

ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИ ИНТЕРВЕНЦИИ ЗА УЧЕНИЦИ С ЛЕКА УМСТВЕНА ИЗОСТАНАЛОСТ В ГРЪЦКИТЕ НАЧАЛНИ УЧИЛИЩА

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Резюме: Целта на обществото и на образованието през 21 век е да премахнат дискриминацията и предразсъдъците между отделните хора. Децата с лека умствена изостаналост са категория ученици със специални образователни потребности, която често се бърка с други категории деца със специални образователни потребности. Има очевидни разлики между учениците с лека степен на умствена изостаналост и тези с някаква форма на речева патология, както на образователно равнище, така и по отношение на социалните взаимоотношения между тях (Tzouriadou, Anagnostopoulou, 2011). От 2000 г. насам образователната политика в Гърция има за цел да интегрира учениците със специални образователни потребности, в резултат на което много ученици с умствена изостаналост посещават общообразователно училище и следват обща учебна програма с другите ученици, адаптирана или не адаптирана (Vlachou-Balafa, 2000: 79-100). Децата с лека умствена изостаналост, които посещават основно училище, често получават паралелна подкрепа или посещават интеграционни класове. Интеграционните класове в началните училища имат за цел да подпомагат, укрепват и подкрепят ученици с умствена изостаналост по двата основни предмета – език и математика. Така според своите възможности ученикът може да преодолее трудностите си и да се адаптира към общата учебна програма. Материалът разглежда обучителните интервенции, прилагани от учителите по специално образование в гръцките общообразователни начални училища към ученици с лека умствена изостаналост.

Ключови думи: лека умствена изостаналост, педагогически интервенции, учене, увреждания, специално образование

PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH MILD MENTAL RETARDATION IN GREEK PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract: In the 21st century, the purpose of both society and education is to eliminate discrimination and prejudice between individuals. Children with mild mental retardation are a category of students with special educational needs, which is often confused with other categories of special educational needs. There are obvious differences between students with mild mental retardation and students with some speech disorder, both in the educational level and in the social relationships of these children with each other (Tzouriadou, Anagnostopoulou, 2011). From 2000 onwards, the educational policy in Greece aims at the integration of students with educational needs and thus many students with mild mental retardation attend general school, following a common curriculum with the rest of their classmates, with or without adaptations (Vlachou- Balafa, 2000: 79-100). Children with mild mental retardation, who attend primary school, often have parallel support or attend integration classes. The integration departments in primary schools aim to help, strengthen and support students with mild mental retardation, in the two main subjects, language and mathematics. In this way, the student will overcome any difficulties and adapt to the common teaching program, as much as they can, according to their capabilities. The material examines the teaching interventions applied by special education teachers to students with mild mental retardation in Greek general primary schools.

Keywords: Mild mental retardation, pedagogical interventions, learning, disabilities, special education

INTRODUCTION

As all human beings can be useful to themselves and to society, so children with intellectual disabilities can learn to communicate, cooperate when they receive the appropriate help, training and support. Special education aims to eliminate the social handicap of children with mild or moderate intellectual disability, which creates difficulties for them to achieve their social roles, as it is not only an educational process, but a life support to all people who are part of it (Apokoroniotaki, Aslanoglou, Mitsiakou, 2014: 25). In Greece, there are legislations and presidential decrees that determine that the education of children with mild mental retardation and other special educational needs

takes place in specific structures of special education, parallel support and in integration sections of the general school (Lappa, Mantzikos, 2018: 46).

The latest law on special education and training (Law: 3699/2008) stipulates that in order for a child with special needs to be admitted to general education, they must have a differential diagnosis from the Center for Diagnosis, Evaluation, Counseling and Support and that the main goals of special education and training are the full development of the personality of students with mild mental retardation and the strengthening and utilization of their potential, so that they can join the general school, their inclusion in the educational system, in social interaction and professional life and their complete acceptance by society as a whole, having full accessibility to all the infrastructures, services and goods of society (Lampadari, Garavelas, 2018: 10).

