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**EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL CONCEPT:
EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES WORLDWIDE**

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Abstract

The article investigates the issue of equal educational opportunities and learning achievements for students belonging to different social classes, communities and confessions, and analyses various approaches to its solution. The authors of the article reflect on the concept of equal opportunities and the current state of its implementation in the world and in Russian education. The idea of equal educational opportunities for all is one of the key ideas in education policies and strategies of different countries in the information age. In the present situation of social inequality, many countries with developed economies focus on creating conditions for equal educational opportunities and learning achievements within the framework of their education policies for certain social groups (people of the third age, migrants and their children, people with special needs etc.—inclusive education). This innovative research is multidisciplinary in nature. It is accounted for by the clear eagerness of scientists and educators of different countries for international dialogue about systemic reforms and the most critical issues, in order to find the best solutions to the present-day obstacles. The study aims at developing methodological approaches to tackling the problem of equal opportunities for everyone in the contemporary society. The findings of the study should lead to establishing fundamental scientific notions on the current stage of the implementation of the concept of equal opportunities and learning achievements (expertise), at outlining teaching conditions and mechanisms that are necessary for its implementation.

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1. Introduction

The issue of inequality in education has been in the spotlight of attention of scientists and educators for a long time; however, this problem has not yet been solved and is currently regarded as one of the key problems in the relationship between the society and the education. It evolved into the concept of equal opportunities, and nowadays there is a variety of different approaches to this issue and ways of solving it at every stage of its development. Initially, the focus was on equal opportunities for different groups of learners (children with special needs, people of the third age, migrants etc.). In the current state of the art, researchers inevitably have to face the issue of equal learning achievements, as well as to search for solutions to such issues within education systems. International organizations dealing with education emphasize the most important principles of fundamental education: justice, social integration, education as an important driving force that can change people's lives and contribute to the modern development of the society. These principles require access to high quality education for everyone, inclusive education and ongoing education for all age groups.

2. Problem Statement

The idea of equal learning opportunities for all is not new for the modern pedagogy. Ideologically, it is based on the principle of freedom and importance of state-controlled education, as suggested by Popper (1947): there must be a certain amount of state control in education to make it accessible for everyone and to provide protection for each individual and for all people. In the scientific discourse, scientists worldwide define several stages in the process of solving the problem of equal learning opportunities. Each stage had certain features and peculiarities. The first stage took place following the appearance of public schools in countries with more developed economies. In 1950–60s', there was an expansion of education across all social classes (the second stage). Russian and Western scientists believe that the third stage of the solution to the problem deals with the question of education for everyone, including different cultural and ethnic groups, as well as by promoting education in less developed countries (Frumin, Kuzminov, & Penskaya, 2006; Niyeto, 2005).

The term “equal educational opportunities” was first suggested by Crosland (1962) in the 60s'. He differentiated between “weak” and “strong” equality: “weak” equality is based on the idea of providing equal opportunities for all in a comparative system of tests and exams, in order to access better and more thorough education. “Strong equality” concerns all levels of education. The idea is that people must be equal not only at the starting point, but also with regards to learning achievements: We need to teach all children well (Goodlad, 1996). Worldwide, education systems have been implementing both “weak” and “strong” equality systems. However, nowadays, we are facing the need to develop and apply combined systems and new concepts of equality in education: formal, compensatory and democratic ones (Howe, 1994). Up until today, there has been an ongoing scientific debate if using “combinations” means that educators do not believe that they are able of teaching certain social groups and citizens of their countries (Department of Education and Skills, 2006). This debate started decades ago and is still ongoing, on many levels, involving more and more participants: scientists and education practitioners discuss the essence of the term “equal opportunities”, learning achievements, quality, expertise, conditions of reaching equal

results in education (Gutman, 1987; Brick, 1993; Howe, 1994; Evetts, 2003 etc.). For instance, the liberal system is referred to as a weak system, characteristic for the society where economic, social and political benefits are distributed according to intellectual achievements. Those who show the best results in education get the most prestigious, respected and high-paid positions (Evetts, 2003). The French education system is similar to Crosland's (1962) "weak equality". He described it as a situation, where children's path in education depends solely on their achievements. A "strong" education system presupposes that the government distributes resources in a manner that creates equal chances for all children, due to conditions (especially starting conditions) that increase chances for socially disadvantaged children (Gutman, 1987). The latter is directly connected with inclusive education.

