THE FUNCTIONS OF SUPPORT SYSTEM AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PROCESS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract
One of the essential components of inclusive education is provision of the qualitative pedagogical-psychological support system. This pre-condition is topical for the wholesome functioning of the educational system in Latvia. The significance of it is supported by the normative acts and strategic development documents. However, the present inclusive education support system organization and operation has its essential drawbacks. Using European social fund project resources research has been conducted with the aim to study the situation with internal support system functioning in the educational institutions in Latvia. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used conducting the research. The structure of the support system, personal competence, participation in the interaction in the educational institution, joining the external interaction, personal, financial and other resource provision were focused upon. Having summarized the results obtained, it could be concluded that the support personnel representatives in general are characterized by significant practical activity, experience, real participation in internal and external interaction processes. In their turn a normative base for support system operation could be viewed as problematic as well as personnel quality and structure, and resource coverage.

KEYWORDS: children with special needs, inclusive education, internal support system.

Introduction
Implementation of ideas of inclusive education is regarded as one of the most significant achievements for international education development and provision of public integrity. Internationally public debates, scientific research and practical activities are allocated to these processes. Their aim is to create pre-conditions for qualitative improvement of educational environment for children with special needs. In order to implement integration and inclusion policies in the field of education, in the process of general learning and upbringing the problems must be solved in a specific, individual-oriented way that is connected only with special education.

Fundamental guidelines for the implementation of this approach are included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to it, full-value development and qualitative education must be ensured for each child with special needs. Consequently, the educational process must be oriented towards the stimulation of child's personality development, cooperation and creativity, also towards learning to make choices and ensuring the child's physical and emotional well-being. For this purpose it is necessary to create conditions for scientifically based assessment of the child's abilities and conformity of the educational process with the needs of each individual (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

The previously described implementation programme of normative conditions is reflected in the UNESCO Salamanca Declaration (1995). It sets out a summary of the development of pedagogical integration and inclusion processes. Also the above mentioned document includes the guidelines for the development of education system in accordance with the ideas of integration and inclusion and formulates the quality criteria for implementing the educational process including the special education. According to these criteria, children with special needs must have an educational establishment close to their place of residence, opportunity to attend school and spend spare time outside the school with their peers, opportunity to receive a special assistance and educational support for any activity within the educational process, and social integration should be promoted in all spheres of child's life. UNESCO Salamanca Declaration defines the preconditions for a successful integration process. In this context one of the key factors is to develop educational support system for children and young people with special needs to ensure the pedagogical integration process (Salamanca Declaration, 1995).

The development of ideas of Salamanca Declaration can be observed in UNESCO Inclusive Education Guidelines (2005). According to it, inclusive education must ensure the optimal development of each child taking into account the individual abilities of each personality. Consequently, inclusive education has been described as a process during which the diverse needs of all pupils are satisfied, increasing everyone's participation in learning, culture and life of different communities, reducing the opportunities for segregation in the process of obtaining...
education (UNESCO Inclusive Education Guidelines, 2005). In this context, each child's optimal development requires individualized educational process in which the focus is on potential of the personality development.

Integration and inclusive trends in education system's development are also promoted by the policies of the Council of Europe, which emphasize that education is a key factor for integration people with special needs into the social life. Inclusion into general education system is not only important for people with special needs, but also for people without any disabilities. Therefore, all people regardless of the type or degree of special needs must have an equal access to education. Education process must ensure the development of individual's personality, giftedness and creativity, intellectual and physical abilities. To achieve these objectives an unified educational system should be developed, which includes general and special education, on-time assessment of the special needs that must be taken into account when planning and implementing the educational process, and development of individual education programs. For these purposes the member states must ensure that the general education system receives coordinated support. Accordingly, in the process of educating and further training of teachers and support personnel, it is necessary to promote understanding about the special needs of the children in education and how to employ appropriate equipment and study materials to ensure the effective learning process. One of the most important conditions for the ensuring pedagogical integration is formation and development of complex educational support system (International instruments and activities, 2009).

