

# Training primary school teachers to work with weak-sighted children

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## Abstract

The article deals with the problem of training a modern educator to work with children of special needs, namely with vision disorders. The experience of a special boarding school for the weak-sighted children has been analysed. The tendencies of the work that are worth paying attention to in training the future teachers to work with children with vision disorders have been revealed.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, children with vision disorders, training future educator

## Przygotowanie nauczycieli szkół podstawowych do pracy z dziećmi słabowidzącymi

### Abstrakt

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę dotyczącą nowoczesnego modelu kształcenia nauczycieli przygotowujących się do pracy z dziećmi z dysfunkcją wzroku. Nowatorskie wskazania, warte uwzględnienia w procesie kształcenia przyszłych nauczycieli, wypracowano w oparciu o doświadczenia dydaktyczno-wychowawcze szkoły z internatem dla dzieci z zaburzeniami wzroku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja włączająca, dzieci z dysfunkcją wzroku, przygotowanie przyszłych nauczycieli

## Підготовка вчителів початкової школи до роботи зі слабозорими дітьми

### Анотація

У статті розглядається проблема підготовки сучасного педагога до роботи з дітьми з особливими потребами, а саме – з порушеннями зору. Проаналізовано досвід спеціальної школи-інтернату для слабозорих дітей. Виявлені тенденції роботи, на які варто звернути увагу при підготовці майбутніх вчителів до роботи з дітьми з порушеннями зору.

**Ключові слова:** інклюзивна освіта, діти з порушеннями зору, підготовка майбутніх педагогів

The society is extremely concerned about the increasing number of children with mental and physical deviations in their development and children with disabilities. According to the UN experts' researchers, people with limited life and social functions make 10% of the world population. More than 120 million of them are children and teenagers.

Unfortunately these global problems haven't bypassed our country. In recent years in Ukraine the number of children with psychophysical disorders has

increased by 22 %, whereas a number of children with disabilities increases by 5-6 thousand yearly.

Today we are on the threshold of fundamental changes in the educational policy of Ukraine concerning this category of children. A characteristic feature of today is reconstructing the system of special education based on democratic principles.

At the present stage of the Ukrainian national education development, taking into account the environmental situation in the country and increasing the morbidity of children, special attention should be paid to forming a healthy nation. In primary school programs key competencies of young learners are distinguished, one of them is the health saving program which is formed on the inter-subject level using subject competencies considering the specificity of subjects and pupils' cognitive abilities (The state report, 2011). It provides personal and social development of a child, acquiring the health saving experience by the pupils considering the state of health (The state report, 2011). Therefore, the teacher faces one of the major tasks – to teach primary school children to strengthen their health, which is considered to be an important life value, bring up conscious effort to cultivate a healthy lifestyle and socialize the child if he / she has special needs.

Nowadays active work at introducing integrated and inclusive education is being done. Inclusive education is introduced in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, a number of Presidential Decrees, the Law of Ukraine “on General Secondary Education”.

There are specialized schools for children with special needs in Chernihiv: the school № 23 – for children with hearing disorders; a special comprehensive school of the I-II levels for the children with shortcomings of intellectual development and a special boarding school of the I-III levels attached to Chernihiv Regional Council for weak-sighted children. Besides, one inclusive class was opened in 2013, where only one child with autistic disorders studied. Following in 2014 eight inclusive classes in schools № 10, № 17, № 18, № 30 and № 24 were opened. In kindergarten № 73 a special group for children with severe speech disorders was opened, and in kindergarten № 52 the model of pre-school inclusive education is being introduced. In this case training future teachers to work in inclusive groups becomes urgent because “the teacher should organize and provide the best learning environment, favorable atmosphere in the group, encourage learning with useful information, promote the application of knowledge, an ability to connect it with live but also assess the achievements” (Savchuk L., 2014, p.40)

The problems of inclusive teaching and bringing up children with special needs in educational institutions during the last two decades have been at the cen-

ter of many researchers' scientific interests, such as: V. Bondar, V. Zasenka, A. Kopolupaieva, T. Skrypnyk, T. Sak, O. Taranchenko, S. Lytovchenko, N. Sofii, Y. Naida, N. Diatlenko, S. Yefimova and others.

Forming teachers' adequate attitude to people with psychophysical disorders and their families, appropriate professionally important traits of personality, including such as love for children regardless of their health, tolerance, empathy, is becoming of great importance.

The school teachers should master common problems of Corrective Pedagogics and Special Psychology:

- nature and classification of mental and physical disorders, their causes;
- peculiarities of the structure of abnormal development;
- general characteristics of a modern system of educational and correctional services;
- selection of children to the special institutions and participation of comprehensive school teachers in it;
- psychological and pedagogical characteristics of the children with mental and physical development disorders and uniqueness of work with them in terms of corrective and inclusive education;
- individual approach to the children while learning and educating depending on the category of disorder of their mental and physical development.

It is necessary to form in comprehensive school teachers the skills of psychological support for the children with special needs; the ability to organize a conflict-free social interaction with different levels of mental and physical development; ability to cooperate with different types of families; skills of team interaction with their colleagues. The absence of all this is the main drawback inhibiting the implementation of inclusive learning.

