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CRITERIA FOR TEACHING QUALITY AND LEARNING QUALITY (INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES)

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Abstract

The problem of establishing the criteria for teaching quality and learning quality is particularly relevant in inclusive education, not only because of the novelty of its implementation within the Russian higher education, but also because this problem is directly related to the many internal difficulties of this implementation. In this regard, this article is aimed at identifying the polycontextual limitations of the inclusive methodology formulated in epistemic reflexivity of teachers. Teachers through their professional activities, like sociologists in the past, have started to conceptualize and reflect upon the interaction of organizational forms and participants in the multilateral process of inclusion, which comprises of students with and without disabilities, teachers, parents, psychologists, and administrators. The leading approach of our theoretical article is based on E. Giddens' structuration theory and G. Günther's concept of polycontextuality. The article identifies the main contextuals that are vital to establish the criteria for teaching quality by teachers, as well as the contextuals that are essential to determine the criteria for learning quality by students, with an indication of their limitations and mutual influence. The theoretical considerations presented in the article enabled us to see the near-term prospects for the development of inclusion for both teachers and hearing-impaired students.

Keywords: Teaching quality criteria, learning quality criteria, inclusive education.
1. Introduction

The implementation of inclusion in Russian higher education struggles against external and internal difficulties. External problems such as adopting the very idea of inclusion by the university management, introducing specialized services, departments and conditions for training teachers, creating social interaction and specially equipped learning environment are complicated but resolvable. Meanwhile, internal problems are not only far from a solution, but, in some cases, even from a clear wording. This paper aims at considering these problems from the point of view of the interaction between the two spheres – monitoring the quality of teaching and the quality of learning in the context of inclusion.

For many high school teachers, the introduction of inclusion was a challenge from both a psychological and a professional point of view, because when the legal requirement for an accessible environment was into force, preparatory activities for teachers, psychologists, students without disabilities, tutors had not been conducted at Russian universities. In particular, it took time to explain the physiological and psychological characteristics of students with disabilities to teachers.

2. Problem Statement

Methodical guidance of teachers, primarily by trial and error, was the first step in the world of inclusion. In this field, pedagogical practices are still ahead, unfortunately, of scientific theories in Russian higher education. Nevertheless, equal non-involvement in politics both students with disabilities (in the case of our university with a hearing impairment) and teachers has the advantage that Russian teachers pay more attention to their immediate professional activity, namely, the creation of inclusive teaching methods in higher education. The relevance of the study in the terms of teaching quality and learning quality is due not only to the establishment of preliminary monitoring criteria, but also to referring to epistemic reflexivity of teachers, which is manifested in the formulation of polycontextual limitations of inclusive methodology.

Teaching quality (professional competence of a teacher in a higher educational institution) in the Russian professional standards is traditionally determined by the level of education and practical experience (length of teaching experience) of the teacher (Prikaz, 2014). Almost everywhere, professional standards establish the accomplishment of educational goals (content-related and organizational aspects of the teacher’s work) in the form of the academic results of students as the main criterion in monitoring teaching quality. However, noting the difficulty in measuring teaching quality, both foreign and Russian scientific practitioners offer a more differentiated approach to determining the criteria for teaching quality. So, Canadian researcher Strong (2011) identifies three groups of criteria: “personal characteristics, professional characteristics, pedagogical standards”. Russian scientist Dolja (2016) supplements this list with such criteria as “job satisfaction; the need for cooperation and readiness for it”. Vinokurova (2018) presents a three-level system for assessing teaching quality (personal – individual, institutional – departmental and external – state levels), as well as what the quality indicators should be: relevant, specific, measurable and implementable. Chernova and Alieva (2012) reasonably emphasize that “in the
modern theory and practice of assessing teaching quality in higher education, there are contradictions between the need to develop a methodology for assessing the performance of teaching staff and the unreadiness of universities to form systemic ideas about the quality of teachers' activities” (p. 3).

According to the long-standing tradition in Russia, the above-mentioned evidence of the internal reflection of professionals working with students without disabilities reflects only ideas about the ideals of monitoring teaching quality. As public opinion exerts little influence on the educational policy of Russia, we have to state that there is a disunity of the efforts of the state and the academic community.

