

READINESS OF PEDAGOGICAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FOR VOLUNTEERING WORK WITH MENTALLY RETARDED CHILDREN HAVING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Abstract: The paper presents the results of studying readiness of pedagogical university students for volunteering work with mentally retarded children having autism spectrum disorders (ASD); the phenomenon of the said work can be detailed via psychological and activity-based competency constituents, with their formation levels specified. Reasons behind the fact that students' professional competencies and personal qualities potentially characterize their readiness for volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children are discussed, too. However, for stimulating the development of some of the competencies – the communicative, labor, and personal ones, – the readiness under study needs focused psychological and pedagogical support.

Keywords: students, pedagogical higher educational institution, volunteering, mentally retarded children with autism spectrum disorders.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of volunteering as a means for solving diverse problems of the society has been the subject of Russian and foreign studies in philosophy, law, sociology, economics, psychology, and pedagogy. Each domain of science defines volunteering as applied to its subject of research, focusing on individual aspects of this phenomenon.

Within the context of philosophy, the understanding of the essence and content of volunteering was identified with the good and virtue in some concepts, with mercy and altruism in others, with humanism in yet others, and with individual well-being in yet other concepts. Philosophers defined volunteering as an immaterial sphere of individual being based on the ideas of morals, spirituality, and morality that were characteristic for the society of a particular period of history, where the key questions were those of subjective perception of life and spiritual harmony (Shcherbakova, 2012).

According to Russian law, voluntary (volunteering) activity is deemed to mean voluntary work activity in the form of gratuitous performance of works and (or) rendering of services for the purposes specified in the Federal Law "On Charity Activity and Voluntary Work (Volunteering)" (1995), among them for "social support and protection of citizens, including... social rehabilitation of the unemployed, persons with disabilities, and other persons who due to their physical, intellectual particularities, or other circumstances are unable to exercise their rights and legal interests independently" (2018).

In the context of history, volunteering is characterized as voluntary, socially important activity of people, regardless of their age, race, sex, and confession, within measures aimed at resolving social, cultural, economic, and environmental problems in the society without making profit (Tarasova, 2012).

In the study of incentives and motives of voluntary work activity and at various levels (macro-, meso-, and microlevels), social service embodied in the shape of volunteering activity, alongside its various contexts – the economic one, the psychological, cultural, organizational, social and demographic, institutional, and individual ones – is characterized as a sufficiently explored phenomenon (Gruver, 2017). Voluntary work is defined as an efficient method for integrating efforts and resources of both the society and the state in completing social tasks, mobilizing social initiative, social consolidation of the public. It is also a method

for improving the efficiency of social policy and, in general, achieving the well-being of the society. The following criteria are suggested for differentiating the kinds of volunteering initiative proceeding from: the fact of time consumption (on a regular, periodical, seasonal, occasional basis), the place of work (local, national, and international volunteering), age group, legal status (formal and informal), and domains of the said work (Bodrenkova, 2014).

The Government of the Russian Federation rates promotion of the development and propagation of voluntary work activity (volunteering) as one of the priority lines of the state social and youth policy. Special attention is paid to the following kinds of voluntary work: volunteers of the Victory, volunteering in emergency situations, social, event, medical, cultural, and educational volunteering, senior age volunteers, corporate, environmental volunteering, and volunteering at educational organizations (Martyanova, 2019). Pedagogical volunteering is singled out as an individual kind defined as the interaction of teachers and voluntary workers with representatives of the rising generation needing integrated assistance in solving the problems of personal establishment and self-development (Akimova, 2006). Researchers substantiate pedagogical volunteering as an independent kind of voluntary work activity performed by young students (Lyashenko & Lebedeva, 2017).

At pedagogical higher educational institutions, volunteer movement covers at least two key tasks: on the one hand, it optimizes the very process of professional training and personal development of students; on the other hand, it enhances the educational institutions' social and educational capacities.

In the present-day Russia, there is a social demand for volunteering work with persons having health limitations (HL) and disabilities. The federal statutory acts specify the necessity of organizing volunteer movement as a form of rendering personal, individualized social support to HL persons which contributes to socialization of this population category and to promoting integration processes among young people.

It is pedagogical higher educational institutions where future teachers are trained that are the centers that can provide such special instruction of volunteers for working with HL children, mentally retarded children having autism spectrum disorders (ASD) included. Nevertheless, with quite an impressive number of works discussing the specific features of organization of volunteering activity and the experience of its development within Russian higher education, the questions concerning readiness of students of pedagogical higher educational institutions for volunteering work with HL children still remain at the periphery of scientists' research interests.

