

## EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH IN FUTURE TEACHER TRAINING FOR WORK WITH CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF PRESCHOOL INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The development of inclusive preschool education in Ukraine largely depends on the professionalism of preschool teachers. Research shows that their practical training for work with children in an inclusive environment is insufficient. One of the effective ways to solve this problem is an experiential approach in future teacher training for work with children in the context of inclusive preschool education. Therefore, the objective of our study is to empirically test the proposed experiential approach, which involved teaching students through practical experience according to the Pfeiffer's model. The experimental group received practical training according to the above experimental method; the control group was trained according to the traditional one.

**Keywords:** Experiential education, Practical training of teachers, Inclusive preschool education, Educational coaching, Learning styles and techniques

### 1 Introduction

There has been a significant development of inclusive education in recent years. According to the data of the Ministry of Education of Ukraine, (Ministry of Education of Ukraine, 2020) 4,681 pupils with special educational needs receive education in preschool institutions of the country. This is not, however, enough to solve the existing problems of inclusive preschool education, given that there are more than 165,000 children with disabilities in Ukraine.

It should be noted that the uniqueness of the preschool period of education is the nature of development of children of this age, which should be reflected in approaches to their education, in the organizational structure of the educational institution, as well as in training educators and teachers (Odom et al., 1998).

Reforming the system of institutional care and education of children, especially in relation to inclusive education in Ukraine is based on European values and principles, and is recognized as one of the most important priorities of state development (European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities, 2015).

Despite the organizational and practical efforts, inclusive education in preschool educational institutions of Ukraine requires adaptation of education and training programs to the needs and interests of children with special needs, as well as the organization of opportunities for active participation of all children — both children with typical development and children with special needs — in classes that take place in their general kindergarten group.

Our observations indicate a low level of professional training of young specialists — teachers of preschool educational institutions. Especially in terms of their activities under the conditions of inclusion we note the weak practice orientation of graduates of higher educational institutions (HEIs) of III and IV levels of accreditation. When these specialists come to the preschool establishment, they are not ready to work, they are not familiar with the content of the new programs because too little hours are allocated for their practical training. Their learning

style is overly theoretical, while training and internships are mostly formal, without sufficient systemic connection of their practical actions with awareness, analysis of achievements and mistakes, and creative search for ways to improve their competencies. These facts indicate the urgency of improving the training of teachers in Ukraine who are able to work in preschools in an inclusive environment.

Inclusive development in early childhood is one of the current problems. Its solution largely depends on the quality of training of teachers of preschool establishments. In this complex process, such issues as the quality of training of preschool teachers, the ratio of care and education in the structure of their activities, the importance of innate qualities (the ability to value children and interact with them), on the one hand, and competencies obtained during training — on the other, lack sufficient scientific justification. Researchers note that even developed countries allocate less financial and human resources for training of preschool teachers than for training of primary and secondary school teachers (Moran, 2014).

One of the significant factors that reduce the quality of training of preschool teachers at the Faculties of Pedagogy of Ukrainian HEIs is that they are taught by teachers who have no experience of educational work with preschool children. Given the urgency of this problem, on the one hand, and the lack of developed approaches to its solution, we set the objective to empirically test the proposed experiential approach in future teacher training for work with children in the context of inclusive education.

### 2 Literature Review

While developing the content of experimental methods of practical training of students for pedagogical activity under the conditions of inclusion, we carried out the analysis of the relevant references. This is about a general pedagogical approach with the conditional name "learning by doing" developed in, (Dewey, 1995) which was later called "experiential learning" in American pedagogy, i.e. learning through practical experience, or Kolb's (Kolb, 2015; Kolb, 2017) learning models.

We should note that experiential learning belongs to such a broader pedagogical approach as constructivism, which is based on the works (Vygotsky, 1960; Piaget, 1953). The essence of the constructivist approach is to create such learning conditions when students can independently construct the development of their own competencies based on gaining some practical experience directly in real professional activity or in specially created (simulated) quasi-professional activity. In this way, students internalize, i.e. practically acquire the necessary competencies, and not memorize them only theoretically (McLeod, 2019).

