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Special Education for Disabled People in Ukraine: Innovation and Experiments

Recent years have witnessed dramatic qualitative changes in the system of special education for disabled children in Ukraine. The transition of comprehensive schools to a 12-year term of education brought improvements into the system of special education for all types of schools. For instance, blind, partially blind, deaf, hard-of-hearing children and those affected by cerebral palsy now study 13 years: elementary (grades 1-4), secondary (grades 5-10), and high school (grades 11-13). Learning-disabled, mentally-challenged and emotionally-disturbed children receive a 10-year education: elementary (grades 1-4) and secondary school (grades 5-10). Special schools also provide pre-school programs for children who want to be prepared for studies at school.

We have completed the development of the National Standards of Special Education (elementary school level). These include defining the contents on subjects taught and their basic curricula, which are obligatory for every type of special school, whether they are state, municipal, private or charitable associations. The basic curriculum includes both *invariable* and *variable* educational content. The *invariable* component contains compulsory subjects of national importance, rehabilitation measures to treat children's disabilities, and determines the minimum number of school hours assigned. The *variable* component is aimed at the developing students' special needs and their cognitive interests. Each school has its specific features and peculiarities concerning the type of rehabilitation efforts undertaken, the region's history, culture and national traditions. In this way, the individual approach is realized for each student.

The basic curriculum presupposes the existence of compulsory classes:

Classes that make up the basis of comprehensive schools and comprise a rehabilitation section;

Individual and group rehabilitation classes;

Optional classes.

The introduction of National Standards of Special Education (elementary school level) renewed the content of Ukrainian education, its approbation and application in school practice. A detailed analysis was made of previous Ukrainian experience that was gained while constructing educational content for children with special needs. It took into consideration special education, psychological achievements, as well as legislative acts, and helped with the completion of curricula, original textbooks, and didactic materials for all types of special schools. We also launched activities for the development of curricula and textbooks for younger children with different disabilities.

Such an approach to the structure, contents of education and mechanisms for their realization, presupposes changes in school education in accordance with the demands of a democratic society. It is aimed at an appropriate level of students' knowledge, their complete social and psychological adaptation, and integration into today's social environment.

Together with comprehensive education, special schools adopted a new system of control and assessment of student achievement in accordance with state requirements on educational qualification. While developing this new system of student evaluation, we took into consideration characteristics of personality development, as well as specific educational principles that make up the foundations of modern special education. This includes: preliminary study, orientation to student rehabilitation, differential and individual approaches towards educational levels, integrity of studies, general development, consideration of students' achievements and not their failures, unity of educational demands and the individual characteristics of a child.

The Ministry of Education and Science, the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, and the Institute of Special Pedagogy took important steps towards

consolidating material resources for special boarding schools and improving the living conditions of disabled children, their studies and rehabilitation. These measures have proven to be effective, especially since, at present, all special schools possess special technical equipment and the methodological support for using it. Every school has equipped a special classroom for studies, using interactive educational, medical and rehabilitation technologies, job orientation, and physical therapy.

An important contribution to a successful rehabilitation process in special schools is work training for students. Well-equipped workshops of varied profiles help students prepare themselves for independent work upon graduation. This subject has more hours in the curriculum of special schools than in regular ones. However, many special schools are opening additional classes for more in-depth studies of separate subjects (humanities, sciences, arts, technology) in order to prepare their graduates to enter higher educational establishments and ensure success in future working careers.

Parent and different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide very important social and pedagogical support to disabled children. They try to influence state policy in order to expand public assistance and provide equal access to qualitative education and other vital spheres of life. Increasingly, NGOs are working to create conditions under which children with special needs will be able to prove their potentials, reach the maximum level of their development and social integration. Thanks to the initiative of parents of disabled children and the support of international NGOs in the mid 1990s, we opened a number of new types of educational rehabilitation centers. Children who study there suffer from autism and other highly complex (psychophysical) disorders, which make it impossible for them to study in traditional schools. However, as experience has demonstrated, this support is limited in time and space. As a rule it is irregular and when the project is over, funding stops, making the future of these children unpredictable. We should take as a motto for ourselves that “all children in Ukraine are children of one state” – all children must be assured that they will not find themselves on the fringe of society. This suggests that the state should, by some means, support those centers started with the support of international non-governmental organizations.

Development of market relations and different kinds of property ownership will lead to more activity by NGOs and charitable foundations. Together with the state, they will share responsibility for creating equal access to qualitative education for all children, regardless of their level of psychophysical development. The government should develop a program to help coordinate the activities of non-governmental public organizations with regional state structures in order to stimulate the support they provide for participants in the special education process (i.e. through taxes, advertising services, preferences in state orders, etc.).

Today, Ukraine's system of special education is in the process of reconstruction. We are building up its democratic humanistic foundations, creating alternative models of psychological and pedagogical support, establishing mechanisms for free choice of educational opportunities, level and range of education. This approach is based on two key principles:

- to leave the child with family and society wherever possible, and favor his/her natural process of socialization
- to develop and approve additional models of special education, giving the parents of disabled children a chance to choose from among various types of education for their child.

We find a third principle very promising as well – to link financing of educational services with the child, rather than the school, so that parents can choose the level and range of services provided for their child. Here, we can benefit from studying the positive experiences of Western countries. Under such conditions, schools are interested in enlarging their number of students and, thereby, improving educational services. The local state budget should provide the sums of money necessary to satisfy the educational demands of a disabled child regardless of the type of school (i.e. - state, municipal or private) delivering the educational services.