The lack of unity is even more indicative of inclusion. If Swedish researchers report that their politicians show interest in introducing and supporting inclusive education and teachers working in this field (Magnússon, Göransson, & Lindqvist, 2019), in Russia the support of teachers is limited, at best, to the technical equipment of classrooms and assistive technologies developed at a particular university with substantial support from the regional level authorities. Though European researchers have identified the dependence of the stress level of a teacher working in inclusive classes on his involvement in the process (Weiss, Muckenthaler, Heimlich, Kuechler, & Kiel, 2019), Russian educators have pointed out professional burnout as a result of insufficient support from psychologists. At present, methodological developments and their introduction into inclusive education in Russia are supported mainly by grants from scientific foundations such as the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR).

3. Research Questions

The article identifies the main contextuals that are vital to establish the criteria for teaching quality by teachers, as well as the contextuals that are essential to determine the criteria for learning quality by students, with an indication of their limitations and mutual influence. The theoretical considerations presented in the article enable to see the near-term prospects for the development of inclusion for both teachers and hearing-impaired students. In our work, we are going to fill the gap in research on the development of the criteria for teaching quality and learning quality based on the example of the introduction of inclusion in a Russian technical university.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the article is to determine the criteria for teaching quality and learning quality in inclusive education. More specifically, theoretical insights of the higher education system, which is still “delayed” in the transition from classical science with its rigid separation of the subject and object of knowledge to reflexive science, recognizing the dynamics of various options of their evolution and interaction, are presented. What interests us here are the two spheres influencing one another: first, the sphere of teaching quality, which develops around the subject – a teacher and an object – his reflection on the quality of his own work and on the obstacles that limit the quality improvement, and, secondly, the sphere of learning quality in inclusive education, which develops around the subject – a student with disabilities (in our case - with hearing disabilities) and an object – his reflection on the quality of his own studies at the university.
5. Research Methods

Epistemic reflexivity (Brownlee et al., 2019) of teachers in Russia is still isolated and not brought into a coherent theoretical system, unlike, for example, epistemic reflexivity in sociology (Dudina, 2018), but, has a number of common features with sociological knowledge.

General-methodological prerequisites are the following:
- firstly, a teacher, as well as a sociologist, becomes an observer reflecting on the basis of his activity, which leads to the emergence of a “second order” system (as in cybernetics) (Foerster, 1979), which presents itself as its own referent (Luhmann, 2009);
- secondly, a teacher, as well as a sociologist, becomes interested in structuring his own activities in order to achieve more qualitative rather than quantitative results;
- thirdly, a teacher, like a modern sociologist, begins to recognize himself as a contextually specific subject.

The above general-methodological prerequisites set a common “frame” in establishing the problem field of our research. However, referring directly to pedagogy as a sphere of epistemic reflexivity, we have found several significant differences from sociology.

Establishing the criteria for teaching quality in inclusive education

We will use the ideas of Giddens' (1997) structure theory and the concept of Günther’s (1971) polycontextuality to preliminarily establish the criteria for teaching quality.

Teaching quality realized by the subject-teacher, who is “inside” the educational process in the situation of inclusion, is associated with the recognition of:

a) limitations of the impact of the organizational context of socialization (a university that shares the ideas of inclusion and builds up the learning process accessible for students with different types of disabilities).

In addition to socialization, hearing impaired students gain knowledge that is qualitatively different from the school level that is often unsystematic;

b) limitations of the disciplining impact of a higher schoolteacher, unlike a schoolteacher. A university lecturer is not a tutor and assistant of students, but he is primarily a scientist, a researcher immersed in his subject. Having worked with students without disabilities for many years, a high school teacher is accustomed to the role of a consultant who directs independent research work of students and states the exact same requirements for students with disabilities. A university lecturer is well aware that reducing this level of requirements will inevitably lead to a decline in the quality of teaching and, as a result, in the quality of learning;

c) constant interaction of the structure of the educational space and the subjects-teachers working in it. University teachers are not hostages of the rules established earlier for students without disabilities, they have the power to change teaching methods rather than curriculum as a whole. Moreover, they rely on their past effective teaching experience, which led to the success of students in mastering learning material. However, applying new methods to inclusion, teachers discover successful methods of consolidating knowledge and skills for students without disabilities;
d) several important contextures, namely: professional standards, quality of the methodological work of teachers in inclusion, personal qualities of the teacher. Let us take a closer look at these contextures and their influence on the criteria for teaching quality in inclusive higher education.

