

MODERNIZATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN UKRAINE: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

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The first special institutions were established in Ukraine for blind, deaf, later – mentally retarded children, in the mid XIX century. Those institutions were charity-based. Since then the state-protected system of social support for children with psychophysical disorders of pre-school and school age has been formed. Today the structure of special education includes 391 schools educating and bringing up 61200 children who also receive a complex of rehabilitation and medical treatment services. Among them there are 270 schools for children with mental disorders (38400 mentally retarded children), 121 schools for the physically-impaired (17900 children who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, blind, with bad eyesight and those with hard speech disabilities and infantile cerebral paralysis.)

142 special pre-school institutions were established for children of pre-school age with mental and physical disabilities, and special groups were opened within 1200 regular pre-school institutions. In total, the pre-school education covers over 45.000 children today. However, the number of these institutions does not meet the existing demands in the country. A significant number of children of pre-school age with psycho-physical deviations (especially mentally retarded children) are looked after in families with limited possibilities to stimulate the cognitive development. Therefore, the mental state of such children suffers from secondary formations, retarding their development.

The strategies and legal basis of special support to the mentally and physically impaired children are regulated with specific normative and legal documents:

- ▣ **the Constitution of Ukraine** which defines and guarantees the human rights and freedoms in accordance with the commonly adopted international norms in the field of human rights protection, in particular, the UN Convention on Children's Rights;
- ▣ **Laws of Ukraine:** "On the Fundamentals of Social Protection for the Disabled in Ukraine", "On Education", "On Provision of Pensions", "On the State Support to Families with Children", "On Physical Training and Sports", "On the Status and Social Protection of the Citizens Who Suffered from Chernobyl Catastrophe", "On Promoting Social Integration and Development of the Youth in Ukraine", "On Charity and Charitable Organizations";
- ▣ **National Programs** (the Program "Education. Ukraine in XXI century", the National Program "The Children of Ukraine"), **the National Doctrine** of Ukraine's development in XXI century. These documents provide a package of normative and legal documents, define the priorities and principles of special education development; they set the guidelines for regional undertakings to improve the state of the children on the basis of integrating activities of state bodies with civic organizations, associations, foundations. These documents also define the specific steps to fulfill the international obligations of Ukraine, establish the terms, people-in-charge and funding from the state and local budgets for the above-mentioned programs.
- ▣ **the Decree of President of Ukraine** "On the National Program of Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Physically Disabled People". It reflects the priorities of the state policy on professional rehabilitation and employment of people with mental and physical disabilities, as well as the measures to promote the integration of these people into society, secure the Constitutional rights of disabled children to professional orientation, education, employment, to broaden economic, organizational, and legal mechanisms of creating new and preserving existing work-places;
- ▣ **the concepts** "The Special Education of Disabled Children in Ukraine in Short/Long-Term Period", "The Rehabilitation of Children with Limited Physical or Mental Abilities", the State

Standard for Special Education approved by the Collegium of Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science and by the Presidium of Ukraine's Academy of Pedagogic Sciences. These documents focus on personal, as well as social and psychological directions of development of disabled children. At the same time, they emphasize the need for more energetic activities of state, non-governmental organizations, foundations in social protection of the children on the basis of democratic functions of special education. The concepts set the stages, conditions and mechanisms for developing a network of variable special pre-school and school institutions with the education process proceeding from early diagnosis and correction of mental disorders and offering the relevant curricula, syllabi, textbooks, didactic and teaching support.

The recent years have seen qualitative changes in the system of special education of children with mental and physiological impairments. The structure of special schools of all types has been improved regarding the introduction of 12-year studies in comprehensive schools. In particular, the special schools for blind, weak-eyesighted, deaf, hard-of-hearing children and children with cerebral palsy offer 13 years of studies: the primary school (1-4 forms), the basic school (5-10 forms), and the upper school (11-13 forms). The children with hard speech disorders, mental disorders and retardation study 10 years: in primary school (1-4 forms) and the basic school (5-10 forms). The structure of special schools provides preparatory classes for the children without appropriate pre-school education. The main purpose of these classes is to prepare the children for school studies.