At the level of state policy, providing equal educational opportunities is part of the issue of inclusive education.

Many western researchers have considered issues of inclusive education. Loreman, Deppeler, and Harvey (2015) support the vision that focuses on the vertical dimension of inclusive education, which presupposes a change in objectives and main standards as the final result of the change in axiological, technological, modulation and semantic aspects.

Inclusive education is a process that includes multiple steps and represents a chain of interrelated modifications (the concept of inclusive education for atypical children). Slicker and Palmer (1993) argued that the structural concept of inclusive education is based on a comprehensive approach and joint effort, with the participation of all parties involved in the process of inclusive education in order to integrate an atypical child in the education environment and to monitor the changes that occur during this process.

This scientific debate is reflected in state documents; primarily in those dedicated to the general understanding of the concept of inclusive education almost in all countries: in the USA, in the documents on equal primary school education for all children; in England, in initiatives for schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods of megalopolises; in the French press, where the reasons for Arab youth riots or genetic predisposition to mental development issues in various ethnic groups are being actively discussed. In Russia, this problem has become especially acute in the last decades: the conditions of social and economic inequality led to the emerging of two education systems, for the rich and for the poor, both in secondary and in high education, as confirmed by social studies (Konstantinovskiy, 2008; Omelchenko & Lukyanova, 2004; Rudnik, Shishkin, & Yakobson, 2006).

3. Research Questions

The problem of the equality of educational opportunities for all was the main subject of education research in the USA in the last 70 years. This fact, as well as the Initiatives adopted by UNESCO and the UN, confirm the importance of the problem. As shown by experience, it is still necessary to carry out academic research on various aspects of the problem of equal opportunities and learning achievements. The society admits the central role of educational and social inclusion, hence the international cooperation in this field and international legislative initiatives. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education publishes annual reports in this field, the data takes into consideration the quality and efficiency of education systems, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Human Rights of 2006, the strategic objectives of the European Union in education and the Education

Strategy (ET 2020). EASIE data enables to observe a wide range of indicators concerning inclusive education, including disaggregation by gender and the level of education (European Commission, 2010; Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures, 2019).

The European Union also funds national projects on inclusive education. For instance, in 2015, the EU supported the launch of the project in the Czech Republic called “Learning for everyone: inclusion as a way to effective education for everyone” (National Education Systems, n.d.).

Such countries as Australia, the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, the USA, Finland and Japan have a positive experience of practical implementation of international initiatives in the laws on education. For example, inclusive education in Japan is regulated by the national Constitution and the law “On Education”, within the framework of a balanced model of cooperation between special and general education systems: “Systems for children with special educational needs.” From a very young age, these children take an active part in the life of society, participating in common activities on all stages of their education. Programs for special children allow them to acquire the necessary knowledge, most schools have experts who specialize in working with children with special needs. When necessary, each child receives a tutor to accompany them and provide any type of assistance. There are specialized schools for children with disabilities. Parents can choose the type of the institution for their children themselves (Principles Guide Japan’s Educational System, n.d.).

The education expert Westwood (2007) speaks highly of the British approach to inclusive education and the vast experience of the UK in this field. He emphasizes that educators closely follow the legislation that instructs them to be ready to teach children with special needs together with regular classes and instructs schools to be ready to become inclusive and capable of catering for various educational needs of children.

The term “special educational needs” is widely used in legislative documents of various countries, however, approaches differ. For instance, in Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, the Netherlands, Spain and the USA this category primarily includes children with special needs. In Australia, New Zealand and Sweden, there is no strict differentiation between different categories of children, therefore, it’s not easy for the countries to find common points with regards to solving the problem of inclusive education (Sigal, 2015).