We first explain what contexture means. This concept was introduced by Günther (1971) at the beginning of the 20th century developing his many-valued logic. Overcoming the classical two-digit logic (true / false, good / evil), he found a solution in intermediate, relative indicators (“more true than false”, etc.), grouped by degree of approximation / distance from the desired category. These contextures, in fact, set the dynamics of ontological states: if you think of life and death, for example, as certain ontological states, to characterize which it is enough to establish “exist” or “non-exist”, then the interaction of life and death (namely, this interaction is formed the fate of every living creature) is always multivalued. In the same way, a teacher dealing with the educational space of inclusion, consciously or not, moves into the dynamic sphere of coexistence of health and disease, which is characterized by ambiguity.

Thus, the degree of hearing impairment (degree of severity and recovery after a surgical procedure) of students affects the quality of perception of learning material. A teacher teaches a class working with a group in which some students have successfully completed rehabilitation and hear almost as students without disabilities, some students have difficulties (including psychological ones) in using cochlear apparatuses (for example, they hardly hear certain sounds and therefore incorrectly perceive abstract and professional vocabulary), and some students are inoperable deaf and communicate with the teacher only using a sign language through an interpreter. This situation leads to the abandonment of universal teaching methods suitable for students without disabilities and to the development of an individual approach to each student taking into account his state of health. In addition, a teacher, as the bearer of the norm of health, needs to put more effort into teaching deaf people and a significantly less into the successfully rehabilitated students. In other words, polycontextuality of coexistence and interaction of disease and health for a teacher manifests itself in various pressures on his physicality and intellect.

It should be noted that the standards in Russia adopted for the “teacher” profession have not changed and remain focused on the organizational and content-related aspects of the teacher’s activities and do not take into account the increasing burden on the teacher in inclusion. There is a contradiction now: a right to higher education for disabled people at any Russian university approved by the legislators and professional standards which have not specified labor intensity for university teachers (as opposed to the worktime standards for teachers of special schools). Nevertheless, this intensity is so great that not every teacher will agree to work in inclusion. Here, physical and intellectual efforts cannot always be compensated financially. According to this parameter, polycontextuality of interaction between teacher's labor standards in inclusion and health standards is manifested in the absence of salary indexation and compensation for the health expenses for teachers working in inclusion.

However, even under such conditions, teachers continue to work in inclusion. And this is due, above all, to their personal qualities: patience, goodwill, striving to do better today than yesterday and to creatively solving methodological problems. Polycontextuality of coexistence of a teacher in the environment of students with and without disabilities is manifested in the developing of his personal qualities in inclusion.
So, the criteria for teaching quality in inclusive education, from our point of view, are the teachers’ perceptions of how well they are able to:

a) transfer knowledge as a system to students whose school knowledge is almost not structured and not strictly controlled;

b) keep a high level of requirements for independent research of students;

c) create new methodological solutions when working with students with and without disabilities;

d) develop their positive personal qualities;

e) maintain their physical, intellectual and mental health.

Nowadays these criteria are significant for teachers themselves, but not for a university (at the local level) and not for the ministry developing professional standards (at the federal level) due to the fact that the opinion of the academic community in inclusion is not taken into account.

Establishing the criteria for learning quality in inclusive education

Now we will look at the process of inclusion from the other side - from the side of the student with disabilities.

Learning quality perceived by a subject-student turns out to be associated with the manifestations of the following contexts:

a) the complexity of scientific knowledge obtained at the university;

b) a high level of requirements for independent work when preparing for lectures and seminars;

c) the need to interact in small groups and with the whole class;

d) high motivation to continue learning, learning skills,

e) involvement in student life and interaction with students without disabilities.

Let us consider the most important contradictions and limitations of these contexts in their polycontextuality.

