



FOREIGN EXPERIENCE IN SHAPING THE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article analyzes inclusive education practices in foreign countries (the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada, Finland, and Japan) and examines their role in shaping the political consciousness and cultural development of persons with disabilities. The study's findings indicate that inclusive education, through individualized support, assistive technologies, and universal design principles, integrates children with disabilities alongside their peers, develops their social skills, and prepares them for active participation in public and cultural life in the future.

Keywords: Inclusive education, persons with disabilities, political consciousness, culture, assistive technologies, universal design, individualized support, international experience.

Introduction

The social engagement, political consciousness, and participation in cultural life of persons with disabilities represent critical issues for contemporary societies. Global development trends of the 21st century necessitate the formulation of comprehensive policies aimed at recognizing persons with disabilities as full members of society, protecting their rights and freedoms, and enhancing their political, cultural, and social activity. International experience demonstrates that fostering the political consciousness and cultural integration of persons with disabilities not only upholds the principles of social justice but also contributes to the strengthening of democratic institutions. Effective mechanisms for



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increasing the political activism and cultural involvement of persons with disabilities are inherently linked to the synergy between a country's political institutions, legislative framework, social organizations, and cultural and educational resources. Consequently, the advanced experiences of foreign nations – such as the inclusive political models in Western Europe and the systems of opportunity for civic engagement and cultural development in North America – hold significant pedagogical, political, and methodological importance in shaping the political and cultural consciousness of persons with disabilities.

Reflecting on foreign expertise regarding reforms to cultivate a culture of political consciousness among persons with disabilities, it is noteworthy that in Italy, preparation for inclusive governance begins within the school system. Within an inclusive environment, every child – regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional characteristics – feels accepted as an active participant in society. This approach facilitates not only the learning process but also the formation of political awareness, cultural identity, and social dynamism among persons with disabilities. Each country develops inclusivity by adapting it to its specific conditions. For instance, Italy emphasizes early integration: children with developmental diversities study alongside their peers in mainstream kindergartens, which aids their social adaptation and political development. In Germany, the system is more differentiated: alongside inclusive schools, there are specialized institutions providing support for children with severe developmental impairments, thereby expanding their social and cultural opportunities. In the Baltic states, assistive technologies are being widely implemented, enabling children with disabilities to study with their peers, engage in social activities, and develop their cultural competencies.

In Canada, particular emphasis is placed on the individualized approach: a personalized educational plan is developed for every individual with a disability, taking into account their specific needs and capabilities. This approach serves as a vital instrument in fostering the political consciousness and cultural engagement of persons with disabilities, as it prepares the individual for active participation in decision-making processes, social life, and cultural activities within the community.



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The United States is among the pioneering nations to have systematically implemented inclusivity. The "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" (IDEA), enacted in 1975, mandates that schools develop Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for every student with a disability. A core principle of this legislation is instruction within the "Least Restrictive Environment" (LRE). This ensures that children with disabilities remain integrated with their typically developing peers to the greatest extent possible, thereby enhancing their social activism, cultural integration, and political awareness. For instance, in certain New York schools, children with autism may study in specialized classrooms but consistently interact with their peers during extracurricular activities, in cafeterias, and on playgrounds, which significantly boosts their social and cultural engagement.

In the US, creating an accessible environment is a statutory requirement: schools are equipped with elevators, wide doorways, and adapted restrooms. Furthermore, significant attention is paid to sensory needs through the provision of assistive technologies, such as specialized reading and writing software, adapted keyboards and mice, audiobooks, and other supplementary materials. All these factors directly influence the development of the political consciousness and cultural involvement of persons with disabilities.

In the United Kingdom, the population of children with disabilities is approximately 1.3 million (15.5%). While a network of special schools exists—where roughly 7% of these children are enrolled—there is a growing momentum toward inclusive education. The Equality Act 2010 obligates schools to make "reasonable adjustments," including the installation of elevators, wide doors, adapted restrooms, and visual-acoustic modifications in classrooms. This approach is instrumental in the societal integration and the formation of the cultural and political identity of children with disabilities. For example, students with dyslexia are provided with enlarged fonts and extended time for assignments, which increases their capacity for self-development and active civic participation. In 2022, an additional £2.6 billion was allocated to enhance teacher training, adapt school environments, and develop specialized services. Research indicates that students who receive an inclusive education are more likely to lead



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independent lives, secure employment, face a lower risk of unemployment, and engage more frequently in community activities.

