

INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES INTO SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The article describes and defines socio-educational conditions of the integration of children with disabilities into school community. Appropriate integration may help to successfully solve social and education problems of children with disabilities, as well as achieve their equal rights and possibilities to participate in school community. The article theoretically presents the results of the research of socio-educational conditions of integrating children with disabilities into school community.

Key words: *integration, school community, children with disabilities, socio-educational conditions.*

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Recently Lithuania has been actively discussing issues concerned with the integration of children with disabilities into school community. There are frequent arguments that integrated education of children with disabilities can ruin what has been created in the country in a number of years. However, the advocates of the integration of people with disabilities, Algėnaitė (2003) and Migaliova (2004) believe that such integration may help to successfully solve social and education problems of children with disabilities, as well as achieve their equal rights and possibilities to participate in school community. The Law of the Republic of Lithuania of 1991 on Social Integration of People with Disabilities defines the right of children with disabilities to be educated in educational institutions; however, it is obvious that not all educational establishments are adapted to accept children with disabilities, and thus, are not prepared to provide quality education to these children. Pursuing to integrate children with disabilities into school community successfully, it is essential to primarily change the attitude of the society, and educators in particular, towards persons with disabilities.

The integration of children with disabilities into school community may occur after evaluating and determining their social and educational needs, which is impossible without cooperation and collaboration of all members of school community: children, parents and teachers (Ruškus, 2002). According to professor Ruškus (2001), education of children is conducted following different programmes, employing methods of differentiation and individualization, encouraging the relations of mutual support in the classroom, differentiating the assessment of the achievement of children with special needs, as well as creating the

atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration among all community members in the process of integrated education. Although the ideas of social and educational integration are being developed in school communities, children with disabilities are still subject to negative assessment.

The aim of the article is to describe and define socio-educational conditions of the integration of children with disabilities into school community.

Hence, the following **objectives** are raised:

1. to identify and analyse socio-educational conditions of the integration of children with disabilities into school community;
2. to present the results of the research of socio-educational conditions of integrating children with disabilities into school community.

Problem of the research. Social discourse of people with disabilities has not been sufficiently explored in Lithuania. The problems and needs of children with disabilities have received more attention recently; however, their integration into school community has not been much discussed yet. This issue is of significance for school communities; therefore, the following problem-based questions are raised in the article:

1) Which characteristics, features and traits are attributed to the integration of children with disabilities into school community?

2) What socio-educational conditions contribute to the integration into school community?

Research methods: scientific literature analysis; quantitative research employing questionnaires; qualitative research and its content analysis.

Theoretical assumptions on integrating a child with disability into school community

Conditions of integrating children with disabilities into school community. The integration of children with disabilities into school community demands a variety of organizational means; therefore, it is important to consider the state of health, family needs, as well as mental and physical capabilities of every child. Gailienė (1997) maintains that specialists, who deal with the problems of children with disabilities, tend to focus on their basic needs: material well-being, arrangement of the surrounding environment, possibilities of mobility, etc. Great attention is attached to their physical health and medical rehabilitation; however, in the light of numerous problems, little attention is paid to their emotional state, creation of favourable psychological climate, and the development of social abilities. Therefore, it is essential to consider not only physical, but also functional, social and public aspects of integrating people with disabilities into school community.

Physical integration involves the arrangement of such physical environment, which would contain no obstacles for people with disabilities to satisfy their basic needs. Functional integration covers well-being of people with disabilities in the surrounding environment and society. The social aspect of integration aims at forming a positive attitude towards people with disabilities, as well as developing their social skills. The fourth aspect of integration – public – focuses on cherishing the socio-cultural integrity of the personality and their value system, guaranteeing their successful integration into social life and performance of social roles.

The integration of children with disabilities into school community demands willingness of all teachers and school specialists, as well as parents and other family members to cooperate and encourage the child's integration. The cooperation of teachers, specialists, parents and classmates will improve the speed and quality of the integration of children with disabilities. Such cooperation involves mutual sharing of knowledge, skills and experience. One of its main concerns is to understand what and how much parents and specialists have in common, as well as how much they have to learn from each other (Ališauskienė & Miltenienė, 2004). According to the authors, it is specialists' responsibility to help the families to achieve their goals.

Topping and Maloney (2005) state that parents often express a negative attitude towards the integration of children with disabilities into school community and society, as they have doubts regarding the provision of sufficient assistance and the danger of being outcast and abused. The conducted research has revealed that parents often refer to painful experiences and negative reactions of the society with reference to a child with disability, have doubts about the sufficiency of school resources to accept and integrate a child with disability into school community, as well as protect them from being abused by other children. Topping and Maloney (2005) believe that parents should establish close relations with school teachers and specialists, who would provide them with pedagogical and psychological information on the behaviour with a child with disability in the family, to make the process of integration more effective.

