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Theoretical and methodological basis for the inclusive preschool education in the USA

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Abstract: *The study aims to highlight the theoretical and methodological aspects of inclusive education of preschool children in the United States. Methods of analysis, generalization, and systematization were utilized to research into the problem under study. Results. Inclusive practices in preschool education in the United States are formed at the intersection of federal requirements for the provision of special education (in particular, those covered in Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), federal programs (e.g., Head Start, Early Head Start), and state initiatives to develop public pre-K. It is noted that the expansion of state and federal preschool programs and the*



growing interest in approaches to learning that aim to address the needs and abilities of all children (e.g., universal instructional design) have significantly improved the development of children with special needs. The specifics of the Head Start and Early Head Start programs, which provide free support for the development and learning of children from birth to age five, are considered. The U. S. educational inclusion, based on the applied behavior analysis, its achievements and problems are considered.

Conclusions. *The theoretical analysis conducted clearly indicates that inclusive preschool education in the United States is developing within a comprehensive system of federal laws, programs, and standards. Its regulatory framework covers the rights of children with disabilities, state educational standards, and special support programs. shown that only in mainstream schools and kindergartens children with disabilities achieve maximum socialization and adaptation. The children with special needs in the country under study receive a comprehensive education and care, and thanks to the use of the applied behavior analysis, they become capable of interacting with society in the most productive ways. However, a number of issues regarding the education of children with special needs in the United States still remain relevant for educational, social, and psychological sciences.*

Keywords: *children with special needs, preschool children, U. S. educational inclusion, applied behavior analysis.*

Теоретико-методологічний базис інклюзивної дошкільної освіти в США

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Анотація: Дослідження має на меті висвітлити теоретичні та методологічні аспекти інклюзивної освіти дітей дошкільного віку в США. Для вивчення досліджуваної проблеми використано **методи** аналізу, узагальнення та систематизації. **Результати.** Інклюзивні практики в дошкільній освіті в США формуються на перетині федеральних вимог до надання спеціальної освіти (зокрема, висвітлені в Законі про освіту осіб з обмеженими можливостями), федеральних програм (з-поміж них програми *Head Start* і *Early Head Start*) та державних ініціатив щодо розвитку державної дошкільної освіти. Зазначено, що поширення державних та федеральних програм дошкільної освіти та зростаючий інтерес до підходів до навчання, які спрямовані на врахування потреб і здібностей усіх дітей (наприклад, універсальний дизайн навчання), значно покращили розвиток дітей з особливими потребами. Окреслено специфіку програм *Head Start* та *Early Head Start*, які забезпечують безкоштовну підтримку розвитку та навчання дітей від народження до п'яти років. Розглянуто освітню інклюзію в США, засновану на прикладному аналізі поведінки, її досягнення та проблеми. **Висновки.** Проведений теоретичний аналіз указує на те, що інклюзивна дошкільна освіта у США розвивається в межах комплексної системи федеральних законів, програм та стандартів. Її нормативна база охоплює права дітей з обмеженими можливостями, державні освітні стандарти та програми спеціальної підтримки. Стверджено, що лише у загальноосвітніх школах та дитячих садках діти з обмеженими можливостями досягають максимальної соціалізації та адаптації. Діти з



особливими потребами у досліджуваній країні отримують всебічну освіту та догляд, а завдяки використанню прикладного аналізу поведінки вони стають здатними взаємодіяти із суспільством найпродуктивнішими способами. Однак низка питань щодо навчання дітей з особливими потребами в США все ще залишається актуальною для освітніх, соціальних та психологічних наук.

***Ключові слова:** діти з особливими потребами, діти дошкільного віку, освітня інклюзія в США, прикладний аналіз поведінки.*

Problem statement. In modern conditions, inclusive education is a promising form of education for all children, since the inclusive educational process involves adequate organization of educational activities that meet the educational needs of each child. This significantly expands the possibilities of socialization of children, methods of their communication with society, and forms the necessary prerequisites for the inclusion of each child in society.