This support system is formed by the competent professional associations (teams), whose functions include the diagnostics of the educational special needs, gathering the information on the nature of problem and finding solutions, as well as ensuring specific assistance for implementing the education program (J. Schöler, 1999).

Problem of Research

In Latvia, the reforms of education system oriented towards inclusion actually started only in the end of 20th century. Currently, in general and professional education the equality is ensured in accordance to the abilities of the students (Children's Rights Protection Law, Chapter VIII, Section 54). Accordingly, implementing the special education programme in the general pre-school education establishment, for children with special needs the individual learning plan must be developed. This education programme should be based on the careful diagnosis, in-depth study and correctional activities performed by the teachers and medical personnel (Special pre-school education programme model, 2009). On the level of primary and secondary education, the special education programmes are defined as a specific form of general education programmes (Education Law, Article 38, 1998). Consequently, children with special needs have the opportunities to receive education both in the special schools and educational institutions that implement the general primary education programmes. The law states that for integration of children with special needs in education institutions, the adequate provisions and individual education programmes are necessary. The responsibility for the implementation of these activities is delegated to the educational establishments (General Education Law, Article 53, 1999).

However, many important functional aspects of the educational system still are at the stage of development. This is supported by documents of development strategy of Latvia's education system. The restrictions for unified support system are mentioned as one of the major problems for developing an inclusive educational environment (Approach for development of inclusive education support system for youth under the risk of social exclusion, 2009). In order to find a positive solution for the problem, in Latvia the situation in sphere of educating the pupils with special needs has been explored.

Research Focus

Within the research context for developing inclusive educational environment, the summarizing research has been done at Liepaja University Laboratory of Special Education, which also includes the functional analysis of internal pedagogical-psychological support system of educational establishments.

The object of the research:

an inclusive education.

The aim of the research:

to assess the internal pedagogical-psychological support system's structure and the quality of the work process.

The research is based on idea that inclusion has to be understood as a pedagogical tool that promotes the development of pupils' learning achievements improving the quality of learning.

The quality of integration process has to be achieved through the complex interactive relationships between the people and the groups involved in educational process (Feuser, 2004; Gröschke, 2005;
Considering the quality of educational-psychological support system’s structure, the quality and quantity of the resources are evaluated: the structure of environment, personnel and professional services. The quality assessment is based on pedagogical, diagnostic, didactic, methodical, rehabilitation and correctional processes, interactive relationships and interdisciplinary cooperation, and involvement of students and parents in solving of developmental problems.

Methodology of Research

The research reflected in this publication is conducted within the framework of European social fund project "Development of support system for students with functional impairment" (the agreement Nr.2010/0330/1DP/1.2.2.4.1./10/IPIA/VIAA/001). One of the main project areas is to explore the situation in Latvia with regards to education provision for students with special needs (Project materials, 2010). The situation is studied simultaneously by academic staff of three Latvian higher education institutions (Latvia University, Rezekne Higher Education Institution and Liepaja University). As the result of collaboration of researchers involved in the project, the research methodology has been developed and research basis selected.

The research conducted by Liepaja University lecturers on provision of inclusive education was carried out in five regions of Western Latvia. During the research process, according to the goals and objectives of the project, the situation is clarified about the quality of the special education process and accessibility of the environment, and also educational institutions typical for Latvian education system are involved: three pre-schools, two special schools for children with mental and behavioural disorders, seven general education schools that provide an inclusive environment for children with special needs, and one professional educational establishment that implements educational programme for young people with learning disabilities.

The research is implemented using multidimensional and multi-perspective approaches. The internal functioning of educational institutions is studied from multidimensional perspective, which means provision of methods and resources for activities, and external interactions of educational establishments, which includes cooperation with parents and support structures outside the educational establishment.