Every country benefits greatly, when a child with mild mental retardation becomes an independent productive member of society. This presupposes the provision of all possible assistance and training by the state, which invests in human resources and money. The cost of special education services, however, is returned to the state in the form of profit from the economic productivity of these individuals. The education of students with mild mental retardation includes the full utilization of their potential and the satisfaction of their needs, so that they can participate in all activities of society and live with dignity and independence.

The main goal of the school is to provide every form of opportunity and assistance to students with mental retardation, so that they can develop their potential for economic and social independence. It is a democratic educational policy, according to which all human beings have equal rights to knowledge and social acceptance, and includes goals related to self-esteem, social adjustment and responsibility, and financial independence (Sharma, 2015: 27).

The purpose of this article is to review the educational interventions related, mainly, to the communicative needs of students with mild mental retardation and the educational strategies for their language development in Greek elementary schools. These specific educational interventions include the co-education of students with mild mental retardation in mainstream schools, through educational programs for the social skills training of these students and teaching programs for the language lessons. The policy of inclusive education for students with mental retardation poses great challenges and is related to the development of new strategies and teaching methods, tailored to the specifics of the difficulties they encounter in the process of learning. To the greatest extent, this refers to the teaching of basic school skills such as reading, writing and mathematical operations. In this regard, the adaptation and application of existing software products, presenting an opportunity for maximum visualization of the educational material and its gradual assimilation, is of particular importance.

THE CO-EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH MILD MENTAL RETARDATION

In recent years, education has been operating with the school's philosophy that gives equal opportunities to all students and applies the principles of co-education of all children and students with mental retardation. People of this category prove that they can be educated and become active in a society, without prejudices (Parmenter, 2011: 315). Due to the diversity of students with mental retardation, educational intervention programs differ from child to child. The degree of severity of the intellectual disability, the adaptive behavior and the capabilities of each student, are the main factors that must be taken into account in order to design such a program. Students with mild mental retardation, who are educable, attend general schools, while students with moderate intellectual disabilities, who are able to practice, are trained mainly in practical applications (Stasinios, 2013: 95).

Students with mild mental retardation acquire knowledge mainly through experiences, practice and experiential learning, in contrast to the school that applies, for the most part, a one-sided and same for all students, teaching method. The educational methods in question are quite ineffective in terms of the level of knowledge and daily skills of students of this category. It is very important that the teachers transfer to these children individually the knowledge that will benefit them in the future. In this way they will develop their personality and expressiveness, highlight their strengths, strengthen their potential and integrate smoothly into society (Stavroussi, Papalexopoulos, Vavougiou, 2010: 107).

Co-education contributes to the self-esteem of students with mild mental retardation and to them becoming more active in their school environment and in their social relationships. Thus, all students gain benefits in the social, emotional and academic aspects of their lives, while improving their learning and reducing the likelihood of school bullying. According to Friend et al. (2010: 12), there are six models of student co-education in the classroom. The first model proposes, during the educational process, that two teachers coexist. One teacher has the role of the observer and the other the role of the teacher who teaches. The first teacher collects the social and learning characteristics of the students (one teacher, one observer). In the second model, cooperative learning is applied, according to which the students are divided into three or more groups by the teacher, who uses group activities (station teaching). The third model of co-education is that of parallel teaching, in which the same educational material is used for all students, but the class is divided into two groups, changing the form of teaching. The class teacher teaches the students and at the same time the parallel teacher helps the students with mild mental retardation (parallel teaching). The fourth model of co-education supports the existence of two teachers in the classroom. One teacher helps most of the students and the special education teacher works with the other children in the

class and provides them with specialized help (alternative teaching). The fifth model of co-education is related to team teaching, according to which the two teachers work together with the aim of equal teaching and the inclusion of all students (teaming). The sixth model of co-education consists of a teacher and an assistant, who helps those students who have difficulties during learning instruction. Usually, when a student with mild mental retardation is assessed as capable of attending general school, the third model of co-education is followed, i.e. parallel support. This model presupposes the continuous communication and collaboration of the general classroom teacher and the special educator, in order to design an individualized program for the student with mild mental retardation. The student's individual program is based on the student's educational level and their social relationships within the classroom (Bebetsos et al., 2013: 234).

