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Current Trends in Special Education: Psychological and Pedagogical Support for Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

The article focuses on problems of special education and psychological-pedagogical support for students with learning disabilities. The research aim is to identify current trends in special education for these students, certain conditions and factors that impact their academic performance and development of life competencies. Research methods: analysis of today's legislation, regulations, proceedings papers, guidance and other policy documents on special educational needs for students with learning disabilities in public elementary and middle school; analysis of statistical data on education for students with learning disabilities in 2019/2020 academic year in all 85 constituent entities of Russian Federation; an online random sample survey among specialists who work in public schools that students with learning disabilities attend. Conclusions based on the conducted study are as follows: the number of students with learning disabilities on inclusive terms is increasing; there is a legal backing and methodological support for special education in public elementary schools; special education conditions need to be provided not only in public elementary school but also in middle school; inclusive education specialists are lacking knowledge on learning, teaching and psychological-pedagogical support for students with learning disabilities in today's school environment; there is a shortage of special education professionals in schools and learning centres. The results of the study can be used to develop educational policy, learning plans, programmes and to improve quality of inclusive education specialists training.

Keywords: students with learning disabilities, students with delayed mental development, inclusive education, special educational needs, psychological and pedagogical support, educational statistics.

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Introduction

In accordance with Federal legislation of Russian Federation, the Education Act guarantees to all Russian students with special needs and disabilities a right to special-need education and a right to choose models of learning, with inclusive education among them.

As far as students with disabilities are concerned, the group of students with learning disabilities is the most numerous and mixed one. Today most of them learn in inclusive classrooms. However, this type of psychic dysontogenesis is erroneously considered as a “self-fixable” state and as an easier case than it really is. It oftentimes leads to special education conditions being ignored and not specified according to special needs that may differ (Malofeev, 2014). Series of studies have proved that when inclusive classrooms are poorly planned and don't have special differentiated psychological and pedagogical support it only worsens it for students with learning disabilities. Not only doesn't it allow for their cognitive and personal development but also results into negative impact on their post-secondary social adaptation (Indenbaum, 2013; Korobeynikov, 2002).

Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify current trends in special education for students with learning disabilities, their needs and factors that can either facilitate or impede their learning capacities and development of life competencies. Analysing today's system of special education for students with learning disabilities helps to reveal positive changes in their learning and upbringing and to identify current objectives that require comprehensive solutions.

Literature review

Current trends in updating education for students with health limitations and disabilities in Russia are the same as the global trends of the world learning disabilities wide. That involves an equal access to good-quality education, highest possible level of inclusion of students with physical and intellectual disabilities to social and academic environment together with their typically developing peers (Gribov, 2021; Amor et al., 2019; Bombardelli, 2020; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Moreover, major changes in today's Russian special education for students with health limitations have been introduced in expanding inclusive learning and in purposes of education – to improve personality traits and to develop life skills and competences.

For instance, strategy and tactics of intervention show learning disabilities be built not for the whole nosologic groups of students with health limitations, as it used to be, but according to variants of developmental delay within each nosologic group. Therefore, special learning conditions are differentiated according to variants of pupils' special learning needs that are based on the variant of the their learning disabilities. This is reflected in Federal State Educational Standard of public elementary school for students with health disabilities and in Concepts of special education development for students with health limitations and disabilities in Russian Federation 2020–2030 (Concept for the development of education for students with disabilities, 2019).

The same trends refer to students with delayed mental development. In 1960s learning disabilities were considered a separate nosologic group. In 1980s the system of special education for these students was first developed to create special schools (classes) and programmes (Babkina, 2020). Furthermore, special educational needs of all students learning disabilities not be met completely due to polymorphic and mosaic nature of disorders, which is determined by the variety of factors of dysontogenesis (Babkina & Korobeynikov, 2020; Indenbaum, 2012; Korobeynikov, 2002; Markovskaya, 1993), and due to the fact that the group of students who can be referred to this nosologic category is a very mixed one. Learning conditions for learning disabilities used to be chosen according to whether it was a severe delay or a learning disabilities case, which was roughly estimated. In most cases the delay was considered to reduce if elementary school programme learning disabilities have been one year longer. Meanwhile, only in exceptional cases middle school programme learning disabilities be prolonged too (based on typical public school programme but with less students in a class and with school programme adapted to cognitive capacities of students).