Undoubtedly, a purposeful teacher training process promotes successful solution of the problem of educating children with special needs.

The goal of this article is to explore peculiarities of the future primary school teacher training to work with weak-sighted children.

The beginnings of going to school is an important stage in a child's life, it creates demands related to influence on his / her of numerous specific and still unfamiliar factors. Firstly, it is a great static load that requires special organizing of the motor mode to meet natural needs of the body in movements; secondly, there is a necessity of mastering a great deal of diverse information and stressing the visual apparatus after long lasting work with small objects while reading, writing, drawing etc. On top of all, children with special needs have such problems as:

- communication with adults and healthy children, treating the child by others, the language barrier;
- disease, a defect, a delay in verbal and physical development, motility disorders;
- disorder of the rights to educate children with disabilities (Duraklevich I., 2005, p.13).

Disorders of sight get a special place in pediatric pathology which can lead to blindness. According to the Institute of Hygiene and Medical Ecology named after A. Marzeev AMS of Ukraine researchers have found out that in pupils from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> forms the frequency of the sight acuity decreasing and the tendency to the scoliosis increases by 1.5 times. That is why a modern teacher should be familiar with the methodics and methods of preventing these diseases.

Unfortunately, insufficient time, to our mind, is spent on preventing eye diseases in modern regular school. The main reasons for this are:

- 1) Large loading of the pupils with the program material – the saturation of the lessons which leads to increasing fatigue and decreasing both mental and physical ability.
- 2) Low level of teachers' knowledge of anatomical and morphological and physiological characteristics of children.
- 3) Reluctance of teachers "to spend time" of the lesson on the relaxation of the visual analyzer and the activation of its ability.
- 4) Lack of teachers' attention to individual students' problems is in the prophylaxis of eye diseases.
- 5) Superficial parents' knowledge of the progressive sight disease found among children.
- 6) Lack of collaboration of parents and teachers in this field.

In higher educational institutions while preparing a future primary school teacher the courses aimed at general pedagogical knowledge and specific methodology training. Ecological and health education is gaining a great importance which includes the following subjects as "Anatomy and physiology of children with the basics of genetics", "The basics of valeology", "The basics of medical knowledge and the basics of health", "Safety of life and the basics of labor" and "The basics of ecology". In addition, a formation of a modern specialist involves the study of special subjects to work with children with special needs such as: "Inclusive Education" (90 hours according to the curriculum), "The basics of defecology and speech therapy" (90 hours) in the fourth year and "The basics of correctional pedagogy" (72 hours) in the fifth year. Non-traditional activities in this process are of great importance – meetings with teachers, working with weak-

sighted children and workshops, which are held on the basis of special schools. Let us examine the activities mentioned above.

Almost every year there are meetings with teachers, university graduates who work with children with special needs. So, the principal of a special boarding school of the I-III levels for the weak-sighted children attached to Chernihiv Regional Council O.V. Zhytniak distinguishes three main directions in the school work:

- 1) Organizational and pedagogical – determining the level of development of each child (the diagnosis), staffing the groups and subgroups of children, taking into account mental and physical characteristics while choosing games, scientific and visual materials.
- 2) Treating and renewable – the purpose of which is the development and preservation of residual vision, flawless performance of the security regime by the pathologist, the educators, the teachers of music and physical training.
- 3) Correctional and educational – the prospect of every child's sight development is determined by the ophthalmologist, the mode of the visual load is set, correction with glasses and other types of hardware treatment is prescribed.

Children with sight disorders who go to a special boarding school require constant treatment and regular monitoring on the part of medical professionals. Working with these children in a teaching process with the respect of their physical education should be carried out under the direction of tyfloeducators, psychologists and optometrists.

At one of the meetings with a primary school methodologist at the same institution V.I. Beloshapko the students learned specific techniques to work with children with vision disorders which can be briefly referred to as follows: Ensure the absence of all obstacles on the way to the learner's workplace.

- When writing on the classroom board they try to locate a material so that the pupil does not blend it into a solid line. To find out which colour chalk lettering the pupil sees better.
- Enable the pupils to come to the board or the visual aid to discern the written word better.
- Read aloud all that is written.
- Try all that is written on the board to duplicate with handouts.
- Participate for the pupils with vision disorders in the frontal class work using some individual educational materials such as cards, tables and charts.

- Pay attention to the quality of the handouts: the paper should be matte, not glossy, the print should be large and contrast.
- A pupil with vision disorders needs more time for doing exercises, reading texts. Do not burden the pupil with reading long texts during the independent studying of the material, it is better to explain it verbally again, to make sure that the student has understood everything.
- Check the pupil's understanding of the material submitted at the lesson more often.
- Monitor the pupil's posture, however, not to limit his /movements when he/ takes the texts too close to his/ eyes.
- The child can see the facial expression of the teacher badly, cannot realize that he is appealing to him – it is better to approach the pupil and touch him calling by his name.
- Always call yourself and other communicants, as well as all the present, and those who went out or came back to the room.
- While dealing with a group of children, not forget to call the person you are addressing to.

