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THE TRANSFORMATIONAL INFLUENCE OF INCLUSION IN LITERATURE ON THE FORMATION OF A MORE EMPATHIC UKRAINIAN SOCIETY

Abstract

The article examines the concept of inclusion in the literature, emphasizes its meaning, challenges, opportunities and the transformative impact it has on the formation of a more inclusive and empathetic society. Using specific examples, the author analyzes the main directions of inclusive literature in Ukraine, which develops within the framework of individual projects. The article emphasizes that inclusion in literature is a powerful tool for developing empathy and it begins with representation. Inclusion involves making literature more accessible to a wider audience, explores social problems in Ukraine and fights against stereotypes and prejudices. The author emphasizes that children's literature is an important area for the formation of empathy of future generations, where the seeds of inclusion can be sown early. Inclusion in Ukrainian literature values the importance of authentic works. The article proves that authors and publishers in Ukraine play a crucial role in promoting inclusion through literature. Also, inclusion in literature is closely related to education and curriculum development. The author emphasizes the existing problems of inclusive literature in Ukraine: social resistance to changes, constant prejudices and the slow pace of cultural changes. Through the stories we tell and the voices we uplift, we can build a Ukraine that is not only stronger and more unified but also more just and inclusive for all.

Keywords: Inclusion in Ukrainian literature, empathy, authentic works, children's inclusive literature in Ukraine, inclusive literary projects.

In recent years, Ukrainian society has experienced significant cultural, political, and social changes. Amidst these shifts, the role of literature in shaping national consciousness and societal values has become increasingly evident. One of the most profound impacts literature can have is in fostering a culture of empathy and inclusion. By reflecting diverse voices and experiences, Ukrainian literature has the potential to play a pivotal role in the formation of a more empathic and inclusive society.

Empathy — the ability to understand and share the feelings of another—is crucial in building a cohesive society. Literature is a powerful tool for developing empathy because it allows readers to step into the lives of characters who may be very different from themselves. Through stories, readers can experience the world from multiple perspectives, which can challenge prejudices, reduce stereotypes, and encourage more inclusive thinking.

Literature has the power to captivate, inspire and challenge our understanding of the world. That is why in recent years in Ukraine, as well as around the world, more and more attention has been paid to inclusion in literature, where writers and publishers seek to amplify diverse voices, narratives and perspectives.

As Olena Osmolovska, director of the "12" Publishing Center, notes: "inclusive literature is focused on the realization of the rights of persons with special needs and the formation of a positive perception of disability and personal diversity" [7].

The goal of inclusive literature is to attract people with special needs to the general cultural environment through interesting book offerings.

Today, inclusive literature in Ukraine unites the following areas:

1. Literature that tells about people with special needs, forming in readers a positive perception of the condition of such people (books that focus the reader's interest on universal qualities and possibilities of literary characters with disabilities and are designed to make communication with such people mutually interesting and comfortable).

"Today, the few domestic publications whose characters are people with disabilities shift the emphasis from the tragedy of the main characters, sadness and suffering to an interesting story. This is especially observed in children's literature. It is because of an interesting story that it is much easier for writers to convey the understanding that all people are different, and some have certain characteristics and need, first of all, perception and understanding, and then, of course, adequate help" [7]. For example, "books about heroes with special needs who change the perception of literature "The Adventures of Dasha and Shadow" by Victoria Nadykto, "The Thirty-First Meridian" by Yevgenia Pirog, These books are not about diseases, but about adventures and feelings. Children, even with a serious illness, can be happy, interesting and make the lives of others interesting, full, and meaningful" [8].

2. Literature aimed at the perception of personal diversity; since each person approaches the process of reading differently and at different ages. According to the writer Tetyana Stus: "adults perceive literature as a work of art: they appreciate the author's style, the translation, they can pay attention to ideological components, and children like to get used to the role in the plot and empathize with the characters. Some people find the stories of world classics fascinating, while others find it more interesting to read the story of their favorite video game character. Hence the popularity of all Minecraft game guides or Olga Kupriyan's "Lola's Diary" – a prequel to the Ukrainian teenage series "#School"» [4].

3. Literature for children with special educational needs. "For Ukrainian writers, inclusiveness in children's literature seems natural and obvious, as a children's book can "program" the mind, establish certain patterns of behavior and perception of the world. For example, the dilogy "Loudly, quietly, whisper" and "I see so" about hearing and sight of the creative workshop "Agrafka" of the Stry LeV Publishing House» [10].

It is generally known that "despite the popularization of social networks, it is difficult for children, and later teenagers, to socialize in real life after the virtual one. Literature becomes one of the most effective and least traumatic ways of socialization, because it develops empathy, allows the reader to feel a part of history" [4].