The multi-perspective approach ensures that the educational process and the environmental structure are evaluated from the perspectives of different parties involved in the process, which includes the views of the teachers, school administration representatives, support system specialists, also children and parents. Such research approach has allowed to the single-out the internal support system of educational establishment as one of the structural elements of inclusive environment, which limits the possibilities of achieving higher quality.

Instrument and Procedures

In this study the qualitative and quantitative research methods are employed, which ensures objective implementation of the research goals and objectives.

Analysis of scientific literature is performed for revealing the quality assessment models of inclusive education for children with special educational needs.

The analysis of European education policy and normative documents of state education system are used for exploring the special education process and environmental factors.

The questionnaires are used to study the quality of special education process and the environment conditions in Latvian education system. Usefulness of this method is defined by the multidimensional and multi-perspective direction of the study. The questionnaires were developed as the result of collaboration of partners in European social fund project "Development of support system for students with functional impairment". The content of internal educational-psychological support system's questionnaire for the personnel has been developed taking into account the specifics of activities, professional qualifications and social roles. The questionnaire consists of semi-closed disjunctive and semi-closed conjunctive questions. The content of questionnaires is developed taking into account several interrelated parameters: competence of personnel (staff expectations, hopes, education, form of obtaining education, self-assessment, self-reflection on pedagogical activities of the staff, tendencies for improvement of educational activities), the internal interactions within the educational institution (methodological approach, cooperation and information exchange between the teachers, cooperation and information exchange with the teacher support system team, cooperation and information exchange with the management of educational institution, collaboration and information sharing with parents), the external interactions (collaboration with pedagogical-medical
commission, public organizations), the resources (material resources, resources for organizing the teaching process, utilization efficiency of the resources).

During the research process, from July 2011 to October 2011, the questionnaires were handed out simultaneously to five groups of respondents: teachers, administration staff, support system specialists, children and parents.

**Data Analysis**

In the study, using the SPSS system resource the frequency calculation of obtained relative data is performed.

**Results of Research**

In the group of respondents there is identical number of speech therapists and psychologists (21.4%) and also special education teachers and social pedagogues (17.9%). 21.4% of respondents have a different specialization (school doctor (n = 1), a pre-school nurse (n = 1), administrative staff member (n = 2) and teachers – class teachers without professional qualification for working with children with special needs (n = 2)).

The length of practical experience working with students who have special needs differs in each group of respondents. The work experience up to one year has been for 20% of social pedagogues, and up to two years - an identical amount of school psychologists and the group of other specialists (each with 16.7%), up to five years - 20% of special education teachers, 40% of social pedagogues, 16.7% of speech therapists and the professionals with other specialization, and 50.0% of psychologists. Accordingly, 80% of special education teachers, 40% of social pedagogues, 83.3% of speech therapists, 33.3% of psychologists and 66.7% of professionals with different specialization have six or more years of professional experience.

Data relating to the respondents' professional experience with groups of children with specific learning disorders confirm the experience differences of the representatives of the support personnel (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Experience of support personnel working with different groups of children with special needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of children with developmental disorders</th>
<th>Special education teachers (n = 5)</th>
<th>Social pedagogues (n = 5)</th>
<th>Language and speech therapists (n = 6)</th>
<th>Psychologists (n = 6)</th>
<th>Professionals with other specialization (n = 6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental development disorders</td>
<td>80,0%</td>
<td>60,0%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
<td>50,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing impairments</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>16,7%</td>
<td>16,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impairments</td>
<td>60,0%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>16,7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health disorders</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>66,7%</td>
<td>83,3%</td>
<td>83,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psycho-somatic disorders</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50,0%</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and speech disorders</td>
<td>80,0%</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
<td>100,0%</td>
<td>50,0%</td>
<td>50,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>66,7%</td>
<td>66,7%</td>
<td>53,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical impairment</td>
<td>60,0%</td>
<td>20,0%</td>
<td>16,7%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
<td>33,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>60,0%</td>
<td>40,0%</td>
<td>50,0%</td>
<td>66,7%</td>
<td>16,7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data relating to how the knowledge is acquired for working with children with special needs confirm diversity of possibilities (see Fig. 1).
The replies to the question about assessing one's own education are very different. 100.0% of special education teachers, 66.7% of speech therapists, 33.3% of psychologists and 20.0% of social pedagogues evaluate their knowledge as sufficient.