The most important reasons inhibiting the integrated education of a child include a disorderly educational base, teachers' incompetence, poor quality of the teaching process, and unreadiness of the society to accept people with mental disorders into community. School leaders tend to accept children with special needs to comprehensive schools with the aim of increasing the number of schoolchildren rather than the idea of integrated education. They are not concerned with the satisfaction of their special needs, i.e. the adjustment of the environment and teaching aids, as well as employment of relevant specialists and teacher assistants. Most comprehensive schools integrating children with disabilities into their community meet a number of problems (Galkienė, 2005), which are presented in the model of integrating children with disabilities into school community (Figure 1).

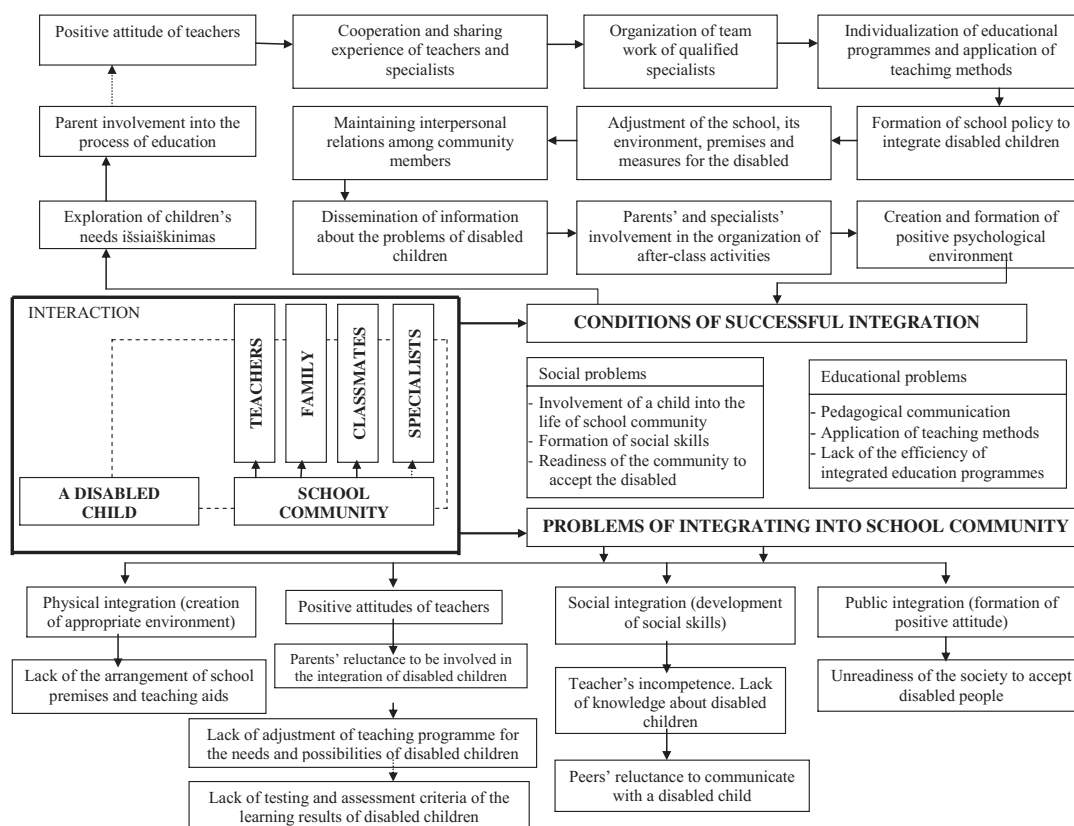


Figure 1. Model of integrating disabled children into school community

The goal of teachers and specialists is to convince school community that children with disabilities are equal members of the community, though they need special attention. It is important to prepare these children for independent life and develop their personalities with reference to their special needs.

The effective interrelationship between a teacher and a child with disability is often inhibited by preconceived negative attitudes of the teacher. Following them, the teacher creates an image of a child and is unable to see his/her progress and positive achievements. This results in the destruction of self-confidence and inner world of the child. Therefore, it is extremely important to teach pedagogical communication to pre- (and in-) service teachers. If teachers are not prepared to communicate with children with disabilities or have insufficient knowledge and experience, they will be able to neither manage children or their socio-psychological processes nor integrate children with disabilities into school community (Ambrulaitis, 2005). The conducted research has shown that the positive approach of teachers contributes to successful integration of children with disabilities into school community. The positive attitude of teachers and society helps to develop successful interrelations and education strategies of people with disabilities, as well as to create an appropriate environment for their integration. According to Ušeckienė (2002), all the mentioned factors reduce a child's disability on the social level, broaden the space of his/her activity, as well as encourage confidence in oneself and the society.

