

National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine

VIACHESLAV ZASENKO, LESIA PROKHORENKO

ORCID: 0000-0003-0325-4578; owow4enko@ukr.net

ORCID: 0000-0001-5037-0550; lesya-prohor@ukr.net

*Children with Special Educational Needs.
Education During the Pandemic*

Dzieci o specjalnych potrzebach edukacyjnych. Edukacja w czasie pandemii

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to draw the attention of managers, scientists, practitioners of special and inclusive educational institutions, parents, representatives of public organizations to the problems of education in crisis situations, long-term quarantine of the most vulnerable population of any country, namely children with special educational needs, including those with disabilities. The general aspects of reforming and shifting in the field of education are briefly characterized; the range of problematic issues concerning the organizational, content and methodological aspects of ensuring the functioning of an effective system of distance learning for such children is outlined. At the same time, an important role is given to providing organizational and content-methodological aspects of psychological-pedagogical and correctional-developmental support of children with special educational needs in distance learning, and attention is paid to strengthening the role of family taking into account home environment and health preserving, security and pedagogical regime. The article also provides data on the latest educational and methodological developments and on specific steps to ensure the effective implementation of distance learning. Finally, the paper outlines a range of problematic issues and proposes a number of measures to optimize this process.

Keywords: children with special educational needs; distance learning; pandemic; psychological and pedagogical support; correctional work

INTRODUCTION

The scale of new historical tasks dictates the need for radical changes in the content, technological, managerial components of innovative development of

education, which is designed to help young people master life skills in the situational context of social and spiritual change. Progressive changes in social relations necessitate the process of continuing education as a guarantee of competitiveness, professional and social mobility, self-improvement of citizens. This is especially true for the education of people with special educational needs, including those with disabilities, which is an important component of sustainable development strategies. There is a dynamic process of reassessment of values, overcoming established stereotypes that prevent the formation of a new philosophy of society to perceive a person with special needs as a subject of life, who is able to develop their life project, bear civic responsibilities, and accept the challenges of the 21st century.

An extremely important prerequisite for the socialization of persons of this category is the acquisition of education of the appropriate level, which opens the way for them to social and professional growth, the realization of their own abilities and needs. Therefore, one of the priorities of state policy in the field of education is to create conditions for persons with special educational needs to realize their rights to equal access to quality education, as well as the development of personal intellectual and professional opportunities.

It should be noted that in modern Ukraine, based on a number of thorough studies by domestic authors and the analysis of progressive foreign experience, the practice of preparing people with special educational needs for independent working life and inclusion in society is being actively introduced, which, of course, actualizes scientific psychological, pedagogical and social quality of development and socialization of this group of people. Education for people with special needs is in the focus of constant attention and is one of the main priorities of modern educational reforms, which are defined by the laws of Ukraine “On Education”, “On Complete General Secondary Education”, the Concept of “New Ukrainian School” (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2016) and others. It was and still remains important not only to ensure the right of such persons to choose the appropriate institution for obtaining a particular level of education, but also to implement modern innovative technologies and forms of education. One of such forms, which is becoming widespread today, is distance learning. This is especially important today, in a period of various emergencies, e.g. pandemics (Zasenko, Prokhorenko, 2018a).

PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE

Therefore, the purpose of the article is to draw the attention of a wide range of readers to the problem of education of persons with special needs in conditions of long-term quarantine, and to define, at least in a concise way, features and complexities of distance learning.

MAIN CONTENT

In modern realities for people with special needs, distance education is almost the only way to overcome social isolation, to be part of social and socio-economic life, or to form their own full social status, etc. An illustration of this is the current school year, which is exceptional (unfortunately, in negative terms, and probably it will not be the last).

In fact, the level of knowledge acquired by students in distance learning depends on the organization, on the condition and quality of didactic and methodological support, on the forms and methods of delivering teaching materials. It also refers to children with special educational needs, with whom, as a rule, in special or integrated educational institutions, in addition to actual training, systematic psychological and pedagogical support as well as correctional and developmental work are also important.

The period of quarantine has become a challenge for all educational institutions. In the context of the pandemic, the issue of distance learning to maintain the health of the Ukraine population became crucial. Teachers were not ready both morally and practically to work remotely. This is especially true as far as the provision of educational services to children with special educational needs is concerned.

With the introduction of distance learning, teachers have posed a number of questions, e.g. "How to implement such training?", "Will children be able to work remotely, learn new knowledge?". The most important issue, however, concerned teachers, or more precisely, their feeling of insecurity and psychological unpreparedness. This has particularly affected teachers working in an inclusive environment.

Issues related to developmental correction, rehabilitation and social adaptation with a view to full integration into society have a special place in the organization of education for students with special needs. Therefore, the main task of the educational system of education of students with special needs, regardless of where he studies (special or inclusive institution) and what form of education (full-time or distance), is full or partial compensation, or in pedagogical terms – the acquisition of basic personal competencies, necessary for modern life, including the acquisition of skills to independently acquire knowledge throughout life and implement them in their practice.