According to questionnaires, the support personnel express a relative satisfaction with the working conditions. 71.4% of respondents state that they have their own office, 21.4% - share an office with other specialists, 3.6% use some other premises available at their educational institution.

The obtained data related to the existing methodological basis for diagnostics and methodological basis for correction reveal accessibility to different resources. Considering the methodological basis for diagnostics, 42.9% of respondents use both officially available and personally developed resources, 32.1% - personally developed, 21.4 % - officially available resources. Considering the methodological basis for correction, 42.9% of respondents used both officially available and personally developed resources, 28.6% - officially available, 25.0% - personally developed resources.

The summary of replies to the question about the desired resource perfection for methodological base for diagnostics and correction allow to identify the particular needs. In connection with improving the methodological basis for performing diagnostics, 46.4% of respondents indicate the need for more diagnostic tests. In relation to the content of these materials, 10.7% of respondents indicate the need for tests diagnosing thinking, perception, attention, and intellectual development, 7.1% - tests for diagnosing mental development disorders, 3.6% - tests for diagnosing different disorders.

In connection with improving the methodological basis for performing correction, majority of respondents (46.4%) acknowledge the need for improvement. 42.9% of respondents have not provided a specific answer on this issue. With regard to the content of correction materials, respondents mention some specific already published materials, some joint materials for all special education institutions, as well as manuals on upbringing and learning difficulties, algorithms. In this context, respondents express the need for unified diagnostic materials on special needs issues.

Data relating to the type of activity performed by support personnel in educational institution confirm the shortcomings in cooperation of specialists. 57.1% of respondents confirm that the work of all specialists is coordinated, 25.0% indicate that each expert is working according to one’s own plan of activities, 3.6% state that the work is not coordinated, 3.6% express the thought that the support team work needs to improve.

The data in relation to providing help for the parents allow to identify the dominant spheres of professional consultative activities. The survey data show that the most often support staff assistance is needed with behaviour-related issues (75.0%), learning-related issues (67.9%), parenting issues (67.9%), mutual communication issues between the family members (39, 3%).

The obtained data relating to the co-operation of support personnel with out-of-school support services confirms the utilization of diverse resources but at the same time – also the shortcomings in this area. According to the questionnaires, support personnel professionals mainly collaborate with professionals of municipal social services (75.0%), 64.3% - with special educational institutions, 46.4% - with the specialists of law enforcement services and 14.3% - with non-governmental and different public organizations.

Cooperating with the pedagogical-medical commission, 46.4% of respondents only prepare the documents for assessment of children, but 75.5% receives specialists’ advice when necessary.
The data related to the common difficulties for support personnel working with children with special needs reveal rather typical problems (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Common difficulties for support personnel working with children with special needs

According to the comments of respondents, significant difficulties for professional activities of support personnel is caused by behaviour problems of children and lack of learning motivation, shortcomings in mutual cooperation between personnel of different educational establishments and difficulties to understand the non-interpreted conclusions of medical specialists.

Discussion

The qualitative functioning of internal pedagogical-psychological support system is an important factor for providing inclusive education. According to norms and regulations of education system of Latvia, the responsibility for functioning of support system is delegated to the educational establishments, but these documents do not define the essence of the internal support system. As the basis for their activities the team of professionals can use only the recommendations formulated by the Ministry of Education and Science, which gives overall characteristics of the team structure, work tasks and principles of cooperation. However, these recommendations have only the recommendatory character (Methodical Recommendations, 2009).

In any event, it is a feature of democratic education policy. However, it must not be forgotten that in Latvia education of children with special needs for many decades had developed on basis of segregation. Therefore, the general education institutions are not familiar with the problems characteristic to special education, and this is still an unexplored experience.