Ambrukaitis (2005) states that more than a third of teachers acknowledge having insufficient practical experience and knowledge to select appropriate tasks for children with special needs, guarantee their psychological and physical safety in the classroom, record the changes of their achievements, evaluate their learning difficulties, as well as apply theoretical knowledge in pedagogical work.

Having summarized the aspects of integrating a child with disability into school community, a model has been designed, which distinguishes the following conditions of successful integration: parent involvement into the process of education, adjustment of school environment for people with disabilities, the formation of school policy aiming to integrate children with disabilities, individualization of educational programmes and teaching methods, cooperation and sharing experience of teachers and specialists. A significant role in the process of successful integration is attached to the interaction, cooperation and problem-solving by all community members.

Methodology and organization of the research of socio-educational conditions of integrating children with disabilities into school community.

Characteristics of the research sample. The sample population included learners and teachers of schools in city N, where 20% of schoolchildren have a disability. The sample have been selected with the aim to validate the research, collect the most precise data, as well as to find out current situation and socio-educational conditions of the integration of children with disabilities into school community.

50 questionnaires were distributed to the teachers of school N, 45 of which were returned (90%). Class 7a were given a task to write a composition on one of the following topics: "Life Disadvantaged", "Do All Children Have a Happy Childhood?", "Children with Disabilities among Us", and "Let's Not Lose Our Heart".

Organization of the research. The empirical research was conducted in March – April in 2010 at a secondary school of city N. Firstly, contacts were established with the administration, and an official permission to conduct the research was obtained. Respondents were informed about the goals of the research, the guarantees of anonymity, as well as the instructions of filling in the questionnaires. While conducting the qualitative research, a discussion on the disability was organized during a class of the Lithuanian language, which was followed by a written composition on one of the above-mentioned topics.

Research ethics. The goal of the research and the instructions of filling in the questionnaire were delivered to the respondents in a clear and understandable way. The research participants were given a right to choose whether to participate in the research or not. The accomplishment of the research was grounded on the principles of goodwill, respect of one's dignity and justice.

Quantitative and qualitative research analysis was selected to verify the goal of the research, which was organized in the form of a questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions: 4 demographic questions revealing characteristics of respondents, i.e. their age, gender, experience of pedagogical work and qualification; and 15 closed-ended questions reflecting the aspects of integrating children with disabilities into school community.

Results of the research of integrating children with disabilities into school community

Characteristics of respondents. The results of the conducted quantitative research showed that the age of the greater part of research participants ranged from 51 or more (33.30%) to 41-50 years (33.30%). The age groups of 31-40 and 26-30 constituted 20% and 13.30% of all the respondents respectively. It is noteworthy that 93.3% of all participants were female, and only 6.7% were male.

The qualification and pedagogical experience of the respondents are directly related to their professional practical experience, which influences their pedagogical activity and results of integrating children with disabilities into school community; therefore, the respondents were asked to define their qualification and scope of pedagogical activity. The questionnaire revealed that 36.70% of all participants had the qualification of a senior teacher, 30% of a teacher-methodologist, and 20% indicated having the qualification category of a teacher. Teachers-experts, special pedagogues, social pedagogues and speech therapists constituted 3.30% each.

The data of the questionnaire revealed that 56.70% of the teachers had more than 20 years of pedagogical experience, 16.70% indicated having 15 to 20 years of experience, 10% declared having 10-15 years of experience, and 10% claimed having 5-10 years of pedagogical experience. Only 6.70% of research participants had the experience of less than 5 years.

Hence, it is possible to state that the research involved highly-qualified teachers and specialists with extensive experience of pedagogical work, who initiated, organized and implemented the integration of children with disabilities into school community.

Readiness of school community to integrate children with disabilities into the community

The research aimed at revealing the aspects of readiness for the integration of children with disabilities into school community, its related problems, as well as creation of the possibilities and conditions for positive integration. With this reference, the analysis of the research data was divided into three sections, which reflected the problem areas of the integration of children with disabilities into school community, and the current situation at the investigated school.

Methods of collecting information on the integration of children with disabilities. The results of the questionnaire showed that the greater part of the respondents obtained information about schoolchildren with disabilities in qualification development courses (70%), consultations with the special pedagogue working at school (63.30%), as well as self-dependent reading of scientific literature and consultations with members of the commission for special education (46.70% respectively). The necessary information on the integration of people with disabilities was provided in the seminars arranged at school (50% of the respondents). It appeared that the special course delivered at a higher school did not provide

with the necessary knowledge on the integration and education of children with disabilities (36.70% of respondents).

Thus, it is possible to conclude that teachers obtained information about the education of children with disabilities and their integration into school community through the participation in qualification development courses, consultations with special pedagogues and self-dependent studies of scientific literature.