2 Literature Review

In line with the objective of this research, let the specific features be presented which are highlighted in the content and organization of volunteering activity of higher educational institution students (including those of educational organizations of pedagogical focus) and discussed in the works of foreign and Russian researchers.

Foreign researchers characterize particularities of students' voluntary work as a gratuitous activity (Bussell & Forbes, 2002). Within the philosophical context, they specify that in its true essence, students' voluntary work is first of all focused on the experience of volunteers and not addressed to results of free work in the interests of the beneficiary (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). It is also noted that volunteering which implies the development of an active civic stance and social responsibility is an effective route for one to gain a promising social and personal experience (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). C. Holdsworth & J. Quinn (2010) analyze the importance of presentation of the volunteer students' experience for developing volunteer movement at higher

educational institutions. In particular, on the one hand, the potential of volunteering is considered within the context of optimizing the process of students' mastering effective methods of interaction with the society, those in their professional sphere among them, and on the other – within the context of broadening their employment opportunities (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014). E. Katz & J. Rosenberg (2005) call volunteering a signaling device: using that, students manifest their professional expertise to the future employers through presentation of their experience of voluntary work activity.

G. Armstrong (2016) considers volunteering within the context of social demand for institutions of higher education as for the necessity of cultivating an active civic stance in students: a specialist must not only possess knowledge in a scientific domain and opportunities for contributing to science but also be an active and socially responsible citizen. Citizen scientists are those who can identify and correct the imbalance of powers in the society using innovative solutions and, by doing so, promote the creation of a fair society.

C. Holdsworth & G. Brewis (2014) analyze the potential of enhancing the practice-oriented learning at higher educational institutions within the context of established integration of teachers' professional training curriculum and their voluntary work activity experience. These authors believe volunteering in pedagogical education consists in granting the future teachers an opportunity of taking a deeper "plunge" into the professional environment (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

P. Salter et al. argue that engaging students into the activity of the professional community already before the work start – more extensively than only into practical teaching of academic subjects in classrooms of educational organizations – enables the teachers to more efficiently interact in the school communities where they expect their subsequent working life to take place. So, the future teachers learn not only teaching as such but also being a teacher. The researchers are certain that broadening the professional experience plays the decisive part in the future teachers' development. In this case, they are aware about and involved into the challenges of the communities where they teach in, be it considerations of the professional practice, diversity of students, moral and social problems of education. Most pedagogical educational institutions value the experience of pedagogical volunteering. In the researchers' opinion, for enriching the said experience, pedagogical volunteering has to have focused and structured representation in the academic process of the educational institutions (Salter et al., 2013). A. Coffey & S. Lavery (2015) substantiate in detail how pedagogical volunteering assists students: it renders the process of training of the future teachers for professional activity more intensive.

M. A. C. Bernardo et al. (2012) view programs of pedagogical volunteering as effective forms of interaction between higher educational institutions and the teaching community of educational organizations. Participation of the teaching community in higher education has the nature of trust-based and respectful partner relations within fulfillment of teaching and training processes that are determined by reciprocity of the objective and results projected. However, currently, there is no cutting-edge progressive evaluation of the outlined interaction between higher educational institutions and the teaching community; there is a necessity of reviewing the objective and updating the projected models and results of pedagogical volunteering consistently (Caspersz et al., 2012). C. W. Howe et al. (2014) believe the most promising formats of the interaction in question are implemented in the American context of professional education which is traditionally oriented to a combination of students' academic results with their social works.

Russian academic community highlights volunteering activity of students as an important psychological and pedagogical resource for solving social, cultural, economic, and other problems and building the socially responsible society (Gruver, 2017). Volunteering of the future teachers fits seamlessly within the

context of a multipositional system of relations between the participants of the educational process in conditions of network cooperation. Namely, it is potentially inbuilt into the content-related and procedural aspects of organizing the professionally focused practice for students of pedagogical higher educational institutions. Alongside this, it provides stronger guarantees for availability of varied options as for the content and forms of students' activity in the process of training (Shukshina et al., 2018).

