

THE TRAINER PROFILE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (EXAMPLES FROM BULGARIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM)

Vanya Dobрева

Department "Culture, historical heritage and tourism", ULSIT/ Sofia (Bulgaria)

Abstract

One of the main issues for the development of inclusive education is related to the training and qualification of the teacher/trainer. Examples from the Bulgarian education system show that inclusive education has yet to be analysed and rethought in the light of the new role of the teacher in the implementation of his/her tasks. In the Preschool and School Education Act, adopted in Bulgaria in 2016, the topic of inclusive education receives its initial treatment. Additionally, another normative document specifies the principles of inclusive education through the introduction of a state standard. If in theoretical terms the term "inclusive education" does not raise any particular objections, in practice - at least in Bulgaria - there are a number of unresolved issues. Alongside the understanding of how to form a natural school environment that is inclusive of every student, regardless of their social or ethnic background, the law introduces the obligation to educate children with varying degrees of health problems - mild but also severe illnesses - in mainstream schools. This reflects on a change in the meaning of the figure of the teacher, the new sense of value in the realization of his educational role, as well as on the actualization of historical experience and good practices, affirming the new character of inclusive education. In this context, and the revival of humanities knowledge as a basis for the formation of empathy, moral and value orientations.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, trainer, education, humanities, culture.*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the education system has begun to interpret in terms of societal inequalities. Data from global organisations such as UNESCO, for example, show that inequalities are now profoundly affecting various aspects of human life. There are growing economic and social disparities between different parts of the planet, between different regions, between developed cities and lagging small settlements, and so on. Inequalities extend to people's health status, gender and religious identity, ethno-cultural characteristics (UNESCO, 2025).

2. Inclusive education: General conditions

Statistical data show that the existing environment of inequalities reflects on the formation of the personality, deeply affecting its future possibilities for realization. In search of a solution to the problem of social inequalities in the 20th and early 21st centuries, a number of philosophers updated the Enlightenment view of the determining importance of the environment in shaping the individual, deducing in accordance with modern realities the importance of its cardinal change - transformation from an environment that isolates differences into an environment that includes every individual (Foucault, 2016).

In the first decade of the 21st century, these concepts of inclusive environments began to be more closely linked to educational guidelines. The view was substantiated that the school also creates a micromodel of a social environment of peers, which should not reject, but include children and students of the same age, regardless of their social, mental, intellectual, health, ethnic, religious conditions. Thus, the concept of the new role of education in the 21st century as inclusive education was formed: the individual is given the opportunity, even in his early years, to socialize in the natural environment of his peers in order to reveal the potential inherent in him (Ainscow et al., 2006).

In some studies, a distinction is made between the understanding of education in the 20th century – mainly integrative, and the understanding of education in the 21st century – inclusive. In the first case – integrative education is a process in which conditions are created for the individual to adapt to the school and its various forms. In inclusive education, by definition, an equal environment is created that includes the individual, developing his/her strengths. (Baksanskii, & Safonicheva, 2015).

The question of the profile of the teacher/trainer in inclusive education is relevant. According to general statements, this teacher should possess both solid theoretical scientific competence and be endowed with additional qualities such as understanding and empathy for students, a psychological sense of a way out of conflict situations, as well as an approach to encouraging students. (Todorova, 2020) Among the skills that the teacher in inclusive education must form is mastering knowledge of how to assess and diagnose the abilities of students. And also how the teacher can direct each of his students to those specialists - psychologists, speech therapists, social workers, etc., who will solve the issue of identified deficits in the student's behavior/knowledge (Lozanova, 2023).

Therefore, the teacher in inclusive education does not work alone, but in an interdisciplinary team of other specialists. This team, thanks to the competencies of individual specialists, has the task of solving individual problems of students, overcoming obstacles of a personal and social nature (Stancheva, 2021). Since inclusive education refers to the inclusion of children and students with health problems in the traditional school environment, the teacher must also have the ability to work with medical specialists, who should also be involved as part of the team for the personal development of the individual child or student.