An important theoretical basis of our study was the work (Kolb, 2017) on the model of acquiring new experience, which is based on the assumption that the information in the educational process can be collected in two mutually exclusive ways: through particular experience, on the one hand, and abstract conceptualization — on the other. A reaction to information can be represented in a similar way. Reflexive observation at one pole, and active experimentation — at the other. The combination of the above variables makes up four stages of the learning process: 1) gaining experience; 2) observation and reflection; 3) abstraction and theoretical generalization; 4) experimental verification and application of the acquired knowledge in practice. The learning process can start at any stage and continue cyclically until the necessary competencies are developed. We should note that Kolb's (Kolb, 2015; 2017) model is based on the central principle: direct particular experience is the basis for observation and reflection. The four stages in this model are not a circle, but a spiral, where a particular personal experience leads to reflections, abstractions

and assumptions that require active experimentation and verification (confirmation or refutation), i.e. obtaining a new experience.

The development of ideas for building an optimal learning style is covered in the works (Li et al., 2016; Thorne & Mackey, 2007; Morrison et al., 2006; Hawk & Shah, 2007). In our opinion, the most adapted method of teaching students is the method of determining the learning style, (Honey & Mumford, 2006) where was argued that learning should be based on the development of the ability for each learning style to successfully pass all stages of the cycle.

It is important to note that active reflection and application of knowledge positively distinguish experiential learning from ordinary "practical learning". In this sense, we should pay attention to the characteristics of experiential learning, (Beames & Brown, 2016) which we used in the design and organization of our study.

### 3 Methods

The object of our study was students of 2nd and 3rd year of study majoring in 012 Preschool Education, who underwent internships in preschool inclusive educational institutions during the 2018-2019 school year. A total of 95 students were involved in the empirical part of the experiment. We determined the size of a representative sample using an online sample calculator. According to the results of calculations, for the general population of  $N=95$ , the level of confidence probability  $p=95\%$  and with a confidence interval of error of  $\Delta=\pm 0.05$ , the sample should equal to  $n=75\div 76$  people. It is this number of students that formed the experimental and control groups of 38 people each.

Achieving group homogeneity was based on the following criteria of practical training of students: 1) the ability to identify special needs and abilities of children; 2) the ability to adapt and modify the content of curricula and programs to the special needs of children; 3) the ability to use auxiliary learning technologies, in particular differentiated teaching methods; 4) the ability to work in a team of diverse specialists; 5) the ability to interact with parents who have children with disabilities.

We determined the levels of practical training of students in both groups (experimental and control) after the experiment by summarizing two evaluations: scores of the internship supervisor from an inclusive preschool establishment, and scores for the students' defence of internship results by members of the Graduation Department.

We carried out the evaluation in the ECTS system, (European Commission, 2020) which was translated into a four-level quality scale. The high level of practical training corresponded to Level A — excellent (90-100 points); higher than medium — B and C (75-89 points), the medium level was correlated with D

and E (60-74 points), the low level corresponded to FX and F (1-35 points).

We carried out the experiment according to the scheme "Before-after with the control group", i.e. the evaluation was performed before and after the internship of both groups. The experimental group underwent practical training according to the experimental method, the control group — according to the traditional one.

We used the Pfeiffer's (Pfeiffer, 1998) model in the organization of practical training of students. We adapted this model taking into account the specifics of practical training of students in preschool educational institutions in the context of inclusion.

### 4 Results

To evaluate the results of the experiment, we conducted two sections of the levels of practical training of students for work with children in an inclusive environment: before the experiment and after the experimental actions, which allowed comparing the results and drawing appropriate conclusions.

Table 1 shows the results of evaluation of the levels of training of students of the experimental and control groups before the experiment.

