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**Ukrainian secondary school students' attitudes toward inclusive education:
a regional study of peer interactions**

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Abstract. Aim. *This study aims to assess the attitudes, interactions, and readiness of Ukrainian secondary school students for inclusive education with peers who have special educational needs, addressing the critical gap in empirical data about Ukrainian students' perspectives on inclusion. Methods.* *An extensive survey was conducted using Google Forms targeting 327 secondary school students from 15 educational institutions in the Lubny district of the Poltava region, Ukraine, during martial law conditions. The majority of respondents were 15-16 years old. The survey covered classroom composition, interaction frequency, comfort levels, preferred*



activities, emotional responses, perceived barriers, and suggestions for improving relationships. **Results.** Findings reveal significant variations in inclusive education experiences. Regarding classroom composition, 42.5% of students do not have peers with special educational needs, 25.5% do have them, and 25.9% are unaware of their presence. Interaction frequency shows 47.1% rarely interact with peers with special needs, while 25.1% never engage with them. However, 77.8% express willingness to participate in inclusive activities, with school celebrations most popular (26.8%). When encountering peers with special needs, 43.3% feel a desire to help, while 50.8% would treat them like any other classmate. Main barriers include not knowing how to communicate (32%), lack of interest (28.3%), and fear of doing something wrong (22.7%). Students identify joint activities (42.3%) as primary solutions for improving relationships. **Conclusions.** Ukrainian secondary school students demonstrate predominantly positive attitudes toward inclusive education, with strong natural empathy and supportive instincts toward peers with special educational needs. The study reveals a critical gap between positive intentions and actual interaction patterns, with communication uncertainty emerging as the primary obstacle. This gap highlights the need for practical guidance and training. The research concludes that Ukrainian secondary school students show encouraging readiness for inclusive education, but this potential requires systematic development through enhanced communication training, increased joint activities, and structured peer support programs to bridge the gap between positive attitudes and confident interaction skills.

Keywords: special educational needs, educational inclusion, disability attitudes, peer acceptance, student interactions, inclusive culture, school integration, inclusive practices, regional research, disability awareness.



**Ставлення українських школярів до інклюзивної освіти:
регіональне дослідження взаємодії з однолітками**

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***Мета.** Це дослідження має на меті оцінити ставлення, взаємодію та готовність учнів українських середніх шкіл до інклюзивної освіти з однолітками, які мають особливі освітні потреби, заповнюючи критичну прогалину в емпіричних даних про погляди українських учнів на інклюзію. **Методи.** Було проведено масштабне опитування за допомогою Google Forms, охопивши 327 учнів середніх шкіл з 15 навчальних закладів Лубенського району Полтавської області України під час дії воєнного стану. Більшість респондентів були віком 15-16 років. Опитування охоплювало склад класу, частоту взаємодії, рівень комфорту, бажані види діяльності, емоційні реакції, сприйняті бар'єри та пропозиції щодо покращення стосунків. **Результати.** Дослідження виявляє значні відмінності в досвіді інклюзивної освіти. Щодо складу класу, 42,5% учнів не мають однолітків з особливими освітніми потребами, 25,5% мають їх, а 25,9% не знають про їхню присутність. Частота взаємодії показує, що 47,1%*



рідко взаємодіють з однолітками з особливими потребами, тоді як 25,1% ніколи з ними не спілкуються. Однак 77,8% висловлюють готовність брати участь в інклюзивних заходах, причому шкільні свята є найпопулярнішими (26,8%). Зустрічаючи однолітків з особливими потребами, 43,3% відчують бажання допомогти, тоді як 50,8% поставилися б до них як до будь-якого іншого однокласника. Основні бар'єри включають незнання, як спілкуватися (32%), відсутність інтересу (28,3%) та страх зробити щось не так (22,7%). Учні визначають спільну діяльність (42,3%) як основні способи покращення стосунків. **Висновки.** Українські учні середніх шкіл демонструють сильну природну емпатію, переважно позитивне ставлення до інклюзивної освіти та готовність підтримувати однолітків з особливими освітніми потребами. Дослідження виявляє критичний розрив між позитивними намірами та фактичними моделями взаємодії, причому невизначеність у спілкуванні виступає основною перешкодою. Цей розрив підкреслює необхідність практичного керівництва та навчання. Дослідження робить висновок, що українські учні середніх шкіл демонструють обнадійливу готовність до інклюзивної освіти, але цей потенціал вимагає систематичного розвитку шляхом посиленого навчання комунікації, збільшення спільної діяльності та структурованих програм підтримки однолітків, щоб подолати розрив між позитивним ставленням та впевненими навичками взаємодії.