3. Aspects of the Bulgarian education system: Historical experience and contemporary challenges

Examples from the Bulgarian education system attest that the educational policy in Bulgaria is aimed at providing quality education for every student, regardless of their social, religious, or ethnic status. And this is a practice that has been established in the Bulgarian environment since the founding of secular education in 1835.

For historical reasons, Bulgarian society as a social construct has been egalitarian since the 19th century. This is the reason why education is perceived as an equal opportunity for all Bulgarians – boys and girls – to acquire secular knowledge in order to develop themselves as individuals. After the liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 and the development of the independent state, education has preserved its public character, distinguished by general accessibility and equal conditions for the education of children and students. The public character of education in Bulgaria is expressed in the establishment of the mass public school, which is state-run and integrates students, regardless of their social, ethnic or religious affiliation. As for children and students with health problems, specialized schools are beginning to be built for them. However, there are also practices, albeit sporadic, of isolating children with special needs from direct contact with other students. (Mincheva, 2019).

3.1. Historical aspects in the development of Bulgarian education

A strong impetus for the development of educational processes was given in the second half of the 20th century, a period of building the industrialized Bulgarian state, defined as a welfare state. The school network was expanded, schools were opened in every Bulgarian village - general education and/or vocational, related to the regional economic situation. Additionally, an educational policy was implemented that improved the traditions of general education and vocational schools. In just a few decades, illiteracy was completely eliminated, and in a number of reports by UNESCO from the 80s and 90s, Bulgaria was given as an example of a well-implemented cultural and educational policy and a successfully developed educational system.

Within certain parameters, it can be said that during this period an accessible educational environment was established, which played a significant socializing role. It is expressed, first of all, in the conceptualization of education primarily in terms of educational tasks, related also to the formation of values such as industriousness, solidarity, patriotism, socialist belonging. In connection with this and the emphasis that education in Bulgaria places on the development of humanitarian knowledge and culture (Atanasov, 1984).

From the point of view of historical experience, Bulgarian education developed a wide network of schools in the second half of the 20th century. In the general education school, additional extracurricular forms of work with students – the clubs – were also formed. Competition between individual schools was also stimulated through the competitive principle: each school worked on various cultural events – performances, concerts, sports competitions, etc. Schools for gifted pupils are also established: music and art schools, as well as schools for pupils with outstanding sporting abilities (Simeonov, 2025).

As an organic part of Bulgarian education, the system of vocational education is also developing, crystallized in a variety of school types - specialized vocational training, technical school and vocational school. The specificity of this type of training lies in the mastery of a type of profession, or of a part of a profession. In current terms, vocational education develops competencies and skills appropriate to the economic environment (Chavdarova, 1996).

In the 20th century, specialized schools for children with health problems were established. In the capital city of Sofia, a special school for visually impaired and hearing impaired students is still successfully functioning (**Special** school for visually impaired students). Here, specialized programs for the education of students were developed and implemented, which through preliminary diagnosis determined the stages of individual development of each child and each student. And other schools for children and students with severe health problems were established in the decades of the 20th century in Bulgaria. Many of them also operated as boarding schools. These children are mainly cared for by medical professionals, in parallel with pedagogues, as far as the condition of the pupils allows to reach a certain educational level.

An essential part of the educational policy in the 19th and 20th centuries in Bulgaria was related to the training of teachers, both the formation of sustainable theoretical-scientific knowledge, but also the acquisition of pedagogical skills, conditioning their educational role. Teacher training also corresponds to the educational situation: for the different levels of education, teachers receive different training: for primary (grades 1-4) and junior secondary (grades 5-7) education, teachers with a high school education and pedagogical qualifications are appointed, while teachers with higher education, some of them assistants in higher education institutions, work in secondary schools (grades 8-12).

