

# “Portrait” of a Child with Disabilities in a Modern Educational Environment: Clinical, Psychological, and Pedagogical Characteristics and Determinants

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## ABSTRACT

The introduction of Federal state educational standards for students with disabilities into Russian pedagogical practice and the emergence of variable forms of education suggest the need to clarify the characteristics of the modern population of children with various disorders of psychophysical development. Changes in the ingrained ideas about the typical phenomenology of manifestations of various variants of mental dysontogenesis, the nature, causes and mechanisms of learning difficulties, social adaptation and socialization of children with disabilities, seem inevitable and natural. Changes in the level of population characteristics of psychosocial development of various categories of such children can be considered as manifestations of “social pathomorphosis”, which modifies the habitual features of not only a “special child”, but also a child with conditionally normative development. At the same time, the role of social factors concentrated in the educational environment is, for many reasons, the leading one. The study of their role and assessment of the likely impact on the quality of education and psychosocial development of children with disabilities is a necessary condition for optimizing correctional and pedagogical activities. The possibility of solving these problems is associated with conducting longitudinal clinical, psychological and pedagogical research of children with disabilities who are studying in modern educational conditions.

**Keywords:** *children with disabilities, typological variants of development, population characteristics, variable educational environment, organic and social factors, longitudinal and cross-section research*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern practice of education for children with disabilities, while maintaining its previous strategic goal, is characterized by fundamental changes in the forms and conditions of its implementation, as well as in the content of individual targets. The positive perspective of these changes is justified and revealed in the updated pedagogical paradigm reflected in the concept of Federal state educational standards for students with disabilities [2], as well as in the Concept of education development for students with disabilities and special needs [6]. Both of these documents are based, among others, on two main (basic) theses.

*The first thesis* emphasizes the heterogeneity of the composition of children with disabilities within each nosological category, which in itself is not news to specialists working with these children. For them, it has long been obvious that a medical diagnosis means only the possibility of assigning a child to a certain category of students on the basis of primary-dominant developmental disorders (sensory, cognitive, motor, emotional) detected in him. The very content of subsequent habilitation and

correctional and pedagogical work with children is focused on the prevention or compensation of secondary developmental disorders that have mainly a social genesis. It is secondary disorders that manifest themselves most variously, determining the heterogeneity of the composition of children of a particular nosological group. At the same time, the influence of the primary defect is not leveled: the degree of its severity and structural originality are also manifested in the variability of deviations of the secondary level. This influence is particularly pronounced in cases of intellectual development disorders.

The most important achievement of the concept of the Federal state educational standard for students with disabilities is the Declaration of the need for differentiated conditions and content of education, taking into account the variability of children’s development within each nosological group. Determining the development variants associated with differences in children’s special educational needs becomes an urgent task for researchers in the field of correctional pedagogy and special psychology. The need to rely on these variants can be seen in the main provisions of the Concept for the development of education for students with special needs and disabilities, and in the project of the corresponding

Strategy. It is difficult to disagree with the statement that *“it is necessary to develop and implement a psychological and pedagogical typology of children with disabilities for each nosological group and each age stage of development. The selection of variants for children’s development will ensure the qualitative differentiation of educational variants and thus the maximum possible effectiveness of the educational system”* [6].

At the same time, the conceptual or program-strategic representation of optimal ways to solve large-scale problems, with all the convincing logic of justification of key positions, can remain if not a utopia, then only an image of an attractive future, but which is difficult to achieve. To prevent this from happening, we need a thorough, step-by-step study of the proposed innovations from the perspective of their practical implementation.

Thus, following the description of differentiated variants of FSES, the adapted educational programs, which correspond to them, appeared. However, the procedure for determining children’s development variants, which form the basis for choosing educational routes, remained at the level of general recommendations addressed to specialists of the psychological, medical and pedagogical commission. Relatively clear criteria for differential diagnosis in this area, a refined description of the psychological content of each developmental variant, and diagnostic tools adapted to these tasks have not yet been worked out. Such a working cannot be based only on initial theoretical ideas about what the development variants of children in a certain nosological group may look like: it should be based on the results of empirical studies conducted on correctly formed samples of subjects. It is not so much about meeting the requirements of representativeness, which in this case are not the most important, as about the accuracy and completeness of the description of the psychological and pedagogical characteristics of each child included in the study sample. A superficial description of them cannot give reliable grounds for attributing the child to a particular variant of development.

Thus, a pragmatic, that is, filled with practical meaning, clarification of the thesis about “heterogeneity of the composition of students with disabilities within a specific nosological category” implies the development of a correct procedure for determining their development variants based on the assessment of a set of clinical, psychological and pedagogical characteristics. The correctness of the procedure in this case means not only equal attention to each component of this complex characteristic, but also the reliability of conclusions based on the use of valid diagnostic tools and the presence of a sufficient number of analyzed cases (or a sufficient array of data from an empirical study).

