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INTEGRATING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER INTO EDUCATION

S.M. Umarova
Associate professor, Department of special pedagogy, QDU
Anora Usmanovna Otajonova
Student, speech therapy program

Abstract.
This article examines the pedagogical, psychological, and social aspects of integrating children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) into the educational process. Particular attention is given to the organization of inclusive education, the application of individualized approaches, the enhancement of teachers' professional competence, and the strengthening of collaboration between families and educational institutions. Furthermore, the article outlines effective pedagogical methods designed to expand educational opportunities for children with ASD by taking their individual needs into account.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, inclusive education, special pedagogy, individualized approach, right to education, social adaptation, pedagogical support, collaboration with parents.

Introduction

Today, one of the primary objectives of the education system is to ensure that every child receives a quality education that takes into account their individual characteristics, abilities, and needs. Inclusive education plays a vital role in fostering equal opportunities within society, developing children's intellectual potential, and facilitating their active participation in social life. In particular, the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the educational process represents a significant and pressing area in modern pedagogy. Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by unique patterns in a child's social communication, interpersonal interactions, behavior, and interests. The way it manifests varies from child to child. While some children may struggle with verbal communication, others might grasp complex subjects quickly yet face difficulties in understanding social situations. Consequently, applying the same requirements and teaching methods to all children with autism spectrum disorder may not yield the desired outcomes.

The primary objective of involving these children in education is not merely to ensure their school attendance, but to create the necessary conditions for them to acquire knowledge, engage in communication, carry out independent activities, and develop social relationships with their peers.

The Importance of Including Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Education

Education is a fundamental right for every child. For children with autism spectrum disorder, access to education not only fosters the development of their knowledge and skills but also expands their opportunities to participate in the life of society.

Integrating such children into the educational process helps achieve several important goals. First, it creates opportunities to identify and develop their existing abilities. Second, it facilitates the formation of essential daily living skills—such as communication, self-care, task completion, and independent

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decision-making. Third, through interactions with peers, it promotes cooperation, mutual respect, and social adaptation.

It is not appropriate to evaluate a child's potential solely based on their difficulties. Instead, it is essential to identify their strengths, interests, and preferred learning styles. For instance, some children may process visual information effectively, while others might learn better through repetition, hands-on activities, or tasks presented in a clear, sequential order.

Therefore, when organizing the educational process, it is necessary to consider the child's individual developmental characteristics, sensory needs, communication capabilities, and pace of learning.

Inclusive Education and Its Potential

Inclusive education is an approach aimed at creating the necessary conditions for all children to learn together, while taking into account their individual needs and capabilities. This approach emphasizes not only the child's adaptation to the educational institution but also the adaptation of the educational environment to meet the child's specific needs.

When integrating children with autism spectrum disorder into general education institutions, it is essential to focus on the following conditions:

Creating a comfortable and safe environment. Excessive noise, harsh lighting, and distracting factors in the classroom should be minimized as much as possible.

Establishing a clear daily routine. Presenting the sequence of lessons and daily activities in an understandable format beforehand helps the child feel secure.

Applying an individualized educational approach. Tasks should be structured according to the child's level of preparation, abilities, and needs.

Providing accessible opportunities for communication. In addition to verbal speech, tools such as pictures, symbols, written text, and other alternative means of communication can be used.

Fostering interaction with peers. Working in pairs, participating in small-group activities, and engaging in collaborative play help develop social skills.

The effectiveness of inclusive education is not determined solely by a child's admission into a classroom. Other essential criteria include the child's active participation in lessons, their sense of belonging to the group, and positive changes in their educational outcomes.

Effective pedagogical methods in the educational process

When teaching children with autism spectrum disorder, it is advisable to employ pedagogical methods that are flexible, consistent, and focused on the child's individual needs.

1. Visual support. The use of pictures, symbols, charts, visual aids, and cards illustrating sequences of activities makes it easier for a child to understand tasks. For example, if a daily schedule is presented using images, the child can anticipate what the next activity will be.

2. Breaking down tasks into smaller steps. Dividing complex tasks into several simpler steps helps the child master the assignment incrementally. Each step should be clearly explained and, where necessary, reinforced through practical demonstration.

3. Positive reinforcement. Acknowledging a child's actions and achievements, offering sincere praise, and using appropriate incentives can increase their interest in learning activities. Such incentives should be tailored to the child's individual characteristics and preferences.

