

Dr. Vjacheslav Zasenکو

Doctor of Pedagogy, Assistant
Director of the Institute of Special
Pedagogy of the Academy of
Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine.

**Special Education in Ukraine: Current Conditions and the Search
for New Perspectives**

The system of education in Ukraine is legally regulated by the laws "On Education" and "On Comprehensive Secondary Education", and program documents such as "Education -Ukraine in the XXI-st century" and "Children of Ukraine". These official educational documents directly regulate the education of persons with special needs, in the form of special education.

Recognition by Ukraine of the UN Convention on Childrens Rights and the World Declaration on Ensuring the Life, Care and Development of Children intensified the interest of Ukrainians in the problems of disabled children with exceptional needs. This necessitates the creation of favourable conditions for the integration of disabled children into the system of modern education. Despite crises in its public and spiritual development, Ukraine is undertaking all necessary measures both to preserve its historically acquired experience in special education, and to augment it by developing modern technologies for corrective and compensatory work with disabled children. This will create conditions for realization of the right of parents and children to choose the type of school, content and form of education they want.

Ukraine has created a clearly differentiated system of 8 types special schools (including pre-school and secondary school programs), with one type for each category of children with special needs (deaf, hard-of-hearing, blind, partially sighted, mentally challenged, learning-disabled and children with speech disorders). In addition some public educational establishments (e.g.: vocational schools, technical colleges, universities) have established a certain number of special groups in their institution. This provides an

opportunity for children with disabilities to get their desired level of education and vocational training.

The system in special schools corresponds to the structure of general (mass) schools. That way, the idea of continuity in education is realized. Naturally each sector of special education has its successes and unsolved problems, and are commented on below.

1) Special attention is given by the state to young children with special needs at a pre-school age between 2 and 7 years old. To ensure their development and preparation for school, a broad network of about 180 special kindergartens and 1400 special groups have been created in regular kindergartens. The total number of students attending these is more than 75,000. Among the successes of special pre-school programs the following improvements have occurred:

- increased numbers of special kindergartens and special groups have appeared in regular kindergartens;
- effective work of pre-school programs has ensured that children going on to special boarding-schools receive continuity in their education;
- differentiated education has been developed for various categories of pre-school children with special needs;
- effective work of regional and central psychological, medical and pedagogical commissions has improved the selection of children to appropriate pre-school programs;
- new content of education for different categories of pre-school children with special needs has been developed;
- some teachers for special pre-schools have been trained;
- Special pre-school pedagogies have become an independent branch of special education.

Among the challenges, which are not yet resolved, is the problem of early diagnosis, registration of such children, as well as early intervention to assist them.

Also unresolved are problems of researching "pre-school" pedagogy for children younger than 2 years of age, methodological support for special education practitioners, and a process of consultations with parents of such children. Thirdly, there are a number of unresearched problems concerning pre-schoolchildren who have complex (simultaneous) disabilities.

2) The next category of special education covers comprehensive special boarding-schools. Ukraine has about 400 special schools for eight categories of children with special needs that include more than 60,000 children. The success of this sector is in the fact that it ensures that practically all children of school age attend schools and that children with special needs get differentiated education and has a chance to continue to study.

Meanwhile, there continues to be a number of problems which demand urgent solutions.

First of all, the development of the National Standard for Content in Special Education has to overcome many difficulties, in order to be realized. State legislative documents determine the obligatory level of education (complete secondary) and structure of comprehensive secondary school. The law of Ukraine "On Comprehensive secondary Education" (article 32) states what the National Standards of secondary Education should be. Unfortunately, special education is not supported by specific policy documents. For example, regular schools provide complete secondary education in 12 years. How many years will be necessary for some categories of children with special needs to achieve this level? Is it necessary to achieve at all? For example, hard-of-hearing children have certain peculiarities in becoming educated and it would be good for them to study, say, one year longer. A question arises: what are best time terms for education? What structure should secondary school have? What sectors are to be prioritized?

