



GENERAL AND ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND STUDENTS WITH CHRONIC DISEASES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF STUDENTS IN PEDAGOGICAL SUBJECTS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the training of future pedagogy specialists for the effective implementation of the normatively defined general and additional support for children and students with chronic diseases. This is also the author's starting position for an analysis of the main legislative documents that define the framework for active pedagogical activities, required for the inclusion of children and students at risk of social exclusion from the education system. The additional subject of the study is to outline the requirement to introduce academic disciplines aimed at forming competencies for working with children and students with chronic diseases as part of the training of students from the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Trakia University of Stara Zagora. The hypothesis of the study is that in the process of forming prosocial behavior in children and students, especially towards their peers with chronic diseases, pedagogical specialists can greatly benefit from the support of relevant information materials adapted for different age groups.

Keywords: children and students with chronic diseases; social inclusion; higher education

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade the educational system of the Republic of Bulgaria is undergoing major reorganizations, beginning with the Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA). Further regulations aim at providing a complete system that works in accordance with the principles that guarantee the right of education for every child in our country. The equal access to quality education and the inclusion of every child and every student are ensured with the special Ordinance on Inclusive Education from 2017. It provides additional details on the general and additional support for personal development of children and students, listed in PSEA.

AN ANALYSIS OF LEGISLATIVE AND STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS ON EDUCATION

This study focuses on the training of future pedagogy specialists for the effective implementation of the normatively defined general and additional support for children and

students with chronic diseases. Three more groups that require additional support for personal development are defined in art. 187 of PSEA – children and students at risk, gifted children, and children with special educational needs. The Ordinance on Inclusive Education does not specify a definition of chronic diseases and in most texts children and students with chronic diseases and children and students with special educational needs (SEN) are listed together, with additional details specified only for the second group. Bearing in mind that additional support is provided by the power of legislation, there must be a much clearer distinction between the two groups of children and students that require additional support for personal development in order to comply and fully adhere to one of the principles of education – to be oriented towards the interests and motivation, as well as the age and social changes in the life of the children and students and their abilities to apply the acquired competences in practice (1).

The main set of legislative documents on education do not specify a definition of the term “children with chronic diseases”. The Strategic framework for the development of education,

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training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030) also treats children and students with chronic diseases in a similar way as those with SEN. For activities related to the functional assessment of the educational needs both groups are listed together. However, a more specific goal is rather the support and complete participation in the educational process of children and students with SEN only. The general impression is that chronic diseases have been added to the first activity only to ensure consistency with art. 187 of PSEA, which lists four groups (2).

Bearing in mind that article 5 of the Ordinance on Inclusive Education states that “the support for personal development of children and students is organized and carried out in accordance with the approved regional and municipal strategies for support for personal development of children and students” (3), the study focuses on those strategies. This is also a starting point for the author to perform a qualitative analysis not just on the major legislation that defines the framework for proactive pedagogical activities that incorporate children and students at risk of social exclusion, but also on related strategic documents.

The latter are not only analyzed in terms of content, but major parts are also a subject of comparative analysis. A starting point is the Strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030). It does not list children and students with chronic diseases as a separate group and does not stipulate different activities than those required for children with SEN. Moreover, the Strategic Framework only mentions children with chronic diseases in Priority Area 5 “Effective inclusion, permanent incorporation and educational integration”, stressing on the requirement of functional assessment of their needs (2).

The analytical parts of some strategies define the most common chronic diseases in children and students from the respective region. For example, the Regional Strategy for support of the personal development of children and students in the Plovdiv region for 2024 – 2026 the authors refer to Ordinance Number 8 from November 3rd, 2016, on the preventive screenings and clinical examinations to provide a list of diseases and define the required measures to support the personal development of the children and students. This allows collecting a list of diseases that affect the

educational process. Such diseases are visual impairments, obesity, chronic tonsillitis, allergic rhinitis, pneumonia, asthma, epilepsy, cerebral palsy – for children up to 7 years of age; visual impairment on both eyes, asthma, epilepsy, other behavioral and emotional disorders, autism, deafness, visual impairment on one eye, diabetes, cerebral palsy and allergic rhinitis – for school children (4). The strategy also lists the number and profile of the specialists that provide resource support, which might allow combining the two lists of the most common diseases in children and students in the Plovdiv region, in the context of the Ordinance on Inclusive Education.