In Canada, there is no single federal law governing inclusive education; instead, each province develops its own legislative framework. For instance, the Education Act in Ontario guarantees equal rights to all children, while the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination in education. Approximately 500,000 to 700,000 children with disabilities are enrolled in Canadian schools, accounting for 7–10% of the total student population. The Canadian educational model prioritizes the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools. In the province of Alberta, all teachers are required to complete courses on inclusion, which serves to foster an inclusive culture and promote the political and cultural activism of persons with disabilities. In certain instances, children may attend specialized classes or receive individualized home-based instruction. Schools actively utilize assistive technologies, including specialized software, communication devices, and audiobooks. In 2017, Ontario launched the "Technology for Inclusion" project, providing financial assistance to schools to enhance these resources.

While Finland has not enacted a specific separate law on inclusive education, it effectively integrates children with disabilities into the educational process. Unlike many other nations, inclusivity in Finland is applied not only to children with disabilities but to all students, including gifted children and those from migrant families. This holistic approach facilitates the formation of social engagement and cultural consciousness among persons with disabilities, transforming them into equal members of society. In the 2022–2023 academic year, approximately 72,000 children with disabilities were enrolled in Finnish schools, representing 12% of the total student body. A distinctive feature of this system is the absence of specialized schools; children with disabilities are educated within regular schools and classrooms.

To provide personalized support, the "two-teacher system" (co-teaching) has been implemented in classrooms. A special educator or an assistant participates in lessons, collaborating with the lead teacher to plan curricula that account for the needs of all students and provide direct assistance to children with disabilities. This system not only enhances educational quality but also aids in developing the



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social skills of persons with disabilities, encouraging peer interaction and boosting self-esteem. Furthermore, it alleviates the workload of the primary teacher and fosters a tolerant environment. Finland maintains high standards for educators: all teachers must hold a Master's degree in pedagogy and undergo regular professional development in inclusive education. For example, in 2022, over 5,000 teachers completed training in inclusive education at the University of Helsinki.

The concept of "Universal Design" is applied in the architectural planning of school buildings and the creation of educational materials. This ensures an accessible learning environment for all students, including those with disabilities. Modern schools feature wide corridors, elevators, and adapted restrooms. Textbooks are produced in print, electronic, and audio formats, allowing children with visual or hearing impairments to access information easily. Research conducted in Finland confirms the efficacy of this inclusive approach. A 2019 study by the University of Jyväskylä revealed that children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms achieved higher results in reading and mathematics compared to those in specialized classes. Additionally, their social skills and self-esteem were significantly improved. A 2021 study by the University of Helsinki further demonstrated that children with disabilities in inclusive settings adapt better to the school environment and exhibit fewer behavioral issues. Consequently, the Finnish experience serves as an effective model for shaping the political consciousness of persons with disabilities and nurturing them as active, culturally engaged citizens.

In the Japanese education system, approximately 430,000 children are identified with special educational needs, representing 2.6% of the total student population. Of these, 104,000 students are enrolled in special schools, while 326,000 receive their education in mainstream schools; in practice, a combination of special classes and integrated education systems is utilized. Although Japan was long dominated by a segregated special school system, the trend toward an inclusive model has intensified in recent decades. To provide individualized support within mainstream schools, specialized classes or groups are established where children with disabilities receive supplementary assistance. Japanese pedagogical universities offer specialized programs in inclusive education, and teachers



undergo regular professional development. For instance, in 2022, over 10,000 teachers participated in the "Supporting Children with Disabilities in Regular Schools" training program. Furthermore, assistive technologies – including specialized software, communication devices, and audiobooks – are widely employed to support students. In 2020, the Japanese government allocated 10 billion yen (approximately \$95 million) for the development and implementation of new assistive technologies. Consequently, the Japanese experience serves as an effective instrument for enhancing the social and cultural activism of persons with disabilities, encouraging their active participation in the educational process, and ensuring their equal membership in society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the international experience of inclusive education – as seen in the USA, UK, Canada, Finland, and Japan – serves to enhance the educational, social, and cultural engagement of persons with disabilities. Inclusive approaches expand individual opportunities through personalized support, assistive technologies, and the principles of Universal Design, integrating children with their peers and developing their social competencies. Simultaneously, inclusive education strengthens a child's self-esteem, improves their adaptation to the school environment, and prepares them for active participation in the political and cultural life of the future.

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