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First days in kindergarten of a child with special educational needs

Early childhood is an intensive period of the child's development, time of shaping behaviors and acquiring, by him, basic skills. In this time, the child is especially susceptible to influences, hence, indispensably it seems to use this so convenient moment to begin the social integration process of disabled children with non-disabled children in kindergarten. One should underline that the child with special educational needs beginning pre-school education in an integration or ordinary establishment has to adjust to the new and unknown environment and needs special help in the process of social integration¹. Help, which the child expects, should come from parents, kindergarten teachers, the technical staff of the establishment, as well as, from peers attending the kindergarten group. The support should be well thought over, adapted to the child's needs, age, and type of the disability.

The child's adaptation to the requirements of the establishment is influenced by: type of disability, the degree of intellectual disability, the child's earlier social experiences, functioning of the group of peers, the teachers' behavior, the establishment's organization, and the adaptation programs proposed by the kindergarten.

It is the hardest to enter a pre-school group for more impaired autistic children, because they rarely attempt any contact with peers. A large meaning for the child's functioning in the kindergarten group has the degree of intellectual disability. Children with a mild intellectual disability abide, in kindergarten, norms of team life, children with moderate disability are characterized, in kindergarten, by fears, reluctance to work with others, and lack of abiding social rules. Good in coping in a kindergarten group are highly-functioning autistic children, children with meningeal ruptures-pithy, children with Down's syndrome with a mild and moderate disability.

On the adaptation to kindergarten, a not trifling influence have the children's previous social experiences. Rich experiences decrease children's fears and increase attractiveness

¹ Grzeszkiewicz B., Stan i perspektywy edukacji przedszkolnej. (w:) Grzeszkiewicz B., (red.) , Współczesność i przyszłość edukacji elementarnej, Szczecin 2006, p. 35.

among peers. Then, the child has a richer vocabulary, engages in plays, sings songs, participates willingly in classes. Some parents, in order to enrich experiences of their children before the beginning of education in kindergarten, buy them various polysensory toys and different pets (fish, hamsters, cats, ponies) and take their charges to interesting places.

For a disabled child, a great meaning has the peer group. Pre-school children can assure a disabled child self-realization in various forms of activity and teach an independent functioning in the society. It is important to prepare healthy children for contact with disabled children and explaining them in what way in daily situations can they help their colleagues and in what moments should they be especially cautious.

Big influence on the children's functioning in the group has the teacher, who has to direct the educational process in such a way, so the disabled children would be noticed, appreciated, and respected. Many factors have influence on the quality of the teacher's work. One of the most important factors is his education. A well prepared teacher should finish a pre-school pedagogy speciality and pedagogy for the mentally retarded. Important is the teacher's age and emotional attitude towards work. Excessive commitment in the disabled child's family matters sometimes disturbs the image of the situation and doesn't allow to adequately help the child and his guardians. An important element encouraging the teachers to work intensively is a higher financial salary (motivational addition as well as addition for arduous work conditions).

Kindergarten, as an establishment completing the education in the family, is obliged to organize its environment in such a way to help children adjust to the operating rules. In intervention groups, the amount of people supporting the child is important. In younger groups of children, three - four years old, besides the teachers there should be technical support and an additional person, carer, so called, " the nanny." Of course, in some cases an indispensable help is the mother of the child, who stays in the hall and, in case of the appearance of difficult situations, enters the group and help the teachers or takes the child home. Some disabled children, because of faster tiredness, should stay in integrated units till dinner. In the establishment there should be a stimulation office and for children needing quieting down, during the day, there should be rooms allowing to relax with a limited number of elements. An indispensable detail of integrated kindergartens is the room for the children's motor rehabilitation, as well as a speech therapist office. In the establishment one should establish a natural-farm corner, in which the children will be able to touch and get to know various animals.

For a child beginning education in kindergarten, extremely important are the proper educational programs realized in the establishment.