In another strategy, the Regional Strategy for support of the personal development of children and students in the Pazardzhik region for 2023 – 2025, information on children with chronic diseases is part of the information of children with special educational needs and represents only a quantitative characterization “a total number of children with chronic diseases”. It must be noted that the strategy discusses children and students with SEN and children and students with chronic diseases together, although it includes an appendix with two separate tables with similar contents (5).

The Regional Strategy for support of the personal development of children and students in the Dobrich region for 2020 – 2022 also does not discuss children and students with chronic diseases separately, but rather, together with some of the other groups defined in article 187 of PSEA, however, quantitative data lists chronic diseases separately, and by municipality for the whole region (6). There is no attempt, as in the Strategy for the Pazardzhik region, to provide more detailed information about the type and specifics of chronic diseases. The Regional Strategy for support of the personal development of children and students in the Lovech region for 2025 – 2026 provides statistical data about the most common diseases in children and students by municipality, based on clinical examinations. Such diseases are asthma, impaired vision (in one or both eyes), obesity, special symptoms and syndromes, epilepsy, specific developmental delays, other behavioral and emotional disorders, allergic rhinitis. This data can be used even to derive information about the relative number of specific cases for the municipalities and region (7).

The Regional Strategy for support of the personal development of children and students in the Stara Zagora region for 2023 – 2024 also presents statistical data about the number of children and students with special educational needs, that are included in the educational system. Moreover, the diseases are separated into groups for children and students with sensory disabilities, multiple disabilities, intellectual disabilities, speech and language impairments, specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia), disorders on the autism spectrum, emotional and behavioral disorders. This detailed list allows for less hesitation about the required professional support and easier selection according to the competencies of the specialists, engaged in individual work with the child or student (8). The information about children and students with chronic diseases only includes number by municipality. Only some of the municipal strategies attempt at listing specific diseases, such as diabetes and chronic bronchitis.

The issues described in the listed strategic documents can be problematic for more than one of the groups of children and students, defined in the Ordinance on Inclusive Education, and the presented solution can improve the quality of life of more than one group. Solving some of those problems can prevent the social exclusion of children and students with chronic diseases. These are the requirements for single-shift attendance, ergonomic and comfortable environment, additional training for children with academic deficiencies in different subjects, improved partnership with companies and employer organizations to aid the selection of training and occupation.

By analyzing some of the regional strategies for support of the personal development of children and students we can conclude that teachers have the weakest training and the least opportunities for practical experience in working with children with chronic diseases. The reason for this is the great variety of diseases that can turn chronic and the insufficient research in education, as well as the lack of practical resources and didactic materials for teachers.

Bulgarian legislation that determines the educational policy of the country does not attempt to define chronic diseases. There is rather an assumption that it is widely known which diseases qualify as chronic, and

respectively – that every teacher is familiar with the suitable approaches towards children with chronic diseases. To develop a mechanism for achieving highly effective educational activities with children and students with chronic diseases, it is mandatory to first define a profile for this group. Unfortunately, it is difficult to coin an operational, working definition. Starting with the fact that we are discussing diseases and disorders, we must point out legislative and other documents published on the website of the Ministry of Healthcare. Analyzing such documents draws the conclusion that multiple disorders of the systems and organs of the human body can be chronic. The website of the World Healthcare Organization, which engages in exchanging medical achievements for human health protection, provides information that can be summarized as follows: Non-infectious diseases, also known as chronic diseases, are not transmitted from human to human. They are prolonged and usually progress slowly (9). Bearing in mind that rare diseases alone total to the number of 6000 to 8000 (10), it is not possible to provide specific forms of general or additional support in the educational environment for each disease.