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4. Use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools. Children who experience difficulties with verbal speech can express their needs using pictures, gestures, written text, or specialized electronic devices. Utilizing these tools helps to expand the child's communication capabilities.

5. Explaining activities in advance. Informing a child beforehand about a new task, a change in location, or an adjustment to the lesson schedule can help reduce difficulties associated with unexpected situations.

6. Interest-based education. Incorporating a child's favorite topics, games, and activities into the lesson process helps capture their attention and facilitates the acquisition of knowledge.

When applying these methods, it is essential to consider each child's individual characteristics. A technique that proves effective for one child may not yield the same result for another. Therefore, the educator must conduct regular observations, evaluate outcomes, and adjust teaching methods whenever necessary.

The educator's professional competence and responsibility

An educator's knowledge and skills play a crucial role in the successful inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder in the educational process. The educator must understand the specific manifestations of autism, individual educational needs, and effective communication strategies.

A teacher should, first and foremost, strive to interpret a child's behavior accurately. In some instances, a failure to complete a task, withdrawal from interaction, or signs of distress may not stem from intentional resistance; rather, they could be linked to a lack of understanding of the task, sensory overload, or difficulties in expressing personal needs.

In such situations, instead of punishing the child or making comparisons with others, it is essential to identify the root cause of the issue and provide the necessary support. Teachers should offer clear, simple instructions, allow sufficient time for the child to complete tasks, and acknowledge even the smallest of their achievements.

Furthermore, it is advisable for educators to collaborate with special education teachers, psychologists, speech therapists, and other relevant professionals. The exchange of experience among these specialists helps in better identifying a child's needs and organizing the educational process more effectively.

Collaboration Between Families and Educational Institutions

Collaboration between the family and the educational institution is of particular importance in the development of a child with an autism spectrum disorder. Parents possess vital information regarding their child's interests, daily routines, methods of communication, and reactions to various situations. This information assists educators in tailoring the educational process to the child's specific needs.

It is essential to establish regular communication between the family and educators, discuss changes in the child's development, and define shared goals. For instance, skills being fostered at school—such as dressing independently, completing tasks, or asking for help—can be consistently reinforced at home.

In this process, it is crucial to treat parents with respect and understanding. Rather than blaming the family or attributing the child's challenges solely to their upbringing, it is far more effective to provide practical recommendations and seek solutions through collaborative effort.

Close collaboration between the family, educators, and specialists helps a child demonstrate their potential, apply learned skills in daily life, and adapt to the social environment.

Challenges in including children with autism spectrum disorder in education

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There are certain difficulties in this area. These include insufficient specialized training for educators, a limited supply of adapted educational materials, a lack of fully established necessary conditions within educational institutions, and the persistence of misconceptions about autism in society.

At times, when working with children with autism spectrum disorder, their capabilities are underestimated, or the same outcomes are expected from every child. This can negatively affect the child's engagement in the learning process. Furthermore, there is a risk of misunderstandings or instances of discrimination arising among peers.

To address these challenges, it is essential, first and foremost, to enhance the qualifications of educators in educational institutions, expand practical training on inclusive education, and develop a system for working based on individual education plans. Adapting learning materials, ensuring support from necessary specialists, and strengthening collaboration with parents are also key priorities.

Furthermore, it is necessary to organize educational activities among students that foster mutual respect, tolerance, and the acceptance of differences. Creating an environment that values the uniqueness of every child is one of the fundamental requirements of inclusive education.

Conclusion

Integrating children with autism spectrum disorder into the educational system is an important pedagogical task rooted in the principles of humanism, equality, and social justice. Creating a supportive learning environment for these children not only fosters the development of their knowledge and skills but also enhances their capacity for independence, communication, and social adaptation.

An effective educational process is built upon understanding a child's individual characteristics, leveraging their strengths, adapting learning materials, and providing the necessary pedagogical support. Success in this endeavor relies on the interplay between a teacher's professional expertise, collaboration with parents, assistance from specialists, and a welcoming atmosphere within the educational institution.

It should be particularly emphasized that the goal of inclusive education is not merely to adapt a child to the existing system, but to create the necessary conditions for them to participate actively in the educational process. A high-quality and equitable educational environment can be fostered by acknowledging each child's abilities and needs, respecting their dignity and rights, and supporting their individual development.

Consequently, integrating children with autism spectrum disorder into the educational system requires the collaborative effort of not only educational institutions but also families, specialists, society, and relevant organizations. Only when such collaboration is consistently established can a solid foundation be laid to ensure every child's right to education and to enable them to more fully realize their potential.

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