This research reflects the accumulation of experience in conjunction with performance quality assessment of internal support system. The interpretation of obtained research data, similarly as with the questionnaire content development, is done following several criteria, such as: subjective resources and competence, internal interactions within the educational institution, the external interactions, environmental resources.

The analysis of subjective staff resources and competence shows that the support personnel group of respondents is relatively small (n = 28). As the research process was connected with the particular educational institutions, it can be concluded that currently the special education programmes are provided by very limited number of suitably qualified specialists.

In the group of respondents psychologists and speech therapists are the dominant majority. Special educators and social pedagogues come next. Relatively limited is representation of medical staff and teachers in support teams of educational establishments. The deficiency of personnel resources is also confirmed by survey responses of administration of educational institutions involved in the study (n = 63). Significantly small percentage of the respondents from this group think that the number of teaching hours and personnel work loads are sufficient (23.8%), including also for the professionals of support team.

The survey data show that the respondents have experience of working with a wide range of disabilities. From the responses of administrative staff it can be concluded that the most typical special education programmes are for children with mental disabilities and children with learning difficulties and mental
retardation. Therefore in the region where research was conducted there are limited integration opportunities, for example, for children with sensory or physical disabilities. The obtained research data allow concluding that the support personnel has appropriate professional education and that they keep improving their competence through continuing education. In this context, the remarks that dominated particularly in the responses of psychologists and social pedagogues about lack or partial lack of expertise can be considered as contradictory. Consequently, the doubts arise about the quality of content of study programmes and also about the work quality of the professionals.

The internal interaction within an educational institution is one of the cornerstones of the support team’s work, and it is optimistically evaluated by preschool and primary school teachers involved in the study (n = 236). 86% of respondents claim that the support system operates in the particular educational institution. However, in this context there are also some other viewpoints: 4.3% of surveyed teachers believe that the support system does not work or only assistance of one specialist is provided (5.5%). Also the responses of children (n = 299) are controversial to optimistic support ratings (data from surveying comprehensive school pupils, grades 6 to 9). A relatively small number of respondents (6.7%) name assistance of support team members as a possible form for overcoming the learning difficulties.

Dominating majority of respondents indicate that there is coordinated cooperation between the professionals. However, respondents in all groups emphasize the difficulties of working with children with special needs. This may indicate that there is a need for greater support from management of educational institutions in terms coordinating the work of support team. Perhaps a planned perfection of staff’s professional competence is needed in this field.

External interactions in the work of the support personnel are most visible in collaboration with children's parents. The survey data confirm the activity of the support team – the active engagement in the solving rather diverse problems together with children’s parents. In this context, the data obtained from the parents involved in the study seem contradictory (n = 196). According to survey data, only 36.7% of parent respondents think that educational establishments are capable to provide them necessary information or help. And only 9.2% of parents say that they are looking for a real help in school or preschool educational establishment. Therefore, the cooperation between parents and support team so far can be considered as rather deficit.

Contrary, the data from the responses of the support team members show active cooperation of specialists with local pedagogical-medical commissions, which is one of the few regional components of external support system. In this context, the possibilities to access the necessary consultations are regarded as significant. At the same time cooperation takes place also with various departments in the extended social environment. In this respect public organizations can be regarded as underutilized resource. Such collaboration allows to draw greater public attention to the socialization processes of children with special needs.

Evaluating environmental resources, it is important to keep in mind that respondents mainly speak about providing special rooms for their activities within the educational institution. However, there are also situations that the same office is used by several specialists or that specialists use the rooms that are available for that moment. Perhaps this situation is the result of insufficient environmental resources, as it is also evidenced by the 44.5% of respondents – representatives of the administration of educational institutions. Possibly this situation can be interpreted as a lack of awareness from the side of the management about the specifics of activities of the support personnel.

