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ON COMPATIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND MENTAL RETARDATION

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a very broad concept. According to the World Health Organization, there are about a billion people with disabilities having completely different diagnoses – from cerebral palsy to hyperactivity, from blindness to schizophrenia, from asthma to Down syndrome. Therefore, a general discussion about inclusive education is hardly possible. It is required to discuss if not a specific disease, then at least a group, type of disorders, which can be divided into physical, emotional and mental. People with mental retardation (Down syndrome, cretinism, hydrocephalus, etc.) form a special group, concerning which it seems a priority to discuss not the methods of inclusion, but its expediency. This topic is very polemical within primary and secondary education. Many people think that an ordinary teacher cannot work with mentally challenged children, since he/she is not able to use special methods and techniques. There is, however, an opposite opinion, which is officially approved by the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation”. Complex spiritual needs and sophisticated social ones are not available to mentally challenged people, hence their path to happiness is not very winding. However, happiness will become unattainable if such persons are involved in the higher education system (provided that it is called higher in the traditional sense, which is not completely lost).

Keywords

Mentally challenged children – Mental retardation – Inclusion – Higher education

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Introduction

Inclusive education is a very broad concept. According to the World Health Organization, there are about a billion people with disabilities having completely different diagnoses – from cerebral palsy to hyperactivity, from blindness to schizophrenia, from asthma to Down syndrome¹. Therefore, a general discussion about inclusive education is hardly possible. It is required to discuss if not a specific disease, then at least a group, type of disorders, which can be divided into physical, emotional and mental. Since the 1990s, Russian citizens with health problems of the first and second groups have the right to study within the general curriculum. It is guaranteed by the Federal Laws “On the Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities in the Russian Federation” and “On Education in the Russian Federation”². We believe that an inclusive ideal is not close, but achievable. After all, these disabilities are not mental ones, hence the most important human need, – cognitive, – remains intact.

Sometimes “intact” is a weak word. In Stavropol school No. 21 mentally challenged children have been studying with healthy ones for more than fifteen years. Headmaster Alexander Kizima says his students with cerebral palsy include gold medalists and winners of intellectual olympiads. However, all of them have great difficulty in passing the exam: because of their illness, they can hardly fix the answers in the squares of the form³. Obviously, in addition to ramps and elevators, such children need another examination mode (for example, on larger paper forms or on a computer). There are also experiments with the inclusion of children suffering from physical and emotional issues: impaired vision (kindergarten No. 77, Cherepovets), impaired hearing (school No. 299, Moscow), hyperactivity (school No. 604, Zelenograd), etc. Although positive dynamics are evident, the condition of some children is so serious that they cannot afford regular schooling and are bound to study in special educational institutions. Everybody understands this: educators, parents and authors of two major international documents – the Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education and a Framework for Action⁴ and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁵.

Research Methods

For a person with physical limitations higher education is more comfortable than secondary one – first of all, in terms of communication with peers. University students are adults (as distinct from those who go to school). Sometimes they are not very kind and intelligent, but with a certain level of social maturity. Therefore, they do not usually tease or ignore their unordinary groupmate.

¹ G. V. Zhigunova y I. L. Tkachenko, Resursnyj potencial invalidov juvenil'noj kategorii (Moscow-Berlin: Direkt-Media, 2014)

² Federal'nyj zakon No 181-FZ “O social'noj zashhite invalidov v Rossijskoj Federacii”. November 24, 1995 y Federal'nyj zakon No 273-FZ “Ob obrazovanii v Rossijskoj Federacii”. December 29, 2012.

³ A. Chablin, Byvajut li «deti vos'mogo vida»? Kavpolit, July 28, 2015. Retrieved from: http://kavpolit.com/articles/byvajut_li_deti_vosmogo_vida-18647/

⁴ Declaración de Salamanca y marco de acción para las necesidades educativas especiales. UNESCO. Salamanca, España, 7-10 de junio de 1994.

⁵ Proceedings of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. United Nations. 2006. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

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Russian researchers conducted an inter-university study that demonstrated “complete loyalty” to students with disabilities⁶ (Studenty-invalidy ..., 2010), who, nevertheless, may cause some confusion and “alertness” among teachers and students. These negative emotions show the insufficiency of inclusive experience in our country. However, after a certain period everybody gets used to the person’s physical “peculiarities” and begins to pay more attention to his/her moral qualities.

If a challenged person does not want to interact with healthy peers, he/she can choose a distance-learning format, which becomes more and more popular within higher education (having strong chances to become the main one). In particular, such training is suitable for psychically unstable people – for example, those inclined to outbreaks of unmotivated anger. A university can give them knowledge through the Internet without endangering anyone.