To fulfill the basic provisions of the UN Convention on Children's Rights, the World Declaration on Children's Preservation, Survival, Protection, and Development, as well as National programs of social and pedagogical support for disabled children and their parents, Ukraine has

launched a state experiment on educating children with disabilities in regular schools. This pilot program works along two directions:

First, children with special needs are integrated into regular comprehensive schools. This model presupposes the organization of special classes for children with some type of impairment in a general school. Here, students follow special curricula, study in special programs, have special textbooks and their own rehabilitation classes. They do all this separately from regular students. They do interact with their healthy peers, participating in various spheres of school life during extracurricular time.

Second, children with different disabilities are educated inclusively among regular students. The educational process here is differentiated according to the child's ability to cope with the program. At the same time, rehabilitation measures are undertaken. In such classrooms a teacher should receive the help of an assistant who knows how to use different rehabilitation technologies. This assistant provides support of various kinds and, if necessary, psychological services. Such classes usually have fewer students.

The introduction of new models of integrated education for disabled children does not mean that the network of traditional special schools and boarding schools should be reduced in number. Our reasoning recognizes that social, economic and cultural conditions of life in many families are unsatisfactory, and parents are unable to meet their children's needs and cannot pay for educational services received in a boarding school. Moreover, some groups of children get little, if any, benefit from studying in an educational environment (e.g. children with autism and different complex disorders, etc.). Their integration should first be preceded by studies in a special school where they are able to get necessary rehabilitation assistance. It is this that determines the level of a student's knowledge, skills and life experience and, finally, leads to his/her competence and social integration.

Egalitarian reforms in Ukraine's national system of special education, aimed at achieving equal rights for all its participants, cannot mechanically copy the European experience of inclusion. We must take into account social

and cultural factors in the development of this society, and the experiences gained from rehabilitation practices during previous periods. If we were to ignore them, the children would lose a great portion of the help they now get from the existing system of boarding schools.

Proceeding from the ideas mentioned above, the Institute of Special Pedagogy launched a broad-scale experiment aimed at creating and approving new models of special education that could facilitate children getting equal access to qualitative education; yet simultaneously, getting complex psychological, pedagogical, medical and social services. These models allow students not only to feel themselves as part of a community, but also to receive special services and acquire necessary social skills.

At the same time, modernization of Ukraine's special education system is taking place in conditions that do not completely meet financial requirements. The network of special schools for children with complex disabilities (e.g. autism, combined disabilities) is growing slowly, only covering a portion of the population that needs help and with a limited range of social services. That is why it is very important to develop: modern legislative norms for special pre-school, school and post-school education; effective measures to provide methodological and informational support; and reconstruct the system of training and re-training teachers in accordance with new philosophies of special education. Some negative features of inclusion practices today include spontaneity and voluntarism. An increasing number of special needs students are included simply because many schools do not offer special programs or special teaching methods for their students, and the range of their special educational services is quite poor. This causes a great risk of failure in meeting the service needs of disabled children. As a result, there is a high level of distrust within the public towards inclusive education, in spite of the general rhetoric that tends to perceive inclusion as positive.

The public mass media, scientists and teachers, ask questions such as: is our society morally, psychologically and socially ready to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities learning in an environment where the majority are regular students? Will those children then be able "to

blend in" with the existing educational environment, to develop their potential strengths and become useful members of society? At present, few researchers will take on the responsibility of evaluating these issues.

The conception of inclusive education is complicated and has many aspects. It consists of many segments that, if not resolved, may lead the whole idea to failure. Unless children with disabilities are provided with an increased number of educational services, they will remain lonely and facing many problems, once in a comprehensive school. Such services require education according to individual plans and programs; special textbooks (particularly in elementary school); and special equipment, didactic materials, and diagnostic and counseling services of specialists (speech therapists, doctors, social workers, etc.)

Ensuring the basic right of each child to be born healthy, be safe, get services, to develop socially and psychologically in life, is difficult to achieve because those guarantees have more of a declarative than a practical character. There are few successful mechanisms of state and public control for the norms already developed. Even today, Ukraine has not passed a Law "On Special Education of Disabled Children". This seriously hinders the creation of a flexible state system for early complex rehabilitation. It is very difficult for the state, parents of disabled children and non-governmental organizations to unite their efforts in order to achieve their goals. Our Institute has developed provisions on integrated and inclusive education, but as of yet they have not been adopted. This makes it difficult to solve many of our practical problems, be they moral, psychological, organizational, legal or financial. Comprehensive schools are not ready to provide rehabilitation services for children. All this makes it impossible to realize the principle of early intervention, fails to help prevent deviations in the child's development, and causes secondary intellectual shortcomings.

The practical realization of integrated education for disabled children requires the training of specialists in higher educational establishments, in order to satisfy the educational needs of these children, as defined by psychologists, speech therapists, interpreters for the deaf and teacher

assistants. There should also be created a broad network of post-graduate pedagogical education in this field.

The first stage of reforms in special education is coming to an end. Special schools have adopted a new structure and renewed the educational content in accordance with the National Standard of Special Education. We have started an experiment on more flexible and constructive models of special education and work on the development of more effective technologies to support disabled children, especially in the early stages of ontogenesis. Problems of special education and social protection of disabled children are acquiring a national profile. The innovative search for solution is uniting government structures, boards of education and schoolteachers, and also non-governmental organizations, unions, foundations and parents. It is very important that this work continue the experience gained in our country during previous periods of history. By persevering, we will soon witness how our children with special needs feel themselves needed with fully engaged, vibrant lives in modern society.