By 2000s, results of interdisciplinary scientific studies on students with delayed mental development hadn't really matched what had been happening in pedagogy: although reasoning for educational differentiation of students with learning disabilities can be found in clinical and psychological studies (Babkina, 2020), in pedagogical practice all the students with learning disabilities still were considered a group of almost same learning disabilities level in terms of learning needs. Due to an overall direction towards integration of special and typical public education, now it is important to develop methods, approaches and conditions of pedagogical and psychological support for students with learning disabilities as well as to create conditions for them to thrive in terms of academic performance and personality skills.

With the Federal State Educational Standard of public school for students with special needs and disabilities being approved, it became possible to focus more on the differences and heterogeneity within the polymorphic category of students with learning disabilities.

This difference results first and foremost from the degree of disorder expression owing to biological and social reasons. Biological and social nature of disorder, for its part, determines diversity of learning disabilities not special educational needs (Korobeynikov & Babkina, 2017). However, in order to make these possibilities real we need methodological support, materials and learning programmes, and training for specialists that will help them to implement differentiated approach to special education.

Methodology

Methodology used in the research is based on fundamentals of special education and intervention psychology derived from Lev Vygotsy's cultural-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1991), from research on typological differentiation of mental developmental delay (Korobeynikov & Babkina, 2017) and differentiated approach to tailoring educational path for a student with learning disabilities according to his/her variant of developmental delay within the nosological group (Babkina & Korobeynikov, 2019).

Data of Federal State Statistic Service and Ministry of Education of Russian Federation were applied to estimate: the diversity of nosologic groups; how common inclusive education is in schools; and the ratio of students with learning disabilities who learn in special schools to those who study on inclusive terms. Statistical data on education in students with learning disabilities in 2019–2020 were analysed and structured.

We used:

1. Theoretical analysis: “Law on Education in the Russian Federation”; orders of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation concerning the organization of education for students with disabilities; Federal state educational standards for students with disabilities; adapted educational programs for students with delayed mental development; teaching materials for teachers working with students with learning disabilities in elementary and secondary schools; teaching aids for students with learning disabilities were analyzed. Longstanding practical experience of the authors of the article were also taken into account.

2. Inductive statistics method. This variables were analyzed: number of students in each nosological category; the number of students studying in a special elementary school; the number of students studying in an elementary school with an inclusive approach; the number of students studying in a special secondary school; the number of students studying in a secondary school with an inclusive approach; the distribution of special and inclusive schools in different regions of Russia; the number of specialists providing psychological and pedagogical support for students with delayed mental development (psychologists, speech therapists, special teachers) in various regions of Russia.

A detailed analysis of statistical data on the education of students with delayed mental development for the last three academic years was also carried out.

3. *Questionnaire.* The questionnaire included questions regarding the respondent’s educational level; experience in teaching; experience of working with students with delayed mental development; advanced training in the field of education of students with special educational needs; interdisciplinary interaction of school specialists and advice from specialists from resource centers; professional difficulties in teaching and psychological and pedagogical support of students with delayed mental development in inclusive environment.

Results

The analysis of statistical data on education in students with special needs and disabilities in 2019–2020 in 85 territorial divisions of Russian Federation proved students with learning disabilities to be the most numerous nosologic group, which makes up 40% of all students with health limitations and disabilities (Figure 1).

