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Functioning of Preschool Educational Institutions under Pandemic Conditions

Funkcjonowanie przedszkolnych placówek oświatowych w warunkach pandemii

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the issue of preschool education in a pandemic. The purpose of this study is to reveal the problems, which public preschool educational institutions (PEIs) may face during the pandemic period. Special emphasis is placed on the subject matter of the article, which is the activities of PEIs in a pandemic. The present research broaches such issues as the mode of functioning of PEIs, the organization of an educational process in PEIs, and the specific features of the activities of the PEI staff under quarantine conditions. To complete the study, the following methods have been employed: theoretical – analysis of psychological-pedagogical and methodological sources, review of educational designs and programs, educational and methodological complexes, and actual educational resources of PEIs; empirical – questionnaires, surveys, interviews, testing, direct and indirect observation, expert evaluation. The article explores the specificity of the activities of PEIs both under the conditions of distance functioning and under the conditions of normal activity, observing quarantine measures. It also reveals and analyses complications and difficulties in the work of the PEI staff, as well as inconveniences for children and parents. Furthermore, the study considers the measures aimed to eliminate the negative factors of distance learning and gives recommendations for the heads of preschool institutions on the peculiarities of their activities in a pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic; preschool educational institution; specificity of preschool educational institution functioning in quarantine conditions; preschool children; educators; parents

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, it is generally accepted that preschool educational institutions (PEIs) are targeted at providing social upbringing and basic elementary education for children. From an early age of 1.5–2 years to an older preschool age of 6–7 years inclusively, in PEIs, pre-schoolers receive necessary nutrition and care. The upbringing of a child in PEIs is done at the will of parents. From a psychological point of view, the matter of raising children in PEIs seems quite debatable. The fact is that at an early age, family upbringing is extremely important for a child, whereas social upbringing cannot always equivalently replace it. In most cases, enrolling a child to a PEI is related to definite contretemps. A significant number of kids cannot easily adapt to such changes in their lives.

Admittedly, preschool age is a stage of mental and physical development of a child, which is extremely important for their maturity and growth of psyche and personality. Undoubtedly, the main factors conducive to a child's physical and mental state are their parents, teachers and surroundings, the real environment of their existence. The central and crucial figure in this triad is the teacher, the kindergartener. However, the indications are that current realities are not quite beneficial for preserving and improving the health of people and, above all, children. The modern way of life is marked by instability, contradictions, loss of habitual and search of time-appropriate worldviews and axiological landmarks. The uncertainty about "tomorrow", anxiety about their own future and the future of their relatives, as well as economic, environmental, political and existential crises cause global stress and neuroticism of the population, and lead to an increase in a number of psychosomatic diseases. An inimical social environment, concern for the aforementioned problems of the parent community has a negative impact on the well-being and health of children. Unfortunately, in recent years, pandemic factors have contributed to all these problems.

For a long time, PEIs functioned under normal conditions that to some extent met the needs of children, educators and parents. The pandemic has made significant changes in the life activity of these PEIs (*Child: Educational...*, 2016).

STATEMENT OF BASIC MATERIALS

Clearly, the pandemic in any form negatively affects the life activity of PEIs. All participants of the educational process experience some level of confusion. Present-day PEIs shift to a quarantine mode without ceasing normal functioning, but with many significant alterations. Preschool educational institutions start working remotely, which causes a number of difficulties. And when PEIs return to standard activities, again this triggers off a number of problems of an adaptive nature. All these enforced changes have a negative effect on the quality of an

educational process, the well-being and health of all its participants – the staff, children and parents (Savinova, 2020).

Furthermore, when it comes to functioning in the remote mode during the pandemic, the PEI staff has to work under dramatically changed conditions. Pursuant to the resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of 11 March 2020, no. 211 “On Prevention of the Spread of Coronavirus COVID-19 on the Territory of Ukraine”, functional duties of PEI caregivers are supposed to be completed distantly (remotely) with the use of modern information technologies. However, it should be recognized that distance work with pre-schoolers, given their age, is quite specific. Pre-schoolers do not yet have skills to work on a computer or on other devices; they need the help of their parents or other family members to establish communication with their caregiver via the Internet. At the same time, not every family has such opportunities. Notwithstanding, educators must fulfil educational plans and programs provided for a current preschool year as well as a health-improving period. The actualization of this work, as well as the responsibility for educational activities and control over the fulfilment of educational plans and programs, in accordance with Art. 26 of the Law of Ukraine of 5 September 2017, no. 2145-VIII “On Education” is entrusted to the head of a PEI. In his/her turn, the head of a PEI must be guided by the Order of the Ministry of Education and Sciences of 16 March 2020, no. 406 “On Organizational Measures to Prevent the Spread of Coronavirus COVID-19”. Further, the head of a PEI issues an order to establish the mode of work for the PEI staff and approves measures of ensuring educational-pedagogical, methodological and other kinds of work. He or she also specifies the features of an educational process in a remote format (Savinova, 2020).

