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THE EMERGENCE OF INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN UKRAINE

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Since independence in 1991, Ukraine has struggled with restructuring its Soviet style educational system. The process has been sluggish and fraught with tension, resistance, and set backs, mirroring Ukraine's efforts to revamp its economy and regain productivity levels that characterized it prior to independence (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2003). One of the initiatives currently being discussed is integration of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in educational and social settings. The debate has prompted heated discussions and caused some to recommend a reexamination of the special education system (Zasenko, 2004). This article discusses some of the initial actions taken in this debate, and presents some of the pressing barriers that will have to be addressed to make inclusion a reality for Ukraine's young people and citizens with special needs.

Ukraine is located in Eastern Europe, bordering the Black Sea, between Poland, Romania, and Moldova in the west and Russia in the East. It holds a strategic position at the crossroads between Europe and Asia and is the second largest country in Europe (The World Factbook, 2006). After Russia, the Ukrainian republic was the most important economic component of the former Soviet Union, producing about four times the output of the next-ranking republic. Its fertile black soil generated more than one-fourth of the Soviet Union's agricultural output, and its farms provided substantial quantities of meat, milk, grain, and vegetables to other republics. Shortly after independence was ratified from the former Soviet Union in December 1991, the Ukrainian government liberalized most prices and erected a legal framework for privatization. However, widespread resistance to reform within the government and the legislature have stalled reform efforts and led to some backtracking (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2003). Economic output has steadily declined since independence (The World Factbook, 2006). Today, Ukraine is struggling to fight internal corruption, develop capital markets, and improve the legislative framework for businesses. Reforms in the more politically sensitive areas of structural reform and land privatization are still lagging (Benardo, & Silber, 2005).

Education in Ukraine

Since independence, Ukraine has attempted to restructure its Soviet style educational system. Today, it states it has a European public educational structure that provides pre-school through higher education to citizens (Author, 2001). The *new* educational system reports that it encourages each individual to choose education according to his/her mental and professional abilities (Korsak, 1998). The principal levels now offered are: preschool, primary general education, basic general secondary education, full general secondary education, vocational technical education, education qualification levels for *qualified workers*, basic higher education, full higher education including graduate, postgraduate and doctoral education, and self-education (Korsak, 1998). The process of educational reform has been sluggish and fraught with resistance and setbacks, mirroring Ukraine's efforts to revamp its economy and productivity levels (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2003).

As of 2001, 39% of preschool-aged children attended preschools and special kindergartens that have been noted repeatedly as a national priority (System of the Education in Ukraine, 2001). The country's movement toward a 12-year term of study has prompted revisions in the content of primary education. Government documents state that the curriculum for primary education is based on *human values, on the principles of scientific and cultural development, humanism, democracy, and mutual respect among different ethnic groups* (System of the Education of Ukraine, 2001, pp. 1). Although there has been a call to adjust the curriculum for secondary education, reforms to the more than 36,000 secondary schools has been slow (System of the Education in Ukraine, 2001).

An important component of the Ukrainian educational system is vocational education. According to the International Program on Education in Human Rights, and the Constitution and law of Ukraine, the vocational educational system performs an important function in the social protection of youth (Korsak, 1998). The number of vocational schools has doubled since the 1990s. In 2001, there were over 110 higher vocational schools and centers of vocational training, 14 vocational-and-art schools, and 4 agrarian firm-colleges (System of the Education in Ukraine, 2001).

Higher education is viewed as a constituent of national education (Korsak, 1998). However, the number and diversity of private higher education institutions have risen significantly since independence (Stetar, 1997). There are over 500 state-owned and non-governmental educational establishments, with about 200 higher educational establishments of post-graduate education under the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Additionally, 23 ministries and administrations have their own network of educational institutions, the most important of them being agrarian, industrial and transport institutes (System of the Education of Ukraine, 2001). The higher education and the post-graduate system of education trained 30,000 specialists in 58 specialties in the early 2000s (System of Education Ukraine, 2001). Educational institutions provide instruction and financial assistance to 81 thousand orphans, 50 thousand children with one parent, and 178 thousand children from disadvantaged families, comprising about 45% of the total number of students served (System of the Education of Ukraine, 2001). Although the higher education system continues to expand (Stellar, 1997), calls for reforms to the system are increasing due to the lack of critical thinking and initiative, poor attendance, and examination policies that some believe discourage preparation and learning (Author, 2000; Johns, 2004).