Table 1. Levels of practical training of students before the experiment

Levels of training based on evaluation results	Experimental group		Control group	
	People	%	People	%
High level	6	15.79	5	13.16
Higher than medium	10	26.31	12	31.58
Medium	17	44.74	15	39.47
Low	5	13.16	6	15.79
Total:	38	100	38	100

According to Table 1, in the experimental group of 38 people we found 6 people (15.79% of the total number of groups) with a high level of practical training, 10 people (26.31%) had higher than medium, 17 persons (44.74%) had medium level, while 5 persons (13.16%) had low level.

The control group students had the following indicators: 5 students had a high level (13.16%), 12 students — higher than medium (31.58%), 15 students had a medium level (39.47%), while 6 students had a low level (15.79%). Comparison of the shares of students according to the levels of practical training of students of the experimental and control groups for the experiment showed no significant difference between them (Figure 1).

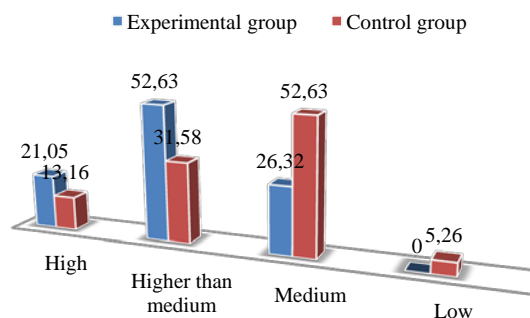


Figure 1. Comparison of the shares of students of the experimental and control groups with the relevant level of practical training

Since the results of the experiment are presented on an ordinal scale, it is advisable to use Pearson's  $\chi^2$ -test to determine a statistically significant coincidence or difference between the experimental and control groups.

Comparing the empirical and critical values of the  $\chi^2$ -test, we can conclude that there are no differences between the experimental and control groups before the experiment:

$$\chi^2_{emp.} = 0.64 < \chi^2_{cr0.05} = 7.82$$

After the experiment, we carried out a re-evaluation of the levels of practical training of students of the experimental and control groups. Table 2 presents the results of this re-evaluation.

Table 2. Levels of practical training of students after the experiment

Levels of training based on evaluation results	Experimental group		Control group	
	People	%	People	%
High level	8	21.05	5	13.16
Higher than medium	20	52.63	12	31.58
Medium	10	26.32	16	52.63
Low	-	-	5	5.26
Total:	38	100	38	100

According to Table 2, we found 8 people (21.05% of the total group) with a high level of practical training, 20 people (52.63%) had a higher than medium level, while 10 people (26.32%) had a medium level after the experiment in the experimental group of 38 people. We observed high and higher than medium levels in a total of 28 students, which was 73.78%. In addition, there were no low-level students in this group (Figure 2).

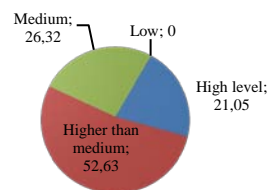


Figure 2. Levels of practical training of students of the experimental group after the experiment (in %)

The control group indicators were as follows: 4 students had a high level (10.53%), 12 students had a higher than medium level (31.58%), and the total high and higher than medium level was 42.1%. The medium level was found in 20 students (52.63%), 2 students (5.26%) had a low level (Figure 3).

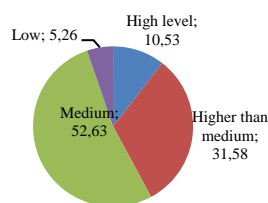


Figure 3. Levels of practical training of students of the control group after the experiment (in %)

Comparison of students' shares by levels of practical training of experimental and control groups showed a significant difference between them. The number of students in the experimental group with a high level is twice the number of students of the same level in the control group (Figure 4).