The evidence seems to be strong that quarantine conditions have a negative impact on children’s education, health and well-being. In particular, during the temporary cessation of children’s standard activities, they are deprived of social life and normal life activity, typical for their age. They do not have the opportunity to communicate with the caregiver and peers, and to play with them. The regime of an educational process, sleep, games, and nutrition becomes unbalanced, which certainly negatively affects the health and well-being of children. In some families, children suffer from unfavourable home conditions, because during quarantine their parents either are out of employment or work remotely, which in some cases is the cause of drunkenness, family disorders, domestic violence, child abuse, etc. All these have a negative effect on the psyche of children (Kuzminskyi, 2009).

Given this evidence, changes in the manifestations of parental attention to the upbringing and care of children during the quarantine period may also be observed. If the parents continue to work during the quarantine, and a PEI shifts to remote functioning, there appears an essential problem of child neglect. Moreover, if

parents lose their jobs because of the quarantine, the financial situation of the family deteriorates, and hence the living conditions of a child also worsen (Staienna, 2020).

Thus, the negative impact of the quarantine standards on children's education, upbringing and health is exacerbated by concomitant circumstances, such as enforced parental unemployment, foreign employment, parental engagement in the war, significant social stratification, and an increase in the number of disadvantaged and nuclear families (Kuzminskyi, 2009).

On this basis, it may be inferred that the working conditions of the head of a PEI are also complexities, since they are expected to ensure the organization of an educational process, and any other kinds of work, with the use of distance learning technologies. It means that this should be done without children's regular attending a PEI. The head of a PEI has to independently work out a local document, which specifies the tasks performed remotely by caregivers and other staff.

This implies that communication with parents or other fosterers of children should be carried out on social networks in the form of consultations, conferences, group-work, mobile applications, e-mail, etc. During these new formats of communication such issues and recommendations are expected to be considered as children's daily routine, appropriate games for their development, books for reading, healthy nutrition, etc. (Staienna, 2020).

Respectively, the mode of work of educators and assistant educators also undergoes significant alterations. An educator is supposed to send the child's parents an electronic record of relevant classes. But this is where the problems arise. Even if an educator diligently follows all the aforementioned recommendations and guidelines, this does not necessarily mean that they will be followed by parents or children's fosterers. And this is not a matter of a negligent or unscrupulous attitude of parents (fosterers) to their children. Much of the parental community are not adequately knowledgeable about psychological and pedagogical issues of children upbringing and teaching. The indications are therefore that in Ukraine, there is no systematic work on parental pedagogy. Unfortunately, the former experience of parent universities, mother schools, etc. are unjustly discarded and forgotten (Bekhterev, 1923).

Another issue that should be broached here is that not all settlements, villages or towns are covered by the Internet and in some villages and hamlets there are not even a cellular connection. And even if there are such communication facilities, not all parents are financially solvent to buy a computer or any other smart device due to the fact that they are on a tight budget. It is an admitted fact that a significant number of the Ukrainian population is affected by poverty (Savinova, 2020).

The disposed information convincingly illustrates that in a pandemic, continuous or local quarantine, the quality of an educational process, living standards and children care significantly deteriorates, which is definitely fraught with

negative consequences for the psychological development of children and the shaping of their personality (Savinova, 2020).

Furthermore, during the quarantine, the staff of a PEI is also affected. Not all educators have a good command and appropriate knowledge, habits and skills to provide a distance or remote teaching process. This causes psychological discomfort and a feeling of dissatisfaction with the performance of the personnel's functional duties under unusual conditions. Some educators experience a psychological overload due to uncustomary working conditions, changes in the established working routine, a shift to remote teaching, children's and parents' neuroticism caused by enforced changes in the activities of a PEI. Moreover, the mentality of educators is negatively affected by the fear that financial situation will significantly deteriorate because the regular functioning of a PEI is temporarily ceased. They are constrained by the fear of coronavirus infection and at least – by loss of health and wages, and at most – by loss of life, death (Ananyev, 2002).

It is clear that the activity of a PEI during the transition from a remote mode to normal work observing quarantine measures is important and hence it requires a significant responsibility. It is necessary to open a PEI in compliance with definite requirements to ensure a maximum protection of all participants of an educational process in order to preserve the health of children, educators and parents. With the opening of a PEI, it is necessary to comply with the terms of quarantine and relevant recommendations (Savinova, 2020).