Special Education in Ukraine

Primary and Secondary Schools. For many years, children with developmental problems, sensory disorders, brain dysfunction and complex disorders have remained at the margins of the Ukrainian secondary education system or have been totally excluded from it. These children were educated by a separate, special school system which consists of independent institutions, many of them operating as boarding schools for children who lived too far from the school to commute each day (Csanyi, 2004). In 2004, 1.8% of all children in Ukraine were registered as having disabilities. The Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science reported that during the 2005–2006 academic year, 54,100 children with special education needs received education in 396 special schools (Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation Network, 2006). Special schools serve children with specific disabilities such as children with physical disabilities, children with mental retardation, children with sensory disabilities such as visual impairment or blindness and deafness or hearing impairments, children with social-emotional needs, and children with health needs. These boarding schools prepare children educationally, socially and many offer work rehabilitation. Most special schools offer 6-12 years of schooling, although some students with some special needs such as blindness and hearing impairments can now study for 13 years (Bondar, 2004).

Educational programs for gifted students are not considered a component of the special education system in Ukraine. However, services for gifted children have increased annually since independence. As of 2001, there were 273 gymnasiums, 232 lyceums, and 25 colleges established for gifted children (System of the Education, 2001).

Technical Education. Recently, Ukraine has faced a considerable increase in the number of students under 18 who study at technical and vocational schools and colleges. Some students have physical, sensory or health disabilities, are orphans, are victims of the nuclear disaster at the Chernobyl NPP, and come from troubled or fractured families, requiring special social care and governmental support to receive an education. Comprehensive education-scientific-rehabilitation complexes, from kindergartens to master courses, have also been established. Besides technical schools and colleges, children and youth may take special training courses for the disabled allowing them to obtain the qualification of junior specialist (System of the Education of Ukraine, 2001).

Educational Trends since Independence

Under the Soviet Union, public education was used as a means to develop and indoctrinate workers for the state (Korsak, 1998). The system was completely centralized and emphasized extracurricular activities, with many students attending special institutions emphasizing specialized skills in music or sports. Following independence, the Ukrainian government made Ukrainian the official language (although many schools still give instruction in Russian), creating a pressing need for textbooks, novels

and other educational materials in the Ukrainian language. The educational system has also struggled with providing multiple ideologies in its attempt to move toward a European model. In 1995, Ukraine ratified the European Convention for Human Rights granting social protection to those with disabilities. However, the law did not extend to equality in education. Despite this, one of the most heated topics in the educational reform *movement* has been the concept of educational and social inclusion of individuals with special needs.

Inclusion at the Primary and Secondary School Levels

Special education and the social protection of children with disabilities are slowly gaining some national attention (Bondar, 2004). Integration, or inclusion, teaching students with special needs with peers in regular education settings has been discussed by some education decision-makers (Bondar, 2004; Zasenko, 2004; Open Society Institute and Soros Foundations Network, 2006). The topic has been driven by movements for civil rights from outside international forces such as UNESCO (1994) and the Soros Foundation (2006). During 2005-2006, the International Renaissance Foundation's Education Program with partner support from the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation conducted a country-wide project aimed at changing national educational policy in order to provide equal access to quality education to children with special needs. The project supports several pilot integration programs throughout the country. In this experiment, students with special needs participate in fully integrated and partially integrated settings (Bondar, 2004). In partially integrated settings, students with disabilities have contact with their typically developing peers primarily through extracurricular activities. It is too soon to evaluate the outcomes of the project which is scheduled to continue for several years. Although this project may be changing some public opinion regarding integration, most ministry representatives and families of children with disabilities believe the present system of special boarding schools will continue since most families do not have the financial means to provide similar educational experiences for their children (Bondar, 2004).

In the spring of 2006, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, Committee for Science and Education of the Parliament of Ukraine, the Academy of Pedagogical Science of Ukraine, nongovernmental organizations, state education institutions and representatives of eight foreign countries (Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Moldova, Russia, and Hungary) held a conference to discuss policy recommendations for inclusive education in Ukraine and to exchange experiences in practice, development and implementation of inclusive education in their countries. Participants made the following recommendations:

- 1) systemize the collection of statistical data to correspond with the international approach to disability classification;
- 2) accept the philosophy of inclusive education at the state policy level and change legislative documents;
- 3) accept the concept of inclusion and begin the development of reforms at all levels of the educational system;
- 4) develop the Coordinating Center for the development of Inclusive Education with representatives of the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry for Health Protection, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Family and Youth, other civic organizations, and parents of children with special needs.

