified in the first stage of our research affect the formulation of educational content and the restructuring of the educational process. In particular, the reform of the education system and the lack of clear guidelines for distance learning in inclusive classes.

We thought it was important to determine the motivation of the teachers' assistants to receive information about the organisation and implementation of inclusive classroom activities. So, we asked our respondents (64 persons) to fill in a questionnaire on the needs of practitioners and theorists in inclusive education. We also asked this questionnaire to be filled in by professionals who are members of the Ukrainian group «Teacher's Assistant Ukraine» (7168 persons) via Viber messenger. The questionnaire could help to identify the main issues that need to be presented adequately to the general public and on the basis of which appropriate courses to improve the qualifications of teachers should be developed. The questionnaire was anonymous and contained only nine items. However, from the time of publication of the proposal for completion we received only five responses, which in itself showed the «low» efficiency of surveying the audience through groups in various messengers.

It also showed the low motivation of our respondents we met during the training course. A month after the questionnaire was published, we were able to ask our respondents about the completion of the questionnaire and the information it contained during the online session. Among the responses we can mention the following.

"I did not have time to answer, but we looked at all the questions in class" (respondent 15).

"It was not for evaluation, so I decided to give priority to other tasks" (respondent 22).

"Everything I am interested in, I find on the Internet or ask my colleagues" (respondent 35).

Thus, we were able to evaluate both the method of information transmission and the motivational decisions of the main part of the respondents. It should also be noted that thanks to the responses of our colleagues to this questionnaire, we were able to get acquainted with the request for information from specialized specialists - a speech therapist, two defectologists, educators and a social worker. It should be noted that the questions corresponded to the scope of each specialist's work. While the speech therapist and defectologist were interested in the development and quality management of the individual development programme and other support documentation, the educator and social worker were interested in the following issues:

"Developmental tasks for children with special educational needs" (respondent educator),

"Written timetable, as a basis for activities, manuals for nosology" (social worker respondent).

Currently, all of the courses and webinars offered on online platforms provide theoretical aspects about the law and the characteristics of children with special needs. At the same time, it is very difficult to find materials or practices for applications of record keeping and working methods, which can be easily implemented in a typical primary school lesson or a visual explanation of how to use a particular technique, device or adapted materials. The problem in this case is also due to the fact that each local education department and methodology office create and approve «their» materials on the basis of the legislation, which once again confirms the inadequate implementation

of reforms at the local level. This in turn complicates the process of mutual adaptation of a child with special educational needs to the school and, consequently, the school and the participants in the educational process to the child.

IV. DISCUSSION

At the same time, if we turn to the issue of problems that arose in the process of transition to distance education, which we voiced in the introductory part, we can note that the issue of low motivation can be «fought» during training by re-crediting online courses as independent work of students, or by holding open debates on issues covered in the proposed courses, in particular on their practical application in offline learning, distance education or mixed form, or on the application of examples and theory to work with children with SEN and organisation of

At the same time, other positions are questionable and can be attributed to the debatable issues of further development of the education sector in Ukraine due to the closeness of the educational system to external observation, the lack of quality content created by teachers themselves and presenting work directly with children, experience in implementing inclusive education in a regular classroom or a classroom working under the NUS programme.

For us, this component of organising distance education and training for future specialists through familiarisation with practical advice and visualisation of «pedagogical situations» rather than theoretical courses is an important part of supervision and experience exchange. However, whether due to the «personal data law» or the low level of proficiency in the technologies currently available for creating video messages and stories, including the ability to promote them on the Internet (insufficient CEO potential and description of the presented experience in video format), the lack of video recording skills and high-quality content design creates a «pedagogical vacuum» for improving the practice of both teacher training and improving methods, forms, techniques through the exchange of experience in an open format, which we can observe in the English-speaking world.

In addition, when we had the opportunity to conduct a preliminary survey of teachers on the issue of video interviews for educational purposes, only three of the 46 teachers surveyed agreed to participate, one of whom agreed to a video interview and the other two to a voice recording.

This raises even more questions about the organisation of the educational process, which, in our opinion, are not only worthy of attention, but should be addressed from the perspective of the teacher, school, and management; the formation of a remote educational space and the inclusion of each child in the educational process; parents who choose the format and «mentor» of the educational process for their child; and, most importantly, from the perspective of the child with or without special educational needs. And although this part of the «reflections» and the results of observations and «communication» may lead to an even

greater discussion, we have to return to the part that was «central» to this research.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we analyzed weaknesses in the training and professional development of teachers and teaching assistants to work in inclusive education space and developed additional specialized courses for teachers; developed a list of online platforms and professional development courses for self-study by motivated teachers and teaching assistants.

We believe that all these should contribute to the success of innovative approaches to working with children with special educational needs in inclusive practice, their peers in both inclusive classroom and distance education settings, regardless of the challenges and dynamics of today's world.

All this does not exclude the need to consider for further work such issues as the psychological and pedagogical characteristics of children according to their nosology offered by inclusive resource centres; how to maintain school records, their open and closed information to improve the quality of psychological and pedagogical support for all children (including normotypical) in the distance inclusive education; practical forms and methods of work with children of this or other categories in classroom-based system, NUS and distance learning.

It is worth noting that against the background of the existing challenges, we continue to consider the issues outlined at the beginning of this article and to study the results of the implementation of updated programs and various forms of practice-oriented information, which will be presented in our next studies.

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