In order to thoroughly get prepared to receive children, it is expedient to follow a clear sequence of measures and rigorously observe all sanitary norms. First of all, it is bounden to check the staff for COVID-19, instruct the personnel of a PEI, purchase disinfectants, etc. After a long stay at home, children and parents need to adjust to a new reality.

Under the pandemic conditions, there are difficulties in the process of meeting children in a PEI in the morning because parents are strictly forbidden to enter a kindergarten; they bring children only to the entrance of a preschool institution. Children have to wait some time outside for a caregiver, regardless of the weather. Parents supposed to call the caretaker, who goes out, picks up a child, accompanies them, changes their clothes and brings them to the group premises. A similar process only in reverse occurs at the end of the day. This procedure is quite inconvenient for everyone – children, parents and educators, especially in a cold season. In the autumn-winter period, a caregiver has to change outerwear and shoes several dozen times a day. Parents have to ring up the caregiver twice a day, calling her to receive or pick up a child. Each time, going out to pick up or give back a child to the parents, the educator leaves the children of the group to her assistant. All these complicate life, create everyday discomfort for children, the staff and parents (Savinova, 2020).

To sum up, quarantine conditions are a significant obstacle to the normal functioning of preschool institutions. But with a thoughtful approach to the

organization of both a remote and a normal educational process, most of the negative factors of distance learning can and should be eliminated. Much depends on how responsibly and creatively the managers of PEI – heads, educators-methodologists, caregivers, nurses, etc. – feel about the organization of PEI under baffling conditions. First of all, the head of a PEI should issue the order on the implementation of remote work for a quarantine period, which clearly defines functional responsibilities of the personnel, who have to organize their work in accordance with the working plan of a PEI for a preschool year. The order has to be accompanied with the guidelines and programs of self-education, as well as pedagogical, methodological and organizational work within the established educational loadings. Within the working hours, assistant educators are required to participate in organizational and pedagogical work along with the educators of the group. Moreover, once a week both educators and their assistants are obliged to present materials of organizational and pedagogical activities during remote work in the form determined by the head of a PEI. Respective responsibilities should also be specified for the dietitian nurse, the physiotherapist nurse, the deputy head of economic affairs, the clerk, etc. (Staienna, 2020).

Second, educators build long-term interactions with children in different ways: they offer to parents various tasks for their children, conduct online classes, organize photo contests, prepare videos of classes, which pre-schoolers and parents can watch at any convenient time. As a result, it may be possible to significantly reduce the negative consequences of the functioning of PEI in a pandemic (Staienna, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, the life activities of a PEI in a pandemic is much more complicated than it may seem at first sight. In the remote format of an educational process, there is a lack of proper experience of interacting with children on the Internet; there is low or no provision of many families with computers, other communication devices and the Internet; one may observe an inability of children and individual parents to use computers. In the period of transition from remote to normal work, in compliance with the quarantine requirements, all participants of an educational process experience a number of inconveniences that do not contribute to the effectiveness of mental and psychological development of children and their health. However, with a thoughtful approach to the organization of the functioning of a PEI in a pandemic, a significant part of the negative factors can and should be eliminated. First and foremost, the head of a preschool institution must take all possible measures that would neutralize the negative impact of enforced factors on the lives of the participants of an educational process – children, teachers, and parents. Under current conditions, the efficacious functioning of a PEI in a pandemic urgently requires this.

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ABSTRAKT

Celem przeprowadzonego badania było poznanie specyfiki funkcjonowania państwowych przedszkolnych placówek oświatowych podczas pandemii. Kwestie badawcze były następujące: tryb działalności, organizacja procesu edukacyjnego oraz cechy działalności pracowników przedszkolnej placówki oświatowej w warunkach kwarantanny. Metody badawcze: teoretyczne – analiza źródeł psychologiczno-pedagogicznych i metodologicznych, badanie planów edukacyjnych, programów, zestawów materiałów pedagogiczno-metodologicznych, aktualnych stron internetowych przedszkolnych placówek oświatowych; empiryczne – kwestionariusze, ankiety, wywiady, testy, obserwacje bezpośrednie i pośrednie, oceny eksperckie. Badaniu poddano cechy działalności przedszkolnych placówek oświatowych w warunkach funkcjonowania na odległość oraz w warunkach normalnej aktywności, ale z zachowaniem zasad kwarantanny. Wykazano trudności i komplikacje w pracy zespołów tych placówek oraz niedogodności dla dzieci i rodziców. W opracowaniu analizie poddano środki mające na celu wyeliminowanie negatywnych czynników uczenia się na odległość. Wskazano również zalecenia dotyczące specyfiki działań kierowników placówek oświatowych dla dzieci podczas pandemii.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia; przedszkolna placówka oświatowa; specyfika funkcjonowania przedszkolnej placówki oświatowej w warunkach kwarantanny; dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym; wychowawcy; rodzice