To lobby for the adoption of these recommendations, a series of regional seminars were planned and a public relations campaign was organized to raise social awareness of inclusive education (Author, 2006). In general, public sentiment regarding inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of life continues to range from sharp discomfort and strong resistance to ambiguous feelings about the feasibility of integration (Vilkos, 2005).

Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation. The most effective work in inclusion today is being accomplished by the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, a non-governmental, non-profit organization that aims to promote the process of democratic reforms in education (Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, 2005). The foundation fosters quality education for all children, especially children with special needs, children of national minorities, children from socially unprotected families or homeless children (Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, 2005).

Since being launched in 1999, the project has implemented demonstration integration programs in 17 of Ukraine's 25 regions, reaching more than 15,510 children and their families (Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, 2005). The project attempts to reform Ukraine's educational system through 3 programs: teacher training, inclusion, and educating minorities.

1) *Teacher Training Program*. The project offers basic and advanced courses and ongoing consultations for preschool, primary and secondary school teachers, school administrators, university teachers, and parents.

2) *Inclusion of Children with Special Needs Program*. The project offers teacher training, seminars, round table discussions, conferences, and published materials to governmental and non-governmental organizations dealing with issues of integration of children with special needs into active Ukrainian life. Additionally, efforts to increase and improve public attitudes about integration are conducted through round-table discussions, films, and published materials.

3) *Education of Minorities Program*. The project offers teacher training, seminars, round table discussions, and conferences in regions with the highest percentage of national diversity to promote appropriate, culturally-sensitive practices.

Despite service and research projects like this, the widespread introduction of integrated education in Ukraine currently lacks necessary legislative and economic frameworks, as well as skilled personnel (Kolupayeva, 2004).

Inclusion at the Higher Education Level

Including students with disabilities in higher education settings began about 7 years ago in Ukraine. Before that time, students with disabilities did not attend universities. The concept of providing *reasonable accommodations* (Author, 2004) in primary, secondary or higher education settings is new to most Ukrainian educators. A reasonable accommodation makes it possible for a student with a disability to participate fully in an education program, and makes it possible for the instructor to fairly evaluate the student's understanding of material without interference from the student's disability (Heward, 2006; Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2004). In general, accommodations involve presentation accommodations (e.g., large print, Braille, talking materials), response accommodations (e.g., different ways to complete assignments such as use of calculators, signing responses), and timing and scheduling accommodations (e.g., timing of exams), and setting accommodations (e.g., physical accessibility) (Thompson, 2004; Sahlen, & Lehmann, 2006).

The notion of systematically providing accommodations for university students with disabilities is foreign to most instructors in Ukrainian colleges and universities. Instructors tend to be at a loss as to how to facilitate learning and evaluate students with disabilities. Some immediately assume that students with visible disabilities such as cerebral palsy or blindness will not be able to manage the academic demands of higher education.

Today, the only university that welcomes students with disabilities in Ukraine is Open International University of Human Development *UKRAINE*, also called University *Ukraine*, a non-profit, non-governmental institution founded in 1999. This university has about 25,000 students throughout Ukraine with and without disabilities. With more than 2,000 students with visual, hearing, mobility and medical disabilities studying at the university, it offers accommodations to students with special needs studying in integrated classes as well as provides scientific and sports activities for these students. Although campuses are not physically accessible, it is hoped that new buildings under construction in Kyiv will address some of this pressing need. Nonetheless, sidewalks, businesses, and public transportation continue to not be in Ukraine.

Instructors at the Kyiv campus receive training in how to provide accommodations without adjusting academic standards and how to offer more effective integrated classes. This type of training is important at the higher education level because some instructors encounter students with disabilities for the first time when the students enter their classes. The literature on faculty attitudes regarding inclusion in universities in the United States shows that although attitudes have slowly become more positive over the last 15 years, tension still exists regarding the fairness of practices designed to create equal opportunities for all students (Burgstahler, Duclos, & Turcotte, 2000; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1998). Although there have been some growing pains at Open International University of Human Development *UKRAINE*, both instructors and students with disabilities reported that they were satisfied with their experience at this integrated university (Raver & Kolchenko, in press; Raver, in press).