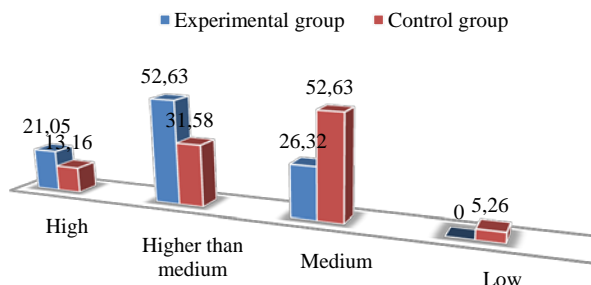


Figure 4. Comparison of levels of practical training of students of experimental and control groups after experiment (in %)

Calculations of the  $\chi^2$ -test after the experiment indicate a significant difference between the experimental and control groups:

$$\chi^2_{emp.} = 16.03 > \chi^2_{cr0.05} = 7.82$$

To better understand the results of the experiment, we analysed the changes that occurred in the experimental group. Table 3 shows the results of assessing the levels of training of students in the experimental group before and after the experiment.

Table 3. Changes in the levels of practical training of students in the experimental group

Levels of training based on evaluation results	Experimental group (before the experiment)		Experimental group (before the experiment)	
	People	%	People	%
High level	6	15.79	8	21.05
Higher than	10	26.31	20	52.63

medium				
Medium	17	44.74	10	26.32
Low	5	13.16	-	-
Total:	38	100	38	100

Analysing the data in Table 3, we can describe the changes and find that the most significant changes occurred in a subgroup of students with higher than medium level of practical training as a result of the experiment. While this subgroup involved 10 people before the experiment, it doubled to 20 people after the experiment. In the subgroup with a high level of practical training the number of students increased by 2 people (8 vs. 6), i.e. by almost 6%. At the same time, the medium-level subgroup decreased by 7 students (by 18.42%) after the experiment, and all students of the low-level subgroup improved their level of practical training to the medium level. Figure 5 shows the dynamics of changes that occurred in the experimental group.

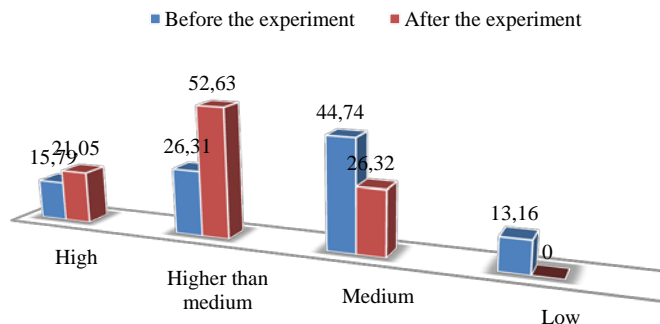


Figure 5. Changes in the levels of practical training of students in the experimental group as a result of the experiment

Thus, we can argue that our proposed experimental approach has significantly increased the effectiveness of practical training of future teachers for work in preschool institutions in an inclusive environment.

Next, let us consider the results of the experiment in two aspects. The first concerns the competencies acquired and developed by the students of the experimental group during the internship built on the basis of the experiential approach. The second aspect reveals the positive changes in the development of students' competencies related to the experiential learning cycle in connection with the involvement of students of the experimental group in reflection, analysis, generalization and finding ways to improve their professional skills as inclusive preschool teachers. The results of the experiment also relate to the development of students' skills in the educational coaching system.

Thus, the students of the experimental group (compared to the control group) had a significantly higher level of development of such competencies as:

- ability to determine special educational needs of pre-schoolers with psychophysical disorders, to monitor their development, and adequately assess the causes of difficulties in learning and different activities of these children;
- ability to detect deviations in the development of pre-schoolers, and participate in the provision of proper psychological and pedagogical support to children in need of correction of psychophysical development jointly with correctional teachers;
- ability to plan and implement an individual approach in all activities taking into account the diagnosis of children with disabilities: make up an adapted educational program, select pedagogical tools to achieve educational goals and objectives in accordance with the specifics of children's development by involving them in games in small subgroups, to general round and imitation games, pair assignments, and thus develop the interest of children with special educational needs to communicate with peers and enrich the experience of such children;
- experience in developing basic self-care and hygiene skills in children with disabilities (washing, wiping hands and face with a towel, putting on and taking off clothes, caring of clothes, sitting properly at the table and using cutlery, putting toys in place and maintaining order etc.);
- ability to prepare healthy pre-schoolers for positive interaction with peers who needed correction of psychophysical development, to help children through joint activities to learn new ways and techniques in practical matters (joint games, work assignments, care for animals, plants, etc.);
- the ability to develop manual dexterity, articulatory and general motor skills in children with special educational needs through finger, articulation exercises, speech,

massage, general developmental exercises, games, and assignments;

- skills to create a subject-development environment for the effective solution of educational problems taking into account the level of psychophysical development of each pre-schooler;
- experience of interaction with parents, providing them with the correct information and skills of raising children with mental and physical disabilities.

On the other hand, the students of the experimental group received and developed specific competencies related to reflection, analysis, generalization, and finding ways to improve their professional skills as inclusive preschool teachers:

- skills of preparing a report on each lesson with the presentation of photos, videos and other materials;
- ability to present materials on activities in an inclusive preschool establishment, share their experiences with colleagues, structure discussions;
- ability to determine the factors of success and causes of failure in their practical activities, exchange views, structure their experience according to the following criteria: "What parts of the lesson do you consider successful? What worked well and thanks to what? What elements of the lesson can be considered unsuccessful? What failed and for what reasons?";
- ability to generate and select ideas, as well as find ways to improve practical competencies in particular types of work with children in an inclusive environment;
- the ability to compare the discussed experience in an inclusive preschool establishment with generalizations of previous experience, i.e. classes conducted earlier;
- ability to develop and implement plans for personal development and improvement of professional skills as inclusive preschool teachers.

In the process of internship supervision during the experiment, teachers and internship supervisors from preschool educational institutions used the method of coaching, which was based on a cyclical sequence of stages of experiential learning (analysis of the level of student professional training and collection of necessary information; elaboration of personal and professional development plan; implementation of the plan using appropriate styles and techniques; evaluation of the success of the achieved results). Coaching techniques such as GROW, Structural Technique, 3D, Spiral of Practice were used (Parsloe & Leedham, 2009).

As a result, the role of the teacher, who created conditions and helped students to organize the process of gaining experience and personal development as future preschool teachers in an inclusive environment, radically changed in experiential education. This allowed considering the coaching skills acquired by students as a result of the experiment. It is worth noting that the educational coaching used in experiential learning was based

on the principles of equality, faith in people, holistic approach, monitoring and feedback (Code of Ethics, 2020; Whitmore, 2017). The principle of equality or partnership created favourable conditions for teacher-student cooperation. The results of this approach were experimental group students' gained confidence in their abilities and taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions in the learning process. Thanks to the principle of a holistic approach, students developed the competence of designing their own personal development. Through the application of the principles of monitoring and feedback, students developed their skills of assessing and recording their own achievements on the way to mastering the professional activities of teachers in an inclusive environment.

## 5 Discussion

Analysing the results of our experiment, we should note that the thesis (Kasyanenko, 2018) also covered improving the process of training future teachers for work with preschool children in an inclusive environment. The formative experiment conducted in her research involved the development of a model of training university students majoring in Pedagogy for work under the conditions of inclusion, determining the pedagogical conditions of its formation and generalization of experimental data.

Substantiating such a model, the author emphasizes the application of the contextual learning theory, activity learning theory, as well as the theoretical generalization of different experiences of using forms and methods of active learning. Kasyanenko (Kasyanenko, 2018) considers that the most important features of this type of training should be: the active position of the subject of study, when the subject of activity gradually transforms from purely educational to almost professional, as well as requirements of professional activity, setting the contextual principle of building and implementing specialist's training.

