

Trends Toward the Integration and Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Russia

S.V. Alehina, PhD

Institute on Inclusive Education, Moscow, Russia

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Debra Cote, PhD; Erica J. Howell, PhD; Vita Jones, PhD; Melinda Pierson, PhD

California State University, Fullerton, USA

Abstract: During the past 20 years, the Russian government and culture at large has increased its awareness of integrative and inclusive educational practices for children with disabilities. However, educational reformers cite the need for the implementation of these practices on public school campuses. In response to the dearth of legislative action in implementing integrative and inclusive practices, parents of children with disabilities, in conjunction with community organizations, have become strong advocates for the rights of their children to attend integrated and inclusive school settings. This paper presents the current changes in Russia's education system for students with disabilities as the country moves toward integrative and inclusive practices.

Keywords: inclusive education, international education, Russia

Across Russia, consensus exists that education should be available to all children, including students with disabilities (Malofeev, 1998). In many countries around the world, the term integration can be defined as (1) allowing a student to attend an educational institution or (2) removing a student from a segregated school site and educating that child in a general education school. Even more progressive is the term inclusion which means that students with disabilities are to be educated in the same classroom at the same school site as their peers without disabilities.

Law makers, educators, and families in Russia are grappling with the development of practices and policies that ensure children with disabilities have rich social experiences with peers while making sure their educational needs are met. In response to this concern, Russia instituted significant changes in educational programs in the past 20 years that include the following: (1) the development of opportunities for integration in the schools (students with disabilities can attend public schools in separate classrooms), (2) academic and instructional support for all students, and (3) research and experimentation regarding best practices in schools and universities to train teachers on how to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Godvonikova, 2009; Morova, 2012).

A Review of Russian Special Education Practices

The current special education system in Russia can be defined as a large, overarching system and not specific, localized systems as present in US education. This lack of provincial input and control creates difficulties in implementing special education services. During the 1980s, this system undermined the creation of individualized supports for students with disabilities and underfunded special education services (Kordunov, Nigayev, Reynolds, & Lerner, 1988). Furthermore, children with special needs were traditionally placed in specialized, segregated settings, often in cities far away from family members. State budgets paid for these

institutions which eliminated the financial stress for families (Kordunov et al., 1988). Into the 1990s and 21st Century, inclusive processes continued to adhere to the rigid teaching conditions of Russian regular schools where the methodology of Soviet psychology and defectology (abnormal development) were followed (Nazarova, 2011).

Russian educators understand that some students with disabilities (e.g., speech disorders, hearing, vision, or musculoskeletal system disorders, intellectual disabilities) need differentiated instruction (Lesnevskiy & Miyakawa, 2009). However, there are varied opinions as to how services should be received. For example, Lesnevskiy and Miyakawa (2009) conceptualized educational placement as: (1) occurring in specialized and segregated settings, (2) in integrated settings where groups of children with disabilities learn in specialized classrooms that are placed on public school campuses (not in segregated school sites), or (3) individualized instruction that occurs at home and through distance technologies.

The segregation of students with disabilities is well documented throughout Russian history (Godovnikova, 2009; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Loshakova, 2004). Political directives indicate that as far back as 1806, the state supported a school for the deaf that existed in St. Petersburg. Due to public unrest in the early 1900s, the states could not provide the institutional financial support for students with special needs, resulting in hardships on families. By 1936, an escalating number of special schools were built to house children viewed as having special needs. Although a universal compulsory education edict was enacted in 1943 to service all students, students with special needs often did not attend school due to overcrowding (Malofeev, 1998).