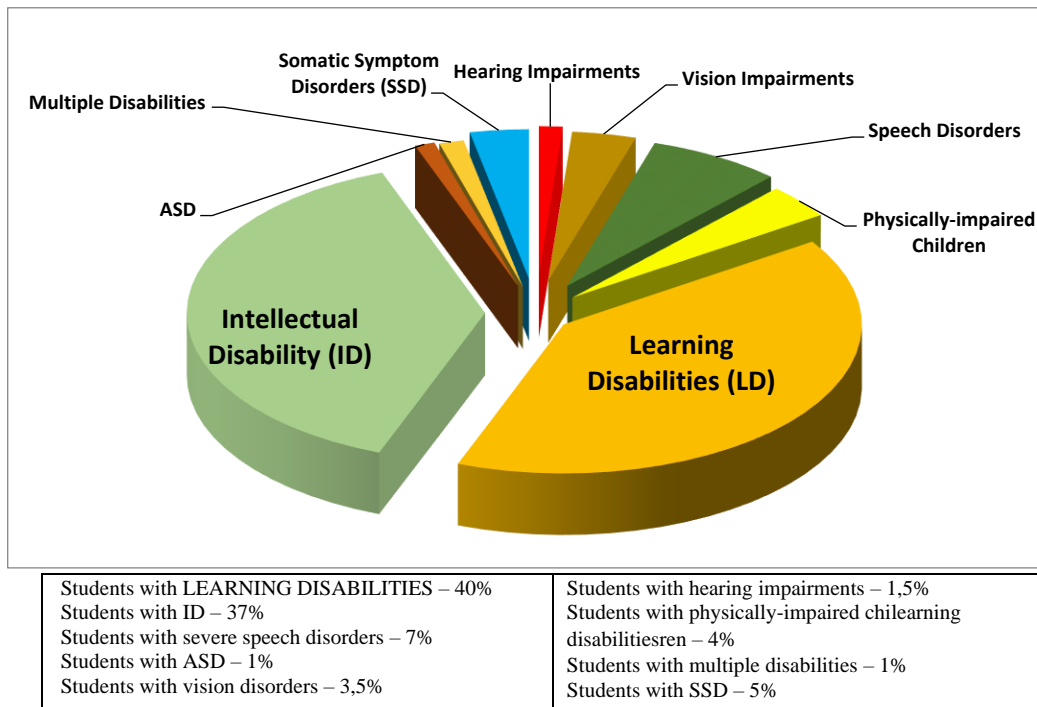


Figure 1. Percentage representation of different nosologic groups in schools.

The number of students with learning disabilities attending inclusive classes has increased year by year.

For instance, in 2013-2014 academic year 115 100 of students with learning disabilities were taught in special school/classes and 76 600 – in inclusive classes, while in 2015–2020 academic year it was almost normally distributed: 96 000 of the former attended special schools/classes and 95 700 of the latter studied on inclusive terms.

Today the number of students with learning disabilities learning in regular school on inclusive terms is significantly above the number of those in special school/classes. In 2019–2020 academic year, among students with learning disabilities, 92 100 students attended special school/classes, while 170 500 students (65% of the total) were taught in public schools on inclusive terms.

According to comparative analysis of 3-year statistical data, each year the number of students with learning disabilities who learn together with typically developing peers increased both in elementary and in middle school (Figure 2).

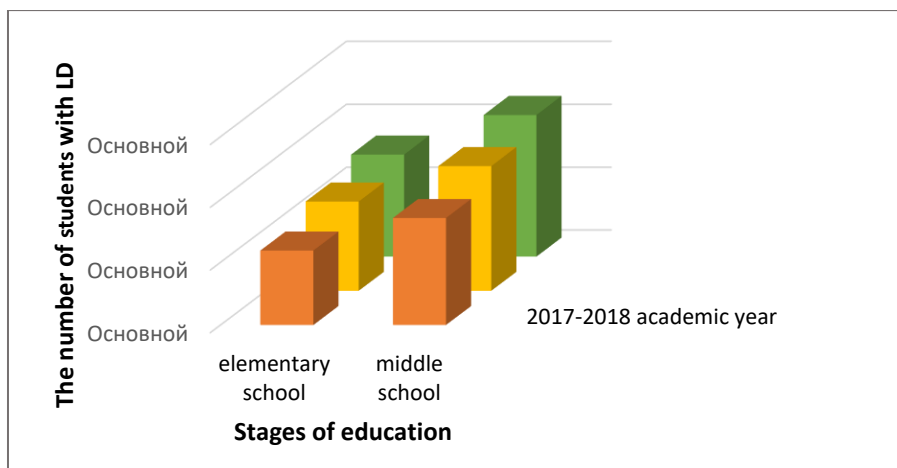


Figure 2. Changes in the number of students with learning disabilities studying on inclusive terms (2017–2020 academic year).

It is important to mention that sharp demographic fluctuations learning disabilities barely cause the recent significant increase of the total number of students with delayed mental development learning on inclusive terms with the number of students with learning disabilities in special schools/classes staying quiet stable. But what is mostly likely to be the reason is a more comprehensive and full account of students with learning disabilities due to special differentiated educational standard for students with health limitations implemented in 2016. To be more specific, what played the key role was adding «not severe» variants of developmental delay (Babkina & Korobeynikov, 2020) to statistical data on students with learning disabilities – not severe variants, yet requiring special learning conditions.

Statistical analysis proved percentage ratio of special and inclusive educational models to spread unevenly in different federal territories of Russia. On the one hand, that might have been caused by already existing special school chains/classes throughout regions. On the other hand, the reason learning disabilities be the regional educational policy that implies active implementation of inclusive model in schools.

However, no matter what educational model (special or inclusive), education must be provided to students with learning disabilities according to their own special needs. Special educational needs include the following essential points: adaptive educational programme with intervention classes; special methods, techniques and educational tools; comprehensive psychological, pedagogical and, if needed, medical support; conditions for specialists' training and work.