It should be noted that in Ukraine there are 319 special educational institutions with a contingent of more than 42,000 students with special educational needs, and more than 25,000 students study in the conditions of inclusion. In total, more than 18,000 inclusive classes have been established in schools. During this school year, almost 43% of the total number of schools organized inclusive education. That is, almost every second school in Ukraine teaches children with special educational needs.

Since September 1, 2021, about 8,000 children with special educational needs went to inclusive groups of preschool institutions. The number of groups that started working is about 4,000. All this requires a special system of distance learning for this category of students.

For example, among the difficulties encountered during distance learning, one can mention problems with the content of didactic materials. In addition a, an ethical question appears. First of all, we are talking about people who have sensory developmental disorders (hearing, vision). Such pupils (students) in the course of training usually need direct presence of the correctional teacher as it is a question of a relief-dot Braille, sign language, etc.

There are also problems with conducting correctional and developmental classes in such subjects as Development of Auditory Perception, Orientation in the Environment and so on. Regularity and repetition are basic principles of correctional education of children with special educational needs, which is an axiom. This category of students needs daily training for development, because it is not only about learning new knowledge, but also about supporting, repeating previously acquired knowledge, skills and abilities to preserve them. Educators should maintain the knowledge and skills of children with special needs in constant activity, because a few missed classes are an indisputable move backwards.

In view of the above, it should be noted that given the requirements of time and requests of practitioners, currently, much attention of scientists of the Mykola Yarmachenko Institute of Special Education and Psychology of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine (hereinafter referred to as “Institute”) is focused on distance learning, development of its methodological and semantic content, which is particularly important in the current conditions. In particular, school counselors have also a role to play, they advise parents and teachers on distance learning of children with intellectual disabilities, with visual, hearing and speech impairments. A number of educational webinars were held for teachers of special educational institutions and general educational institutions with inclusive education, training and rehabilitation centers.

Researchers of the previously mentioned Institute have successfully introduced distance learning technologies, including distance learning courses for teachers. With the help of Skype communication, the organization of student online forums covers the main issues and problems related to psychological, pedagogical and correctional support of people with special needs, including in terms of distance learning, providing them with basic materials, etc. Thus, during 2020–2021, more than 300 students, including psychological and pedagogical staff of educational institutions, inclusive resource centers, and managers, improved their professional level and received a state certificate issued by the Institute.

In addition to research departments, an important role in the implementation of distance learning is played by the Institute’s Psychological Counseling and

Training Center, which systematically conducts educational events, provides advice to practitioners and parents of children with special needs on the specifics of distance learning in accordance with ethical standards.

It should be added that the development of a new generation of educational (150 titles) and correctional (78 titles) programs, covering the criteria for assessing the educational achievements of students with special educational needs, who are in need of psychological, pedagogical, correctional and developmental support, has become fundamentally important. It significantly updated the content of education and made it possible to track the “progress” of such students and monitor their level of knowledge acquisition, plan appropriate work not only at school but also at home and not only in a regular way but also in remote teaching.

The above studies change stereotypes in understanding the problems of education and upbringing of children with special needs, and necessitate a shift from focusing on personality disorders (medical model) to focusing on the features and opportunities of development (social model).

Inclusive resource centers (IRCs) play an important role in the context of reforming the sector. More than 600 institutions of this kind have already been established in the country. These centers were established to provide psychological, pedagogical, correctional and developmental services to children with special educational needs and to families and communities in which such children are involved. Psychological and pedagogical assistance provided in the IRC provides a comprehensive assessment of the child’s condition and is conducted in such areas as: assessment of physical development; assessment of speech development; assessment of the cognitive sphere; assessment of the emotional and volitional sphere; assessment of educational activities. If the specialists of the center establish that the child has special educational needs, the conclusion of a comprehensive assessment is the basis for drawing up an individual development program and providing him with psychological and pedagogical assistance, including the support of IRC specialists.

Currently, IRC specialists face significant difficulties, both due to insufficient professional training and the lack of individual methods of work. This state of affairs is certainly complicated by the implementation of these areas of work in remote mode. What is more, the Institute has already started developing appropriate methods of work, including diagnostic ones, and developing training courses, thanks to which IRC practitioners will be able to improve their professional level on a permanent and licensed basis. The following curricula have been developed and implemented for in-service training courses for IRC teachers:

- “Educational and professional training program for employees of Inclusive Resource Centers”,
- “Technologies for teaching children with special educational needs in an inclusive environment”,
- “Individual educational trajectory of a child with special educational needs”.

The introduction of a system of constant counseling of pedagogical workers on the issues of inclusive education, correctional and developmental work, organization of personality-oriented educational process of people with special needs, etc., as well as appropriate counseling of parents of children with special needs deserves significant attention. For this, as noted, the Institute has established the Psychological Counseling and Training Center, which provides educational services, research, counseling, psycho-diagnostic, psycho-correctional and psychological training activities. The possibility of receiving an online consultation is of fundamental importance.

An important problem associated with the organization of remote psychological support is the lack of a system of psychological and pedagogical support in emergencies for families of children with special educational needs, which, at best, are one of the main factors in terms of their inclusion into society. Therefore, the strategy for the development of the education system for people with special needs must include the active participation and involvement of the family in the process of preparation and “entry” of such children into society (Zasenko, Prokhorenko, 2018b).