Grigorenko (1998) highlighted the cultural shift of assisting students with disabilities that occurred in the 1930s. Pejorative terms such as “defectology” were coined to describe individuals with disabilities in Russia. *Hulfsshules* or *help schools* were among the early attempts to educate children with disabilities. Originally, only children who were blind, deaf or had an intellectual disability could attend segregated schools. In time, students with severe learning difficulties requiring specialized training were allowed to attend school. As a native Russian, and prominent psychologist, Lev Vygotsky established an institute to study the development of children with disabilities. Vygotsky along with his colleagues developed overarching theories guided by the following principles: a) a focus on prevention and rehabilitation, b) expansion of services for students with “mild” disabilities, c) the development of specific strategies for students with disabilities, and d) implementation of the zone of proximal development (i.e., difference between what a learner can do without help or what he/she can do with help). Vygotsky’s diagnostic and therapeutic efforts span 70 years of intervention and investigation (Grigorenko, 1998).

While Vygotsky contributed significantly to instructional practices for all learners, Russian educators and policy makers are still attempting to understand the best fit for these instructional theories. Russians who advocate for inclusive practices define them as the “process, result and condition when invalids [a term for individuals with severe disabilities] and other individuals with disabilities are not socially desegregated or isolated but participate in all spheres and forms of social life together (equally) with others” (Nazarova, 1984, as cited in Oreshkina, 2009, p. 262). Russian researchers Iarskai-Smirnova and Loshakova (2004) provide a broader

definition of inclusive practices as educational strategies that meet the wants and needs of all children including those with disabilities. When compared to segregated school settings, they argue that inclusive schools foster children's fullest participation in school and community life (Iarskai-Smirnova & Loshakova, 2004). Although the typical educational practice for students with disabilities in Russia is segregation (i.e., separate schools), several inclusive opportunities do exist for students to attend general education schools; however, they would be placed in separate classes. These opportunities are mainly found in primary educational settings. In fact, educators in Russia created Project Inclusive Education Week in 2010, where they come together annually with the idea of incorporating inclusive practices throughout the country (Nazarova, 2011). Individuals with disabilities also participate in this event as advocates for changing policies and stigmas.

The emergence of these practices in education provides an opportunity for a major evolutionary leap in the development and understanding of inclusion as a real possibility for children with disabilities. However, researchers and educators express serious concerns about the validity of this trend (Zhavoronkov, 2011). For example, one concern is that Russia's move towards integrative approaches in special education is the result of Western influence and may not be applicable for Eastern European society (Alehina, 2012b). Furthermore, without the necessary legal, economic and social support, progressive inclusionary ideas and attempts may not procure the equality of educational rights and opportunities for students with disabilities.

Education for Children with Disabilities in Russia

Educational opportunities for Russian students with disabilities continue to evolve. In February of 2012, the Russian Federation adopted legislation to amend the Federal Law called *On Education* (2010). A student with a disability was now defined as a learner who had the physical characteristics and/or mental development that complicated or impeded the child's education (Alehina, 2012b). The federal education law included language that promoted inclusive education, where students with special education needs were taught in classrooms with children without disabilities. However, the current law failed to mandate teacher training to meet the needs of those children.

Although these amendments appear to indicate progression toward the full inclusion of students with disabilities being placed in general education classrooms (not just schools), Russian proponents of inclusion continue to be discouraged by the lack of government support in providing resources for successful implementation. Furthermore, many Russian citizens do not feel the integration of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers is appropriate (Iarskai-Smirnova & Loshakova, 2004). Although efforts to implement integration of students with disabilities on typical campuses occurred during the 1990s in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Alehina, 2012b), the systematic implementation of integrated education in Russia as mandated by legislation has yet to happen (Godovnikova, 2009; Korkunov, Nigayev, Reynolds, & Lerner, 1998; Nazarova, 2011). Parent and social organizations are most often responsible for promoting inclusionary initiatives and ideas in Russia, and as a result, most changes in educational policies have occurred in the last three years.