Ключові слова: особливі освітні потреби, інклюзія в освіті, ставлення до людей з інвалідністю, прийняття однолітків, взаємодія учнів, інклюзивна культура, шкільна інтеграція, інклюзивні практики, регіональні дослідження, обізнаність щодо інвалідності.

Problem statement. Inclusive education is a key indicator of a country's social development and its commitment to ensuring equality for all citizens. Ukraine began



its journey toward inclusive educational environments with the approval of the development concept in 2010, aimed at ensuring constitutional rights for children with special needs and implementing international practices in general education institutions [1].

Ukraine has demonstrated substantial progress in transforming its educational system over the past fifteen years. In 2010, only 45% of the 129,000 children with special educational needs were integrated into general education institutions. By January 2025, current statistics show that 47,610 students with special educational needs are studying in 33,397 inclusive classes of general secondary education institutions, with an additional 15,297 children enrolled in 7,658 inclusive groups in preschool education institutions [2].

However, Ukrainian researchers have identified persistent systemic challenges, including insufficient financing, lack of qualified specialists, architectural inaccessibility, and other implementation barriers. These challenges are particularly pronounced in regional contexts where resource distribution, specialist availability, and community readiness vary significantly from urban centres.

While statistical integration represents progress, the success of inclusive education ultimately depends on the quality of peer relationships and social acceptance within classrooms. Students' attitudes, comfort levels, and willingness to interact with peers who have special educational needs serve as critical indicators of genuine inclusion beyond mere physical placement in mainstream settings. Understanding student perspectives is essential because positive peer attitudes and meaningful social interactions are fundamental prerequisites for creating a supportive, inclusive culture that facilitates academic and social success for all students.

The examination of inclusive education effectiveness requires understanding how national policies translate into meaningful peer interactions and classroom experiences. Research in specific educational contexts, such as the Lubny district of



the Poltava region, provides valuable insights into how inclusive education functions at the grassroots level, where success depends fundamentally on the authentic acceptance and engagement of students themselves.

Analysis of the latest research and publications. Recent empirical evidence from across various countries consistently demonstrates that secondary school students without disabilities generally maintain neutral-to-positive attitudes toward the inclusion of peers with special educational needs (SEN). Across the late 2010s and early 2020s, most quantitative surveys report encouraging dispositions among adolescents without disabilities. Strnadova, Potmesil, and Potmesilova conducted a comprehensive survey of 1,201 pupils aged 11–16 and found that 67% supported inclusive schooling and expressed willingness to help classmates with special educational needs. These findings demonstrate not merely baseline acceptance but active support for inclusive practices among the majority of students [3].

The encouraging nature of these attitudes extends beyond simple tolerance to meaningful acceptance. In their mixed-methods investigation, Gökbulut et al. employed both student drawings and acceptance-scale scores to examine peer perceptions. Their analysis revealed that most typically developing students portrayed peers with SEN as “ordinary friends” who readily participate in common activities. Students often did not perceive their SEN peers as fundamentally different from other friends, suggesting a natural integration of diverse abilities within adolescent social frameworks [4].