The effectiveness of co-education lies in the smooth cooperation of the general education teacher with the special education teacher, in the application of the legislative regulations, in the existence of appropriate personnel, such as psychologists, in the existence of appropriate equipment and logistical infrastructure (Kountouriotou, Dimakopoulou, Polychronopoulou, 2016: 103-115). The teaching work aimed at children with mental retardation attending general schools must follow certain guidelines. Emphasis must be placed on the acquisition of the basic skills of daily life of these students and their support, so that they can socialize and become independent citizens, to the extent of course that is possible, based on their mental level (Stasinos, 2013: 97). The teacher must choose the appropriate teaching units, which will be understood by children with mild mental retardation, with the help of the appropriate supporting material and the teaching staff. With the techniques of repetition and practice, the learning goals can be achieved both for students of typical development and for students with mild mental retardation.

Also, children should be motivated to learn and their efforts should be regularly rewarded. The evaluation of students' progress and frequent communication between the teachers and the parents strengthens the inclusion of children with mild mental retardation in the classroom and in society (Stasinos, 2013: 104). With co-education, students with mild mental retardation follow a common educational program with all other students. To achieve it, the cooperation of teachers as a team and the existence of the necessary logistical equipment are required, in order to creatively achieve the transmission of knowledge (Kountouriotou, Dimakopoulou, Polychronopoulou, 2016: 103-115).

SCHOOL INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR THE SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING OF STUDENTS WITH MILD MENTAL RETARDATION

Children with mental retardation present serious deficits in their social skills, as they face problems in their interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem and reduced motivation to learn. It is very important that they master the necessary

social skills, so that many areas of their personal and social life are enhanced. These areas include ensuring a quality life, safeguarding safety and health and various activities in the social environment in which the individual operates.

The practice of children with mental retardation in social skills should begin before attending school, so that their transition from home to school and from school to society to become smoother. Achieving this education will have a greater degree of success if the child is active in team-based environments where initiative and experiential learning will be promoted. Also, the interdisciplinary approach of the teaching subjects will help the students to learn and better consolidate the new knowledge and learn to communicate and cooperate smoothly in the group.

Social skills training for students with mild mental retardation includes interpersonal relationships, interacting with other people, and maintaining friendships with other people. Children need to practice applying appropriate behavior in different social situations and learn to participate properly in a conversation, understand the feelings of others and express their own in a socially acceptable way. Self-concept and self-esteem are important social skills for smooth social integration and gaining positive experiences. Children need to realize their value, understand their potential and overcome various negative emotions. It is important for them to be able to express their feelings in a socially acceptable way, to have positive self-esteem, to understand their uniqueness, to accept their failures and to rejoice in their successes.

Also, the fact that an individual is responsible is characterized as a social behavior, which includes the application of the corresponding reactions in different circumstances, maintaining social relationships, avoiding victimization, independence and taking initiative, recognizing rights and obligations and understanding personal responsibility (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2004: 3). Teaching a child about responsibility can include learning how to avoid risks, manage money properly, and follow rules in games and activities. Finally, communication is an important social skill, so that a person can communicate adequately with other people, through expression and understanding, and create meaningful and quality relationships. Children must be trained in the perception and understanding of different communicative situations and in finding the appropriate way to respond, in searching for information and transmitting it to others and in recognizing dangerous situations and how to deal with them (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2004: 4).

TEACHING PROGRAMS FOR THE LANGUAGE LESSONS

The teaching of the language course in the primary school aims at the development of the oral language of the students and the transition from spontaneous speech to cultivated oral speech (Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2004: 15). More specifically, it aims to develop students' ability

to adequately handle oral and written language, both at school and in various situations of daily life, developing, in this way, their communication skills.

Children with mild mental retardation have, to a lesser extent than their typically developing peers, developed oral communication skills, which is the basis for developing various partial skills such as criticism and creative thinking. For this reason, the school language teaching program for students with mild mental retardation must emphasize and prioritize the oral language, applying, as much as possible, the cooperative method and emphasizing the children's learning motivations. The main skills that students must acquire are the oral (listening-speaking) and the written language (pre-reading-reading, spelling-writing and production of written language, literature and vocabulary).