Discussion

Many in Ukraine are still holding onto the promises of the Orange Revolution in 2004 and President Yushchenko's declaration that Ukraine is on a trajectory to conform with European norms and values (Bernardo & Silber, 2005). Some hoped that this trajectory would involve the restructuring the general

and special education systems (Bondar, 2004). Unfortunately, many educators, administrators and families worry that, in reality, restructuring has moved very little from rhetoric to real action (Institute of Special Pedagogy, 2004).

The implementation of inclusion in Ukraine faces many formidable barriers. Inclusive education is more expensive than the present systems which will be a real challenge for a country that struggles to manage everyday operating needs. As Dr. Alla Kolupayeva, Scientific Secretary of the Institute of Special Pedagogy, reported in 2004: *Only an economically stable and developed country can afford to mainstream the majority of its children with special needs* (pp. 143). Currently, inclusion in Ukraine must contend with weak governmental policies and funding, negative public attitudes, and the lack of instructional methodology.

Policy and Funding. To move forward with inclusion, Ukraine needs an explicit policy statement from its central education ministries. A coordinated action from several national ministries in Ukraine, including Education and Science, Health Protection, and Social Policy, which do not have a history of collaboration and cooperation, would have to occur. Inclusive education would increase the need for specialized materials and would require institutions to become physically accessible. Who would pay and how it would be paid for is unclear.

Public Attitudes. Only about 58% of regular education teachers and 15% of special education teachers supported Ukraine's first country-wide experiment with integration in 2000 (Kolupayeva, 2004). For inclusion to be successful, a sympathetic public attitude toward differences is essential. As a nation, Ukraine demonstrates a willingness to change its cultural views regarding disabilities. It has partnered with several international nongovernmental organizations to advocate for and protect children with disabilities (Open Society Institute and Soros Foundations Network, 2006). It participated in the 2003 European Year of People with Disabilities that was dedicated to promoting the positive contributions of persons with disabilities and raising positive awareness to reduce discrimination (Division of International Special Education and Services, 2004). In 2002, the parliament passed a law requiring all enterprises, including privately-owned businesses, to reserve 4% of their jobs for the disabled. A company that does not comply is subject to a fine equal to its average employee salary multiplied by the number of disabled it should be employing (Vilkos, 2005). Despite this, the law is either ignored, since enforcement is rare, or companies hire individuals with mild health impairments such as asthma for jobs. In reality, laws alone will not change social attitudes. As a human resource manager recently commented in the *Kyiv Post*: *Imagine a manager in a wheelchair in a Ukrainian bank, and now imagine the reaction of the bank's clients...our society simply is not yet ready to tolerate such a situation* (Vilkos, 2005, pp. 22). Changes in public attitudes take time, sometimes generations, as it has in the United States.

Instructional Methodology. Implementation of inclusive education requires mandatory primary, secondary, and higher education teacher training, control of class size, availability of appropriate materials, and the presence of additional adults in the classroom to offer more individualization. It also requires educational methods that are cultural appropriate and empirically-based. Currently, there is a lack of replicable educational research in Ukraine largely because data are managed differently in each ministry making evaluations of programs and methodology difficult and rare (Kolupayeva, 2004). Further, differentiated curriculum will need to be developed, written and implemented which can be a slow process (Csyany, Hoffmann, Keresztessy, & Willumsen, 2004).

In summary, although Ukraine has an excellent *disabilities law*, the law is largely ignored. Although advances have been made in protecting and respecting individuals with disabilities since the 1990s, attitudes toward differences can still be severe, negative and isolating (Vilkos, 2005). Limitations in policy, funding, public sentiment and instructional procedures have kept the inclusion debate in Ukraine heated. Further, it is still debatable whether European or American models of inclusion are appropriate for other countries beginning this journey. Although there is a research base identifying strategies that support effective inclusion in the United States, many American school systems continue to lose sight of child-centered decision making, resulting in disappointing educational outcomes. As Ukraine moves forward in its human rights efforts and its goal of becoming a truly egalitarian society, decision makers must be reflective about educational reform and embrace only models that are economically viable and have community support. By approaching inclusion in this way, Ukraine places itself in the proper position to do the right thing for children, youth and adults with disabilities, as well as increasing the chances of it becoming a model for other countries in the region.

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