These positive attitudes carry significant implications beyond mere social pleasantries. Poikola et al. demonstrate that when students view peers with disabilities positively, this correlates with more frequent helping behaviour and social acceptance in classroom activities [5]. The connection between attitudes and behaviour underscores why understanding and improving student attitudes is crucial for achieving genuine peer integration in secondary educational settings. The research by Van Steen



and Wilson [6] showed that attitudes towards inclusion are the result of a complex interplay of demographic and cultural factors, which offers a renewed basis for intervention research into improving educational opportunities for children around the world.

Gender consistently emerges as a significant moderator of attitudes toward inclusion. Girls display higher empathy levels and demonstrate a stronger inclination to interact with peers who have disabilities compared to their male counterparts. The study by Arslantaş, Pürsün and Aydoğmuş, which analysed a sample of 2,101 students, corroborated this trend and additionally showed that younger cohorts are generally more positive than older ones—probably because stereotypes accumulate over time [7]. This gender differential is frequently attributed to higher empathy levels observed in female adolescents, as well as lower social dominance orientation, factors which correlate strongly with pro-inclusion attitudes as documented by Navarro-Mateu et al. [8].

Age represents another important demographic factor, with younger cohorts generally expressing more positive attitudes than older students. This pattern likely reflects the accumulation of stereotypes over time, as negative perceptions and social biases become more entrenched during adolescent development. Poikola et al. suggest that younger secondary students maintain slightly more accepting attitudes than older teenagers, potentially because they have more recent experience in inclusive elementary settings or because negative stereotypes have not yet solidified.

Student comfort levels vary significantly depending on the type of disability presented by their peers. A consistent pattern emerges across multiple studies showing that comfort levels are highest when interacting with peers who have mild physical or sensory impairments and lowest for those with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorders. The scoping review of 62 studies by Poikola, Kärnä, and Hakalehto



documents this pattern extensively, noting that uncertainty and discomfort are particularly marked in relation to intellectual disabilities [9].

Strnadova and colleagues found that Czech adolescents were most uncertain or uneasy about interacting with classmates with intellectual disabilities, even though they expressed comfort with other disability types. Similarly, autism spectrum disorders often elicit the least positive inclusion attitudes among students, largely due to peers' misconceptions or limited understanding of these conditions [10]. These findings indicate that "inclusion" is not a monolithic experience for students, who may welcome some peers while feeling less prepared to interact with others, pointing to a clear need for disability-specific awareness and preparation efforts.

While inclusive education policy often assumes that simply placing students together will naturally nurture acceptance, research provides important qualifications to this assumption. Pozas and Letzel-Alt demonstrated in their study of Mexican lower-secondary schools that simple exposure to a classmate with SEN does not automatically improve attitudes toward inclusion. What proves essential is the quality of contact — specifically, whether students form genuine friendships or engage in positive, meaningful interactions with their SEN peers [11].

This principle aligns closely with established contact theory and finds support across multiple studies. Genuine, positive interaction through friendship formation, cooperative projects, and shared extracurricular activities consistently predicts more favourable perceptions of inclusion. Conversely, superficial or negative encounters can leave attitudes unchanged or potentially worsen them. The research by Poikola et al. indicates that prior friendships with students with disabilities often predict higher acceptance levels, while challenging behaviours exhibited by close friends with disabilities can negatively influence a student's overall view of inclusion, likely because difficult interactions reinforce stigmatising perceptions.



Individual characteristics play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward inclusion. Students' self-confidence and empathy levels emerge as particularly influential factors. Navarro-Mateu et al. report that education students with higher empathy scores consistently held more favourable inclusion attitudes. Similarly, adolescents' self-efficacy beliefs — their confidence in their ability to engage appropriately with diverse peers — significantly predict positive attitudes toward including classmates with disabilities [12]. This suggests a reciprocal relationship where students who feel capable of interacting appropriately approach inclusion more positively, creating a virtuous cycle of confidence and acceptance.

Environmental factors within the school context prove equally important. Schwab, Sharma, and Loreman validated the Inclusion Climate Scale and demonstrated that perceived teacher support and an emotionally safe classroom climate significantly bolster student acceptance of inclusion. Their research revealed two key factors: Teacher Support and Care, and Emotional Experience, with the scale demonstrating satisfactory reliability and validity for measuring inclusive classroom climates [13].