The requirements for teachers in schools for gifted children are, along with teachers in general education, to appoint teachers with specialized skills characteristic of the school's profile - very often these are prominent musicians, artists or athletes. The same is the requirement for teachers in vocational schools - here too, along with teachers in general education disciplines, teachers with knowledge and training in individual professions, special for the respective school, are appointed. Therefore, the figure of the teacher - at least the Bulgarian experience shows this - has been a fundamental factor in the development of education and the formation of the individual for decades.

Teacher training, for the most part, is also related to the acquisition of humanitarian knowledge, which further stimulates the teacher's values and cultural profile.

3.2. Contemporary aspects of the education system: the practice of inclusive education

The current state of education in Bulgaria reflects the societal processes that occurred after the changes in 1989, when the country began a new period of development. There are several significant changes. First of all, vocational education began to lose its specific features: only one type of vocational school was established - vocational high schools, which today do not enjoy much public prestige. Secondly, boarding schools for children and pupils with health problems of varying severity are being closed, and these children and pupils are being directed to mainstream schools. Thirdly, the new environment is changing the leading role of the teacher in the education system, assigning his educational functions to parents. The teacher is established as the bearer of theoretical knowledge. But he - such is the accepted theoretical concept and existing practice, and not only in Bulgaria - loses his fundamental role as a central educational factor in the educational system and is transformed into one of the many pedagogical specialists who implement educational policies in pre-school and school environments.

In 2016, Bulgaria adopted the Pre-school and School Education Act. This normative act stipulates - albeit generically - the development of inclusive education. It should be clarified that inclusive education - at least this is its reception in the Bulgarian environment - is perceived as a process of inclusion in mainstream school of children with special educational needs, i.e. children and students with different degrees of health problems. Gifted pupils and children are also included in mainstream school.

The law regulates the creation of teams of psychologists, speech therapists, social specialists with the task to support the personal development of children and students. Especially, for pupils with special educational needs it is written that an individual plan relevant to their abilities and needs should be prepared. The law also indicates the need to develop an additional sub-normative act on inclusive education. However, it is noteworthy that the Act does not treat the profile of the teacher/trainer in inclusive education. And this gives the impression that - at least at the normative level - the traditional teacher training is also suitable for the tasks of inclusive education (Pre-school and School Education Act, 2016).

The next act, developed in 2017 and completed in 2024, is the Inclusive Education Regulation. It introduces the content characteristics of inclusive education, formulating a state standard for its implementation in Bulgarian conditions.

Inclusive education in the Regulation is interpreted as a process of awareness, acceptance and support of the individuality of each child and student, by using a variety of resources to remove obstacles to learning and create opportunities for the development and participation of children and students in all aspects of life.

On the other hand, the substantive characteristics of the state standard are: the terms and conditions for providing general support for the personal development of children and students; the terms and conditions for providing additional support for the personal development of children and students and its provision; the terms and conditions for the participation of the student's parent in the procedure for imposing sanctions, as well as the specific terms and conditions for imposing these sanctions; the structure, terms and conditions for approving individual curricula and individual curricula for students with special educational needs and students with outstanding talents; the terms and conditions for admission and organization of education of children and students with special educational needs in special schools for the education and support of students with sensory disabilities; the terms and conditions for the education of children and students in a center for special educational support; the terms and conditions for directing students with special educational needs to continue their education in profiles and specialties of professions (**Regulation on inclusive education, 2017**). The issue of the trainer/teacher in inclusive education is not subject to separate treatment in the Regulation.

Understanding inclusive education as a new stage in the development of education in general requires a reconceptualization of the role of the teacher (Mincheva, 2019) First of all, the teacher should be seen again as a fundamental factor for the development of education. That is, in addition to a mastered theoretical apparatus, the teacher should also be characterized by formed educational skills. Current practice, for example, shows that the teacher/trainer in inclusive education concentrates primarily on working either with children/students with special educational needs, or with children/students of a different ethnic or religious background from other children/students, or with a different mother tongue. And this is at the expense of other pupils who lack such problems. These pupils fall behind and their results are unsatisfactory.