The State Standard for Primary Education of Children with Special Needs has been completed as a complex normative document. It covers the educational content and the basic curriculum, obligatory for all types of special institutions regardless of their status (state, municipal, private, or charitable). The basic curriculum includes the invariant and variable components of the educational content. The invariant part of the educational content includes the mandatory educational areas of general and all-Ukrainian significance, the compensatory and correctional component, and determines the minimum quantity of academic hours allocated for mastering these subjects.

The variable part meets the special needs, cognitive interests and gifts of students. It reflects the specific character of an institution and its orientation towards development in educational process. It also takes into account the specific region with its history, culture, and national traditions, and provides the individual approach to the student.

Thus, the basic curriculum includes three types of obligatory school studies:

- ☞ classes that form the basis of comprehensive secondary education and which include the compensatory and correctional part;
- ☞ developing classes of individual and group type;
- ☞ classes to be chosen by the student.

The adoption of the State Standard for Primary Education of Children with Special Needs led to updating the educational content on Ukrainian basis, testing and introducing it in school practices. The curricula, original textbooks and teaching manuals have almost been completed for primary stage of all types of the special institutions after a deep analysis of the previous experience of planning the educational content for disabled children and taking into account the achievements of special pedagogy and psychology, as well as the legal documents. We have also started to develop the curricula and textbooks for disabled children of early age.

Such approach towards the structure, content, as well as mechanisms of their implementation ensures that the students acquire appropriate educational level, fully integrate socially and psychologically in society after graduating.

Together with comprehensive education, special schools adopted a new system of control and assessment of student achievements in accordance with the state requirements on educational qualification for the basic and complete comprehensive school. While creating this new system of student evaluation and its criteria, we took into consideration the characteristics of personality development, as well as specific educational principles of educational development that make up the foundations of contemporary special education. These include: preliminary study and rehabilitation and

developing orientation, differential and individual approaches towards possible educational success, integrity of learning and individual development, consideration of students' achievements and not their failures, unity of general educational demands (knowledge and skills) taking into account the individual characteristics of a child, etc.

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 the children with psychological and physiological needs, their studies and rehabilitation-based education. These measures have proven to be effective since, at present, the special institutions possess special technical equipment and methodological support for using it. Each school has equipped a special classroom for studies, using interactive educational, medical, developing and compensatory technologies, job self-orientation, physical rehabilitation, and therapeutic physical training.

An important condition of successful rehabilitation process in special schools is work training for its students. The equipped workshops of varied profiles help students prepare themselves for independent work upon graduation. Moreover, this subject has more hours in the curriculum of special schools than in regular ones. Many special schools offer additional classes for more in-depth studies of specific subjects of humanities, sciences, arts, technology, thus increasing the possibilities for the graduates to enter higher educational institutions of different profiles and to find employment in the future.

Families and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide very important social and pedagogical support to children with special needs. They try to influence the state policy in order to expand public assistance and ensure equal access to high-quality education, to all spheres of life. NGOs are working to create the conditions under which children with special needs will be able to fulfill their potential, reach the maximum levels of their personal development, education, and social integration. Thanks to the initiative of parents of disabled children and the support from international non-governmental foundations in the mid 1990s, a number of new types of educational rehabilitation centers was opened. The children who study there generally suffer from autism and other highly complex psychophysical disorders which make it impossible for them to study in traditional schools.

However, as the experience has demonstrated, this support is limited in space and time and it is not permanent. When a project is over, the funding of the activities stops too, which sometimes makes the future of the targeted children unpredictable. We should take as a motto that "all children in Ukraine are children of one state", and all children must be assured that they will not find themselves on the margins of society. Therefore, the state should, in some ways, support the institutions, launched earlier with the support of international non-governmental organizations.