The systematic review by Subban et al. further highlights teacher self-efficacy as a pivotal environmental driver, showing that confident teachers model inclusive behaviours that students readily adopt. Schools that actively promote a culture of acceptance through clear anti-bullying policies, awareness events, and structured, inclusive activities tend to see more positive peer attitudes. In contrast, institutional cultures that implicitly tolerate exclusion or maintain low expectations for SEN students can negatively influence student attitudes toward inclusion [14].

Empirical evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of well-designed interventions in improving student attitudes toward inclusion. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Nazlı Sıla Yerliyurt Günay, Şenel Elaldı, and Mehtap Çifçi covering 20 intervention studies reported a large overall effect size (Hedges $g \approx 1.33$) for attitude change following targeted inclusive interventions. This meta-analytic evidence



provides robust support for the practical implementation of structured inclusive experiences [15].

Unified sports programmes, where students with and without disabilities participate on the same teams, consistently yield some of the strongest attitude improvements. Disability-awareness curricula, such as Paralympic School Day activities and simulation exercises, demonstrate modest but positive short-term effects on student attitudes. Long-term cooperative projects that facilitate meaningful interaction between students with and without disabilities also produce significant and sustained improvements in peer acceptance and readiness to interact.

Despite the progress in research, there remain notable gaps and unresolved issues regarding secondary students' attitudes toward inclusion and their preparedness to interact with peers with disabilities. One prominent gap is uneven empirical coverage across regions and cultures. A substantial portion of the recent studies come from Europe, North America, or Australia, whereas there is relatively sparse literature focusing on student attitudes in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, or Latin America, with a few exceptions such as Pozas and Letzel-Alt's study [16].

Although empirical data from Ukraine remain limited compared to other international contexts, recent evidence indicates an encouraging trajectory for inclusive education attitudes. Diachenko et al. analysed legislative and ethical developments within the Ukrainian educational system and reported that approximately three-quarters of the general public endorse inclusive schooling practices. This level of public support provides a favourable foundation for implementing inclusive policies at the school level [17].

Recent comprehensive research by Ukrainian scholars has provided deeper insights into the systemic challenges facing inclusive education implementation. Biliuk et al. conducted an extensive study involving 157 specialists and parents of children with special educational needs, revealing critical barriers that persist in the Ukrainian



educational system. Their research identified five fundamental obstacles: insufficient financing, lack of qualified specialists, architectural inaccessibility, stereotypical thinking patterns, and inadequate administrative support. These findings underscore the complexity of transforming educational infrastructure while simultaneously addressing deeply rooted societal attitudes toward disability and inclusion [18].

However, the Ukrainian context presents unique challenges that must be considered. Kostenko et al. found that heightened war-related anxiety can indirectly hamper peer acceptance of students with SEN, underscoring the critical need for comprehensive psychosocial support within educational settings [19]. Despite these challenges, according to a 2024 UNICEF-Ukraine brief, national campaigns are presently targeting inclusion for approximately 160,000 children with disabilities, and public endorsement of the educational reforms stands at approximately 75% [20].

Previously unsolved parts of the overall problem. Despite substantial progress in international and Ukrainian research on student attitudes toward inclusive education, several critical gaps remain unaddressed, particularly within the Ukrainian educational context. Most significantly, there exists a pronounced deficit in empirical data about how Ukrainian secondary school students actually experience and perceive inclusive education in practice, rather than theoretical policy frameworks.

A particularly significant gap exists in understanding the practical barriers that prevent positive attitudes from translating into meaningful peer interactions.

The regional variation in inclusive education implementation across Ukraine remains insufficiently documented. Rural and semi-urban educational contexts, in particular, have received minimal research attention, despite serving substantial populations of students with special educational needs. The Poltava region represents an understudied yet demographically significant educational environment where inclusive practices face distinct challenges.