4. The erosion of humanities knowledge and its revival through the new role of the teacher in inclusive education

One of the consequences of the accelerated technological and communication development of humanity is related to the erosion of humanitarian knowledge. Rather, it has to do with attempts to reformat and introduce knowledge about the nature of man, cultural diversity and the development of identity (individual and national) into a matrix system. This necessitates the search for new approaches through which humanities knowledge can be revived and prioritized in both education and society.

The above also applies to the preparation of the teacher/trainer in inclusive education. The humanities, the individual's occupations with literature, history, philosophy, culture, on the one hand stabilize traditional social attitudes, values and ethical understandings. (Chantova, 2008) In such an aspect, the teacher/trainer in inclusive education acquires skills to understand and respect cultural differences, to contribute to the creation of a fair and supportive educational environment. Empathy, which through the acquisition of humanitarian knowledge, develops in the teacher, is also of essential importance. This means that through the educational process the teacher will have the opportunity to educate students in respect and appreciation of the dignity of each person, to establish himself as a moral role model.

However, everything said so far suggests a new concept of the teacher's role in inclusive education, as well as the affirmation of the introduction of a variety of school forms through which students receive more adequate prospects for the manifestation of their abilities. It is worth turning to historical experience and rethinking those good practices that we can revive in accordance with the new tasks of inclusive education.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive education is associated with overcoming various obstacles. But it also requires the formation of a new view of the role of the teacher as the main driving factor in the implementation of the tasks of the time. The teacher is the traditional bearer of modern scientific knowledge, but he is also the main factor on which the upbringing of future generations in ethical values, in respect and observance of human dignity, in the preservation and development of ancestral and national historical memory depends.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria for the support of the research under the project "**Model for assessing the effectiveness and quality of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning**", contract № **KP-06-H80/1** of 07.12.2023.

References

- Ainscow, M., Booth, T., & Dyson, A. (2006). *Improving Schools, Developing Inclusion*. London: Routledge.
- Atanasov, J. (1984). *History of Bulgarian Education*. Sofia: Kliment Ohridski University
- Baksanskii, O. E., & Safonicheva, O. G. (2015). Philosophical and Methodological Principles of Inclusive Training. *European Journal of Philosophical Research*, 4(2), 56-65. https://web.archive.org/web/20180602213256id_/http://ejournal17.com/journals_n/1433432553.pdf
- Chantova, Y. (2008). The foreign language lesson as a communicative act: a semiotic analysis. *Works of the Specialized Higher School of Library Science and Information Technology*, 7, 529-540. Sofia: For the Letters - O pismenekhъ.
- Foucault, M. (2016). *Genealogia na modernostta* [Genealogy of modernity]. Sofia: Iztok-Zapad.
- Lozanova, L. (2023). Evfliutzia na poniatieto „priobstavasto obrazovanie” v mezhdunarodnite dokumenty. *Educational and social studies*, 6(2), 20-32.
- Pre-school and School Education Act*. (2016). <https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2136641509>
- Regulation on inclusive education*. (2017). <https://lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2137177670>
- Simeonov, I. (2025). *Discovering and training gifted children in sport*. Sofia: Kliment Ohridski University.
- Special school for visually impaired students*. (n.d.). <https://suunz.org/>
- Stancheva, S. (2021). *Pedagogical support for students with special educational needs*. "Education and Society" Collection, Plovdiv: Paisii Hilendarski University.
- Todorova, V. (2020). The professional profile of the modern teacher in the conditions of inclusive education. *Pedagogy*, 92(4), 514-524.
- UNESCO. (2009). *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education*. Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000177849>
- UNESCO. (2025). What is the global situation concerning education and gender equality? Paris: UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/education/need-know>