The level of development of modern society is characterized by the degree of citizen engagement with the issues of people with disabilities. Over the past decades, the situation for this category of people has improved significantly. Jobs are being created to accommodate their needs, attitudes toward them are changing, and their living environments are becoming more comfortable. One of the most successful countries in this regard is the United States. “Over the past century, the United States has emerged as a leader in the general globalization processes of social development as a result not only of its economic prosperity and political power, but also of progressive trends in the field of inclusive education, which are based on the teaching and upbringing of a person on the principles of spirituality, capable of discoveries in various fields of knowledge, as a critically thinking citizen and an active participant in the socio-economic system” [3, p. 27]. There, people with disabilities receive education in regular, non-specialized kindergartens and schools, work in businesses, and so on. Systematic study of the American experience of introducing inclusive education into preschool practice, identification and analysis of innovative mechanisms of



educational inclusion significantly optimizes the transformation of the Ukrainian educational system in accordance with today's needs.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Many foreign (M. Ainscow, L. Barnard-Brak, A. Chesmore, G. Dei, J. Filler, S. James-Wilson, K. Ledbetter-Cho, D. Lipsky, C. Oh-Young, M. O'Reilly, A. Reynolds, S. Ou, L. Watkins, J. Zine and others) and Ukrainian (T. Bondar, T. Kuchai, O. Mishchenko, T. Oliinyk, M. Zakharchuk, V. Zasenko and others) researchers have studied the issues of the formation of inclusive education in the USA.

Ukrainian researcher T. Bondar [1] states that inclusive education in the United States has been developing in the legal paradigm since 1954 under the influence of an active socio-legal movement for equal rights to education. To promote high-quality preschool inclusion, E. Barton and B. Smith [5] dwell on the empirical evidence for three dimensions of effective inclusion outlined in the DEC & NAEYC [8] statement on preschool inclusion programs: 1) access to learning opportunities (e.g., by providing materials that can be used by both children with and without disabilities); 2) active participation in learning with the support of adults using individualized practices; and 3) supports that provide adults (teachers and parents) with the resources they need to help children learn.

Although research indicates the benefits of preschool inclusion programs for young children with disabilities, simply enrolling them in programs with typically developing peers may not be sufficient to meet their learning needs [12]. Interventions and specialized instruction aimed at improving the specific skills of children with disabilities are often necessary to create high-quality learning experiences in inclusive classrooms [11]. The study of interventions for children with autism who study in inclusive settings was conducted by L. Watkins, K. Ledbetter-Cho, M. O'Reilly, L. Barnard-Brak and P. Garcia-Grau [18]. The scholars came to the conclusion that the interventions related to social communication, visual supports, self-control strategies, and peer interaction were found to be most effective; teacher-led programs also performed well [18]. In turn, during 1980–2013 C. Oh-Young and J. Filler [13]



compared the education of children with special needs in more integrated environments with less integrated (segregated) ones in terms of their academic and social outcomes. They concluded that children with special needs in more integrated settings generally outperformed their peers in more segregated settings [13]. Similar conclusions were reached by researchers A. Chesmore, S. Ou and A. Reynolds [6], who studied children with disabilities for approximately 40 years, in particular the trends of a shift towards less restrictive environments in the education of these children. In recent years, the U. S. academics [9; 10; 12] have increasingly stressed the need for continued study and enhancement of inclusive education practices. For instance, the need for scholars and practitioners to establish a commonly accepted definition of inclusive education.

Identification of previously unresolved parts of the general problem.

Ukrainian articles (review and comparative ones) usefully document the history, legislative basis and philosophical principles of inclusion in the USA; this provides a theoretical basis for reforms in Ukraine. Ukrainian studies often use the American experience as a model for imitation, but mainly rely on survey, normative and comparative approaches, less on highlighting methods of the pedagogical experience that are used in practical activities with children with disabilities.

Formulation of the objectives of article (setting the task). The article aims to highlight the theoretical and methodological aspects of inclusive education of preschool children in the United States. The specific objectives are as follows: 1) to study the legislative and instructional basis of educational inclusion in the USA; 2) to cover the essence of the applied behavior analysis method; 3) to analyze the achievements and problems of implementing the applied behavior analysis method in the educational inclusion.

Presentation of the main research material. Today, inclusive practices in preschool education in the United States are formed at the intersection of federal requirements for the provision of special education (in particular, those covered in IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), federal programs (e.g., Head Start, Early Head Start), and state initiatives to develop public pre-K. The Head Start –



as a federal program with a focus on children with low socioeconomic status – provides special resources for children with disabilities and requires individualization of education within its standards [16; 17]. Such programs also play a role in expanding access to inclusive environments.