With regards to material resources for diagnostics of special needs and correction, it can be concluded that partly materials are provided in a centralized way, but partly – prepared by professionals themselves. According to the responses of support personnel, there is a need for the improvement of material supplies both in spheres of diagnostics and correction. In this context, there can be tests for the diagnosing specific disorders, learning literature, and also different interactive materials, etc. In this sphere there has been an absolute congruence in opinions of interviewed administration staff members and the support personnel. Therefore, the financial resources can be considered as problematic, as only 15.9% of the surveyed schools administration staff members acknowledge it as sufficient.

Conclusions

Providing education oriented towards integration and inclusion of children with special needs is a very important task on a state level. However, the normative basis of the Latvian education system do not provide the conditions for meeting this objective.
Ignoring the gaps of the normative basis, the pedagogical-psychological support teams function in the educational institutions. However, the deficiencies can be observed for the staff members in terms of needed professional competence that is necessary for providing the integration process for children with special needs.

The research data prove that the personnel involved in support system's structure is quite limited. Consequently, the capacity of the staff performing the support system's functions is low.

The quality of the internal support team work is significantly limited by environment accessibility and deficit of material and financial resources in the structure of functioning education system.

The research results show that within the research area the inclusive education is mainly provided for children with mental and learning disabilities. As a result, there are limited integration possibilities for children with other specific developmental disorders. It can be concluded that educational establishments do not provide adequate environment for the work of specific support personnel.

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LES FONCTIONS DU SYSTÈME DE SOUTIEN ET DE SES POSSIBILITÉS DE MISE EN ŒUVRE DANS LE PROCESSUS DE L'ÉDUCATION D'INTEGRATION

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Summary

La réalisation des idées d’intégration dans le processus d’apprentissage est considérée comme une des plus grandes réussites dans le développement de l’éducation internationale et dans l’intégration de la société. À l’échelle internationale ces processus sont discutés lors des débats, étudiés dans la recherche et dans les activités pratiques. Leur objectif est de créer les bonnes conditions visant à améliorer l’environnement d’apprentissage pour les enfants avec les besoins spéciaux. Pour la réalisation des conditions d’intégration dans le domaine d’éducation il est nécessaire de résoudre les problèmes spécifiques et traditionnellement liés uniquement à l’éducation spéciale dans le cadre des processus d’éducation générale.

avec les besoins spéciaux et un établissement d’éducation professionnelle (école des métiers) qui pratique le programme d’enseignement pour les enfants avec des difficultés scolaires.

La base scientifique de ce travail de la recherche est l’idée que l’intégration est considérée comme un outil pédagogique qui augmente le taux de réussite chez tous les élèves et augmente la qualité d’apprentissage. En liaison avec la qualité de la structure du système de soutien pédago-psychologique on évalue la qualité et la quantité des ressources en général : la structure de l’offre d’environnement de l’activité, du personnel et des services. Les processus pédago-diagnostiques, didactiques, méthodiques, ainsi que ceux qui visent à la correction et la réhabilitation de la déficience sont à la base d’évaluation de la qualité d’activité professionnelle. De plus la relation d’interaction, le travail interdisciplinaire et implication des élèves et des parents dans la résolution des problèmes du développement ont été à la base d’évaluation.

L’approche multidimensionnel et de multi perspective a été employé pour la réalisation de cette étude. De point de vue multidimensionnel la situation du fonctionnement intérieur des établissements d’éducation est évaluée au niveau des méthodes et des ressources d’activités et la situation liée à l’interaction extérieure des établissements d’éducation – c’est la collaboration avec les parents et les structures de soutien extra scolaires. De point de vue multi perspective le processus d’éducation et la structure de l’environnement sont évalués par rapport à des perspectives différentes des tous les participants : les professeurs, le corps administratif des établissements scolaires, les spécialistes de soutien, les enfants et les parents. Cette approche a permis de voir le système de soutien interne des établissements scolaires comme un des éléments d’éducation d’intégration qui ne permet pas l’augmentation de qualité.