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Training Teachers to Work with Children with Special Needs in North-Eastern Russia

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Abstract

The research purpose is to study the state of teacher training related to the work with children with special educational needs in North-Eastern Russia considering modern requirements and identify conditions for its improvement according to the requirements of the regional educational space. The research drew on the analysis of the websites of the regional higher education institutions in North-Eastern Russia. The experience of the regional universities in training teachers was compared and contrasted with that of North-Eastern Federal University.

The rationale for the research is that there is the need to develop inclusive way of thinking in future teachers. High quality of teacher training can be achieved via a wide range of implemented programmes of additional professional education. Creating an inclusive educational environment requires a coordinated, consistent work to train special education teachers. The research showed that it is important to establish and develop an early support system. This should be reflected in regional systems of training, retraining, and additional training of teachers. To effectively implement inclusive education in North-Eastern Russia, it is necessary to develop competencies in future teachers for successful work with different categories of children with special needs. As the density of the regional population in North-Eastern Russia is low, versatility of teacher training should be ensured by offering many higher education and additional professional education courses.

Keywords: children with special educational needs, inclusive education, teacher training, regionalisation.

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Introduction

The development of the state policy in the sphere of protecting the rights of students with special needs (Government of the Russian Federation, 2016) led to positive changes in the practice of educating and upbringing children with special educational needs (SEN). Implementation of inclusive education places a high demand on all teachers in organizing educational activities of students with SEN in accordance with the requirements of federal state educational standards, and use of psychological and pedagogical technologies necessary for the individualisation of learning, development, and upbringing of students with SEN. This research attempts to address the need for defining conditions that promote improvements in the efficiency of the process of training teachers for work with children with SEN, taking into account the nature and demands of the regional education system in North-Eastern Russia.

In accordance with Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education (2014), training teachers for work with children with SEN requires building professional competencies for organising group and individual educational and pedagogical activities of students, as well as designing and using corresponding psychological and pedagogical techniques. This is due to the fact that the principal condition for implementing inclusive practices is ensuring the readiness of future teachers on cognitive, behavioural, and motivational levels for including children with SEN in educational environments (Bysyuk & Shevchenko, 2020).

At present, there is a clear need for adopting integrated measures to overcome the shortage of highly qualified special education teachers in the education system and to enable psychological and pedagogical abilitation of students with SEN. Special education teachers play a significant role in psychological and pedagogical coaching of children, on the quality of training (Union of Defectologists, 2019).

In accordance with the strategy of developing the education of students with SEN (Malofeev, 2019), the system of early support for children with SEN and children in the risk group has been defined as a key growth point of the whole education system. It contributes to the fundamental changes in the expansion of inclusive educational space and normalising the life of a family with a child with SEN. This justifies the need for the corresponding training of specialists (Malofeev, 2019). Considering the regional differences and requirements of the education system, the specific nature of training special education teachers in universities consists of 1) the implementation of the ethnic-regional approach based on the unity of cultural and educational space and equality in preserving and developing the languages of peoples that live in this region; 2) the development of national-regional component of educational programmes aimed at building competencies that are in high demand in the regional education system;

3) the organisation of scientific-methodological support in the process of training SEN specialists in the conditions of education regionalisation; 4) the expansion of social partnership aimed at regional regulation in the field of special and inclusive education of the region (Yudina, Abramova, & Kornilova, 2017).

Consequently, in order to improve the quality of teacher training in the area of inclusive education in North-Eastern Russia, it is necessary to consider both the nationwide trends and the needs of the regional educational space.

Purposes and objectives of the study

The research aimed at studying the state of teacher training related to the work with children with SEN in North-Eastern Russia considering modern requirements. Also, it was set to identify the conditions to improve the process of teacher training according to the requirements of the regional educational space by analysing the experience of the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University in the area of training teachers to work with children with SEN.

Literature review

The Russian and foreign experience of developing inclusive education shows the dependence of the effectiveness of this process on the professional competence in the field of educating and upbringing children with SEN of all teachers, taking part in its implementation (Kesälähti & Väyrynen, 2013; Malofeev, 2019; Mattson & Hansen, 2009).

Of special interest for the purposes of our research is the paper by Ogden (2019). The author studied the current state of education of children with SEN in Norway and stressed that teachers who have negative attitudes towards inclusion have a negative effect on the academic development of students with special needs.

Opinions of Sirotyuk (2012) and Kuzmina (2015) are significant for our research as they identify, within the frames of the competence model of training teachers for work in conditions of inclusive education, a basic component that builds universal cultural and professional competencies and a special component that provides for the formation of the system of professional-specialised competencies, professionally important personality qualities, and professional-personal position in the field of inclusive education. Thus, the need for introducing special courses and practice-oriented activities such as internships and volunteering are justified.