In the early 1970s, parents of disabled children in the United States began filing lawsuits against schools that refused to educate their children. Several high-profile cases prompted the government to pass a series of laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities. The first was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 of this law prohibited institutions receiving federal funds from discriminating against people with disabilities. This was the first time that infringement of the rights of people with disabilities was considered discrimination. Previously, it was believed that the inability to obtain a good education and employment was a natural consequence of physical or mental limitations caused by a disability. In 1975, the United States Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA). Its purpose was to provide support to state and local governments in protecting the rights, meeting individual educational needs, and improving the developmental outcomes of children of all ages with disabilities [1; 2].

When passing the Education for All Children with Disabilities Act, the U. S. Congress discovered that there were over eight million children with disabilities in the country, more than half of whom were not receiving a full education, and about a million were not attending school at all. Congress required the development of an individualized education and development plan for each child and that children with disabilities not be removed from regular classrooms unless they were unable to master the curriculum, even with the use of supplementary aids and services. During the redrafting in 1990, this law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The last revision of the document took place in 2004, after which the U. S. Department of Education periodically adopted new or updated regulations in order to improve the mechanisms for implementing and interpreting this law [1].



In the USA, before the adoption of the Education for All Children with Disabilities Act, a significant part of children with disabilities was effectively deprived of access to education and learning opportunities. Thus, in 1970, the U. S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities, while many states had legislation that allowed the exclusion of certain categories of children from the educational process, in particular those with hearing, visual, emotional or intellectual disabilities [1; 2]. The adoption of the Education for All Children with Disabilities Act in 1975 initiated systemic changes in the field of special and inclusive education. Over the past half century, significant progress has been made in developing and implementing effective early childhood development, special education, and related services. While nearly 1.8 million children with disabilities were excluded from public schools prior to the implementation of the Education for All Children with Disabilities Act, more than 8 million students had access to special education and related services designed to meet their individual needs in the 2022–2023 school year. According to statistics, in the 2022–2023 school year, more than 66% of students with disabilities attended general education elementary classrooms for at least 80% of the instructional time, while more than 441,000 infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families benefited from early intervention services [16]. Other key achievements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act include: integration of more children into community schools instead of placement in specialized institutions; increased secondary education attainment; increased postsecondary enrollment rates; improved employment rates for youth with disabilities [17].

Thus, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act not only contributed to the formation of an inclusive education system in the United States, but also became a determining factor in the social integration of individuals with disabilities.

Inclusive early childhood education in the United States has been at the center of political, scientific, and practical discussions in recent years. Since 2002, the American educational system has been regulated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which proclaims the right to a quality education for all children, regardless of



their social status, place of residence, race, ethnicity or special needs [15]. The rights of children with disabilities are also affirmed by Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004). It mandates the admission of children (ages 3–21) with disabilities to mainstream schools in the least restrictive environment possible, which should best accommodate their special needs and be accompanied by the necessary support, as well as meet the needs of their non-disabled peers. Additionally, the proliferation of state and federal early childhood education programs (e.g., Head Start and Early Head Start (<https://acf.gov/ohs/about/head-start>)) and the growing interest in universal approaches (e.g., Universal Design for Learning – UDL) have really improved the development of children with special needs and their peers. The UDL is a pedagogical approach that involves creating flexible learning environments, programs, and services that take into account the diverse needs of all learners. Its goal is to reduce barriers to education and ensure inclusion by enabling the use of learning materials and environments without the need for special adaptations or separate design [15; 17].

Today, in the USA, the Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide free support for the development and learning of children from birth to age five. The programs staff actively involve parents, recognizing family participation throughout the program as the key to successful child development outcomes. All educational activities in these programs are adapted to the needs and abilities of children [17].

It should be mentioned that the U. S. states elaborate on federal provisions in their own legislation and educational standards. Most have separate Early Learning Standards or Pre-K Guidelines that include provisions on inclusion. Some states (e.g., California, New York, Massachusetts) have extensive professional development policies for educators working with children with special needs.

Therefore, the legal basis for inclusive preschool education in the United States is a combination of federal laws (e.g., IDEA, ADA, Section 504), programs (e.g., Head Start and Early Head Start), and state standards that oblige to create conditions for the education of all children in the most inclusive environment.