Beliefs on Inclusive Education

What are stakeholders' views on inclusion and integration and who has been involved in the education system reforms for the past 10 years in Russia? While stakeholders believe that inclusive education is the best way to educate children with disabilities, a broader viewpoint may have a greater impact on the implementation of inclusion (Iarskai-Smirnova & Loshakova, 2004). Examining the social relationships between traditional education and students with disabilities may provide a new lens in which to encourage active inclusion. By first changing the perceptions about children with disabilities, barriers to integration may be more easily overcome so that rich and diverse learning environments for *all* children can be created (Korkunov, Nigayev, Reynolds, & Lerner, 1998). Implementation of inclusive approaches must challenge the beliefs of general education teachers and address the issues of social justice for all children to fully participate in society.

Several trends are slowly developing as perceptions about disability are changing. The Russian people are slowly becoming more open in their beliefs of inclusive education and the number of segregated schools is declining as students with disabilities are starting to become "absorbed" into general education schools (Nazarova, 2011). In order for these changes to be successful and maintained, partnerships and support among all educational stakeholders need to be developed (Logomag, 2012).

Although Russian culture is making attitudinal gains towards inclusion, the cultural belief that people with disabilities are not equal creates extreme challenges for people with disabilities. Current debates in Russia surrounding inclusive education highlights the following issues: (a) Is inclusion necessary or even possible in Russia? (b) Will inclusion be beneficial for children and schools? (c) What new problems will inclusion create? Proponents of segregated schools fear that inclusion will destroy a system that is specialized, functional, and supported by educators familiar with disabilities. Some argue that this fear is a result of the emphasis on academic outcomes rather than valuing the development of academics combined with social and functional achievement that cannot be addressed as thoroughly as in a segregated setting (Alehina, 2012b).

One examination of inclusive practices in Russia surrounds a prolonged pilot project by Dr. Alehina (the fifth author) to assess the educational environment and its readiness in meeting the individual needs of students with disabilities. The investigation assessed the quality of inclusive practices and professional development for teachers with respect to all children with and without disabilities. The pilot project concluded that each school was in one of three stages: (1) beginning integrative practices (allowing students with disabilities to attend general education institutions in special classes), (2) preparation to begin to train the management of the school to consider adopting inclusive practices, or (3) unprepared to accept students with disabilities at this time.

Current Developments in Integration

As legislative practices and cultural practices changed, some progress toward integration of students with disabilities on general education campuses was made. One such example is the closure of approximately 50 segregated schools for students with disabilities in 2011 (Alehina, 2012a). It was expected that students who attended these segregated schools were to enroll in

classes on a general education campus. While Russian policy makers focused on reducing the number of children in special education, it should be noted that they had conversely focused on preserving the system of separate educational institutions. With specialized segregated schools being closed and students with disabilities being absorbed into integrated settings, transformation of special education services is necessary. A new model requires collaboration and organization between general and specialized segregated institutions in order to ensure efficient and quality instruction for children with disabilities in integrated and inclusive settings.

In response to the growing integrative and inclusive philosophy spreading across Russia, a multilevel system of coordinated interdisciplinary institutions was created to support integrated services. In some regions of the Russian Federation such as the Chuvash Republic, Pskov, and Kaliningrad Oblast, these special education institutions known as resource centers aimed to develop inclusive processes and offer psychological and educational support for children with learning disabilities in secondary schools. The major purpose of a resource center was to create a common educational space where various types of educational institutions could network and provide additional remedial developmental assistance with a focus on students with hearing, vision, and intellectual disabilities.

The backbone of this multilevel resource center system was an inclusive education venue created in 1992. By 1998, 720 of these resource centers were developed to focus on the complex psychological needs of students with disabilities, provide medical and social assistance, and assist in rehabilitation support for children with disabilities (Alehina, 2012a). The organizational model of the resource center is for the school psychologist, speech therapist, social workers and teachers to support students with disabilities using a consultative approach.

Another key component alongside the resource centers in fostering integrated education is the growing focus on early intervention. A structural unit was created that focused on Early Intervention Services for pre-school children ages 2 months to 4 years who were identified as at-risk for developmental disorders and in need of psychological, educational, medical and social assistance. The Early Intervention Services unit was created to teach young children compensatory strategies for coping with their disabilities (Alehina, 2012b).