The complexity of scientific knowledge for hearing impaired students consists of such indicators as:

- the absence of “points of interaction” between theory and practice (for example, many students have never held a test tube in their hands, and they know about chemical experiments only from pictures);

- the lack of a system of subject categories, the complexity of perception of abstract vocabulary;

- the lack of understanding of the interaction of sections within each academic discipline and various disciplines with each other;

- the inability to work with texts, including scientific texts (for example, works of Russian classical literature many hearing impaired students learned “from the movies” watching in the classroom, without reading texts and writing essays);

- poor speech skills (preference is given to an easier lexically and grammatically sign language);

- poor logical thinking (preference is given not even visual thinking, but ordinary thinking);

- poor scientific vocabulary.

Polycontextuality of the interaction of past and new educational experience is manifested, firstly, in denying the usefulness of school knowledge, secondly, in teaching with regard to filling the gaps in the school system (as is known, correcting is always more difficult than learning from scratch), thirdly, in the
organization of work with new knowledge based on an understanding of the terminology of the academic
discipline.

The above contexture is a problem field not only for students, but also for university teachers. In
fact, students and teachers are focused on filling the knowledge gaps in the first year of study at the
university. The lack of understanding of elementary scientific concepts among hearing impaired students
(such as analysis, type, kind, class, phrase, mole, energy, syntax, and others) causes fair resentment on the
part of university teachers against learning quality of hearing impaired students in special schools, which
is a direct result of low teaching quality there.

A high level of requirements for independent work and the need to interact in a group are
motivated by the intention of a university teacher to maintain the proper quality of teaching. These
contextures are developed in the field of social interaction, but in different ways. Students without parents
learn to use Internet resources and university library funds more quickly, communicate more actively with
the library staff, as well as with teachers, whenever they meet anything incomprehensible. However, it is
these students who do not check the authenticity of information found online. As a result, their quickly
completed tasks are not always right. Although students with parents are slower to cope with independent
tasks: they need time to understand (parents need time to explain) and to check the correctness of the
results obtained, their assignments are often correct, and their answers at seminars confirm that these
students correctly understood and remembered the new material.

Working at a seminar in a group also activates communication, but first of all, not with a teacher,
but with a sign language interpreter. It should be noted that the presence of an interpreter in all classes has
a huge impact on the hearing impaired, and especially on deaf students. Often, an interpreter provides not
only sign language interpretation of what was said by the teacher, but also advises students what to pay
attention to. In addition, our interpreters because of their personal characteristics, namely, goodwill and
thoughtfulness, support those students who need time to understand the task, create a cheerful emotional
atmosphere during the lesson, which has a very positive effect on the harmonization of relationships
between students and teachers, and within the group itself.

High motivation to continue learning is linked to the hopes of hearing impaired students to find a
decent job in the future. This contexture passes from the field of ideal representations of students with
disabilities to the field of real social interaction of the university management with employers. It should
be pointed out that employers are currently obliged to provide quotas for people with disabilities in
Russia, but this fact does not reduce the tax burden. In addition, an employer is under a duty to provide a
disabled person with an equipped workplace, for which certification is required every four years and for
which a strict reporting form is maintained, as well as a tutor-mentor who is obliged to introduce a
disabled person into the production process on a voluntary basis. It is not surprising that employers are
not interested in disabled people as workers, but we continue to hope that with time the economic
situation in our region will improve and there will be enough jobs for everyone.

The ability to learn is an important learning skill that was not practically developed in the hearing-
impaired students at school. However, this ability or, more specifically, the ability to cope with learning
tasks, leads to different degrees of learning. Experience has shown that deaf students with great difficulty
cope with easy tasks and often do not cope at all. The less the hearing is damaged, the more successful
rehabilitation is, the faster the student learns how to study, including independently, the faster he copes with the tasks of medium difficulty and even, individually, of high difficulty.

Interdisciplinary tasks and tasks on digital and non-digital platforms help hearing impaired students to consolidate the ability to learn to. Both types of tasks performed as a part of an individual learning path increase the quality indicators of students’ academic performance. As we see, this contexture develops in the educational interaction of the student and the teacher.