People with mental retardation (Down syndrome, cretinism, hydrocephalus, etc.) form a special group, concerning which it seems a priority to discuss not the methods of inclusion, but its expediency. This topic is very polemical within primary and secondary education⁷. Many people think that an ordinary teacher cannot work with mentally challenged children, since he/she is not able to use special methods and techniques. Therefore, it is recommended to teach such children at correctional schools, where they will learn to read, write, count and gain basic labour skills due to the efforts of narrowly focused educators. Among the accessible profiles are metalwork, carpentry, sewing, plastering, painting, gardening and maintenance. Therefore, people with subnormal intelligence can bring real benefits to society. However, there is an opinion that such education is more likely to harm students themselves, since it does not give them social skills needed to break the communicative “shell”. Inclusive education is thought to break it and increase the tolerance level. This corresponds to one of the basic inclusive principles, the most general and probably the most controversial: “All people need each other”.

Findings

Russia has few inclusive schools that have been working with mentally challenged children for decades. The oldest of them, with the eloquent name “The Ark” (“Kovcheg”), appeared in the Soviet Union in 1990. About fifteen years ago, other Moscow schools took the same path – for example, School No. 142 (currently No. 1147 named after Nikolai Ostrovsky) and School No. 518. Lyudmila Degtyareva, headmaster of Private School “Aurora” in Novosibirsk, had made the same choice even earlier. It seems obvious that the state would not have adopted the law on inclusion being able to rely only on the international experience. However, the idea of admitting mentally challenged people to *higher education* is something radically new for our country.

In our opinion, higher education and mental retardation are incompatible phenomena. If a student with a corresponding diagnosis can cope with the curriculum, it

⁶ Studenty-invalidy v rossijskijh vuzah: mezhvuzovskoe issledovanie (Moscow: Rossijskij sojuz rektorov, 2010). Retrieved from: http://www.rsr-online.ru/doc/2010_12_03/2.pdf

⁷ R. D. Triger, Psihologicheskie osobennosti socializacii detej s zaderzhkoj psihicheskogo razvitija (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2008) y O. V. Zhdanova, “Inkluzivnoe obrazovanie umstvenno otstalyh detej v «zerkale» pedagogicheskogo mnenija”, Vestnik Universiteta Rossijskoj akademii obrazovanija Vol: 1 (2013): 24–28.

may indicate two things: the incorrectness of the diagnosis or the deficiency of the curriculum. Higher education is a superstructure over the secondary, and not an extension to it. We are convinced that it exists for people with obvious abilities for a certain profession (more complicated than gardening or sewing) and with the so-called “general giftedness”, which can compensate certain weaknesses.

As a rule, obvious abilities and general giftedness are due to good potentialities – “general innate anatomical and physiological features”⁸. However, in mentally challenged people they are not even average, but low. These individuals have serious problems with perception, attention, abstract thinking, memory, speech and emotional-volitional sphere. Moreover, such limitations have an objective reason – the pathology of the brain and the nervous system⁹.

Provided the regular approach (pedagogical, medical and family-maintained), it could be possible that all these problems would not deprive mentally challenged children of the chance to fulfill the intermediate school programme. However, there is an insurmountable obstacle.

Theoretically, people without arms, legs or eyesight are unsuitable for professional sports, but some of them achieve significant results. Of course, the “iron will” helps these persons, but there is also a deeper reason – enormous internal motivation. As a rule, future winners of intellectual olympiads do not have high IQ in early childhood, when their abilities commonly correspond to the age norm or slightly exceeds it, but begin to improve rapidly due to a strong (and often unexpected) motivator. Sometimes this mental outburst occurs quite late, already in high school, which may happen due to a talented teacher, an interesting non-fiction article, the words of a favourite actor or singer, etc. In the 1940s, for example, a Soviet teacher “infected” his student with love of physics, and half a century later this boy was honoured with the Nobel Prize. We are talking about Zhores Ivanovich Alfyorov¹⁰. Of course, the motivation of a physically challenged athlete and that of a highly intellectual student is different. The former commonly tries to prove to the world and to himself or herself that disability is not destiny, that he/she can surpass many healthy people, while the latter just enjoys the process. However, in both cases the abilities are intensified by the desire, the need. Children with disabilities are also called “children with special educational needs”. Apparently, when we are talking about mentally challenged students, “special” needs should be understood as reduced. After all, subnormal intellect is one of the main symptoms of mental retardation¹¹. We regard it as the crucial one. In healthy children a high cognitive need is observed almost from birth and becomes overwhelming at the age of three or four, when some kids ask more than 300 questions a day¹¹.