Vasilyeva, Koryakina, Nogovitsyna, Nikiforova, & Adamova (2021) also note that professionally oriented volunteering activities during the teacher training promote successful personal and professional development, as they build the necessary professional qualities and competencies as well as social-professional activity.

Literature review shows that in the Russian system of teacher training, undergraduate and postgraduate level programmes justifiably include subjects (modules) that are compulsory for learning by all students of pedagogical specialisations, aimed at building competencies in the sphere of educating and upbringing children with SEN. For example, Psychology and Pedagogics Institute of Murmansk State Humanities University introduced the course “Foundations of Special Pedagogics and Psychology”, Northern (Arctic) Federal University offers two compulsory courses on “Foundations of Corrective Pedagogics and Special Psychology” and “Psychological and Pedagogical Foundations of Inclusive Education” (Kesälahti & Väyrynen, 2013).

Kesälahti & Väyrynen (2013) also stress the compulsory inclusion of special courses in teacher training programmes in Sweden. The authors note that the compulsory component of any teacher training programme includes courses on corrective pedagogics (15 credits), in addition to several thematic courses worth 30 credits each, as well as optional courses. The authors also report that in Denmark, where the main goal of teacher training is defined as integration of “inclusive thinking” into the content of all taught courses, not just the courses connected with training special education teachers, all teacher training programmes include disciplines on corrective pedagogics worth ten credits. Optionally, students can choose additional corrective pedagogics subjects worth 10-30 credits.

The researchers identify the main goal of Norwegian schools as the establishment of “education for all”. For the purposes of training specialists who can adapt educational processes, taking into account the potential, abilities, interests, and sociocultural background of students, educational programmes include courses on corrective pedagogics, and “Adaptive education” module (Kesälahti & Väyrynen, 2013).

In Finland, in order for students to understand the nature of interaction of various factors that affect the educational process, as well as to develop positive attitudes towards different students and varied educational situations, the training programme includes a course on special pedagogics that can be taken by all students at the University of Lapland, irrespective of their specialisation. The authors stress that inclusive education permeates the whole process of training elementary school teachers. Thus, students study the course on “Inclusive education” worth 5 credits and implement their ideas on inclusive pedagogics during teacher-training internship.

Kesälähti & Väyrynen (2013) underline that during the implementation of inclusive education programme it is necessary to emphasise the special environment of the North and to direct the educational process not towards the “shortage” of student potential, but towards their interaction with the environment. Additionally, the values, principles and practical experiences of inclusive education should be open to the world and should become an integral part of faculty philosophy. The ideas of education regionalisation are reflected in the system of teacher training in Sweden, where topics of research papers include questions on organising education of children of indigenous peoples and “traditional” aspects of special pedagogics.

The study by Mattson & Hansen (2009) describes the experience of 14 municipal schools of Stockholm in organising education of children with SEN which showed the role of a special teacher as a coordinator of inclusive education in the school. School principals note that exercise of coordinating and controlling functions by a special teacher leads to a more inclusive school, while his or her focus on only educational activities with children with SEN leads to segregation.

At present, in the system of education and psychological-pedagogical abilitation of students with special needs, there is a shortage of highly qualified specialist, with the need to resolve this issue pointed out in the Resolution of the Third All-Russian Congress of Special Education Teachers (Union of Defectologists, 2019).

Lapp & Yarikova (2016) note that the significance of an educational programme is justified by its courses that reflect the needs of all educational stakeholders. This includes local issues of educating people with SEN, current capacity of human resources, demand for specific skills on the labour market, and other issues.

Methodology

In order to study the current state of the process of training teachers for work with children with SEN, we analysed the data on the official websites of higher education institutions of North-Eastern Russia that offer teacher training programmes. The following universities were chosen: the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University (Yakutsk), Churapcha State Institute of Physical Culture and Sport (Churapcha village, Churapcha Ulus, Sakha Republic (Yakutia)), North-Eastern State University (Magadan), Bering Kamchatka State University (Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky). The analysis was built on the data concerning the special subjects offered within educational programmes for building the necessary professional competencies for work with children with SEN, programmes for training defectology specialists, and additional professional education programmes in accordance with current requirements.

For the purposes of identifying conditions that promote improvements in the efficiency of the process of training teachers for work with children with SEN and reflect the needs of the local educational space we analysed the experience of the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University.