In the USA, educational inclusion is based on applied behavior analysis (ABA) method [18; 19]. ABA is a correctional approach based on behavioral analysis, although most specialists working with this system dislike the word “correction”. The essence of this method is to reward desired behavior and punish (usually by withholding a reward) socially unacceptable behavior. It should be emphasized that this method is used not only with children with disabilities but also with healthy individuals. Furthermore, it is worth noting that applied behavior analysis is also common in everyday life. For example, employees are paid a salary as a reward, or fines are issued or bonuses are withheld for poor performance as punishment. Opponents of this method argue that it treats people like animals, and is more akin to training than a scientifically proven method. However, this is not the case. Applied behavior analysis is one of the most accepted and reliable methods in modern psychology and pedagogy. Having proven its effectiveness in working with autistic children, it gained widespread acceptance [18].

One of the founders of applied behavior analysis is Ole Ivar Lovaas, who dedicated his life to helping autistic children and their families [4; 7]. He was convinced that autism was treatable, while most experts insisted that the only treatment option was social isolation. However, in the early stages of his clinical practice, in the 1960s and 1970s, I. Lovaas staunchly advocated the use of physical punishment and electric shock to improve the behavior of children with autism. Some patients were starved so that food rewards could be used later for greater effectiveness. This left a negative mark on the entire history of the ABA method. Nevertheless, the behavior modification method developed by Ivar Lovaas led to a sensational breakthrough in the treatment of autism. The scholar stood out among other applied behaviorists thanks to the success of his project for children with autism in Los Angeles (the Young Autism Project), begun in 1970. The results of that project were reflected in I. Lovaas’s most famous publication in 1987, which claimed that two years of intensive therapy (40 hours per week) can radically change the developmental trajectory of an autistic child and make them indistinguishable from typical children. I. Lovaas also argued that the use of the



methods developed within the project leads to success, i. e. full recovery, in approximately half of the cases (47%) and to significant improvement in a significant percentage of the remaining cases [4]. The experiment, the results of which have been confirmed dozens of times, demonstrated that a behavioral training program, applied at an early age (children from two to six years old), produces astonishing results. Almost half of the children with autism achieved a level of normal intellectual development and were able to begin studying in a regular school without the help of tutors. The remaining children, with rare exceptions, showed significant improvement in speech and communication skills, as well as intellectual abilities [4].

Over time, ABA therapy began to be based solely on humane and compassionate methods of behavior modification. As early as the 1980s, ethical standards for all professionals engaged in behavioral practice were developed, and the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB (<https://www.bacb.com/about/>)) made these standards an integral part of the requirements for certification in applied behavior analysis. D. Baer, M. Wolf and T. Risley indicate that ABA is the discipline that has most consistently studied the following question: what behavioral changes, in what order, and in what manner, achieved will bring the greatest benefit to a child [4, p. 92].

The scholars [4; 18; 19] cited several more reasons illustrating the benefits of explicit and understandable applied behavior analysis for improving the quality of life of children and adults with autism. Particular attention is paid to external variables that influence learning and can be used as tools of influence. Research has shown that only in the mainstream schools children with disabilities achieve maximum socialization and adaptation. Healthy peers of children with disabilities gradually learn tolerance and begin to perceive these children as full members of society [4]. However, the following problems remain [6; 9; 10; 14; 15; 18]: the lack of funding in public schools and kindergartens to provide an accessible environment and to hire highly qualified specialists in applied behavior analysis; the lack of knowledge and skills among public school and kindergartens staff in working with children with disabilities; the reluctance of most people to accept children with disabilities as full citizens. To address the



aforementioned issues, school staff must work collaboratively, systematically, and consistently. And teachers in public schools and kindergartens must be aware of the specific needs of children with disabilities.

Therefore, the success of the U. S. public policy in inclusive education is noteworthy. Largely through the use of applied behavior analysis, an increasing number of children with disabilities are being adapted and socialized. One of the main drawbacks of this method remains its high cost, which prevents its widespread use. Private centers and charitable programs are partially helping to address this problem.

Conclusions. The theoretical analysis conducted clearly indicates that inclusive preschool education in the United States is developing within a comprehensive system of federal laws, programs, and standards. Its regulatory framework covers the rights of children with disabilities, state educational standards, and special support programs. It is shown that only in mainstream schools and kindergartens children with disabilities achieve maximum socialization and adaptation. The children with special needs in the United States receive a comprehensive care and education, and thanks to the use of the applied behavior analysis, they become capable of interacting with society in the most productive ways. However, a number of the issues regarding the process of educating children with special needs remain relevant to the educational, social, and psychological sciences in the United States.

The scope for further research lies in studying the experience of exploiting the applied behavior analysis in educational inclusion of preschoolers in Ukraine.

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