Shortage of the data on children with disabilities. The respondents noted that they missed (50%) or partly missed (43.30%) skills of communicating with children with disabilities. Most respondents thought that they partly missed information about the teaching methods (66.70%), and the arrangement of programmes for the integration of children with disabilities (60%). 56.70% of respondents stated that they had rather insufficient abilities to control their emotions and the same percentage of the respondents declared lacking the abilities of involving parents into the process of integration. 10% of teachers stated that they lacked, and 53.30% maintained that partly lack psychological knowledge. 23.30% of respondents believed that they lacked sufficient information, and 50% claimed that they obtain only partial information about the criteria of assessing children with disabilities.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the teachers in the investigated school mostly lacked knowledge and skills of communicating with children with disabilities, the criteria of assessing their activity, teaching methods and arrangement of educational programmes for people with disabilities. Most respondents lacked the abilities to control their emotions.

Respondents' attitude towards the possibility of integrating children with certain disorders into school community. The questionnaire revealed the teachers' opinion about which children with disabilities might be integrated into school community. The obtained results showed that most teachers would recommend integrating children with mental (33.30%), speech and communication (16.70%) disorders, underdevelopment of cognitive processes (10%) and emotional, behavioural and social development (10%) disorders. 23.30% of respondents believed that no children with disabilities should be integrated into school community.

Hence, it is possible to draw a conclusion that children with mental, speech and communication disorders could be integrated into school community. Unfortunately, a relatively big part of teachers totally disagreed with the integration of children with disabilities into school community.

Creation of favourable environment. The greater part of the respondents noted that children with disabilities should be educated in comprehensive school together with healthy children and systematically receive special support (36.70%). 30% of all the respondents maintained that their education could be carried out in comprehensive school in special groups, whereas 26.70% thought that these children should be educated in special institutions. Only 3.30% of teachers indicated that children with disabilities should be educated in day centres or at home.

Thus, it is claimed that most of the respondents were in favour of the integration of children with disabilities into comprehensive schools in joint or special classes.

Adjustment of the physical school environment for children with disabilities. The research attempted to find out whether the school under investigation provided favourable conditions for people with disabilities. The teachers were given a question regarding the adjustment of the physical environment of the school (toilets, staircases and desks) for the children with disabilities. 63.30% of the respondents noted that the school was not well-adjusted, whereas 23.30% claimed that the physical environment of the school was adjusted only in part.

Efficiency of educational aids in integrating children with disabilities. The teachers were asked about the efficiency of the teaching aids used for children with disabilities pursuing to integrate them into school community. The results proved that the applied teaching aids were efficient (23.30%) or efficient in part (66.70%).

Parents' support in integrating children with disabilities into school community.

According to the teachers, parents took part (33.30%) or partially participated (36.70%) in assessing children's special needs, demonstrated interest (26.70%) or showed partial interest (53.30%) in the process of children's education, as well as regularly (30%) or partly (46.70%) consulted with the teachers. The obtained results revealed negative aspects of the integration of children with disabilities into school community in terms of parents' full or partial reluctance with reference to their children achieving the same results (43.30% and 40% respectively), in providing proposals on the improvement of the educational process (36.70%) or they performed the mentioned functions only in part (33.30%). 43.30% of the respondents noted that parents participate in school life only in part, whereas 33.30% maintained that parents avoided participating in school life at all. 36.70% of teachers indicated that parents did not provide any proposals or provided partial suggestions (the same percentage of the respondents) regarding the possibilities of alternative education or encouragement of new initiatives.

In conclusion, the teachers claimed that parents supported the integration of children with disabilities only in part through the participation in the assessment of children's special needs, showing interest in their education, and attending consultations with the teachers. The research revealed that parents did not demonstrate any activeness in participating in the life of school community, providing proposals regarding the improvement of the education and integration of children with disabilities.

Positive influence of school community on a child with disability. Most respondents stated that the integration of children with disabilities into school community increased communication possibilities and helped to avoid the feeling of being outcast (73.30%), developed tolerance in healthy children (73.30%), provided possibilities to adapt to the life in real society (70%), helped to perceive different life experiences (66.70%), as well as enhanced equal rights and possibilities of all members of the society (63.30%). 60% of the respondents agreed or partly agreed (36.70%) with the statement that the integration of a child with disability into school community provides him/her with the possibilities of overall education and satisfaction of his/her basic needs (53.30% and 40% respectively).