The development of market relations and different kinds of property ownership will lead to more activity of NGOs and charitable organizations. Together with the state, they will be able to share the responsibility for creating equal access to high-quality education for all children, regardless of their level of psychophysical development. The government, therefore, should develop a program to help coordinate the activities of non-governmental public organizations with regional authority bodies, find the mechanisms to stimulate and support all the participants in the special education process (through taxes, advertising services, preferences in giving state orders, etc.), which will be encouraging their activity in implementing the state programs in special education sphere.

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

- ☞ not to separate the child from the 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 possibility to choose the form and type 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 a school, so that the parents themselves could choose the form, level and range of services provided for their child. Here, we can benefit from studying the positive experience of Western countries. The financing of educational needs of disabled children should be covered by the local state budget, state and regional programs, regardless of where a child studies – state, municipal or private school.

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 the National programs of social and pedagogical support for disabled children and their parents, **Ukraine has launched a state experiment on educating children with special needs in regular education system**. This pilot program works along two directions.

First, the children with special needs are integrated into regular comprehensive schools. It is stipulated that special (compensatory) classes for children with some type of impairment are opened in regular schools. Here, the students follow special curricula, syllabi, textbooks, have obligatory rehabilitation classes. They interact with other peers during extracurricular time, participating in various spheres of school life.

Second, the children with different psychophysical disabilities are educated inclusively among regular students. The educational process is differentiated according to the child's ability to cope with the program. At the same time, qualified specialized assistance is provided. In such classrooms a teacher receives the help of an assistant who knows how to use special pedagogical technologies. The assistant provides preventive assistance and psychological, social, and pedagogical services. Such classes usually have fewer students than the regular ones.

The introduction of level-differentiated models of integrated education for children with special needs does not mean that the network of traditional special institutions (special schools and boarding schools) will be reduced in number. First, the social, economic, and cultural conditions of life in many families are so unsatisfactory that the parents are unable to properly meet their children's needs within the family and cannot pay for educational services similar in level to those their children receive in boarding schools. Second, some groups of children get little benefit from studying in integrated educational environment. In some cases, it is even contra-indicated (e.g., children with autism, with heavy speech disorders, with combined disorders.) Their integration should first be preceded with studies in a special institution to receive necessary psychological and pedagogical assistance, without which the studies in a regular institution will bring few results.

The practical experience of the special boarding schools proves their expedience as institutions for the children demanding special state support in obtaining education, as well as social and employment rehabilitation.

Ukrainian defectology scholars are challenged with the option: should they continue developing and improving the compiled experience of educating children in boarding institutions, preserving the gathered theoretic and methodological achievements, or should they prefer new models of schools brought to life by the transforming social relations and Western experience? This question was partly answered by Dr. Michael Rodda (University of Alberta, Canada) in his speech at the international conference "Modern Trends of Special Education Development. Canada-Ukraine Experience" (Kyiv, May 26-27, 2004). In particular, he noted, "Ukraine is unusual in that, unlike Canada and most of the "Western" democracies, it has retained its comprehensive system of special schools for disabled students. These schools are repositories of knowledge and expertise about these disabilities... Ukraine is now challenged to adopt policies of inclusive education. There is much that is good, positive and educationally appropriate for students in an inclusive education program. But it is not appropriate for all students, and it is not appropriate for all students all of the time."

Sharing this opinion, I would like to note that the realization of disabled children's potential depends upon the flexibility of special education system, rather than upon the form of studies (boarding or inclusive), although the latter do define different levels of social adaptability. It depends more upon the level and range of provided services, meeting children's needs (early diagnosis of disorders, the unity of diagnosis and development, the logical continuity of preschool, school, and further education

contents, etc.)

The realization of potential also depends upon the access to individual curricula and programs, special equipment, special teaching methods, differentiated medical, speech therapy, social and psychological services, etc.

The change of education forms does not mean changing the methods and organization of special education. Nor does it mean discarding the orientation towards efficient usage of remaining functions and analyzing systems which are capable to take upon the developing and compensatory functions to ensure the targeted development of psychic processes. This defines the level of acquired knowledge, skills, life experience and, thus, the appropriate education level of the student and his/her social integration.