We studied methodological materials for different educational stages for students with learning disabilities and analysed law documents on standards and requirements for special education. Consequently, we may conclude that an Adaptive basic public elementary school programme for students with learning disabilities is already designed and it is based on special educational standards. The programme includes two variants (7.1. and 7.2.) that match typological variants of developmental delay within given nosologic group. A set of educational programmes, curricula and interventions were developed, along with methodological recommendations for teachers who work in typical public school classes that students with learning disabilities attend on inclusive terms. A system of differentiated psychological support for students with learning disabilities (Babkina & Korobeynikov, 2020) was created and implemented into school practice. All the above mentioned helps to effectively achieve educational objectives and upbringing goals for elementary school students with learning disabilities.

Nevertheless, even with special support elementary school students with learning disabilities are still encountered with difficulties in learning and school activities owing to specifics of this type of dysontogenesis. This is why special educational conditions need to be developed in public middle school too. Thus, an Adaptive Public Middle School Programme for students with learning disabilities (5–9 grade) was designed in State Funded Research Institute of Special Education of Russian Academy of Education, as a state-sponsored project by the Ministry of Education and Science. It includes methodological recommendations for interventions and for psychological-pedagogical support in middle school. Due to that, teachers will be able to work with 5–9 graders from a polymorphic category of students with learning disabilities using individually tailored plan and creating special learning conditions.

Well-trained professionals supply is one of essential prerequisites for good quality education for learning disabilities and teenagers with learning disabilities.

Statistical analysis revealed a shortage of psychological-pedagogical support specialists: the national average of educational specialists consists of 41% of educational psychologists, 29% – social adaptation educational specialists and counselors, 23% – speech-language pathologists and only 7% – defectology specialists (special education teacher). Some places in Russia have yet to see intervention specialists.

An online survey was conducted among 69 605 educational specialists from 76 regions of Russian Federation working both in special schools and in typical public schools that provide inclusive education. According to the survey results, there is a shortage of special education and intervention experts in elementary and middle public school. Only 97 of respondents (1,4%) reported they were completely satisfied with the intervention team for psychological-pedagogical support. More than 89% of them responded they had taken further professional training or courses over the past 5 years. However, 79% of respondents said they still need to improve their knowledge of special-need education in elementary school in terms of conditions, methods and techniques, 93% – agreed that the same refers to middle school.

Discussion

The research results and long first-hand experience let us observe and state significant positive changes in educational system for students with learning disabilities. First and foremost, it's about an opportunity to tailor educational path for learning disabilities by the first grade according to his/her variants of learning disabilities and adding development of life competencies and skills to the programme. With differentiated standard implemented, special learning conditions can be now provided to those students with learning disabilities who used to be out of specialists' focus and therefore had to study on basic public school terms.

And again, there is sufficient legal backing such as documents on standards and requirements, there is methodological support which is not only the adaptive educational programme but also practical learning plans with curricula, for middle school too. Yet, despite all that, the problems of reaching good-quality education for students with learning disabilities are being addressed not as effectively as they learning disabilities. It has to do with lack of professional training for specialists, namely training courses on differentiated approach to inclusive education for students with learning disabilities.

Statistical data analysis and results of the online-survey among educational specialists revealed: shortage of special education and intervention specialists in public schools proficient in special techniques, tools and methods; necessity to increase the number of educational psychologists in secondary public school; the need to stay practice-focused and to improve educational programmes and further teachers' training. Nonetheless, we can note teachers' interest in their own professional growth and their awareness of fundamental changes in today's Russian special education for students with learning disabilities.

Conclusion

Due to results of the study, the number of students with delayed mental development learning on inclusive terms has increased; there is sufficient legal backing such as standards and requirements documents and sufficient methodological support for special education in public elementary school; special education needs to be provided not only in elementary but in middle school; teachers and educational specialists in inclusive schools and institutions are lacking knowledge on special education and psychological-pedagogical support for students with learning disabilities in modern learning environment; there is a shortage of professionally trained specialists in schools and institutions.

Scientifically substantiated in previous studies (Babkina & Korobeynikov, 2020), the differentiated approach to tailoring an educational path for students with learning disabilities according to their variants of learning disabilities within same nosologic group makes it possible for specialists to design differentiated learning conditions that will match learning needs in common educational practice. The research results can be used: to develop learning plans and educational programmes for students with learning disabilities; in professional training for psychologists, special education teachers and inclusive education specialists. The study outcome that reflects statistical data on education for students with learning disabilities can be applied in national special education improvement plan.

The uneven distribution of students with learning disabilities and mismatching level of professional training (throughout the country and in the regions), revealed in the research, prove that academic degree education of special education professionals needs to be updated on real demands of educational system today.

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