Summarizing the research results on the readiness of school community to integrate children with disabilities, it is possible to state that most of the teachers approved of the integration of children with mental, speech and communication disorders into comprehensive schools in joint or special classes. The teachers highlighted several problems related to the integration of children with disabilities into school community: they indicated the lack of skills and knowledge of communicating to children with disabilities, selecting appropriate criteria of the assessing their activity, selecting appropriate teaching methods, as well as arranging educational programmes for them. Pursuing to gain more knowledge on the education and integration of children with disabilities in school community, the teachers most often improved their qualification, consulted with pedagogues of special education and read scientific literature self-dependently. It is noteworthy that despite the application of effective means of integrating children with disabilities, the physical environment of the school did not comply with their needs. The research results disclosed that the integration of children with disabilities into school community enhanced the possibilities of communication, created favourable conditions to holistic education of children with disabilities, as well as satisfied their basic needs. However, the teachers missed parents' activeness in participating in the life of school community, rendering proposals regarding the improvement of the process of education and integration of children with disabilities.

Respondents' attitude towards current processes of integrating children with disabilities at school. Respondents totally (46.70%) or partly (33.30%) approved of the statements that school staff paid considerable attention towards the organization of integrated

education. 46.70% of the respondents noted that school staff held a favourable attitude to the integration of children with disabilities; the same percentage approved of it partly; 36.70% claimed that the administration of the school searched (or searched in part) for the funds to adjust the institution to the integration of people with disabilities and to obtain special aids for their education. Moreover, most of the respondents fully or partly approved of the statements that the issues concerning the integration of people with disabilities were frequently discussed in parents' meetings (40% and 43.30% respectively), and indicated that children with disabilities were involved (33.30%) or partly involved (50%) into after-class activities.

Reasons inhibiting the integration of children with disabilities. The teachers noted that the integration of children with disabilities was in part inhibited by the stereotypical negative attitude of some teachers towards the education of children with disabilities at comprehensive schools (66.70%), the lack of knowledge about integrated education (60%), as well as parents' negative approach towards children with disabilities being educated at comprehensive schools (46.70%). However, the research results revealed that although the school provided with sufficient consultations of specialists (speech therapist, special pedagogue and psychologist) (60%), there was shortage of literature on the integration of children with disabilities (46.70%).

It is possible to conclude that teachers having participated in the research maintain that the successful integration of children with disabilities into school community was inhibited by the negative attitude of teachers and parents of children with disabilities, as well as shortage of information on the integration of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, the number of specialists consulting on the discussed issues was sufficient at the school.

The research results also revealed that successful integration of children with disabilities into school community was totally or partly inhibited by the lack of the adjustment of the school physical environment (33.30% and 66.70%), complicated working conditions following several adapted and regular programmes (46.70%), as well as extensive work load, which prohibited from sparing sufficient amount of time for individual work with people with disabilities (53.30% and 43.30% respectively). Peer abuse was identified as a condition inhibiting the integration of people with disabilities into school community by 40% of teachers. The lack of experience of integrating people with disabilities was indicated as a factor of partial suppression of the efficiency of integration by 63.30% of the respondents.

Problems faced by teachers while integrating children with disabilities into school community. The conducted research showed that most of the respondents felt relative indifference of the school community (73.30%), relatively negative attitude of the members of school community (56.70%); 43.30% noted that they were unable or unwilling to involve parents into the process of education, whereas 53.30% of the respondents expressed the same opinion in part.

According to the teachers, the problems related to the readiness of school specialists to integrate children with disabilities into school community did not occur (66.70%); on the other hand, 53.30% stated that such a team did not exist at all. Among other problems, they mentioned lack of support from professionals of special education (50%), and inefficiency of educational programmes (36.70%). The shortage of funds was identified by 33.30% of the respondents; however, the same percentage of the respondents stated that the discussed problem was not faced in the investigated school.

The research revealed that the teachers, who participated in the process of integrating children with disabilities into school community, faced such problems as being unable to involve parents into the process of education, indifference prevailing in the school community as well as the negative attitude of its members. However, it appeared that the investigated school had a team of specialists dealing with the integration processes and solving the incurred problems.

Problems of parent communication. Most of the respondents partly agreed with the statement that parents raised unrealistic expectations and requirements (60%); they were unwilling to cooperate and share information (50%), considered the child's disorder in an obsessive or indifferent way (50%), as well as were unwilling to regard and follow recommendations (46.70%). 33.30% of the teachers noted that there was no continuity of child education at home; 40% partly supported the statement.

Summarizing the problems of the integration of children with disabilities into school community, it is possible to state that its success was inhibited by the negative attitudes of teachers and parents of the children with disabilities, the shortage of knowledge about integrated education; teachers' inability to involve parents into the process of education, as well as unsuitability of the physical environment of the school. Among other important problems of children's with disabilities integration defined were complicated working conditions following several adapted and regular teaching programmes, and the related shortage of time to work with children with disabilities individually. The research results also disclosed problems related to parents' involvement in the process of integrating children with disabilities. It appeared that parents raised unrealistic expectations and requirements, showed reluctance to communicate and share information, as well as perceived their child's disability inadequately.