*The second thesis* consists in the statement of the need to create special conditions that are differentiated taking into account special educational needs, which mainly characterize one or another variant of the development of a child with disabilities. Scientific and methodological workings aimed at differentiating such conditions are most consistently and orderly presented in relation to

children with early childhood autism and mental retardation [3,4,5,7,8], since they were based on previously identified typological variants of development of each of these categories of children. Similar in construction of principles and tasks and no less effective approach was used to differentiate the special educational needs of children with musculoskeletal disorders [1]. The value of these workings is determined not only by the authors’ long-term study of children in these categories, which provides the necessary reliability of the results, but also by their clear focus on solving actual problems of modern educational practice.

However, at least three problems remain insufficiently resolved. The first is the lack of compact, convenient, but reliable diagnostic tools available for effective use by an average diagnostician involved in the identification and differentiation of children’s development variants.

The second problem is the lack of an orderly and, if possible, unified procedure for monitoring the development and education of these children. Organizing and conducting such monitoring as a special activity, aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of correction and education work with the child, besides its obvious necessity, is part of professional competences, determined by FSES of higher education for the direction of training 44.03.03 “Special (defectological) education” (profile “Special psychology”) [11].

And the third problem is the lack of reasonable criteria, as well as means to define and compare the actual educational conditions, considered as factors that both contribute to and hinder the successful psychosocial development of the child.

## 2. METHODS OF RESEARCH

If we talk about the possibilities of predicting the results of the educational process, then the number of prognostically significant factors should include the level of severity and the degree of compensation for primary developmental disorders. The selection of criteria for a reliable forecast is associated in this case not so much with academic interest, but with the possibility of timely changes in the educational route, which is also one of the most important achievements of FSES. This possibility is particularly important for children with cognitive disabilities, since errors in the initial choice of educational route, which are fraught with problems of school, and then social disadaptation, can be identified and eliminated in a timely manner.

Here it is appropriate to return to the problem of correlation between the clinical diagnosis and the variety of variants (and prospects) for the development of children within a specific nosological category, which was raised at the beginning of the article. This problem manifests itself not only on practical but also on the methodological level, affecting a well-known correlation of the objective role of clinical knowledge and its use in pedagogical practice.

In particular, the diagnosis of “mental retardation” based on the criteria used in the International classification of diseases of the 10th revision (ICD-10), included the definition of various degrees of its severity with a brief description of the guidelines for their differentiation (psychometric indicators and clinical phenomenology). In a more modern version of the classification (ICD-11), the term “mental retardation” is changed to the concept of “intellectual development disorder”, which more fully reflects the essence of this disorder, excluding its understanding as a phenomenon of lag in development, and, consequently, an illusory opportunity to catch up over time [12,13]. At the same time, with diagnostics, although based primarily on mathematical (psychometric) criteria and indicators (standard deviations) of the adaptive behavior test, in the interpretation of its results, considerable importance is attached to the role of socio-cultural conditions and characteristics of the child’s development, as well as concomitant mental disorders and behavioral problems [12].

Undoubtedly, the positive nature of the evolution of medical criteria for diagnosing *conditions of mental underdevelopment* (in a terminology more familiar for us) brings it closer to the content of tasks related to the definition of development variants within this category, but does not allow its identification. The meaning of identifying development variants in our understanding is to provide, first of all, pedagogical conditions that best meet the educational needs of a child with intellectual disabilities, and contribute to the formation of not so much his “academic” but life competences.

Therefore, within the framework of the research, based on the principles of comprehensive study of children with disabilities, the selection of development variants for such children involves relying both on the clinical characteristics of developmental disorders, and on the description of their structure, reflecting the features of mental activity, affective-behavioral sphere and - in the most detailed way - the sphere of life competences. And if the short, but successful mission of the psychiatrist basically ends with making an accurate diagnosis, the mission of the teacher-defectologist only begins from this moment, assuming a long-term path of his training and education, as much as possible consistent with his educational opportunities and needs. As already noted above, the object of professional efforts of the defectologist is secondary developmental disorders, which have mainly social conditionality, although they preserve the manifestations of the primary defect.

The use of the category of children with intellectual disabilities as an illustration of the problem of the correlation of nosology and development variants is due to the greatest distinctness of its manifestations in the context of the tasks of psychological and pedagogical practice. Approximately in the same extent, this problem exists for categories of children with mental retardation, with autism spectrum disorders, with disorders of the musculoskeletal system, often combined with cognitive disorders.

It is less evident in children with sensory disabilities, where development variants will be determined not so much by differences in the severity of the primary disorder, but rather in the content of their education and the conditions of the educational environment in its broad sense.