Focus areas, forms, methods, and technologies of voluntary work activity depend on the target audience, i.e., on the population categories especially needing assistance. One of the important focus areas of volunteering is aid to mentally retarded children having ASD; these children must be provided with not only medical and social but also with psychological and pedagogical support, including the constituent of working with the environment (social milieu) for the children to get integrated into. The process of shaping the tolerant attitude to persons having HL is an important line of social activity relying on the use of information and network technologies, of the social humanitarian, social and political, and social and educational ones. This focus area gains special relevance among students, where the success of their future social and professional functioning depends directly on their level of tolerance.

In the modern science, tolerance is viewed as a complicated phenomenon incorporating sociocultural, political, economic, historical, and psychological elements. The concept of tolerance as a constituent of adaptive space represents a certain quality of interaction between the subject and the object of tolerance. It includes the individual and personal, social and public units, and it is characterized by the subject's readiness to accept the object's sociocultural distinctions (attributes of appearance, personal standpoint, particularities of behavior, etc.). Tolerance is developed as an integral personal quality which is manifested in daily practices in a relevant way. Most scientists share the opinion that the tolerant attitude plays the fundamental role in the structure of mind and self-consciousness, being a versatile personal formation. The tolerant behavior relies on the ability of maintaining one's psychological stability in problem situations, which allows considering this behavior as an individual's social and psychological competency of assessing the situation correctly and finding the optimal way out of it.

Thus, it can be stated that both Russian and foreign systems of higher professional education value the experience of pedagogical volunteering: its potential is sought after for the development of personal and professional qualities of the future teachers. Regrettably, scientific reasons behind the importance of volunteering work with HL children (including that with mentally retarded ASD children) for the future teachers' personal and professional establishment within the context of advance of inclusive education are only discussed in a limited number of research works. In the information sources available, the authors have not found any studies which would represent an integral process of exploring and shaping readiness of students of pedagogical higher educational institutions for volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children.

3 Research Methodological Framework

The objective of the research consisted in identifying the phenomenon of readiness of pedagogical university students for volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children. For achieving the said objective, the following tasks have been set and completed consistently: describing the phenomenon of students' readiness for volunteering work with ASD children; exploring this phenomenon in the course of studying the activity of volunteers of the "Rostok Dobrotы" (lit. Sprout of Kindness) team of Mordovian State Pedagogical University named after M. E. Evseev; summing up the findings and discussing them. The scientific research relied on the general methodological principles of scientific objectivity, consistency, and activity. The specific scientific reference points of the research were predetermined by the scientific concept of competency-based

approach which integrates, among others, personality-, activity- and context-related aspects. The principal research methods were the theoretical and the empirical ones. The former included analysis of scientific literature and pedagogical phenomena representing various aspects of the young students' volunteering activity. The empirical methods included summing up, systemizing, and interpreting the pedagogical experience in this domain (both the authors' own and that of teaching community in general); comparative analysis and synthesis of the empirical data obtained according to the results of the pilot psychodiagnosing study (questionnaire survey) and observation of the activity of MSPU volunteers. The respondents were 112 students of years 2–4 of the faculty of psychology and special education and the faculty of primary and artistic education of the said higher educational institution (aged 18 to 22, with 18 male and 94 female students) intending to join the "Rostok Dobroty" volunteer movement. The research was conducted in September – October 2020 in three stages. At the first stage, the level of the students' readiness for volunteering activity with HL children was found out using the questionnaire form developed on the basis of the authors' understanding of the phenomenon of readiness under study and A. A. Shagurova's guideline (2013) for the psychodiagnosing toolkit. The questionnaire form is represented by four scales incorporating 12 questions each that are oriented to identifying the set of competencies on which effectiveness of the activity depends. Two of them are within the psychological constituent – the scales on cognitive and personal competencies; within the activity-based one, there are two other scales – on communicative and labor competencies, respectively.

Summing up qualitative and quantitative parameters of the above competencies set was the basis for conventional identification of their formation levels. So, the elementary level implied copy competencies and competency generation when solving standard problems. At the reproductive level, standardized competencies were demonstrated based on previously learned behavior algorithms for certain situations with personal resources included into the system. Functionalization of competencies within the context of personal self-maintenance was the sign of the creative level.

At the second stage, the formation level of the students' tolerance toward HL persons was studied in the process of using psychodiagnosing materials designed for identification of the individual and personal, social and public components of the phenomenon in question (Minaeva & Karyakina, 2018). The third stage implied summing up the findings and interpreting them.