Results

The data analysis showed that teacher training in North-Eastern Russia is offered in the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University (Yakutsk), Churapcha State Institute of Physical Culture and Sport (Churapcha village, Churapcha Ulus, Sakha Republic (Yakutia)), North-Eastern State University (Magadan), Bering Kamchatka State University (Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky).

Building professional competencies of future teachers in the area of inclusive education is carried out by teaching compulsory subjects and during professional internships. The analysis of literature and existing practices showed that the efficiency of building these competencies depends on the presence of corresponding subjects in educational programmes.

Table 1. Results of studying the state of teacher training related to the work with children with special educational needs in North-Eastern Russia

No	Education level	Degree	Number of teacher-training specialisations	Number of teacher-training specialisations with special subjects	Number of special subjects
Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University (Yakutsk)					
1	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education	10	10	1
2	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education	23	23	1
3	Undergraduate	Psychological-pedagogical education (with two specialisations)	5	3	1
4	Undergraduate	Professional education (by different fields)	3	2	2
5	Undergraduate	Special (defectological) education	1	3	1
6	Specialist	Special (defectological) education	1	1	65% of all subjects in the curriculum and all internships
		Pedagogics and psychology of deviant behaviour	1	1	3

7	Postgraduate	Pedagogical education	20	20	1
8	Postgraduate	Psychological-pedagogical education	2	2	1
9	Postgraduate	Special (defectological) education	1	1	77% of all subjects in the curriculum and all internships
10	Postgraduate	Professional education (by different fields)	1	1	1
Churapcha State Institute of Physical Culture and Sport (Churapcha village, Churapcha Ulus, Sakha Republic (Yakutia))					
1	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education	1	1	1
2	Undergraduate	Psychological-pedagogical education	1	1	1
North-Eastern State University (Magadan)					
1	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education	4	1	1
				2	2
				1	3
2	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education (with two specialisations)	7	1	2
3	Undergraduate	Psychological-pedagogical education	1	1	3
4	Postgraduate	Pedagogical education	4	1	3
				2	1
				1	2
5	Postgraduate	Psychological-pedagogical education	3	2	65% of all subjects in the curriculum and all internships
Bering Kamchatka State University (Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky)					
1	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education	3	3	1
2	Undergraduate	Pedagogical education (with two specialisations)	8	3	2
				(2 – no data)	
3	Undergraduate	Psychological-pedagogical education	1	1	1
4	Undergraduate	Special (defectological) education	1	1	75% of all subjects in the curriculum and all internships
5	Postgraduate	Pedagogical education	4	1	1
				(2 – no data)	

The analysis showed that there are five degrees that can be obtained in teacher training in North-Eastern Russian Federation: Pedagogical education, Psychological-pedagogical education, Special (defectological) education, Professional education (by different fields), and Pedagogical education (with two specialisations).

Teacher training for all the degrees is offered in the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University (NEFU). All curricula of these programmes include special disciplines aimed at building professional competencies in the field of educating and upbringing children with SEN.

Part-time teacher training in Churapcha State Institute of Physical Culture and Sport (CSIPCS) includes a special subject on “Psychological and pedagogical work with children with SEN” at an undergraduate level.

North-Eastern State University (NESU) offers degrees in Pedagogical education, Psychological-pedagogical education, and Pedagogical education (with two specialisations). In accordance with Federal State Educational Standard of Higher Education (2014), the curricula at undergraduate and postgraduate levels include special disciplines such as “Foundations of special pedagogics”, “Inclusive education”, “Organising work with children with SEN”. However, some programmes do not include special disciplines for building competencies in the field of educating and upbringing children with SEN.

Bering Kamchatka State University (KamSU) offers teacher training degrees in Pedagogical education, Psychological-pedagogical education, Special (defectological) education, and Pedagogical education (with two specialisations). Analysis of information on the university website shows that special subjects are included in programme curricula with a few exceptions.

As for the training of special education teachers for North-Eastern Russian Federation, it can be noted that the corresponding programmes are offered in two universities. For example, NEFU trains teachers with a degree in Special (defectological) education, specialisation “Logopaedics”. Training special education teachers in the postgraduate programme “Psychological and pedagogical support for early age children with developmental disorders” provides specialists for the system of early support.

KamSU trains special education teachers with an undergraduate level specialisation in “Logopaedics”.

NESU trains teachers for work with children with SEN, offering degrees in Psychological-pedagogical education, postgraduate programmes in “Organising inclusive education”, “Psychological and pedagogical support for children in special needs education”.