There are currently over two million reported children with disabilities in Russia and the figure increases annually (Alehina, 2012a; Roza, 2005). Noteworthy, in 1995, there were 453,000 reported children with disabilities; in 2006, the number of reported children with disabilities was almost 700,000 children. However, disability related factors inhibit exact reporting of the incidence of disability. For example, about 90,000 children have physical disabilities, which limit their movement and potentially their access to educational services. As a result, this group may not be accurately represented in the statistics and one may surmise the incidence of physical impairments is higher than reported. In 2012, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation developed a four-year plan that would allow 20% of children with disabilities to enroll in general education classroom. The goal is that by the year 2015, 10,000 educational institutions would allow unimpeded access to education services for children with disabilities (Alehina, 2012a).

Information on current inclusive practices reports that state educational institutions enroll more than 142,000 children with disabilities in regular education classes. Additionally, 132,000 children attend school in special classes for remediation in comprehensive schools. More than 44,000 children receive their education at home. Approximately 35,000 children receive no education, which includes 17,000 children who receive no education for health related reasons. Close to 29,000 children with intellectual disabilities remain virtually isolated from society residing in orphanages and boarding schools operated by the social system. In addition, 164,000 students in special schools are still forced to study in residential accommodations and they receive no training opportunities close to where they live (Alehina, 2012b). Thus, Russian education policymakers still have much work to be done regarding the inclusion of children and adolescents with disabilities.

Current Education Policy in Russia

Within the past decade, Russia has witnessed legislative gains on inclusive education practices, yet struggles with implementing policies. On September 24, 2008, Russia signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and thus committed to the implementation of Article 24 Education. The article notes the right to education without discrimination on the basis of equal opportunity and states that all stakeholders shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (Alehina, 2012a). Duma Dmitry Medvedev made the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the State level, and, following this ratification, inclusive education in the Russian Federation should be instituted in law to include all the necessary components needed to make inclusion of students with disabilities a reality. This includes determination of funding mechanisms, creation of the necessary conditions for successful special education services in general education classrooms and schools, and defined principles for adapting the educational environments for children with special education needs. Although the educational policy of the state has focused on the development of inclusive processes since 2008, the widespread implementation of this policy is still undetermined (Godovnikova, 2009).

Another federal development is the 2011-2015 Federal Program of Education Development which focuses on the proportion of children with learning disabilities and other types of mild/moderate disabilities. It is important to note that the term learning disabled is not distinguishable as one of the eight unique classifications of disabilities. Students in this category may be considered “*temporary delayed in mental development*” as opposed to the term learning disability prominently used in the US (Orenskina, 2009). The aim of this program is to determine how high-quality general education practices will be obtained for this population. In response to the anticipated increase of children with disabilities from 30% to 71% by 2015 (<http://www.fcpro.ru/>), Russia has made a commitment of 287.7 million rubles in order to create successful socialization conditions for children with disabilities in educational institutions.

The 2011-2015 *Accessible Environment* report (<http://fcp.economy.gov.ru/cgi-bin/cis/fcp.cgi/Fcp/ViewFcp/View/2011/392>) predicts that by 2016, the proportion of educational institutions that have an inclusive environment for children with learning disabilities in Russia will be at least 20%. Federal funds for program activities and the development of integrated education for children with disabilities will be more than 9 billion rubles during 2011-

2015. The new federal education standards of primary and elementary school students take into account the unique development of students with learning disabilities through the creation of individual training curriculum and programs that offer psycho-pedagogical support (http://www.educom.ru/en/The_Regulations).

Another legislative mandate, the National Educational Initiative called Our New School, created an expectation that each school must include all children (http://www.educom.ru/en/our_new_school_quot/). This mandate defined each school as providing opportunities for the successful socialization of children with disabilities. In accordance with the *Comprehensive Plan Development and Implementation of Modern Models of Education 2020*, the proportion of non-specialized educational institutions that create conditions for educating children with disabilities should reach 70% by 2016, and the proportion of children with learning disabilities who receive educational services in non-segregated institutions should also reach 70% by 2020.