Such a contexture as involvement in student life and interaction with students without disabilities also develops in a large number of contacts, now in two fields of social practice: people with disabilities within inclusion and people with disabilities in the events of university life. The limitations of this contexture are the ideas of students without disabilities about mental retardation of disabled people; however, these ideas are not confirmed in communication and everyday practices of greeting, help, preparation and holding of joint events. It should be noted that the disabled are ready to establish contacts with people without disabilities and do not despair if something does not work the first time. On the other hand, students without disabilities do not avoid contact with the hearing impaired and try to help them. The result of this interaction was a series of wonderful concerts, during which the hearing impaired students sang and danced, and many of them took to the stage for the first time in their lives.

So, the criteria for learning quality in inclusive education, from our point of view, are the ideas of the student how well he is able to:

a) maintain the motivation to study further;

b) organize independent work in studying academic disciplines, first of all, their terminology and fundamental laws;

c) interact with people without disabilities in various situations, both educational and extracurricular, with peers and with the representatives of the older generation – teachers, librarians, methodologists, psychologists, sign language interpreters.

6. Findings

So, with the help of epistemic reflexivity of teachers working in inclusion, we have established the preliminary criteria for teaching quality and learning quality in inclusive education. Epistemic reflexivity is based on personal experience, which teachers do not relate only to their official duties, but as participation in lives of hearing impaired students – directly through teaching as well as through communication with the help of sign language interpreters, psychologists and methodologists. This personal commitment, most likely, will not and should not become an organized institution with its own rules, patterns and stereotypes, just as there cannot and should not be a universal inclusive teaching methodology.

Continuous communication of teachers and students in inclusion sets the dynamic nature of the interaction between the established criteria for teaching quality and learning quality.

Innovative aspirations of the teacher, ensuring the educational process in inclusion, have not only personal, but also autopoietic nature, because the “reference point” and comparison are inside, not outside of the learning process. At the same time, the subjective assessment of learning quality of hearing impaired students is also leading.
In addition, the following criteria are mutually influential:

1) self-assessment of the ability to transfer knowledge as a system and to maintain a high level of requirements for independent research work of students by teachers, and self-assessment of the ability to organize independent work while studying by hearing impaired students;

2) professionalism and expert level knowledge in their academic discipline of teachers, and learnability, more specifically, the ability to cope with learning tasks of students;

3) high personal qualities of teachers, and motivation to continue studying of students;

4) a creative approach to the development of methods and personal learning paths by teachers, and self-assessment of the ability to build a successful dialogue with people without disabilities by students.

The problem of establishing the criteria for teaching quality and learning quality in inclusive education, as we have found out, is far from being addressed within any federal educational standard, both for teachers (professional standard) and for students with disabilities (educational standards). However, if an individual learning plan can be offered to students taking into account their health status, teachers’ work has not been standardized and there is no alternative to financial compensation for their health expenses.

Nevertheless, work in inclusion is an exceptional pedagogical experience, for which future teachers need to be trained from a professional and psychological point of view. We believe that we have the right to ask the academic community: what alternative, besides the financial one, in compensation of labor effort can be offered to teachers working in inclusion?

Both positive and negative experiences of interaction between teachers and students in inclusion cannot always be formulated to the level of epistemic reflexivity. Reflection, as a rule, is not taken into consideration. That leads to the second question: how reflection on this unique pedagogical experience can be provided? And how obtained results can be transferred to young teachers starting their career?

We leave these questions for further discussion and dialogue with all teachers working in the field of training young teachers.

7. Conclusion

Epistemic reflexivity or appeal to the basis of the professional activity among teachers, as well as among sociologists, is far from immediately formed into a coherent theoretical system. It is connected not only with wider social interaction when working with students without disabilities, but also with methodological difficulties in daily teaching practice and the impossibility of development of the universal inclusive methodology.

We have identified the main polycontextual interactions that influence the definition of such criteria for teaching quality by teachers, as the ability to transfer their knowledge as a system, professionalism, high personal qualities, and the ability for creative methodological solutions. In addition, we have identified the limitations and interactions of contextuals that are important for establishing learning quality by students, such as autonomy, learning ability, communication, and motivation.

In the short term, the tendency to develop the individual learning paths that take into account the health status of students with disabilities is likely to continue in inclusive higher education in Russia. As a
result, the requirements of the academic standards will not be entirely fulfilled by students and individual tasks of various levels of complexity will be elaborated by teachers.

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