However, the obtained data revealed some positive aspects of integrating children with disabilities in the investigated school: there existed an organized team of specialists dealing with integration processes and the related problems; the teaching and administrative staff took an active part in the process of integrating children with disabilities into the school community, searched for the funds to adjust the school premises and accumulate appropriate teaching aids, as well as attempted to involve children with disabilities into after-class activities.

Socio-educational conditions of successful integration of children with disabilities at school. The research results showed that most of the respondents approved of the statements defining such conditions of successful integration as the work of the special pedagogue with a child with disability (90%), favourable psychological environment in the classroom (86.70%), regular consultations with specialists (80%), child education following a special programme and course-books (80%), as well as individual work of the class teacher with a child with disability (66.70%). Most of the teachers believed that the success of the integration of children with disabilities would be enhanced by teacher-parent cooperation (93.30%), readiness of the school to accept children with disabilities into its community 93.30%); more consideration, tolerance and friendship received from peers (93.30%), arrangement of appropriate conditions for children's education (adjustment of the physical environment, preparation of teaching aids and programmes, etc.) (83.30%).

Summarizing the teachers' opinion about the socio-educational conditions of the successful integration of children with disabilities in the investigated school, it is possible to claim that successful integration of people with disabilities into school community necessitated for both physical possibilities, such as adjustment of the premises, psychological climate, teachers' and classmates' tolerance, willingness to help, as well as close cooperation of teachers and parents.

Analysis of the qualitative research – children's compositions

Opinion of healthy children about integration of people with disabilities. Qualitative content analysis is important in conducting research, which helps for the respondents to express their opinion and to highlight the relevant problems and conditions. Open-ended questions permit understanding of their interests and relations to the analysed phenomenon, as well as deeper involvement into the essence of the explored issue. Therefore, it was attempted to avoid preconceived definitions and descriptions while accomplishing content analysis of the current research. The current research follows the conception of qualitative content analysis:

the content analysis is based on a systematic implementation of stages – 1) multiple reading of the text; 2) definition of the manifested categories and subcategories, and their validation by the abstracts from the text; 3) interpretation of the categories and subcategories (Žydžiūnaitė, 2003). Qualitative content analysis includes the text, “obtained” using various techniques, e.g. interview or non-standard open-ended questions (Žydžiūnaitė, 2003). The material of the current qualitative content analysis includes the texts of critical reflection.

Compositions written by children on a selected topic referring to children with disabilities were interpreted using (qualitative) content analysis. Having analysed the obtained data, four categories were distinguished, which defined individual interaction of the research participants with people with disabilities. The distinguished categories – *implicitly expressed positive feelings and observations; recognition of a child with disability without giving him/her assistance; tolerance, willingness to help and positive evaluation*, as well as *dissatisfaction and discomfort in communication* – were further subdivided into subcategories, which reflected the aspects of the informants’ attitudes and opinions about children with disabilities, as well as feelings they experienced when interacting with people with disabilities.

Having analysed the compositions, the category *implicitly expressed positive feelings and observations* was distinguished, which had three subcategories: observation, neutral position and the subcategory of sympathy and compassion. *The subcategory of observation* reflected learners’ disposition to observe and analyse people with disabilities, as well as draw own conclusions, demonstrating the evaluation of disability as a phenomenon. The analysis revealed that learners, when observing people around them, mostly recognized the “healthy and good ones”, and were reluctant to see “the different ones or ones with disabilities”. This approved of the negative approach towards people with disabilities established in the society. The informants had an image of people with disabilities as “sad and angry” due to their physical, sight and other disorders. They were surprised “by women in wheelchairs, who were smartly dressed, neatly combed and wearing make-up”. Hence, it is possible to conclude that such an image of a person with disability occurred due to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the society, and lack of information or insufficient information about the routine, social life, well-being and possibilities of socialization of the different ones. The informants noticed negative behaviour of some mothers, who “neglected their child or were ashamed of him/her after realizing that he/she was mentally handicapped or deaf on one ear”. Such behaviour of adults forms negative attitude of the maturing personality towards human disabilities, as the child starts assuming disability as something shameful and controversial to the established norms, and believes that the different ones should be isolated from the society.

The subcategory of neutral position revealed that some informants had no opinion about children with disabilities and obtained information about them from other people: “The speech therapist Lisa <...> told that people seeing a child with disability in a wheelchair in the street start looking at him/her and whisper.” This quotation demonstrated that adults tended to distinguish the particularity of people with disabilities and spread the negative attitude of the society, which affected the child’s understanding and behaviour when meeting a person with disability in the street.