⁸ N. S. Leytes, Zadatki. Jenciklopedicheski slovar' po psihologii i pedagogike. 2013. Retrieved from: http://psychology_pedagogy.academic.ru/6403/%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BA%D0%B8

⁹ D. K. Daily; H. H. Ardinger y G. E. Holmes, “Identification and Evaluation of Mental Retardation”, American Family Physician Vol: 4 num 61(2000): 1059–1067 y P. I. Sidorov y A. V. Parnyakov, Klinicheskaja psihologija (Moscow: GEOTAR-Media, 2010).

¹⁰ Zh. I. Alfyorov, Nauka i obshhestvo (Moscow: Nauka, 2005) y A. Pillitteri, Study Guide to Accompany Maternal and Child Health Nursing: Care of the Childbearing and Childrearing Family (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2010).

¹¹ A. Pillitteri, Study Guide to Accompany Maternal and Child Health Nursing: Care of the Childbearing and Childrearing Family (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2010).

If the craving for knowledge begins to vanish, the reason is usually unqualified teachers or pedagogically illiterate parents. A well-known psychologist Yurkevich V. S. emphasizes that in children with subnormal intellect the wish to acquire new knowledge or skills is “muffled” by nature. They do not want to learn or their desire is very weak, stopping them at the level of primary vocational education based on 11 grades of the correctional school or 4 grades of the ordinary one¹². However, it is noticed that such people become diligent and disciplined workers¹³, which is obviously caused by concreteness of thinking and lack of ambition. They are not burdened with the monotony of their work, its low prestige, and not distracted by thoughts about justice, the meaning of life and such things. If IQ is reduced significantly, then a person can work as a seller, a loader, a janitor, a cleaner, a cloakroom attendant, a dishwasher. Therefore, mentally challenged people benefit society, make life easier for parents and, probably, feel happy. Complex spiritual needs and sophisticated social ones are not available to them, hence their path to happiness is not very winding.

However, happiness will become unattainable if these people are involved in the higher education system (provided that we call it higher in the traditional sense, which is not completely lost). Moreover, the adaptation of the inclusive curriculum to a weakened brain will be a mockery at students with normal needs and abilities, and society in general.

The IQ of an adult with the mildest mental retardation corresponds to the IQ of a 12-year-old child¹⁴. We emphasize that we are talking about the objective, biologically determined limit. At this age a citizen of the Russian Federation does not have a passport, cannot work and is not subject to criminal liability, and such a situation is not unique for our country.

This scientific edition is created and read by people with normal or even advanced intellectual abilities. However, we do not think that at the age of twelve one of them was ready to enter the higher education institution, which was not due to bad teachers, improper approaches or wrong methods. It is just that their brain, then not fully formed, provided them with more limited opportunities and dictated other desires. Therefore, it does not seem to the authors of this article that a seventeen-year-old person with mental retardation will strive for higher education. This need can be imposed by parents who do not want to face the harsh truth.

We emphasize that we consider only the mildest retardation bordering on the medical norm. The marginal intellectual age of most people with mental disabilities is even lower – 9 or 10 years. Therefore, the elementary school programme is regarded as their maximum. In this context it is frightening to imagine the adaptation limits of higher education.

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that its participants (countries that signed it) should provide inclusive education *at all levels*.

¹² V.S. Yurkevich, *Odarjonnyj rebjonok: illjuzii i real'nost'* (Moscow: Prosveshhenie, 2000).

¹³ E. M. Starobina; I. P. Borodulina y E. O. Gordievskaya, *Professional'naja orientacija, professional'naja podgotovka i trudoustrojstvo pri umstvennoj otstalosti* (Moscow: Forum, 2013).

¹⁴ J. M. Sattler, *Assessment of Children: Cognitive Foundations* (La Mesa: Jerome M. Sattler, Publisher, 2008) y P. N. Shishkoedov, *Obshhaja psihologija* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2015).

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According to this, mentally challenged people receive the right to engage in research activities within postgraduate studies, apply for a PhD degree. We believe that this is not even funny.

Conclusion

The educational inclusion of people with physical and emotional problems is a humane and promising idea, though it is worth discussing the means of its practical implementation. Maybe correctional schools should be preserved only for children with severe disabilities. However, if a child wants to study and seeks to communicate with healthy peers, the society needs to satisfy his/her needs.

The situation with mentally challenged persons is more complicated. Some of them may benefit from the inclusion at the primary education level, including those with mild intellectual disability, indistinct associated pathologies and acceptable motivation intensity.

Children with severe retardation should study at a correctional school, since their difference from ordinary children is too significant. However, in most cases we are talking about minor intellectual limitations, which give some chances to real inclusion. Nevertheless, mental retardation, even mild, is incompatible with *higher* education. Their forced unification can cause irreparable harm to almost all spheres of public life: economic, social and spiritual.

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