4 Results and Discussion

Russian academic community continues the terminology-related debate on the essence of students' readiness for volunteering, defining it in several dimensions. Through the lens of the volunteering competency, it is determined as integral readiness for rendering others highly professional pedagogical, social, and other assistance at no cost (Karimov, 2011). In terms of the criterial framework, it is characterized as the formation level of the total of such components as motivation for success in volunteering and recognition of the values of volunteering and humanism focused interaction as the vital ones (Makovey, 2006). Via the model of volunteering activity, the said readiness is interpreted as a systemic psychological formation including the values- and meanings-related component, the cognitive, reflective, emotional and volitional, communicative, and activity-based ones (Konvisareva, 2006). By systemizing a volunteer's competencies, it is determined within the context of three clusters being represented – the worldview one (the ability to interpret the scientific picture for the purposes of volunteering), the statutory one (the ability to fulfill social standards), and the instrumental one (the operational and activity-based constituent of voluntary workers' abilities) (Bystrova et al., 2018). In terms of the social and psychological context, the above readiness is characterized as a complicated integral new formation ensuring the unity and coordination of

personality levels and subjective experience forms for successful performance of the said activity (Shagurova, 2013).

The authors' understanding of the phenomenon of students' readiness for volunteering work with HL children, mentally retarded ASD children included, relies on the scientific concept of the competency-based approach which integrates, among others, personality-, activity- and context-related aspects. In it, readiness is characterized as an integral subject quality of an individual – the integrity of knowledge and experience which manifests itself in the set of competencies determining the effectiveness of activity. The structure of the said personal quality can be represented by two basic constituents: the psychological (cognitive and personal competencies as such) and the activity-based one (communicative and labor competencies). Readiness is represented in the process of completing tasks available and in transforming the activity where its systemic nature ensures coordinated maintenance of all its competencies, and the extent of maintenance of a certain competency is determined by modality, complexity, and importance of the task (Lavrentyeva et al., 2020). Thus, the "perfect" portrait of a volunteer as a subject of successful volunteering activity within the context of personal self-fulfillment implies achieving the creative development level in both the psychological constituent competencies and those of the activity-based one.

At the initial stages, working with the respondents has revealed their potential capacities of performing volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children, which is confirmed by their knowledge of requirements of the federal statutory acts and having professional competencies. It is confirmed, too, by their having a positive attitude to the development of inclusive practice and being ready for continuous professional progress.

The results obtained at the first stage prove that the students have differences in the formation level of their competency-based readiness for volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children. Positive trends have been registered in the development of their cognitive competencies (knowledge of the agenda of mentally retarded ASD children, the level of universal cognitive competencies). So, 26,7% of the respondents have demonstrated the creative level, and 48,4% – the reproductive one. For the majority of the senior students, the reproductive formation level of competencies is characteristic. Namely, personal competencies (humanism, mercy, initiative, helpfulness, altruism, empathy, motivation for success) at this level have been demonstrated by 44,4% of the senior students; the communicative ones (openness and congruence in communication, developed communicative abilities) – by 37,8%; and the labor ones (designing one's own activity taking into account the specific context of work of an interdisciplinary team, provision of the relevant polymodal resource support, assessment of the results of designing and fulfilling the programs of volunteering, identification of effective interaction practices for all subjects of the support, expert appraisal of one's own activity results, and analysis of the context of difficulties) – by 28,4% of the senior students. Negative trends have been registered when analyzing the formation level of communicative competencies in 42,3% of cases and of labor competencies – in 44,4%.

Regrettably, it is so few as 16,1% the respondents who could demonstrate harmonious development of all the identified groups of competencies up to the creative level. As for the remaining pedagogical university students, their development extent of one or more groups of the said competencies has prevented them from getting close to the "perfect" portrait of a volunteer focused on working with mentally retarded ASD children.

The second stage results have allowed singling out conventional groups of the questioned ones. The first group includes the students having a high formation level of the tolerant attitude to HL persons. In these respondents, an active personal stance was clearly seen relying on social and moral motives of interaction with HL persons. The questioned ones demonstrated their readiness to contact with them in various social situations for

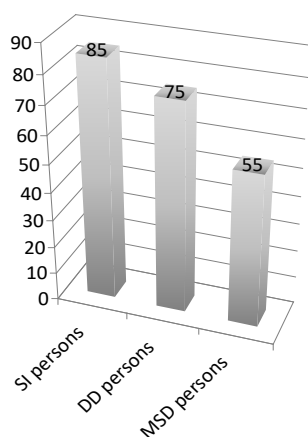
building constructive relations based on accepting other people for what they are. The respondents recognized rights of HL persons and showed a sensible attitude to their special needs. The students if this group are ready to acquire new knowledge, abilities, and skills required for successful interaction with persons of the said category.