The distinguished *subcategory of sympathy and compassion* disclosed experiences and feelings of the research participants, which were invoked by the communication with or observation of people with disabilities. They referred to children with disabilities as unhappy and stated that the latter were “separated from them spiritually”. This statement proved of the wide gap between healthy and handicapped children, the lack of tolerance and mutual understanding, as well as the feeling of estrangement. Schoolchildren, who attended school with children with disabilities, understood and noticed people’s “disgust and detestation”; they referred to parents having abandoned their children as “heartless”; however, at the same

time they declared that it was not “children’s with disabilities fault” that they were different. This showed that the integration of people with disabilities into school community developed tolerance to the different ones, helped the healthy children become more sensitive, and encouraged them to establish tantamount relationships.

The analysis of learners’ compositions helped to distinguish the second category – *recognition of a child with disability without giving him/her assistance*. Two subcategories were also determined: *distinction of a child with disability from others* and *noticing support provided to people with disabilities*. Two opinions of informants were singled out; however, neither of them revealed a clear personal position when speaking about people with disabilities. One of the informants stated: “Two pupils with disabilities have been accepted to our school. Their peers do not realize yet that they are different, but when they grow up, they will realize the difference and can start nicknaming and abusing them.” The statement proved that there was no distinction and discomfort when communicating to a person with disability in the respondent’s environment, people with disabilities were not isolated; however, in the course of time healthy children might become like most of the society – cruel and indifferent, and they might feel ashamed to communicate with classmates with disabilities. Nevertheless, the author of the composition did not show his/her own relationship with peers with disabilities. Another respondent provided a rather different observation: “There are people in the world, who are very kind-hearted; they are, first of all, teachers, educators and others, who work, teach and try to help people with disabilities to love, understand, sympathize and take care of themselves”. This attitude demonstrated that people with disabilities should be cared about and their social skills developed by specialists, characterized by such qualities as kindness and commitment.

The attitudes and opinions of schoolchildren towards people with disabilities helped to distinguish the third category, namely *tolerance, willingness to help and positive evaluation*. Three subcategories were identified: *support, tolerance* and *joy*.

The subcategory – support for a person with disability – highlighted the understanding of most of the research participants about the aim and meaning of their communication with people with disabilities. According to the research participants, “children with disabilities are more sensitive, therefore, they need more care and concern”, “we should not push them aside, but rather use our all possibilities to help them”. Thus, the research revealed the understanding that children with disabilities were weaker, experienced difficulties in accomplishing certain functions and tasks; therefore, they needed more help, which was the responsibility of healthy children. The research participants ascribed support for people with disabilities to their duties and goals: “If I have a possibility, I will devote myself to such children when I grow up.”

The second subcategory – *tolerance* – revealed respondents’ position to accept children with disabilities as equal, communicate and behave with them on an equal level, as well as “learn from them to feel happy with what they have, to become more careful and hard-working.” When communicating with or observing children with disabilities, some learners noticed that “one should not talk to them in a special or comforting way”, “they are interested in the same things as I am”. Hence, the social integration of people with disabilities helped to understand that they did not need comfort or sympathy; they wanted to lead full-fledged lives like others. One of the respondents wrote: “They are disadvantaged, and they cannot be abused as you never know what might happen to you.” This opinion disclosed the idea that no person could be protected from an accident and become handicapped; therefore, it was not right to mock or express hatred to the different ones.

One more important aspect of the attitude towards people with disabilities is distinguished in the article, which is referred to as the subcategory of *joy*. This conception refers to positive emotions, which were experienced by the respondents after encountering and communicating to a child with disability.

Having analysed the compositions, it turned out that joy was not among the most expressed emotions. Only several research participants expressed their happiness to learn in the school, which integrated and educated people with disabilities, as in “it is pleasant to make others happy”. This shows that communication to the different ones provides with the possibilities to experience positive emotions, create a warm atmosphere in the community, and feel joy not only when giving to others, but also receiving and learning from others “to be happy with what God has given to you – health and parents”.