In conditions of implementing inclusive education, the universities of North-Eastern Russia react to the demands of the region in a timely manner by developing and offering programmes of additional professional education. For example, NEFU offers professional retraining programmes in “Pedagogics and psychology of inclusive education” (504 hours), “Oligophrenopedagogics” (504 hours), “Special education teacher (Oligophrenopedagogics)” (640 hours), “Special education teacher (Logopaedist)” (1080 hours; 444 hours). CSIPCS offers a programme on “Tutor support in educational institutions” (254 hours). NESU trains specialists in “Defectology” (604 hours). KamSU trains teachers in “Defectology” (300 hours), “Foundations of logopaedics” (300 hours). Additionally, the universities offer courses of advanced training.

The experience of the Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University

In 2002, the programme “Logopaedics” was opened at NEFU, and in 2003 – the programme “Oligophrenopedagogics”. This was prompted by the shortage of special education teachers in North-Eastern Russia. In 2011, the Department of Special (Defectological) Education was opened in the university. This is still the only department that train special education teachers in the region.

The work of the Department’s professors is aimed at preserving the positive values of Russian pedagogics in special (defectological) education, continuing the best traditions of fundamental university education and practice-oriented training of future special education teachers via undergraduate programmes in “Logopaedics” and “Oligophrenopedagogics”, and a postgraduate programme in “Psychological and pedagogical support for early age children with developmental disorders”. The main directions of the Department’s work reflect the existing experience of modernising leading Russian universities that train special education teachers, modern requirements for their training that are based on the fundamental principles of humanisation of education, democracy, national and regional character of the education system, and continuity of education.

Regional features of the education system in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) that define the character of professional activities of special education teachers were identified. They are the lack of preschool element of the republican system of corrective-pedagogical support for children with SEN; consideration of polylinguistic conditions during the process of educating and upbringing children with SEN; shortage of special education teachers in rural educational institutions (Yudina et al., 2017).

The principal undergraduate and postgraduate professional educational programmes include subjects that were developed taking into account the national and regional specifics and the uniqueness of the educational environment in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) and North-Eastern region.

They are “Corrective-pedagogical support for children with SEN in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)”, “Regional model of corrective-pedagogical support for children with SEN in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)”, “Basic principles of logopaedic work with Sakha-speaking children”. In addition, the content of specialised subjects includes the parts that reflect the feature of corrective-pedagogical activities in conditions of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). The regional aspect is also reflected in the content of term papers and graduation theses of students, the topics of which relate to the issues of providing corrective-pedagogical influence, taking into account native languages. Internships include conditions for building professional competencies of students in the field of corrective-pedagogical work with children with SEN, including work in a Sakha-speaking educational environment.

The practice-oriented professional retraining requires the organisation of an educational process in a university in such a way that gives the students an opportunity to check, expand, and use the knowledge acquired through theoretical studies. In 2014, the Department established the “Saidyy” (“Development”) Centre of Psychological and Pedagogical Support for Children with SEN, the work of which is aimed at creating a research and practical base for building professional competencies of students; providing corrective psychological and pedagogical support for children with SEN; advanced training of teachers on the issues of educating and upbringing children with SEN (Yudina & Kulikovskaya, 2017).

Practical and laboratory classes for students in the Centre, organisation of educational-research and scientific-research work of students allow solving the following professional tasks: pedagogical, methodical, support with consideration of the needs of regional educational space. Term papers and graduation theses of students are used to develop and implement socially important projects such as the establishment of an inclusive theatre group, inclusive studio of arts and crafts, theatre group for children with general speech underdevelopment, studio of arts and crafts for children with general speech underdevelopment, fine arts studio for children with general speech underdevelopment, and others. Junior year students volunteer during these classes to help children complete their tasks and organise active games during breaks. Extracurricular activities of students include participation in different events organised by professors and students of the Department.

Volunteer activity was found to be an effective means of building competencies of students within the frames of realising student-centred and interdisciplinary approaches, organised at the Department via “Sundog” Volunteer Group. This allows students to understand inclusive values, participate in the events aimed at corrective-pedagogical support of children with special needs based on active interaction with public associations of parents (Yudina & Stepanova, 2019).

The work of the Department is aimed at building professional competencies of university students enrolled at undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programmes in the field of inclusive education. The professors of the Department teach the modules “Foundations of inclusive education”, “Psychological and pedagogical foundations of inclusive education”, and “Inclusive education of people with SEN” at the Teacher Training Institute, Institute of Modern Languages and Regional Studies, Institute of Natural Sciences, Institute of Physical Culture and Sport, Institute of Mathematics and Information Science, Institute of Physics and Technology, Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Peoples of North-Eastern Russian Federation, Institute of Psychology, and History, Philology and Road Construction Faculties. Inclusion of special disciplines in pedagogical education programmes of NEFU ensures systematic work on training future teachers to work with children with SEN.