The specificity of the family, its activity in the process of development and education of the child determines the future psychophysical and socio-cultural status, the level of rehabilitation and socio-integration potential, the degree of readiness for integration in the general education institution. The modern family of a child with special educational needs, in addition to traditional functions, must perform a number of specific ones, due to the presence of mental or physical developmental disorders in the child (habilitation-rehabilitation, correctional, compensatory). However, the modern family of a child with special needs can rarely act as an effective author of its social integration. The main reasons for this situation are:

- low economic status of many families,
- lack of effective support from management structures (including education),
- negative social attitude, etc.

In view of this, a group of employees of the Institute had launched a project to develop a holistic system, providing psychological assistance to families of children with special needs in crisis situations.

In order to develop technology for providing psychological assistance to parents of children with special needs (in particular to deal with stress), ensuring psychological stability and formation of immunity to the negative impact of crisis situations in the future, will include:

- individual and group classes with a psychologist,
- work of parent support groups,
- conducting trainings and webinars,
- operation of the advisory telephone line, etc.

It is important to remember that the main task of the team of psychological and pedagogical support of children with special needs in which parents are an active participant, in the pandemic, and hence in distance learning, is to provide education for children based on their individual needs and characteristics development, as well as the use of correctional and developmental training in a home, health-preserving educational environment (Zasenko, Prokhorenko, 2018b).

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, we can say that distance learning is one of the modern forms of the educational process organization based on the use of computer and telecommunication technologies that provide the interaction of teachers (and in our case, the whole team of psychological, pedagogical and correctional support) and students (students with special needs). In this informative and review article, we did not aim to provide specific recommendations on the organization and conduct of teacher training, the role of a teacher's assistant, the peculiarities of creating an educational environment for the family at home and other members of the support team, etc. This is the subject of separate methodological studies. However, it seems appropriate to focus on individual positions and problem situations that need an urgent solution.

First and foremost, it is the respect of the principle of the best interests of children with special needs in any crisis situation and the application of an integrated approach to ensure their right to family upbringing, the right to healthcare, access to high-quality education and social services, and also development and educational and methodical provision of alternative forms of training, education and rehabilitation. This question, however, is not easy. After all, it is about the training and retraining of psychological and pedagogical workers to work with children in such conditions, and about the development of mechanisms and specific methods of psychological and pedagogical, as well as correctional and developmental support. Therefore, to achieve this strategic goal, a number of specific issues need to be addressed. These are the following:

- socio-pedagogical patronage, which ensures the interaction of educational institutions, family and society in the education of children with special educational needs in crisis situations,
- creation of appropriate conditions for people with special educational needs in an independent assessment (sign language translation, Braille, etc.),
- the level of technical support of the educational process in a pandemic,
- development and application of psycho-diagnostic tools and correctional and developmental program for working with children with special educational needs, which usually need to be adapted and modified according to the individual characteristics of the child, in terms of distance learning,

- improvement of the system of training and retraining of pedagogical staff for work in the conditions of distance learning,
- involvement of parents of children with special educational needs in the educational and rehabilitation process in order to increase its effectiveness, etc.

It is obvious that, on the one hand, the implementation of these measures requires the joint efforts of the state, relevant ministries, scientists, NGOs, teachers and parents, and on the other hand, it will bring educational requirements closer to generally accepted international standards and will provide opportunities for all children with special educational needs to obtain the desired level of education.

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ABSTRAKT

Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi menedżerów, naukowców i praktyków placówek oświatowych specjalnych i włączających, a także rodziców i przedstawicieli organizacji publicznych na problemy edukacji w sytuacjach kryzysowych, w tym długoterminowej kwarantanny najsłabszej populacji każdego kraju, tzn. dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi, w tym dzieci niepełnosprawnych. Pokróćce scharakteryzowano ogólne aspekty reformowania i przesunięć w dziedzinie edukacji oraz nakreślono problematyczne zagadnienia dotyczące organizacyjnych, treściowych i metodycznych aspektów zapewniania funkcjonowania efektywnego systemu nauczania na odległość organizowanego dla takich dzieci. Jednocześnie dużą wagę przywiązuje się do zapewnienia organizacyjnych i merytoryczno-metodologicznych aspektów psychologiczno-pedagogicznego i korekcyjno-wychowawczego wsparcia dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi w kształceniu na odległość oraz zwraca się uwagę na wzmocnienie roli rodziny, z uwzględnieniem środowiska domowego, ochrony zdrowia, bezpieczeństwa i reżimu pedagogicznego. W artykule przedstawiono również dane na temat najnowszych osiągnięć edukacyjnych i metodologicznych oraz opisano konkretne kroki podjęte w celu zapewnienia efektywnej realizacji nauczania na odległość, a także zarysowano szereg problematycznych zagadnień i zaproponowano podjęcie działań mających na celu optymalizację tego procesu.

Słowa kluczowe: dzieci ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi; kształcenie na odległość; pandemia; pomoc psychologiczno-pedagogiczna; praca korekcyjna