One more category, reflecting the learners’ negative attitude towards people with disabilities, has been distinguished in the current article, namely *dissatisfaction and discomfort in communication*. This category has been subdivided into the subcategories *exclusion* and *fear*. The subcategory of *exclusion* reflects the negative attitude towards people with disabilities, or their observation how people with disabilities are accepted and evaluated in the society: “I think that the mother, who raises such a child, should let him/her to a special school”, or “I have noticed that when a person with disability gets on the bus, everybody stares at him/her and are repulsed by accidental touching with him/her”. The quotations indicate that not all children are tolerant and able to accept a different person into their environment. It conforms to the opinion established in the society that people with disabilities should be excluded from other people and attended in special care homes. Some learners, who participated in the research, stated that “A person with disability feels uncomfortable and secluded from the world. They are often regarded as mentally handicapped by other people.” The above quotations once again confirm the society’s opinion that a person with disability is outcast from social and public life, is unable to think and behave in the same way as other people do, and incompetent to perform any activity. The second subcategory – *fear* – reveals a topical problem of the integration of people with disabilities into social life and school community. Such statements as “we are afraid of these children, as we have been told that they are aggressive”, and “I felt afraid when I went there” highlight another type of the negative attitude towards people with disabilities: the feeling of fear when talking about the phenomenon of disability, since the negative approach is formed not due to one’s personal experience, but following stories, which are often unjustified. Such a negative attitude towards people with disabilities can be related to the shortage of information about the social life and needs of people with disabilities, their possibilities to integrate into the society, as well as communication with them.

Summarizing the obtained results of content analysis, it is possible to state that the distinguished four categories – implicitly expressed positive feelings and observations; recognition of people with disabilities child without giving him/her assistance; tolerance, willingness to help and positive evaluation, as well as dissatisfaction and discomfort in communication – define the learners’ different positions and individual relationships with people with disabilities. The obtained results showed that healthy children tended to observe the environment and people with disabilities, record the behaviour and attitudes of adults and peers, as well as develop their individual approach towards disability, which was mostly reflected by compassion. The content analysis determined the greater part of schoolchildren, who attended school with people with disabilities, were tolerant and forbearing for the weaker ones and were ready to give them support. The feelings of discomfort and fear are not frequently observed in the learners’ compositions; therefore, it is possible to state that the integration of people with disabilities into school community helps to change the negative attitudes established in the society, as well as develop their tolerance and understanding.

Conclusions

1. School community is composed of schoolchildren, teachers, parents and other groups of people positively related to the school. It is united by common values and goals, which are achieved through the teaching process, common events, trips and other activities, as well as common life of all school members. The success of the integration of children with disabilities into school community depends on both the development of cognitive abilities and social education. Positive psychological climate in the classroom, child education following special education programmes and course books, the class teacher's individual work with people with disabilities, teacher-parent cooperation in the teaching process, as well as favourable learning conditions are the main features of the integration of children with disabilities into school community.
2. Summarizing the aspects of integrating people with disabilities into school community, a model of integration of people with disabilities has been designed. The following conditions of successful integration have been distinguished: parent involvement into educational process, adjustment of school environment for people with disabilities, formation of school policy aiming to integrate children with disabilities, individualization of educational programmes and adjustment of teaching methods, as well as teachers' cooperation and sharing experience with specialists.
3. The integration of children with disabilities into school community enhances possibilities of communication, develops tolerance of healthy children, creates possibilities for people with disabilities to adapt to the real life of the society, as well as provides with favourable conditions for overall education and satisfaction of basic needs of people with disabilities. Most teachers, who participated in the research, approve of the integration of children with mental, speech and communication disorders into comprehensive schools in joint and special classes. Pursuing to obtain more information about the education and integration of children with disabilities into school community, teachers improve their qualification, consult with teachers of special education and study scientific literature self-dependently. A team of specialists has been formed in the investigated school that helps to implement the processes of integration and solve the related problems. The teaching and administrative staff is actively involved in the process of integrating people with disabilities, search for the funds to adjust the institution to the integration of people with disabilities and to obtain special aids for their education, as well as make attempts to integrate people with disabilities into after-class activity. Successful integration of people with disabilities into school community necessitates for both physical possibilities like the adjusted premises, favourable psychological climate, teachers' and peers' tolerance and willingness to help, as well as close cooperation of teachers and parents.

The research results have also highlighted the problems related to parents' participation in the process of integrating children with disabilities. It has turned out that parents raise unrealistic expectations and requirements, are reluctant to cooperate and share information, perceive the child's disability inadequately, as well as are rather passive in participating in the activity of the school community, giving proposals on the ways of improving the integration and education of children with disabilities. The problems faced by teachers while integrating children with disabilities include the lack of knowledge and skills about the communication with people with disabilities, the choice of criteria to assess their achievement, as well as design of educational programmes for people with disabilities. Among other important problems of children's with disabilities integration distinguished are complicated working conditions following several adapted and regular teaching programmes, and the shortage of time to work with children with disabilities individually. Moreover, the obtained results have revealed that healthy children tend to observe the environment and people with disabilities,

record the behaviour and attitudes of adults and peers, as well as develop their individual approach towards disability, which is mostly reflected by compassion. Content analysis of compositions determined the greater part of schoolchildren, who attend school with people with disabilities, are tolerant and forbearing for the weaker ones and are ready to give them support. The integration of people with disabilities into school community helps to change the negative attitudes established in the society, as well as develop tolerance and understanding.

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