An experienced methodologist V.I. Beloshapko said that the failures of weak-sighted children caused by the factors that are not directly related to the peculiarities of their development, such as lack of proper training conditions in the family, as a result some children are educationally neglected and cannot cope with the educational material in the first days of schooling. Parents often do not have full knowledge about the opportunities of treatment, rehabilitation of the child, basic skills of the preventive work with children, they are unaware of the importance of systematic and consistent work after school.

As the senior teacher of physical therapy of a special boarding school of the I-III levels attached to the Chernihiv Regional Council R.G. Chala notes that among sight disabled children the changes of the muscles and skeletal system, such as the violation of the posture, scoliosis and flat foot can be found more often than in healthy schoolchildren. Primarily this is due to the incorrect posture while reading and writing, so that these children have fast back muscles fatigue. The disorder of the posture, in its turn, affects the state of the internal organs and systems, especially the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, causing more fatigue. In the 2013-2014 academic year only 3 % of the boarding school pupils did not have any disorders of the muscles and skeletal system. From the experience of the teacher R.G. Chala, warming ups which are held at every lesson (including secondary and high school) 1-2 times can prevent and correct the defects in the physical development. Special attention is given to gymnastics for the eyes. The

teacher of physical therapy has developed different sets of exercises for the eyes to relieve the fatigue, improve circulation, relax the eye muscles, develop complex eye movements etc. The eye motor gymnastics complex has two directions – recovering and training it varies depending on the workload the dosage of the exercises varies. Renewable exercises include relaxation for the eyes, the direction of gaze at the horizon, blinking repeated throughout the day from 8 to 10 times which is relieving the eye strain and improving circulation.

Training exercises are based on turning and rotating the eyeball, fixing the view on the tip of the nose, fixing on the gap between the brows, fixing on the right and left shoulders. These exercises provide the eyeball, eye tissues, eye motor muscles with the blood supply regulation. They also increase ability of the lens to focus the sight on different distances, generally stabilize and raise the level of functional abilities of eyes.

According to R.G. Chala's opinion, the complex prophylaxis becomes a more reliable system of protecting the sight in children with deviation and one of the main ways which is referred to as a medical physical training.

Close attention should be paid to a visit at special school for the weak-sighted children and explore the organization of the living and educational conditions by the students. It can be seen that colours such as yellow, beige, pink, green and blue have been selected for the walls of the educational and play rooms; on the floor at the walls and under each step of the stairs there is a bright yellow stripe sized 50 cm that can help the children move. The classrooms should have the natural lighting. In addition, some of them (the gym, the workshop, the assembly hall) require both the upper and side lighting. The furniture (desks, tables, bookcases) should be of natural wood color or light green. The classroom boards are dark green or dark brown in colour. The boards must be also equipped with additional lighting. The students learn about different types of visibility with the increased print, the background is not white but light yellow or light green, which is best seen by the children with some certain eye diseases.

Thus, educating children with vision disorders should provide appropriate conditions aimed first of all at preserving the weak sight, facilitating the visual perception and preventing the fatigue.

The teachers of a special boarding school of the I-III levels attached to Chernihiv Regional Council noted that the slower pace of the lessons requiring the participation of the vision, the use of special visual aids available for perception by weak-sighted children, a widespread use of individual forms of work ensure that weak-sighted children successfully learn and master the program material.

Thus, according to the experts, the use of rehabilitation and correction techniques is a prerequisite activity not only in special, but also in comprehensive educa-

tional institutions. After all, a high percentage of weak-sighted children go to public comprehensive schools.

Despite the fact that at the present time the Institute of Special Education and Psychology of NPU named after M.P. Drahomanov provides the teachers with special education, the situation with the staff remains very serious.

Traditional university general training of the professionals alarming towards the effective work with the children with various disorders in their development is not enough. At this stage there is a need of specially trained primary school teachers, subject teachers and pathologists, psychologists, speech therapists. In special comprehensive schools 60 % of the teachers have had higher mental defectological education. There are no defectologists in comprehensive schools with special classes where integrated learning is implemented. Most teachers have no special psychological and pedagogical training, motivation to work with this category of children, but have fear, despair and desire to avoid such work etc. According to the studies, 65 % of teachers who attend the training courses do not know the methods of working with the children with special educational needs, 23 % of the teachers examined are not familiar with special programs, do not know psychological characteristics of the children of this category.

A teacher working with children with special educational needs should be able to put a diagnosis of the child's capabilities and needs, give their expert assessment and develop on this basis individual training programs, refuse the collective methods. In order to do this the teacher should have a deep knowledge of his subject, the teaching methods and the methodology of working with the children with special needs.

Many teachers have difficulties because they do not have such knowledge, have no experience of working in the team, do not use the knowledge and experience of the colleagues, parents in educational process. It is very important to prepare teachers to work, to equip them with the knowledge of special pedagogy, provide the tools and models of alternative education.

The attitude of comprehensive school teachers towards the children with special educational needs is humane, but counterproductive. These children need help in socializing into our life to become full members of the society. The teachers must be prepared to progressive trends in educational policy, which is possible only if the professional development is continued.



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