Furthermore, existing studies inadequately address the perspective of typically developing students as active agents in inclusive environments. Most research focuses on outcomes for students with special educational needs or teacher experiences, while the voices, concerns, and suggestions of mainstream students remain largely unexplored. This gap is particularly problematic given that successful inclusion depends heavily on peer acceptance and interaction quality.

These research gaps collectively justify the need for a comprehensive empirical investigation of Ukrainian secondary school students' attitudes, interactions, and readiness for inclusive education, particularly in understudied regional contexts where policy implementation faces unique challenges and opportunities.

Aims of study. The aim of our study is to assess Ukrainian secondary school students' attitudes, interactions, and readiness for inclusive education with peers who have special educational needs. The study seeks to investigate the frequency and quality of current peer interactions, examine students' comfort levels and emotional responses during these interactions, and evaluate their willingness to participate in inclusive school activities and support mechanisms.

The relevance of the tasks set is due to the need for comprehensive understanding of student attitudes toward inclusion in the Ukrainian educational context, particularly given the country's significant progress in inclusive education implementation from 2010 to 2025 and the current integration of 47,610 students with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms [21]. This research addresses the critical gap in empirical data about Ukrainian students' perspectives on inclusion, which is essential for developing effective strategies to enhance peer relationships, reduce barriers to interaction, and create more supportive, inclusive learning environments that align with Ukraine's commitment to ensuring constitutional rights and educational opportunities for all children.



Primary research material. In the context of martial law, ensuring the rights of people with special educational needs remains one of the priorities of the state's educational policy. To gain a deeper understanding of students' attitudes and awareness of inclusive education in the hinterland of Ukraine, we conducted an extensive survey targeting a diverse group of high-school and middle-school students at 15 educational institutions in the Lubny district of the Poltava region. Utilising Google Forms, this survey aimed to cover various aspects of the impact of inclusive education on different sides of students' lives and their attitudes toward these changes. A total of three hundred twenty-seven respondents participated in the anonymous survey. The majority of respondents were 15-16 years old, followed by a smaller number of 13-14-year-old students.

Respondents were asked if they had students with special needs in their class. The results revealed significant variations in inclusive education experiences: 145 (42.5%) indicated that they do not have them; 82 (25.5%) reported that they do; 83 (25.9%) didn't know if they had students with special needs in their class; 11 (3.4%) used to have such students in their class. This finding is particularly noteworthy as it indicates that over one-quarter of students (25.9%) are unaware of their SEN peers' presence, suggesting either effective integration where differences are not immediately apparent, or insufficient awareness programs. The relatively high percentage of students without SEN classmates (42.5%) reflects the ongoing regional challenges in inclusive education implementation.

To the question of how often students interact with peers who have special needs, 152 (47.1%) indicated that they do it rarely; 81 (25.1%) reported that they never do it; 40 (12.4%) do it daily; 21 (6.5%) interact only a few times a week; 29 (9%) positively mentioned that they have friends with special needs. The results show that most students have limited interaction with peers with special needs, with nearly 72% rarely or never engaging with them, while only 21.4% maintain regular contact. This pattern



contrasts sharply with international findings where proximity typically increases interaction frequency [11], suggesting that mere physical inclusion in Ukrainian classrooms has not yet translated into meaningful social integration.

In a survey of 322 participants regarding feelings of discomfort during interaction with students with special needs 93 (28.9%) reported that they didn't think about it; 88 (27.3%) shared their indifference to a person's issues; 76 (23.6%) positively mentioned that they feel comfortable during interaction; 57 (17.7%) indicated their slight discomfort; 8 (2.5%) reported definite discomfort. The combined comfort levels (23.6%) and neutral attitudes (56.2%) align with international research showing that most typically developing students maintain neutral-to-positive attitudes toward inclusion [3, 4]. However, the 20.2% experiencing some level of discomfort indicates room for improvement through targeted awareness interventions.

