

Key: Ethos of Inclusive Education

(based on Lithuanian practice)

Inclusive education by definition strives to provide *equal educational opportunities* for every child. The term 'inclusion' has largely replaced 'integration' and is intended to represent a different concept. The change in terminology reflects a shift from a needs-based to a rights-based agenda. The role of teachers in developing inclusive education is central to its effectiveness. Consequently, teachers' attitudes, as well as their behaviours, play a crucial role in successful implementation of inclusive education, the key factors of which are the positive ethos, with a values-based teachers' commitment to inclusion.

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) issued a Profile of Inclusive Teachers, a framework of core values of an inclusive teacher. The first core value is Valuing Learner Diversity. It implies the development of teacher's intercultural competence which builds fundamental grounds for ethos in inclusive education.

Cultural diversity can be found in the context of ethnicity, culture, gender, plurality of languages and religions, age, social class, sexual orientation, professional function, educational background, mental and physical capabilities, health. In order to be able to recognize cultural variables within a group of children, teachers need to develop **cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness** or so called **cultural critical consciousness** that involves **self-reflection**, the ability of standing back from themselves and critically reflect on their own cultural values, norms, beliefs and attitudes. Self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness also involve the best ways to teach culturally different students for maximum positive effects. Shortage of self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness lead to neglectfulness, lack of understanding, categorization and labelling of children that consequently can have a negative impact upon their development and learning opportunities.

An inclusive teacher respects cultural differences and is aware of millstones of ethnocentric attitudes. Within the value attitude of ethnocentrism, individuals judge other groups in relation to their own particular culture, which is perceived as a standard especially with concern to values, social norms, beliefs, behavior, customs, and religion. The opposite value attitude is called **cultural relativism** which is based on the idea that all norms, beliefs, and values are dependent on their cultural context, and should be treated as such.

Another obstacle to inclusive education is the tendency to essentialize cultural differences and develop patronizing attitudes towards children from minority groups. Essentialist notions of culture leads to the usual mistake that everyone in a certain culture is the same. It explains the behavior of people in terms of their culture, allowing "culture" to become greater than the people themselves. Therefore for an inclusive teacher it is important to **avoid falling into the culturist trap of reducing children to less than they are**, in the same way as it is necessary to avoid racist and sexist traps.

Teacher's intercultural competence implies **awareness of social inequalities** that often correspond with cultural diversity. On the society level diversity turns into inequality. Inclusive teachers understand the problems connected with social inequality and are aware of the key role they and education plays in establishing democracy and social justice in society. She takes responsibility for promoting education equity in the classroom, **treating every child as equally important and valued individuals. Seeing parents as equals**, an inclusive teacher strives to create and maintain positive relationships with them.

Since children's emotions affect the way they develop and learn, an inclusive teacher is supposed to be able to **connect to, and understand their students** in order to meet the children's needs. In other words, a teacher must be emphatic and focused on nurturing learning rather than judging performance. Empathy resists labels, overcomes stereotypes and breaks through the social construction of the other. Therefore it is an essential part of culturally responsive pedagogy.