Practical solution

In the Integrational Kindergarten no.1 in Lubartów², parents signing up the child in April to the establishment have to be aware of the fact, that from this moment they are beginning the process of preparing the child with special education needs to the functioning in a different surrounding. In May a precise psychological, speech therapy, and organizational documentation is being prepared from these children and their families. The adaptation program to kindergarten lasts, usually, from three months to half a year and is adjusted to the child's specific needs. Both the child and his mother are involved in the program. During work, the mother and the child come to kindergarten twice a week for half an hour to special rooms, in which, at this time, there are no other kindergarten children. Most often, the child plays with the mother, but during the program, as the time goes by, the mother leaves him and carries on, on the kindergarten's premises, consultations with the psychologist, teacher, and speech therapist. The adaptation program concerns the child's slow entry into a different world. It involves the structuralization of persons, space, time, objects, and meals. The child of special care begins with the contact with one unfamiliar adult or a child and is slowly accustomed to the presence of many people. Regarding space, the disabled child, at first, stays only in the therapeutic room, then the rehabilitation room or gym class, until, finally, he is ready to enter the kindergarten room. During work with the child with special education needs, important is the time of work of the teacher with the child. Therefore, educators begin with a half an hour contact with the child and then lengthen the child's stay to about an hour. A big difficulty for mentally retarded children is the adjustment to new objects and surroundings. Therefore, specialists realizing the adaptation program begin with a limited number of stimuli (objects, colors, invoices, sound signals, scents) in the therapeutic room and gradually include new isolated stimuli to the child's surroundings. The adaptation program involves also the meals in kindergarten. The child decides whether and what he is going to eat. The child independently pours himself soup and in the case of the second dish, the kindergarten adjusts the meal to the child's individual preferences. After finishing the program, the children end up in peer groups. Because of a limited number of places, not all children take up education in kindergarten groups. The second phase of the child's adjustment to kindergarten

² Interview conducted with dr Teresa Oleszko principle of the Integrational Kindergarten no. 1 in Lubartów

is the, so called, "Proper program"³. This program is addressed to disabled children and to gifted children who need additional stimulation. The program begins in September and bases on individualistic therapeutic work. It includes the work of the teacher, the psychologist, the speech therapist, the rehabilitation therapist, and the parent. The program provides for four obligatory meetings with parents, teacher's individual consultations with a guardian, as well as "School for parents" including the improvement of the parent's pedagogical skills⁴ by eight weeks, 2 hours a week. The teacher of the kindergarten group is responsible for the realization of the program.

Own research

The research were conducted in the Integrational Kindergarten no.1 in Lubartów in the first days of September 2007. All disabled children (ten) that were beginning their pre-school education after the kindergarten's adaptation program, as well as their teachers took part in the research. An observational questionnaire of the teacher and the child was used and the observations were conducted during classes with the whole group that were organized by the kindergarten teacher. The search was for the answer to the question: *How does the disabled child function in the first days of education in the kindergarten group?* For the research needs, a few educational situations were chosen, for example, executing simple tasks, that were charged by the teacher, by the disabled child; the child's relations with peers during classes; abiding agreements by the child, as well as the teacher's behavior during organizing classes.

Executive simple tasks by the disabled child

The studied children willingly (60%) and rather willingly (40%) executed the charged by the teacher "simple tasks, charged"⁵. Pre-school children executed some tasks independently, e.g., dressing and undressing dolls, and during other tasks, the children occasionally needed help with, e.g., putting together a scattered picture, joining points in the picture, doing jigsaw puzzles, coloring pictures. Children expected the most help during solving tasks connected with mathematical terms (e.g., counting objects, segregating elements

³ Interview conducted with dr Teresa Oleszko principle of the Integrational Kindergarten no. 1 in Lubartów

⁴ Andrzejewska J., Wspieranie rozwoju dziecka przez współpracę nauczyciela z rodziną, (w:) Guz S. , Andrzejewska J., red. , Wybrane problemy edukacji dzieci w przedszkolu i szkole, Lublin 2005

⁵ Waloszek D., Pedagogika przedszkolna. Metamorfoza statusu i przedmiotu badań, Kraków 2006, p.

of a set, doing a pyramid from blocks)⁶. The pre-school children executed consequently tasks, although, during some tasks they gave up quickly (e.g., coloring pictures).