The main factor that ensured the achievement of the objective set (Kasyanenko, 2018) was involving future teachers in a special course Organization of Educational Work with Preschool Children with Mental and Physical Disabilities, which provided for quasi-professional activities aimed at learning ways and experience of particular professional actions in the process of inclusive education. The main forms of learning in this special course were problem lectures, lectures-discourses, seminar, business and situational-role games, modelling and analysis of pedagogical situations, practical classes, consultations, independent and educational research of students under the guidance of a teacher, pedagogical internship.

Without underestimating the importance of this study, we note that quasi-professional activity, although it brings students closer to understanding their future profession, cannot replace particular pedagogical activities in terms of inclusion. Instead, the focus of our experiment was the practical activities of students, which fulfilled real educational objectives as regards preschool children with special educational needs.

A significant difference of our study was the practice-centered approach, i.e. the first and main stage of training of future teachers was obtaining relevant practical experience. Instead, in her study Kasyanenko (Kasyanenko, 2018) set the objective to develop students' motivational, cognitive and reflexive competence in educational and cognitive activities.

It is important to note that in (Kasyanenko, 2018) were used questionnaires and assignments of a verbal nature ("describe", "analyse", "model", "answer the questions") to determine the operational component of the readiness of future teachers for work with preschool children in an inclusive environment. In our study, we gave preference to observation, expert evaluation and performance of practical assignments in real practice for a similar determination of the level of students' readiness.

In our experiment, we paid considerable attention to the justification and application of experiential learning styles

during the internship of students in preschool educational institutions in an inclusive environment. Internship supervisors from the university and from the place of internship used the methods of educational coaching, which gave a tangible effect in shaping the readiness of students for work in an inclusive environment. Kasyanenko (Kasyanenko, 2018) didn't study the above aspect in her thesis.

Thus, our experiment differs significantly from the thesis of (Kasyanenko, 2018) and contributes to the improvement of methods of training future teachers for work with children in an inclusive preschool environment.

## 6 Conclusion

The studies related to the improvement of future teacher training for work in preschool educational institutions paid insufficient attention to the experiential approach in the practical training of students for educational activities with children having special needs. Our research helps to eliminate this gap, and experimentally proves the effectiveness of the proposed approach, which significantly increases the level of readiness of future teachers for practical professional activities in the context of inclusion.

In the course of the research, we established that the proposed experimental approach contributes to a significant increase in the level of practical training of students — future teachers of preschool establishments — for work with children in an inclusive environment. The results of the experiment showed that the students of the experimental group as a whole showed a higher level of practical competencies under the conditions of inclusive education, such as the ability to identify special needs of children and adequately assess the causes of difficulties in the acquisition of knowledge and different activities of these children; the ability to conduct educational classes with them, adapting curricula to special needs. Besides, students showed the ability to work in a team of diverse specialists in the process of reflection on the experience gained; ability to form the readiness of healthy preschoolers for positive interaction with peers in need of correction of psychophysical development; skills to create a subject-development environment for the effective solution of educational problems taking into account the level of psychophysical development of each preschooler; experience of interaction with parents, providing them with the correct information and skills of raising children with mental and physical disabilities, etc.

In the process of internship supervision during the experiment, teachers and internship supervisors from preschool educational institutions used the method of coaching, which was based on a cyclical sequence of stages of experiential learning (analysis of the level of student professional training and collection of necessary information; elaboration of personal and professional development plan; implementation of the plan using appropriate styles and techniques; evaluation of the success of the achieved results), and provided for adhering to the principles of equality, faith in man, holistic approach, monitoring and feedback. Coaching techniques such as GROW, Structural Technique, 3D, Spiral of Practice were used.

The results of the study contribute to the development of inclusive preschool education, can be used to improve the educational process in higher educational institutions for students majoring in Preschool Education, as well as in the system of retraining and advanced training of preschool teachers.

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**Primary Paper Section: A**

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