In particular, the well-known originality of the communicative and speech, cognitive, social-emotional development of deaf and hearing-impaired children does not in itself determine the desired results of their education [9]. Otherwise, the idea of effective inclusive education for students with hearing disorders would remain a “task for the future”. Experimentally proved is the success of learning programs, including deaf and hearing-impaired children in the general educational environment, provided that their special educational needs are identified and implemented as a set of communicative abilities. Among them there are: the ability to perceive and understand speech and actions of the interlocutor as a single semantic complex; the ability to select the most accurate speech structures, which meet the communication situation and are understood by the interlocutor; the ability to rely on the events of their personal life experience and the life experience of the loved ones and family in the process of communication; the ability to build interpersonal relations, initiating and sticking to the conversation context [10]. The content of these special educational needs indicates the social circumstances of the education and upbringing of children with hearing disorders. It is clear that in special schools, the educational environment considers emerging difficulties and minimizes the risks of communication difficulties for students.

All the above-mentioned problem areas should be the subject of consistent and systematic scientific analysis and subsequent scientific and methodological workings necessary for the successful solution of the tasks outlined in the project of the Strategy for the development of education for children with special needs and children with disabilities in the Russian Federation for the period 2020-2030.

### **3. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION**

Our research, planned in the format of a longitudinal study, provides unique opportunities for a long-term and systematic analysis of the dynamics of development and education of different categories of children with disabilities in different educational settings, to identify and describe factors that can have both a positive and negative impact on this dynamics. The need to obtain this kind of data is determined primarily by the lack of reliable, scientifically based and empirically verified ideas about the advantages and disadvantages of inclusive and special education models for students with disabilities.

In this case, the assessment should include such components of the educational environment as the

availability of specialists who provide training, education and comprehensive assistance for the child, their professional level and profile training; methodological equipment of the educational process; characteristics of the child's family environment, the content and quality of interaction between specialists and the child's parents, etc. These characteristics can vary at different times, and, consequently, their impact (positive or negative) on the child's learning and development indicators (that is, on educational and personal results) changes as well. Therefore, setting up a study in the longitudinal format, which involves regular cross-sectional diagnostic samples, seems optimal for obtaining a system of reliable assessments of the influence of environmental (primarily educational) factors and conditions on the dynamics of psychosocial development of a child.

To expand the research base and obtain an array of empirical data suitable for additional verification of the results of longitudinal research, it is proposed to conduct cross-sectional research in the format of an online survey of specialists, the administration of educational institutions where children of a particular nosological group are educated, as well as their parents.

In the process of research, it is assumed to develop and adapt diagnostic tools that are adequate to the content of the tasks, and intended not only for the examination of children, but also for obtaining, analyzing and interpreting the data that characterize the conditions and factors of the educational environment. In particular, the research methodology includes:

- special diagnostic complexes designed to differentiate children's development variants within a specific nosological category;

- content and algorithms for analyzing retrospective data about the child (family and medical history, previous training experience);

- polls and structured questionnaires for teachers, the administrations of educational organizations, parents, intended for use in the longitudinal research;

- instructional and methodological materials for specialists of educational organizations included in the program of cross-section research, informing them about the research objectives, the format and content of their participation and the expected results of joint work, as well as about the technological and procedural aspects of obtaining and primary processing of information;

- lists of parameters for analyzing the studied environmental factors, rules and algorithms for fixing and pre-processing primary data; principles and algorithms for analyzing and systematizing the results of longitudinal and cross-section research.

As a useful practical result, it is proposed to develop a complete procedure and specific algorithms for monitoring the psychosocial development of a child with disabilities and the formats for using its results to assess the effectiveness of education within a specific educational route and for timely adjustments to the organization and content of the pedagogical process.

In addition, the expected results may be considered the following: clarification and updating of fundamental clinical knowledge in the field of regularities in the formation of the phenomenology of mental dysontogenesis, which mainly affects the cognitive sphere of the child.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Getting up-to-date ideas about the role of social factors in this process at the population level will enable predicting the course of psychosocial development of children, taking into account possible risks that can be identified and minimized in a timely manner. In other words, the issue concerns expanding the ability to solve one of the key tasks of special educational practice - the task of preventing secondary developmental disorders in various categories of children with disabilities.

The need to update the system knowledge about children with disabilities is related to the need to assess the evolutionary changes in populations of such children, which occur under the influence of the same main groups of factors. But if the factors of the organic kind are modified slightly over time, then the factors of the social kind are able to change in a short time, generate and

invade the life and educational space of the child freely and uncontrollably. As a result, habitual, stable images of children with typical developmental disorders are transformed in many of their manifestations, and these transformations are not always uniquely destructive (for example, the introduction of digital technologies in the life and education of a child).

The sum of all the expected results obtained through the lengthy longitudinal research will clarify the existing ideas about the modern population of children with disabilities, as reflected in the clinical and psychopedagogical characteristics of their generalized "portraits", which differ in specificity of the primary disorders, but exhibit a similarity in the patterns of psychosocial development dependant on its external and internal conditions.

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