The second line of the research is related to the definition of the requirement to introduce subjects, aimed at the formation of competencies for working with children and students with chronic diseases in the training of students from pedagogical faculties.

The hypothesis is that while forming prosocial behavior in children and students specifically towards their peers with chronic disabilities, the pedagogy specialists should be supported by informational resources, adapted for different age groups.

The grounds for this assumption are part of the functions listed in the job description for the position of “teacher” defined in Ordinance number 15 from July 22nd, 2019, on the status and professional development of teachers, principals and other pedagogy specialists. Teachers are entitled and at the same time obliged and allowed to participate in providing general and additional support for the personal development of the children and students for their adequate inclusion in the educational and social environment. To achieve this, it is required to consider the individual requirements of the children and students and to apply effective educational methods in accordance with those. They must know very well every

child and student in terms of intellectual and social abilities, emotional behavior and psychological resilience, the family and material environment, friends' circle through which they manifest themselves and socialize, the interests and attitude towards the educational process. To fulfill their professional duty of preserving the life and health of the children and students, including during additional and leisure activities teachers must recognize specifics in their physical, physiological, and psychological development. To meet the requirements for providing a quality educational process teachers must engage diligently in the preparation of test materials for assessment of the knowledge and skills of the students in each subject. This process requires an individual approach to children with learning difficulties. While doing their professional duties teachers interact and cooperate with the participants in the educational process and other interested parties, which also requires specific skills and knowledge. Other activities, performed by the teachers that require good overall knowledge on each student are related to the career orientation and consulting of students, especially of students with specific developmental needs – children with special educational needs or chronic diseases. To successfully create “school culture, oriented towards toleration, cooperation and mutual assistance“ (11), teachers again must be very well prepared for working with “specific cases” – the children and students who need specific support due to specific needs.

RESULTS AND NEW STARTING POINTS

Training in one or more of the professional fields of higher education in pedagogy is carried out in 13 state or private higher schools (12).

The profession “Teacher” is not on the list of regulated professions in Bulgaria, but to adequately meet the requirements of the society for quality education the Ordinance on the state requirements for acquisition of a teacher’s professional qualification stipulates a basic set of mandatory subjects for each of the following professions – elementary teacher, schoolteacher, teacher of ..., resource teacher. Training in each of these four professions also includes training in inclusive education. The legislator considers the need for deeper knowledge in the field of working with children with special educational needs and the ordinance specifies the requirement that curricula include optional subjects, related to further development of the competences that are

needed for working as a teacher, divided into two groups. The first group – pedagogical, psychological, managerial for education, and didactical – is included in a sample list for higher schools to select not less than half of the subjects. The same list includes the optional subject of Inclusive education for children and students with special educational needs. The policies related to inclusive education should also be aimed at three more groups of children, but no optional subject is offered for any of the remaining groups. This should not be considered a limitation, but rather – a larger opportunity for academic lecturers from the respective higher schools to offer optional curricula in the field. Based on the researched available curricula of higher schools that offer education in the professional fields of Preschool pedagogy and Preschool and elementary school pedagogy, we can state that schools demonstrate the tendency to adhere as much as possible to the subjects listed in the above-mentioned ordinance for the optional subjects they offer. It was also noted that an optional subject, related to children with chronic diseases as a specific target group from the Ordinance for inclusive education is offered only by the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Trakia University of Stara Zagora. The subject is Pedagogical support for children with chronic diseases and their families. It was included in the curricula for the professional fields of Pedagogy and Pedagogy of the education in... on grounds of the specific daily life of children with chronic diseases, which, according to Buyuklieva is full of medical procedures, medicines, visiting doctors and hospitals, and diets. Thus, “the support and understanding of the teacher is of the utmost importance in the educational process of chronically ill children.” (13).