Children's literature is a critical area where the seeds of empathy and inclusion can be planted early. Books that portray diverse characters and life experiences can teach young readers about acceptance, tolerance, and kindness. In Ukraine, the growing body of children's literature that includes stories of children from different backgrounds, with various abilities, or from non-traditional family structures, is helping to shape a more inclusive mindset from a young age.

For example, books that feature protagonists with disabilities or stories about children navigating the complexities of growing up in a multicultural environment can help young readers develop a natural sense of empathy. By normalizing diversity in children's literature, Ukrainian society can raise a generation that is more open-minded, accepting, and equipped to thrive in a diverse world.

Inclusion in literature begins with representation. Writers consciously explore and highlight diverse voices, experiences, and backgrounds. By depicting characters of different races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds, Ukrainian literature reflects the reality of our diverse world. Inclusive literature offers readers the opportunity to engage with a wider range of human experience and challenge dominant narratives that have historically marginalized certain groups.

In a diverse society like Ukraine, where regional, linguistic, and cultural differences abound, literature that includes and celebrates this diversity can help bridge divides and foster understanding. Ukrainian literature, traditionally centered on themes of national identity and historical struggles, has begun to expand its focus to include narratives from marginalized and underrepresented communities. This includes the experiences of ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and other groups who have historically been sidelined in mainstream cultural discourse. By bringing these voices to the forefront, Ukrainian literature is helping to create a more nuanced and inclusive narrative of what it means to be Ukrainian.

Inclusion involves making literature more accessible to a wider audience. In Ukraine, a lot of work is being done to ensure the availability of literature in various formats, languages and price ranges, including books in Braille, with the use of icons, tactile books, picture books, etc. Publishers and libraries are working to remove barriers such as language barriers, socio-economic limitations and physical disabilities that can hinder access to literature. By promoting accessibility, literature becomes more inclusive and reaches a wider readership. "More and more Braille books and audio book recordings are appearing in Ukraine. For example, to the comic book "Blindman" by Volodymyr Havrysh and Andriy Benytskyi about the perception of space by a blind person, the Braille alphabet was added for people who cannot read with their fingers" [10].

Inclusion in literature also explores important social issues in Ukraine. The authors delve into topics such as war, racism, sexism, mental health, socioeconomic inequality, and more. Through their stories, literature sheds light on these social issues, promotes dialogue, and prompts readers to critically examine societal norms and structures.

In Ukraine, where historical and contemporary tensions sometimes create social rifts, literature that fosters empathy can be particularly transformative. For instance, works that explore the lives of Crimean Tatars, or narratives that delve into the challenges faced by internally displaced persons due to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, can help the broader population understand and relate to these experiences on a human level. This understanding is essential for cultivating a more compassionate and unified society.

For example, "Apples of War" by Nadiya Gerbish is about post-traumatic stress disorder. Lyudmila Okhrimenko has three books on the subject of war: "Adventures of a fly in boiling water in the occupied territory", a collection of short stories "Volunteer stories" co-authored with Mykhailo Kaschavtsev, and the novel "Oscar", which won a special award as the best novel on the subject of war at the International of the "Coronation of the Word" literary competition in 2021. the book "Volunteer Stories 2014–2022" won the literary prize named after Mykola Tomenko [5].

"Through discussions around books, sensitive psychological and social issues can be raised, and a common emotional space can be created in the conversation about the situations in the plot. For example, in books like "Living Writers. To parents" or "How to raise a reader" explain exactly how you can build communication around a book" [4].

Inclusion in literature involves fighting stereotypes and prejudices. Literary works on the topic of inclusion are important for raising awareness, forming a tolerant environment and promoting the inclusive development of Ukrainian society. They can influence beliefs, stereotypes and attitudes towards people with disabilities, prompt changes and improvements in society, which contribute to wider inclusion and equality for all [2, p. 85].

The authors deliberately depart from conventional characterizations and offer more nuanced portrayals of individuals and communities. By humanizing marginalized groups, literature helps break down stereotypes, foster empathy, and foster a deeper understanding of the complexity of the human condition.

Ukrainian writers avoid tokenism and stereotypes that simplify a person's worldview to primitive markers. For example, "Maya and her mothers" by Larisa Denysenko is a book about tolerance and diversity of families. Such literature deepens our empathy and ensures a tolerant society where everyone will feel included - inclusive" [10].

Inclusion in Ukrainian literature values the importance of authentic works. The need for stories written by authors from marginalized communities based on their personal experiences is emphasized. By highlighting marginalized authors, literature provides authentic representation of diverse identities and promotes a sense of self-sufficiency, social inclusion, empowerment, and cultural pride.