According to Polychronopoulou (2004: 125), teaching reading to students with mental retardation must combine elements from various methods and adapt to the needs of each child, in order to be as effective as possible. Students with reading difficulties improve their reading skills only through systematic teaching and practice, during which rich and attractive teaching material for the student will be used, which will be renewed frequently. This material can include various images, which will arouse the students' interest and strengthen the retention of the new information in their memory. It is very important to adhere to a strictly given special educational program, which will include the long-term and short-term goals, the teaching materials that will be used, the methods and means of assessment and the techniques of strengthening the student. For a fuller understanding of the information imparted to the students, they should be presented in groups and the exercises and activities should be of graded difficulty, so that the students are not too quickly led to failed attempts. Finally, the multisensory approach to teaching reading has proven to be particularly effective for students with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities.

Polychronopoulou (2004: 220) also suggests some effective ways to enhance a student's reading readiness, which include the cultivation of oral language, development of visual and auditory perception and the improvement of the child's phonological awareness. Students can practice their phonology informatively through various discrimination exercises of phonologically different word, decision of similarity or difference (on the phonological level of words), discrimination of rhyming words, syllabic and phonemic segmentation, composition, inversion and deletion (Porpodas, 2002). Also, to improve students' phonological awareness they can apply activities of replacing one phoneme of a word with another, matching a syllable with the correct picture (depending on the syllable with which the picture word begins), finding the syllable with which a picture begins from a set of syllables, completing the gap with a letter or syllable to produce the picture word and placing graphs in the correct order to produce a word (Polychronopoulou, 2004: 241).

LONG AND SHORT TERM GOALS

The teaching intervention programs for the students with mild mental retardation include some specifics, which will help in their successful application by teachers and will lead to the school success of these students. The specifics are related to the long and short term intervention goals, the space organization, the training material, the behavioral and cognitive approach, the behavior award and the treatment of the environment.

The therapeutic approach of a mild mentally retarded student must include the long-term and short-term goals of the intervention. The long-term goals should refer to meeting the individual's daily communication needs, increasing the perception and discrimination of different stimuli, using conventional morphology, syntax and pragmatics in interacting with other people. Also, emphasis should be placed on the correct use of phonological skills and the application of augmentative alternative communication for better interaction with other people in everyday life.

The described short-term goals of therapeutic work have a universal character and, in addition to children and students with mental retardation, are also applied to other forms of disorders in child development. Short-term goals include strengthening the maintenance of eye contact by constantly encouraging the student and giving him favorite objects or foods to make it more desirable to look at them. Also, the use of toys, that make sounds or movements, help the child to focus their attention there. Another good practice is to extend the frequency of conventional intentional communication, by moving the desired object to a slightly distant distance, so that the child can protest and request either with the look or with the movement or with the voice. Also, the use of symbolic interaction skills through modeling can help children imitate actions that are necessary for everyday life skills. It is very important to use basic communication vocabulary at home or at school. The child can point to the desired object and the adult can use sentences that gradually expand them, in order to show him the appropriate way to ask for it.

Additionally, augmentative or alternative communication can be used and enhance the content of the sentences by using communication tools from the student's family and school environment through extension, recognition and possible questioning. Increasing the quality of phonological evidence can occur through the use of conventional phonological skills and the development of basic education skills for everyday communication, school, work and home can be achieved through the acquisition of specific vocabulary and content which is necessary for the survival of the individual, as are road signs. Finally, the application of appropriate communication depending on the communication context can be done by the application of role plays, so that children practice in a variety of social situations (Landis, Vander-Woude, Jongsma, 2012).

SPACE ORGANIZATION

According to Panteliadou and Argyropoulos (2011), the space and environment in which students with mild mental retardation live and work must be designed according to their unique individual needs and be proportional to their communicative and behavioral requirements. Their space, therefore, must offer incentives for active learning, provide many options, give stimuli to the student without being disruptive and offer the feeling of safety and relaxation (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, 2006). The organization of the space of the students of this category presupposes the creation of an environment rich in stimuli and options using augmented and alternative means of communication and a careful selection of sounds, smells and images (Strongylos, Kaila, Theodoropoulou, 2010).