The equity-based reforms in the national system of special education should not proceed by mechanical copying of European and American experience of inclusive education. It should proceed by taking into consideration the social and cultural factors of Ukrainian society, the previous experience of complex psychological, pedagogical, and medical correction of child disorders. If ignored, it will deprive the children of the social and pedagogical assistance they can receive within 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 high-quality education; yet, simultaneously, getting complex psychological, pedagogical, medical and social services.

These models should allow students not only to integrate into the comprehensive school system, feel themselves as part of children community, but also to receive sufficient services, acquire necessary social skills, feel themselves wanted.

At the same time, the modernization of Ukraine's special education system is taking place under the conditions that do not fully meet the modern challenges. The network of special schools, especially for children with complex psycho-physiological disorders (e.g., autism, combined disabilities) is growing slowly, only covering a small portion of the disabled children and with a limited range of special 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.

At the same time, some negative features of inclusion practices today include spontaneity, haste, and even voluntarism. An increasing number of special needs students are included without simultaneous developing and introducing special curricula, special teaching methods, without broadening the range of special education services and procedures of the transition towards inclusion. In our opinion, this causes a risk of failure in meeting the educational needs of disabled children, a distrust within the public towards inclusive education in comprehensive schools, in spite of the persuasive philosophies in favor of inclusiveness.

The public, mass media, scientists and teachers naturally ask questions such as: is our society morally, psychologically, socially ready to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities learning in an environment of "healthy" peers? Will those children be able to "blend in" with the existing common educational environment, to develop their potential strengths and become useful members of society? At present, few researchers will take on the responsibility of positive evaluating these steps.

The concept of inclusive education is complicated and has many aspects. It includes a number of segments that, if not settled, may lead the whole idea to a failure. Unless children with disabilities are provided with an increased number and higher level of special 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 (especially in elementary school); special equipment, didactic materials; diagnostic, counseling and efficient services by specialists (speech therapists, doctors, social workers, physical therapists, etc.)

Ensuring the basic right of each child to be born healthy, be safe, enjoy the conditions for overall development, be socially and psychologically protected, is rather difficult to achieve since those

guarantees have more of a declarative than a practical character. There is the lack of successful mechanisms of state and public control over the practical implementation of the norms already developed. Even today, Ukraine has not still adopted a Law "On Special Education of Disabled Children". This seriously hinders the creation of a flexible state system for early complex rehabilitation of the children, makes it difficult for the state, parents of disabled children and non-governmental organizations to unite their efforts in order to achieve the common goals. Our Institute has developed the Provisions on Integrated (Inclusive) Education, but so far they have not been officially ratified. This makes it difficult to solve many practical issues, be they moral, psychological, organizational, legal or financial. As the experience has shown, the comprehensive schools have not prepared the necessary base to provide disabled children with the whole range of social and pedagogical services that are an integral part of special education. All this impedes the realization of the principle of early intervention (concerning the disorders of speech, thinking, imagination, perception, psychomotor system, etc.), fails to help prevent further deviations in the child's personal development and formation of central psychic functions, as well as causes secondary intellectual shortcomings.

The practical realization of integrated education for children with special needs requires stable training of different specialists in higher educational institutions in order to satisfy the educational needs of such children. These specialists should include 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 updated the educational content in accordance with the National Standard for 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. The problems of special education and social protection of disabled children are acquiring a national profile. The innovative search for their solution is uniting government structures, boards of education and school teachers, as well as non-governmental organizations, unions, foundations and parents. This accelerates the development of legislative norms and ensures that the special education is modern, as well as that the artificial age, level, psychophysical limitations and obstacles preventing each child from realizing his/her potential will be overcome. It is very important that this work continue the experience gained in our country before. And thus we will soon witness how our children with special needs feel themselves needed and protected and fully engaged in contemporary society.