Also, inclusion in literature is closely related to education and curriculum development. Educators in Ukraine recognize the importance of including diverse literature in the educational process, as it exposes students to different cultures, life experiences, and perspectives. By including inclusive literature in the curriculum, educators foster empathy, promote tolerance, and critical thinking in students.

For example, the curriculum on Ukrainian literature for children with intellectual disabilities for the adaptation cycle is based on the values of the New Ukrainian School. Its purpose is to form the foundations of reading culture, motivation for reading, to instill interest in books, to teach how to perceive a work of art as a phenomenon of art, to promote the mental development of students and to correct their shortcomings by means of fiction, creative self-realization [6].

Artists with disabilities are constantly supported in Ukraine. For example, the Mystetskyi Arsenal Charitable Fund, the Ukrainian Cultural Fund, and the Nechitaylo Family Fund, which has been translating children's books into Braille since 2018. The publishing house "Ranok" founded the inclusive section "Kangaroo", which publishes non-fiction for adults about various approaches in upbringing and education for children with disabilities [10].

For the most part, Inclusive literature in Ukraine develops within individual projects. For example, within the framework of Olena Osmolovska's project "Inclusive Literature" the collection of short stories "Terra inclusion 2018" was published, where Lyudmila Okhrimenko was published - the author of the novels "Easy Behavior" and "Oscar", the short story "Zaida", the books "The Adventures of an Adult Pinocchio of the Female Gender" and "Adventures of a fly in boiling water in the occupied territory", collection of short stories "Volunteer Stories 2014–2022" novel [5; 9].

For example, the website <https://inclusivebooks.org/> collects inclusive editions of modern Ukrainian authors and forms a single electronic database of domestic inclusive literature, which simplifies access to these materials for parents, teachers, librarians and other interested persons. This project appeared to improve the level of understanding and acceptance of inclusion in Ukrainian society. It reflects the importance of creating an environment where every person has the opportunity to realize himself and feel included [11]. Ukrainian "publishers began to mark books in this way. After all, they are primarily driven by commercial interests. So this means that such literature has its reader. There is now a bibliographic index of all inclusive literature published over the past 20 years. Inclusive literature helps to make a hero with a disability socially attractive, becomes a prevention of indifference, callousness, and cruelty. And every year there are more and more such books" [8].

Authors and publishers in Ukraine play a critical role in promoting inclusion through literature. By consciously choosing to write and publish works that reflect the diversity of Ukrainian society, they are helping to shape the cultural narrative. This includes supporting emerging writers from marginalized communities, translating works from minority languages

into Ukrainian, and ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented in literary awards and festivals.

Moreover, initiatives that promote reading and literacy across different segments of society, including rural areas and underserved communities, are essential. These efforts help ensure that inclusive literature reaches a wide audience, thereby maximizing its impact on society.

Despite advances in promoting inclusion in literature, the publishing industry still faces challenges related to oversight, bias, and underrepresentation. It is important for publishers, art managers, literary agents and literary awards to actively seek out and support diverse authors. Efforts must be made to provide platforms and resources for marginalized authors where they can share their stories and ensure that their work is fairly recognized and distributed.

Although the influence of inclusive literature in Ukraine is growing, problems remain. Societal resistance to change, persistent prejudice, and the slow pace of cultural change can hinder the widespread adoption of inclusive narratives. However, the potential of literature to influence society is enormous. Telling and sharing more inclusive stories can contribute to a gradual but profound transformation of societal attitudes.

The transformational influence of inclusion in literature on the formation of a more empathic Ukrainian society cannot be overstated. By reflecting the diverse experiences of all Ukrainians, literature has the power to challenge stereotypes, bridge cultural divides, and foster a more compassionate and understanding society. As Ukraine continues to navigate its complex social landscape, the role of inclusive literature in shaping a more empathic future is more crucial than ever. Through the stories we tell and the voices we uplift, we can build a Ukraine that is not only stronger and more unified but also more just and inclusive for all. "Artistic works that raise issues of inclusive space, encourage empathy and understanding, create an emotional connection between the reader and characters who have faced the challenges of disability. This can lead to greater empathy and understanding of the needs and desires of these individuals, as well as increased social awareness and support" [1. p. 12].

Today, inclusive literature in Ukraine should, first of all, "accustom children's and parents' environment to a tolerant attitude towards different people and, through the explanation of their characteristics, to understanding effective ways of helping. Shifting the emphasis from "regret" to "perceive", "understand" is one of the priority tasks of inclusive literature. The concept of "inclusive" is transitional on the way to creating a comfortable social society. "Inclusive literature" as a term should bring publications that focus on people with special needs to the book market, and eventually disappear, leaving behind a permanent habit of literature about different people. It is through such processes that the definition of "special" people or "people with special needs" must give way to the understanding that each of us is special" [7].

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