In May 2012 the newly drafted law, *Education*, was presented to President Putin and the Russian Parliament. The intent was that this legal document would explicitly define the concept of inclusive education and help determine a list of special educational environments for teaching children with learning disabilities in the regular school. Furthermore, a unique piece of legislation was introduced in 2010 that addressed the actual training of children with disabilities. The Moscow *Law on Education of Persons with Disabilities* (2010) that established the *Inclusive Education, a Joint Educational Training* provided explicit training instructions for educating all children, including those with disabilities. The training targeted leisure activities, academic skills, and behavioral interventions.

While legislative progress toward integration is being made, the actual implementation may be extremely slow and dissimilar depending on the region of Russia (Korkunov, Nigayev, Reynolds, & Lerner, 1998; Godovnikova, 2009). In some regions such as Moscow, Samara, and Arkhangelsk, these processes are well advanced in their development and, in other regions, inclusive education practices are starting to emerge. In many Russian regions such as Karelia, Komi Republic, Perm, Arkhangelsk Oblast, Samara Oblast, and Tomsk, veteran teachers continue to learn recommendations to make education more inclusive (Alehina, 2012a). Unfortunately, this practice was only developed as a pilot project without established regulatory and financial support. The state sponsored financing for inclusion has been sporadic and inconsistent. However, a new cultural perception is emerging that consists of viewing individuals with disabilities as acceptable members of society. Currently, 15 percent of adults with disabilities are employed. While most of these positions are menial jobs, they are typically permanent (Khudorendo, 2011). The Moscow N.E. Bauman State Technical University boasts a 100% job placement rate for graduates with hearing impairments. Education for students with disabilities is increasingly seen as a basic human right. Article 43 of the Constitution of Russian Federation mirrors the U.S. policy of a Free and Appropriate Education. While both initiatives are alike in language, they differ in implementation, teacher training and professional development (Khudorendo, 2011).

The Impact of Resources on Integration

The fiscal impact of inclusion is one of the most pressing issues impacting implementation of these practices. According to experts in the field of education and in light of Russia's current financial circumstances, it is premature to talk about the full implementation of inclusive education (Lesnevskiy & Miyakawa, 2009). The country's economic circumstances make the follow-through of legislative mandates difficult. The yearly per capita income of Russia's population is approximately \$16,700. The percentage of the population living below the poverty line, whose incomes do not reach the subsistence level has risen to 12.8% (according to preliminary estimates for 2011). At this low level of economic stability and security, some argue that focusing on European or American standards of social processes is extremely naive.

Moving Toward Implementation of Integrative and Inclusive Practices

The most important task in the development of integrative and inclusive education is to prepare the administrators and educators of traditional schooling institutions. It is imperative that teachers and education specialists receive training on research-based best practices in integrative and inclusive education. The Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Professional Education plans to address this need by training 50,400 teachers in psychological and pedagogical instruction to support children with disabilities in general education (Alehina, 2012b). This is the first time in the history of higher education that this will occur in Russia. Currently, teachers who want to teach with children with disabilities can obtain a bachelor's degree or receive specialty training followed by a master's degree that takes about two years. A team of universities that is working on this standard have developed a working session called "Psychology and Pedagogy of Special and Inclusive Education" as part of the training. The main objective is the development and review of basic educational programs, textbooks, and manuals for training in the field of inclusive education (Alehina, 2012a).

Given the fact that the preparation of students who wish to earn a bachelor's and/or master's degree in the field of inclusive education has just begun, Russia has embarked on a large scale task to not only prepare future teachers in inclusive practices, but also to reform the entire school system. The goal is to increase the number of training hours required to teach or be an administrator in an inclusive educational institution. The Moscow Pedagogical University offers licensed programs (e.g., school administrators, coordinators for the development of inclusive education, professional support and psycho-medical-pedagogical commissions and consultation) for the different disability categories of students.