TRAINING MATERIAL

The educational material that can be used for teaching students with mild mental retardation should include software and programs suitable for the needs of each individual, with interactive activities. Some of these companies with corresponding software are “EQUALS”, which is a non-profit English organization and has designed tasks for children with severe learning difficulties. “Individual Educational Plans writer” contains individualized educational plans, “BSquared”, which is an electronic assessment system, “PECS”, which contains educational images, “Widget Software”, which has symbols necessary for education, and “Down Syndrome Educational International”, which is an international non-profit organization and has produced materials for language, lessons and communication (Panteliadou, Argyropoulos, 2011).

BEHAVIORAL AND COGNITIVE APPROACH

The behaviorist approach aims at learning, success criteria and the final learning outcome of the students, through the analysis of skills and techniques of behavior modification for children with mild mental retardation. Although it contributes to the learning of social skills and the development of self-care, it presents the disadvantage that it aims at acquiring knowledge, without first being understood by the child, with the result that the specific knowledge is not retained and not generalized. The cognitive approach aims at the interaction of the child with the environment and the mother with the child. Through the active participation of the child with mild mental retardation, educational practices are applied with the aim of structuring their environment. In this specific approach, the adult does not have full control and attention is paid to both the process and the result (Panteliadou, Argyropoulos, 2011).

BEHAVIOR REWARD

Rewarding behavior has been shown to be an effective training practice for associating the goal through verbal or material reward. The reward is offered to

the child upon successful completion of the activity. Reinforcement can be done verbally, for example saying “well done” or materially, usually offering food. The effectiveness of the specific technique causes concern among experts due to the dubious duration of its effectiveness and the thoughtless and harmful use (Panteliadou, Argyropoulos, 2011).

TREATMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Comprehensive therapeutic intervention involves modifying the physical environment of the student with mild mental retardation, which includes various methods, such as situational teaching, time delay, and modeling procedures, and trains the child in activities of daily living. It is related to language teaching in the environment and enhances students' communication and language skills (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2020).

EDUCATIONAL SOFTWARE FOR TEACHING STUDENTS WITH MENTAL RETARDATION

The use of educational software is an effective educational intervention for students with mild mental retardation. The definition of software includes any program of instructions that can be used and executed by a computer system and these instructions are formulated in the language of computing (Papad, 1989). Educational software is based on constant pedagogical principles and approaches and enhances cooperative learning and interaction. They can either be used as supplementary teaching aids by teachers and as supportive self-teaching aids by students (Panagiotakopoulos, Pierrakeas, Pindelas, 2003).

In recent years, more and more websites with educational material have been created by public and private bodies, which provide a pleasant learning environment. Through the research, it has been seen that students with special educational needs have great fluency in the use of electronic devices, such as electronic computers and tablets and show an intense interest in the use of interactive software, acquiring knowledge and skills in a pleasant way. Using targeted worksheets in combination with appropriate teaching interventions and teacher approaches, students can operate independently and answer written or oral questions (Panagiotakopoulos, Pierrakeas, Pindelas, 2003).

Familiarity with technology and computers is a necessary skill for students with mild mental retardation, in order to strengthen their communication and cognitive abilities, through practical thinking and the acquisition of new sensory and learning experiences of the students. Educational intervention for mentally retarded students through educational software contributes to strengthening their attention, patience and persistence (Misirli, 2009: 1). Moreover, many learning difficulties caused by the existence of various disabilities or deficits are addressed and various untapped potentials of students in this category are revealed. According to Strogilos (2011: 253), the use of electronic devices, such

as electronic computers, interactive whiteboards and projectors, during the teaching process strengthens the language skills of students with disorders of intellectual development, which can enrich their vocabulary and enhance the skill of describing various objects through the electronic computer. Many mentally retarded students can master basic numeracy skills to a greater extent through the computer than using paper and pencil.