Discussion

The research results showed that the fundamental premise for the realisation of inclusive practices is training of teachers, ready and able to skilfully include children with SEN into learning environments of education institutions. This requires the formation of readiness on cognitive, behavioural, and motivational levels. These results are in line with the research conducted by Bysyuk & Shevchenko (2020).

The study also indicated that the issue of training special education teachers in North-Eastern Russia is still important. Some universities in the region do not include special disciplines in teacher education programmes. This can negatively impact the quality of training teachers for work in inclusive environments.

Evtushenko, Linkov, & Rechitskaya (2019) pointed at the connection of education modernisation to the renewal of teacher training content and building professional competencies. There is the need to unlock teachers’ potential for creative activities by providing the conditions for mastering the innovative methods and technologies, taking into account the differences in educational needs of children. Khitryuk (2013), Sabelnikova (2009), and Kuzmina (2015) share this opinion, noting the importance of practice-oriented activities in the system of teacher training. This can be achieved in a team of professionals during training sessions, interdisciplinary team meetings, pedagogical workshops, internships, masterclasses, open events of inclusive educational institution teachers. Thus, there is the need to help future teachers develop inclusive thinking which is why it is necessary to include special disciplines in the curricula and ensure the presence of inclusive components in the contents of modules and internships.

The Resolution of the Third All-Russian Congress of Special Education Teachers underscores the significance of completing and adopting the professional standard of “Special education teacher”, on the basis of which training and retraining programmes of specialists should be modernised (Union of Defectologists, 2019).

Systemic training of special education teachers for the region provides for the possibility of obtaining special (defectological) education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is possible if a university has a specialised department. The research showed that the Department of Special (Defectological) Education in NEFU offers educational programmes on two levels of higher education, which take into account the needs and prospects of development of the regional educational space. Also, the importance of training special education teachers to work in highly competitive spheres of professional activity such as early support was identified. This way, by training specialists in the sphere of early support since 2016, NEFU has promoted the optimisation of the regional educational space for children with SEN.

In modern educational conditions, the issue of developing creative abilities of future special education teachers as an important professional quality is a pressing one. The research showed that an active use of interactive technologies promotes the development of motivation for teaching activities, professional self-consciousness, development of meta-subject competencies and values of students (Evtushenko et al., 2019).

Analysis of the experience of NEFU in training special education teachers shows that the organisation of a practice-oriented education of students of the Department at “Saidyy” Centre, their participation in designing and implementing socially important projects and volunteering activities helps to develop professional competencies, lateral thinking, skills for resolving non-standard professional challenges, development of leadership qualities, and contributes to the understanding of the social and personal significance of the future profession. The consistent work of the Department in training special education teachers for corrective-pedagogical work with children with SEN and various native languages is aimed at increasing the accessibility and quality of the educational environment, taking into account the specific features of the regional educational space.

In the system of training teachers, great significance should be given to improving the effectiveness of additional professional education of special education in-service teachers, taking into account professional needs of the students and requirements of the regional educational space (Voronkova, 2018; Evtushenko et al., 2019). The analysis of the research results showed that all universities in North-Eastern Russia offer programmes of professional retraining of teachers who work with children with SEN, aimed at resolving the shortage of specialists in the region.

In addition, the universities also offer a range of educational programmes of advanced training in the field. It should be noted that in modern educational conditions, when designing educational programmes of additional professional education, it is necessary to take into account the prospective directions of development of the education system of children with SEN and enable flexible response to the requests of employers.

Conclusion

The research indicated the need to develop inclusive thinking of future teachers by teaching them special subjects, aimed at building professional competencies in the sphere of educating and upbringing children with SEN, and integrating inclusive components into the contents of all modules and internships. In order to create inclusive educational space, it is necessary to train a required number of special education teachers specific for each region. Another important task is to establish and develop the system of early support. This requires a coordinated and consistent work aimed at training specialists at undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional retraining educational programmes.

For the most effective implementation of inclusive education in North-Eastern Russia, it is also necessary to develop competencies that allow teachers to successfully work with children in conditions of bilingualism, teach children to show respect to representatives of various cultures.

In conditions of low density of the regional population, it is important to make provisions for ensuring the general versatility of training special education teachers by offering a wide range of higher education and additional professional education courses. This will improve the accessibility and quality of corrective-pedagogical support for children and will raise the competitiveness of teachers.

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