As part of the State program *Accessible Environment* (2011-2015), the next three years will be used to plan and train more than 10,000 inclusive educational institution employees on theory and practice in educating children with disabilities. During the years prior to 2015, it is anticipated that 24,000 trained professionals will comprise 27% of the average annual number of teaching staff working in classrooms for children with disabilities (Alehina, 2012a).

Overall Concerns on Integration and Inclusion in Russia

There are many concerns and limitations regarding integrative and inclusive education in Russia (Alehina, 2012a):

1. Inclusive education is just beginning to be regulated by legal documentation. However, there is no mechanism for funding and implementing special education learning environments for children in general education schools. A working group of Russian educators prepared the *Inclusive Education* Project for the New Russian Law on Education. This project included a developed draft of federal and state educational standards for children with disabilities, and these standards are considered an integral part of the federal government standards for general education. From a regional perspective, the characteristics and traditions belong to Russia. The country as a whole holds the greater power to establish a systematic and comprehensive legal framework of inclusive education. However, in several regions of Russia, a number of localized laws, statutes, regulations, and instructions have been adopted that propose to define the procedures and mechanisms for the implementation of inclusive education.
2. There are insufficient materials and technology to support inclusion in general education schools. Special equipment is extremely limited. The subsidies to schools for the development and support of the students with disabilities are not enough to support inclusive education. The preparation of educational institutions and the implementation of inclusive education for children with learning disabilities involve significant additional costs to improve the curriculum, increase teacher salaries, and support professional development opportunities for teachers and staff.
3. There is a lack of specialized expertise (e.g., speech therapists, psychologists, pathologists, physical therapy specialists) to support inclusive education.
4. General educators are professionally and psychologically unprepared to work with children with learning disabilities. Reasons for this include lack of knowledge of interventions and research-based teaching strategies, insufficient time for course preparation, professional insecurity, fear, and an overall lack of experience working with children with disabilities. Thus, professional development must be implemented for all teachers who will work with children and adolescents with disabilities.
5. There is an inadequate supply of textbooks, supplementary materials, and intervention programs for children with learning disabilities. Effective and adequate inclusion requires the development of individualized curriculum based on state standards that include organizational and methodological support.
6. In Russian society, there are socio-cultural and psychological constraints towards people with disabilities as held by the general population. Due to culture, tradition, and an initial poor perception of people with disabilities, the common belief was that children with disabilities should be taught in segregated campuses separated from society (Godovnikova, 2009).
7. People with disabilities have fewer opportunities for professional education and the labor market; they have difficulty finding employment when they finish school.

Conclusion

Russian educators and families of children and adolescents with disabilities agree that integrating students with disabilities is the best method of educating children. Students with disabilities should be allowed to attend general education schools even if they are placed in special classrooms rather than being placed in segregated schools. It is hoped that the growing knowledge of research-based instructional strategies for children with disabilities, the recent wave of legislative support, the collaboration of experts in resource centers, and the increasing tolerance of Russian society for people with disabilities can contribute to sustained and successful implementation of integrated practices. Although there are many limitations and concerns, Russia has begun building the infrastructure for integrative and inclusive education for all learners.

S.V. Alehina, PhD is the director of the Institute on Inclusive Education in Moscow, Russia and is a specialist in the Russian Federation on Special Education.

Debra Cote, PhD is an assistant professor of special education at California State University, Fullerton, whose expertise lies in the areas of positive behavior support and students with moderate disabilities.

Erica J. Howell, PhD is an assistant professor of special education at California State University, Fullerton and co-directs the Center for Autism Interventions.

Vita Jones, PhD is an assistant professor of special education at California State University, Fullerton. Her research interests are in the areas of early childhood special education and international education.

Melinda R. Pierson, PhD is the chair of the department of special education at California State University, Fullerton and also directs the Center for International Partnerships in Education.

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