In Australia and New Zealand, for example, all children requiring additional support are treated as children with special educational needs, whereas in Sweden special educational needs presuppose education in specialized classes. Both Russian and Western scientists maintain that such a narrow understanding of “special educational needs” caused by contradictory education policies, where children must follow a dedicated learning program (home schooling, specialized institutions, special school, specialized classes in a regular school, combined classes), may lead to risks of exclusion; children might literally become hostages of this continuum (Sigal, 2015, Marcovic & Spacisour, 2010).

European countries approach the question of including and integrating migrant children into society by designing and implementing general recommendations for educational institutions. In January 2019, the European Commission published a report “Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures”—a detailed overview of policies and measures on

integrating migrant students in European schools. This overview comprises access to education; psychological, social and language support; the role of teachers and heads of schools; management. The document serves as an important source of information for education and integration practitioners, researchers and decision-makers. Migrant students often feel disadvantaged, and this is a relevant issue for the whole of EU. In order to facilitate the integration of students from migrant backgrounds, the EU supports a variety of measures, including cooperation of politicians and education institutions, to give them an opportunity to share best practices and learn from each other, e.g. via the Sirius network on migrant education. Furthermore, the EU offers funding via the support program Erasmus+. A recent study based on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that migrant students achieve better academic results when they are well integrated and are expecting to demonstrate high results (Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures, 2019).

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims at determining the conditions of the implementation of the concept of equal educational opportunities in the modern society, taking into consideration the overall social inequality and certain teaching practices that increase this inequality in the educational domain. Equality in education does not only depend on the capabilities, efforts and development of individual learners, but also on the education system that they find themselves in. The authors of the article find it important to study the approaches to the issue of equal opportunities in different countries.

The objectives of the study are in line with developing methodological approaches to solving the problem of equal opportunities for everyone in the contemporary society. The study should result in obtaining fundamental scientific notions on the current stage of the implementation of the concept of equal opportunities and learning achievements (expertise), at outlining teaching conditions and mechanisms that are necessary for its implementation.

5. Research Methods

The research is interdisciplinary in nature and is based on a comprehensive approach, using methods from different domains that the research question is relevant for: pedagogy, economics, sociology, political science and culturology. A variety of research methods enables to get the most fundamental scientific notion on the problem, to define the key approaches to its solution, to develop and propose a theoretical framework for the implementation of the concept of equal opportunities at the current stage of social development, to create recommendations and effective solutions for the education systems of different countries. In order to meet the objectives of the research, the following theoretical methods were utilized: the analysis of conceptual and categorical framework of the problem, generalization, analogy, abstraction, comparative approach; the authors studied a wide range of literature specializing in philosophy, sociology, educational psychology, as well various state and interstate regulations and documents dedicated to the problem.

6. Findings

The research investigated the current state of the problem, the related literature and documents reflecting the implementation of the concept of equal educational opportunities for all and best practices worldwide. It allows us to conclude that the issue of providing equal educational opportunities for different social classes regardless of their social status, ethnic group, nationality or religion, is central for many countries across the globe and requires thorough investigation and a deeper understanding, as well as developing a theoretical framework and guidelines for education policies of different countries. It should be pointed out that there has been a lot of comparative research in the recent years, aiming at finding factors and trends that have a positive impact on the inclusive environment and better performance of all students, of students with special needs in particular, with regards to their emotional, social and academic life (Sigal, 2015).

7. Conclusion

To sum up the results of the study, inclusive education has established itself as one of the priorities of any reform in education systems. However, laws on education in different countries still contain points that hinder the implementation of inclusive education in schools. For example, among such factors one can mention unified requirements with regards to learning results, assistance only for one category of children with special needs (Malta, Slovenia); an age restriction within the in-school support program (Iceland); a dominating system of specialized education for children with special needs (Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and others) such schools are traditionally regarded as educational institutions that are capable of providing qualified help for children with special needs. In Sweden, there are national schools for students with mental impairments, with hearing impairments (riksgymnasiet för Dova och hörselskadade), with major physical impairments (riksgymnasium för SVART rörelsehinder) (National Education Systems, n.d.).

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