The child's relations with peers during classes

The stay of the disabled children with healthy children mobilizes them to a larger effort and to overcome difficulties that appear in everyday life. The healthy children are models to imitate during executing a series of activities. All of the studied children had difficulties with contacts with peers and especially in the category of waiting for their turn. Their verbal contacts with able peers had, most often, a form of a command (Give me! Now me! I want! Move over!), an order (Sit here. Give a crayon. Now me. Come.), a question (What do you have there? What have you bought?), sporadic conversations. Healthy children react positively to disabled children. The otherness of their peers is not a difficulty for them and is not the reason for the blockade in interpersonal relations. The place of the disabled child in studied groups was various and depended on the degree of the disability and verbal competences. Most often (60% of children), during group classes the child stood aside, but was engaged in team work. The remaining children (40%) engaged only in their own activities. During classes, none of the disabled children did not cooperate with peers the whole time, 30% of children cooperated only with chosen children and the remaining (70%) only for a while. Most often, peers treated disabled children positively, for example, accepted them (60%), cooperated (40%), prompted ideas (30%), listened (20%), respected (20%). Few ignored (10%) and moved away from them (10%).

Abiding agreements by the child

All children occasionally did not abide to the group's norms. To the most difficult from them belonged agreements: waiting for their turn, putting toys away, staying quiet or moderately loud talking. Disabled children weren't able to react during encountered difficulties. Then certain behaviors appeared, such as: abandoning a task and doing a different one, anger, pater, screaming, offensive gestures, reluctance to doing a task, looking helpless. Most joy, during classes organized by the teacher, gave the disabled children: rhythmic classes, imitation games, thematic games, awarding success by applause, and direct words of

⁶ Szada – Borzyszkowska J., Obniżona sprawność intelektualna a początki kształcenia matematycznego., (w:) Piwowarski R. (red.), Dziecko. Sukcesy i porażki. Warszawa 2007, p. 404

the teacher to the child. The children were nervous or sad when: they had to wait, encountered difficulties during tasks, and when their best friend was absent.

The teacher's behavior during the organization of classes

A huge role in the adjustment of the disabled children to the functioning in the kindergarten group lays the teacher. The presence of disabled children forces on the teacher constant, intensified attention, as well as a series of educational influences. In general, the tutor did not engage the children to help in laying out and preparing didactic helps. They tried to prepare everything earlier which not always favored the education of creating the environment and "organizational independency"⁷. during classes with the whole group, the teachers positively evaluated the disabled children. Most often they accented the effect of executing a task (very nice, great, bravo, beautifully), their own satisfaction from the child's attitude (I like it very much. I wouldn't have done it better. I'm very proud of you), they underlined commitment (Congratulations on a wonderful idea. I see that you are trying very hard. You've handled it very well). The teacher's role is to explain to the kindergarten group the type of the children's disability with special education needs and encouraging a easier contact than mutual fun, e.g., helping to dress up in the locker room, helping in activities, or helping in pouring soup during dinner. Therefore, during work with the whole group, the teachers often underlined the meaning of help that the healthy children give to their disabled peers.

The kindergarten teacher has to initiate the pupils to comply to social agreements. Most often, the teachers expected from the disabled children the compliance of the following agreements: waiting for their turn, taking care of order, manifesting kindness to others, talking in a moderate voice, listening to others' declarations, remaining silent. When the pre-schoolers did not abide to norms, the teachers reminded them of the agreements or expressed their feelings and wishes (I am sad. I would really like for you to try). Sometimes the tutors encouraged the children to reflection, e.g.: Will you do us a surprise and...?, What do you think, what can we do in this situation? An important element of the teacher's work with the integration group is the ability to encourage children to execute tasks. The studied teachers, most often, encouraged children with words: Try to do this task, don't worry if you will know

⁷ Kuszak K., Dynamika rozwoju samodzielności dziecka w wieku przedszkolnym. Poznań 2006, p.148

how to do it, we will try to solve it together (60% of declarations); Will we be able to do this? (20%); I'm sure that you can manage. (10%); I would like for you to try. (10%).

Final remarks

Integration in kindergarten teaches the children, that everyone can find his place in the world and in the community. First days in kindergarten can be full of positive experiences. In a considerable degree it depends on the preparation of surroundings by adults and creation of a good, friendly climate in kindergarten. Direct, everyday relations with "others" arouses consciousness in children and adults that everybody have even rights, despite visible differences

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