In the survey, participants were asked which school activities they would like to participate in together with students who have special needs. Out of 321 respondents, 86 (26.8%) would be happy to take part in school celebrations. By a small margin, 73 (22.7%) would choose creative workshops as an inclusive activity; 71 (22.1%) indicated that they wouldn't like to participate at all; 70 (21.8%) would like to take part in sports activities; 21 (6.5%) would choose joint projects. The survey shows that most participants support inclusive activities, with 72.9% open to school celebrations, creative workshops, sports, or joint projects. However, 22.1% prefer not to participate, highlighting a need for further inclusion efforts.

The survey results indicate strong support for inclusive activities among participants, with 77.8% expressing willingness to engage with students with special needs through various school activities, including celebrations 86 (26.8%), creative workshops 71 (22.7%), sports activities 70 (21.8%), and joint projects 21 (6.5%). This finding significantly exceeds the 67% support rate reported by Strnadova et al. in their study of Czech students [3], suggesting that Ukrainian students demonstrate even



higher acceptance levels. However, it's important to note that a significant minority (22.1%) stated they would prefer not to participate in any inclusive activities, suggesting that while the majority is open to inclusion, there remains a need for further awareness, education, and inclusion initiatives to address resistance and promote greater participation across the entire student body.

A critical finding emerges when comparing willingness to participate (77.8%) with actual interaction frequency (72.1% rarely or never interact). This substantial gap mirrors the intention-behaviour discrepancy documented in international literature [5, 11] and suggests that positive attitudes alone are insufficient without structured opportunities and guidance for meaningful peer interaction.

Talking about students' feelings when they see/meet students with special needs also gives us a broad understanding of how inclusion is perceived. Out of 319 respondents, 138 (43.3%) indicated that they feel desire to help; 84 (26.3%) reported that they have fear of doing something wrong; 46 (14.4%) feel indifference; 36 (11.3%) feel curiosity, and only 15 (4.7%) mentioned their discomfort. These predominantly positive emotional responses (43.3% desire to help, 11.3% curiosity) align with research by Gökbulut et al., who found that most typically developing students view SEN peers as "ordinary friends" [4]. The relatively low discomfort levels (4.7%) compare favorably with international benchmarks and suggest a naturally empathetic disposition among Ukrainian adolescents.

Regarding reactions when a new student with special needs joins their class, out of 321 respondents, 163 (50.8%) indicated that they would treat them like any other classmate; 82 (25.5%) would offer their help and friendship; 59 (18.4%) didn't know; 11 (3.4%) would try to avoid them; 6 (1.9%) reported that they would observe from a distance. The combined positive responses (76.3% would treat normally or offer help) demonstrate encouraging peer acceptance levels. The small percentage expressing avoidance (5.3%) falls within typical ranges observed in international studies [7, 8],



while the 18.4% uncertainty indicates potential for improvement through guidance programs.

In response to whether they have any ideas why some students choose to avoid interacting with peers with special needs, the survey participants' answers were as follows: 103 (32%) indicated that they don't know how to communicate; 91 (28.3%) reported that they're not interested; 73 (22.7%) suggested that that's because of fear of doing something wrong; 23 (7.1%) think that the reason is in prejudices; 32 (9.9%) saw the problem in shyness. Communication uncertainty (32%) emerges as the primary barrier, consistent with international research identifying knowledge gaps as key obstacles to inclusion [9, 10]. The combination of communication uncertainty (32%) and fear of mistakes (22.7%) accounts for over half of the perceived barriers, suggesting that practical communication training could significantly improve peer interactions.

Respondents were then asked if they wanted to learn more about different types of disabilities and special needs. The majority of users, 136 (42.4%), indicated positively but only if this learning is presented in an interesting way; 68 (21.2%) reported that they don't need this; 50 (15.6%) shared that they already know enough about this theme; 50 (15.6%) showed a positive interest and only 17 (5.3%) reported that they don't care. The 58% openness to learning (42.4% + 15.6%) demonstrates significant potential for awareness interventions, particularly when delivered through engaging formats.