3) Ukraine has declared that it is necessary to introduce a foreign language into school curricula and to teach sign language to children with hearing loss. Vocational training also requires changes and the introduction of new specialties, since about 30% of school leavers change their specialty within 1-2 years after graduating.

4) Another interesting challenge is the need to create centers for gifted children who have special needs. At present the Institute of Special Pedagogy has started to work on this question. Its researchers developed the Conception of National Standards for Special Schools and the main provisions were approved by the Ministry of Education and Sciences. Now, researchers are working on developing the contents of separate subjects for each category of disability.

5) An important challenge is developing knowledge assessment criteria according to the 12-point evaluation system recently introduced to Ukrainian schools. Such a project has been developed and now is in the process of being approved. Based on general principles, it takes into account the specific character of knowledge acquired by children with special needs.

6) It is worth mentioning that young boys and girls with special needs may get complete secondary education in special vocational schools, technical colleges, lyceums (i.e. in special groups created in such educational institutions), as well as in special evening and extracurricular schools.

Recently, a positive tendency has been noticed in that there is a growing number of special educational establishments being created for persons with special needs and special groups in "mass" technical colleges and vocational schools. These provide opportunities for students with some categories of disabilities to get their desired level of education and vocational training.

At the same, for different objective reasons, the number (and the role) of special evening and extra-curricular schools has decreased, although until recently, they were extremely popular among youth with sensory disorders.

7) Finally, a comment on the last sector of special education – higher education. In Ukraine certain categories of persons with special needs get higher education in such universities as the Drahomanov Pedagogical University, Polytechnics, Engineering Faculties etc. The University of Human Development “Ukraine”, where many students with sensory and

movement disorders study to be trained in up-to-date professions, is developing a good reputation.

Recently, special attention is being given to schools of a new type - integrated educational establishments. In Ukraine there are more than 30 rehabilitation centers of this type, under the control of either the state or community agencies (e.g. in L'viv, Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, Vinnitsya, Kherson). Schools such as the following have shown their advantages: schools-kindergartens (e.g. in Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Luts'k), the educational rehabilitation center for hard-of hearing 'Levenia' (L'viv), the gymnasium for blind children in Kharkiv and so on. Some boarding schools for the deaf (e.g. Kharkiv School, Odesa School № 101, Kyiv school № 15 and others) have been designated with the status of experiment pedagogical laboratories and conduct innovative activity aimed at searching out new technologies for educational, therapeutic, correctional and compensatory processes.

The theory and practice of special education in Ukraine finds it extremely important to provide a scientific explanation and a conceptual framework for its work. International practice doesn't have a single approach to definitions for different phenomena in special education. Different countries give different names to the science that deals with education of children with special needs: "rehabilitation pedagogy", "pedagogy of special schools", "correction pedagogy", "orthopedagogy". Researchers, practitioners and especially parents of children with special needs in Ukraine have formed the opinion that the old term "defectology" is incorrect, and words such as "defective, abnormal" humiliate the child's dignity, shock parents, and morally and psychologically diminish their personality. That is why scientific publications now frequently use such terms as: "children with special needs", "children with exceptional learning needs" and "disabled". Deaf and blind children are disabled, but calling them defective is incorrect because, after completing special correction and rehabilitation work, they achieve a rather high level of development and successfully are integrated into society. It is also true of other categories of children with disabilities. That is why it is time to develop terminology that is not an obstacle in education, that prevents discrimination based on this or that

individual characteristic of a child or his/her family, and terms that won't humiliate either children or their parents.

Researchers at the Institute of Special Pedagogy have started work in this direction and have prepared and established terminology with positive and explanatory functions.

From the above we see that special education in Ukraine is in a constant process of searching, innovation and improvement. The success of this process depends mainly on understanding of our final objective, which is in the joint efforts of practitioners and researchers from the entire pedagogical community.