The second group is the questioned ones featuring a medium formation level of the tolerant attitude to HL persons. In interaction with HL persons, these students tried to adhere to social and moral motives; they demonstrated their readiness to contact with them in various social situations, building a constructive relationship based on the tolerant attitude to them. The students recognized the necessity of observing these people's rights but were not always prepared to personally adapt to their special needs. The respondents voiced their readiness for acquiring the minimal scope of knowledge, abilities, and skills required for interacting with HL persons.

The third group is the surveyed ones having a low formation level of the tolerant attitude to HL persons. These respondents are not ready for adhering to social and moral motives within the interaction under study. They demonstrated low readiness for contacts in various social situations and did not see the point in building constructive relations with HL people. Although these students recognized the rights of HL persons, they believed meeting their special needs did not have to concern other members of the society, and, therefore, there was no necessity to acquire new knowledge, abilities, and skills required for successful interaction with HL persons.

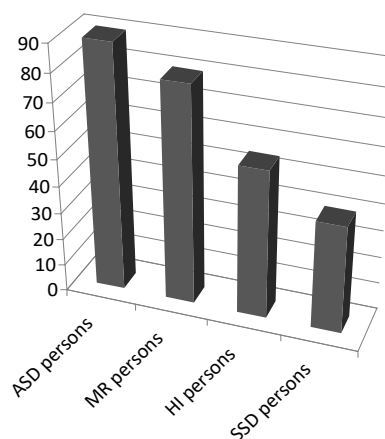
The questionnaire survey has shown that the students consider it the most convenient for themselves to interact with the following categories of HL persons: the sight impairment persons are noted by 85,0% of the questioned; the developmental delay (DD) ones – by 75,0% of the surveyed; and people having muscle-skeleton disorders (MSD) – by 55,0% of the respondents (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, interaction with the following categories of persons has been recognized as the least convenient: for 90,0% of the questioned – with those having ASD; for 80,0% of the surveyed – with those having deficiency of intellect (mental retardation / MR); for 55,0% of the respondents – with people having hearing impairment; and for 40,0% of the questioned – with persons having severe speech disorders (SSD) (see Figure 2).

Figure 1 Comfort in interaction with HL persons



Source: authors' own processing

Figure 2 Discomfort in interaction with HL persons



Source: authors' own processing

The students have considered the following ways of interacting with HL persons to be the most acceptable ones: assistance within charity and volunteering events is noted by 100,0% of the questioned; working as peers – by 75,0% of the respondents; co-education in one and the same group – by 70,0% of the surveyed.

As additional knowledge, abilities, and skills which the students would like to master for interacting with HL people, they have noted: special knowledge about mental and physical particularities of HL persons – 80,0% of the surveyed; further medical knowledge – 55,0% of the respondents; psychological support and conflict prevention skills – 40,0% of the questioned.

Therefore, special conditions are required to stimulate the development of tolerance as a component of personal competencies composing the psychological constituent of readiness for volunteering with HL persons, first of all, with mentally retarded ASD children.

5 Conclusion

The results of analysis of information sources on the problem in question and the authors' own teaching activity experience confirm the importance of studying readiness of pedagogical university students for volunteering work with HL children, with mentally retarded ASD children included. This is also relevant within the context of optimizing the activity of higher educational institutions in promoting students' personal and professional establishment. Significance of the materials of this paper is determined by the authors' finding that students' readiness to volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children can be represented by the following basic constituents: the psychological (cognitive and personal competencies) and the activity-based ones (communicative and labor competencies). As for the set of competencies within each of these constituents, analysis of their features has been proven to allow stating the creative, reproductive, and elementary levels as the formation extent of the said readiness. It has been substantiated that in pedagogical university students, their acquired professional competencies and personal qualities potentially characterize their readiness for volunteering work with mentally retarded ASD children. However, such groups of competencies as the communicative (openness and congruence in communication), labor (design of volunteering activity, assessment of the results of its design and fulfillment, expert appraisal of the results of one's own activity, analysis of the context of difficulties) and personal (tolerance) ones need stimulation of their development – for this process, focused psychological and pedagogical support is essential. The authors' materials can be used in the educational process of higher educational institutions and within network interaction of various level educational organizations.

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