Regarding information sources about special needs, out of 318 respondents, 84 (26.4%) indicated that they would choose special lessons for that; 69 (21.7%) reported that they are not interested; 66 (20.8%) would learn through games and quests; 59 (18.6%) would receive information personally from peers with special needs, and 40 (12.6%) chose learning from videos and social media. The preference for interactive learning approaches (20.8% games and quests, 18.6% direct peer contact) aligns with



research showing that experiential learning produces stronger attitude changes than traditional instruction [15].

When asked whether they would agree to become a “buddy-helper” for a student with special needs, 112 (34.8%) indicated that it would depend on the situation; 75 (23.3%) reported that maybe they would but it needs training; 65 (20.2%) positively agreed to do that; 42 (13%) didn’t know and only 28 (8.7%) indicated that it’s too difficult for them. The combined willingness (43.5% agreed or maybe with training) correlates closely with the 43.3% who expressed desire to help, suggesting internal consistency in empathetic responses and readiness for structured peer support programs.

In the survey, participants also reported their vision of what would help most to improve relationships between all students at school. Out of 319 respondents, 135 (42.3%) indicated that more joint activities would help; 61 (19.1%) reported that the solution is in joint projects and tasks; 52 (16.3%) chose special lessons about diversity; 45 (14.1%) thought that nothing needs to change and only 26 (8.2%) preferred creating support groups. The emphasis on joint activities (42.3%) and projects (19.1%) reflects understanding of contact theory principles, where positive interaction through shared goals improves intergroup relations [11].

When asked how they would rate their classmates’ readiness to interact with students who have special needs, out of 320 respondents, 115 (35.9%) indicated that it is hard to say; 75 (23.4%) reported that not everyone is ready; 58 (18.1%) mentioned that the majority is ready; 38 (11.9%) positively indicated that most are ready; with a small margin, 34 (10.6%) reported that most of the classmates are not ready. The mixed assessment of peer readiness, with 35.9% uncertainty and 30% believing most are prepared, suggests that while positive potential exists, students recognise the need for systematic development of inclusive skills across their peer groups.



These findings collectively reveal that Ukrainian secondary school students possess strong foundational attitudes toward inclusion but require structured support to transform positive intentions into confident, regular interactions with their SEN peers.

Conclusions. The survey conducted among 327 secondary school students in the Poltava region demonstrates that Ukrainian students hold predominantly positive attitudes toward inclusive education, with 77.8% expressing willingness to participate in various school activities alongside peers with special educational needs. This finding indicates a solid foundation for implementing inclusive practices in Ukrainian secondary schools.

The research reveals that students possess natural empathy and supportive instincts, with 43.3% feeling a desire to help when encountering peers with special needs, and 50.8% indicating they would treat new classmates with special educational needs like any other student. These positive attitudes suggest that Ukrainian adolescents are fundamentally receptive to inclusion and capable of forming meaningful peer relationships across ability differences.

However, the study also identifies significant barriers that prevent these positive attitudes from translating into regular interactions. Communication uncertainty emerges as the primary obstacle, with 32% of students acknowledging they don't know how to interact appropriately, and 26.3% expressing fear of doing something wrong. This gap between positive intentions and actual interaction patterns highlights the critical need for practical guidance and training.

By situating itself in the gap between attitudes and actual inclusion outcomes, the current study justifies its significance through practical impact. The ultimate goal of inclusive education is not just that students *hold* positive attitudes, but that they *act* in inclusive ways daily – forming friendships, cooperating in class, and treating each other with respect.



The students themselves recognise the solution pathway, with 42.3% identifying more joint activities as the key to improving relationships between all students. Their preference for interactive learning approaches and conditional willingness to serve as buddy-helpers demonstrates readiness for structured inclusion programs, provided appropriate support and training are available.

In conclusion, Ukrainian secondary school students show encouraging readiness for inclusive education, but this potential requires systematic development through enhanced communication training, increased joint activities, and structured peer support programs. Schools must bridge the gap between positive attitudes and confident interaction skills to fully realise the benefits of inclusive education for all students.

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