Also, various kinds of software such as word processing software, word prediction software, networking technologies, and database software help these students master mathematical concepts and develop problem solving skills (Fytros, 2005: 582). Some of the educational software for students with mental retardation is the following (Papadopoulou, 2012: 10):

- “Aktines” software: is designed in Greece for preschool children and children with mild mental retardation, which is based on the needs, interests and abilities of these children, through their active participation.
- “Hot Potatoes” software: is designed for students with mild mental retardation and offers teachers the ability to create various exercises over the Internet, on a computer network or in a personal computer.
- “Magic Filter” software: is a Greek educational digital adventure game for students with mild mental retardation, which features a group of heroes, who in the context of the game help each other with mathematics, with the aim of language, social and communication skills of everyday life.
- “Symbol writer” software: is educational software, designed in Cyprus, with the aim of developing and improving reading, written and oral skills speech, text processing skills on the computer and the development of verbal communication of students with reading difficulties.
- “Clicker” software: designed in England, it is based on personalized learning and enhances written and spoken expression in children with motor and communication problems and with learning difficulties.
- “Phonics Aline 1” software: is created in Australia and contributes to the mastery of phonological awareness and reading skills of students with learning difficulties.
- “CO Writer” software: is made in America, it is a smart writing assistant and works with word processing software or any other text input program. It can be used by students with mild mental retardation, physical deficits and language delay and by students with difficulties in composing and typing the text.
- “Kurzweil” software: is designed in America and consists of an assistive technology tool that helps students with reading difficulties learn reading, writing and study skills and understanding.
- “Kidspiration” software: is designed in England for students in kindergarten up to the third grade of primary school and is a conceptual mapping tool. It helps students to express, organize and develop their ideas and

through intersubjectivity, they can develop their skills, create scenarios, organize different information, understand concepts and express and share their thoughts.

CONCLUSION

Students with mild mental retardation must receive appropriate educational interventions immediately after the appearance of their first difficulties, so that these difficulties can be dealt with in time by the special educators and the students can be led to their school success. Educational interventions should include different models of co-teaching students with mild mental retardation in general schools, thus contributing to the integration of these students into the student community.

Due to the fact that students with mild mental retardation have deficits in their social skills, it is important to teach them appropriately so that they acquire the necessary social skills and enhance the various areas of their personal and social lives. Also, it is important to teach the language course in primary school so that students can handle spoken and written language adequately. Intervention teaching programs for students with mild mental retardation include certain specificities, which will help teachers successfully implement and lead to the school success of these students. The specifics are related to the long- and short-term intervention goals, the organization of the space, the educational material, the behavioral and cognitive approach, the behavioral reward and the environmental response. Moreover, the use of educational software is an effective educational intervention for students with mild mental retardation. Familiarity with technology and computers is a necessary skill for students with mild mental retardation, in order to strengthen their communication and cognitive abilities, through practical thinking and the acquisition of new sensory and learning experiences of the students.

The education of children with mild mental retardation contributes to their socialization and to changing the culture of society regarding stereotypes about mental disability (Soulis, 2013: 15). It is very important for teachers to have the necessary knowledge to strengthen the self-determination of students with intellectual disabilities Paliopoulos (2014: 29), among educational programs related to the development of self-determination of children with mild mental retardation (Kyriakidou, 2017: 22). Their self-determination mainly refers to decision-making, which requires a hard effort on the part of the teacher. The leading importance for the self-determination and personal formation of students with mild mental retardation is their achievements and successes in mastering the basic learning skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. The degree of mastery of these skills naturally contributes and positively affects the students' self-esteem and their integration into mainstream school. Some of the current goals in this direction through the Greek education system is the development of separate materials

and software programs adapted to the characteristics of students with relevant backwardness, aimed at a visual and differentiated presentation of the learning content in reading, writing and mathematics for the first and second grade and the development of adapted educational materials for other subjects for students with mild mental retardation from other levels of education.

Students should be responsible and be able to choose for themselves and the teacher should have the role of supporter and advisor (Carney, 2015: 39). The teacher must implement an individualized educational program for the students with mild mental retardation, because each person is different, so that there is a successful intervention in the field of self-identification. The strengthening of self-determination in people with intellectual deficits will be done to the maximum extent and in the best way, only when there is a smooth cooperation of teachers, parents and children, which will be based on the principles of cooperation and acceptance and will be a daily routine to each student (Paliopoulos, 2014: 30).

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