DISCUSSION

The Ordinance for inclusive education defines the essence of the State educational standard for inclusive education. In the first place it defines the terms and conditions for providing general support and those for providing additional support for the personal development of the children and students (1).

In one of his studies Pandin does an in-depth analysis of the risks of insufficient resources to carry out the activities related to this state educational standard. He defines two major problems related to teams for support for personal development of the children or students, one being the inclusion of pedagogy

specialist that lack the required field knowledge for working with a child or student with SEN, and the other being the inclusion of incomplete teams. According to Pandin, failure to meet the standards defined in the Ordinance might lead to “negative support that leads to future cognitive deficiencies in a child’s or an adolescent’s mentality, at the cost of the personal growth of the child or student” (1). This, at a later stage, leads to permanent limitation of the abilities for adequate social functioning of the adult.

This allows us to draw conclusions about how important it is to work professionally on supporting social inclusion and preventing social exclusion from an early child and school age. In this field, the expectations of society are turned mainly towards the teachers. However, when working with children and students with chronic diseases they require the qualified assistance of medical specialists. Based on research on children, parents and teachers Buyuklieva reaches the conclusion that “The impact of the diagnosis of CD on families, children and young people, and the changes they make in order to overcome the future challenges are dependent on many interrelated factors. For this reason, in the training of this specific group of children there should be a complex approach and the specificities and characteristics of children with CD should be taken into account, arising both from the very diagnosis, the treatment and also from several other factors.” (15).

This suggest that there is a need to combine the efforts of specialists in different fields of human activity to achieve better results in the pedagogical work with children with chronic diseases. In the context of the expanding role of nurses in services other than hospital care and in long-term care, nurses can provide support to pedagogues with their professional knowledge. In our country medical care is provided by nurses. The profession “Nurse” is on the list of regulated professions in Bulgaria and is a field in higher education, taught by seven higher schools – medical universities and faculties (12). The Ordinance on the state requirements for acquisition of a nurse’s, midwife’s, and doctor’s assistant’s professional qualification stipulates the mandatory subjects and the minimum mandatory credits for training as a nurse. The curricula include the following subjects – “Children’s pedagogy and children’s psychology” and “Practical basics of nursing care” with the later having more than 100

classes in total for the subjects “Pediatric nursing care” and “Nursing care for adults and children with disabilities. Another reason for seeking common points between the work of pedagogy specialists and nurses can be found in article 8a of the Ordinance (16) that defines the main competencies that a nurse must have after graduation. The competences for encouraging people, families and groups to lead a healthy lifestyle and take care of themselves; to provide unsupervised advice, guidance, and support to people that require medical care and their families; to fully carry out professional communication and cooperate with other professionals in the healthcare system – these mostly match the requirements of the educational sphere. This is the intersection point of these two fields of human activity – care and support of social health, which Terzieva defines as “successful interaction with others, fulfilling relations with families, friends, and colleagues, communication with respect to the self and to different cultures.” (17). In continuation of the above we must mention that a team of lecturers and students of the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Trakia University of Stara Zagora are researching the school issues of children with chronic diseases. The research aims at helping future teachers by creating information materials about the most common chronic diseases. The grounds for developing such documents are the specific needs of the research subjects – children, parents, and pedagogy specialists as well as the legislation and strategic documents in education and healthcare that support inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of contemporary school is to assist all children in finding and developing their individuality by providing an environment that helps students acquire skills to make them adequate members of society as adults. Bulgarian teachers play a major role in this development. They are the ones that, with professionalism and dedication, provide support for personal development to their students and become key factors in the formation of independent, responsible, and complete personalities.

ABBREVIATIONS

CD - Chronic disease

PSEA - Preschool and School Education Act

SEN - Special educational needs

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