
ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL CURRICULA IN TERMS OF REFLECTION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-CARE SKILLS TO MENTALLY RETARDED SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

A focus on self-care skills fosters an environment where all children, regardless of ability, can participate and contribute to the classroom community. The formation and development of self-care skills for children with mental retardation during school years is an important and integral part of the overall system of preparing them for study in inclusive settings, independent life and work to the possible extent.

At the same time, literature data, work experience of teachers and special educators working in inclusive schools, as well as our observations show that for children with mental retardation, especially in the lower grades, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical skills and self-care skills in various types of daily activities (game, educational, work, etc.) presents significant difficulties. The possession of these skills is important for these children not only during school but also after graduation.

The significance of the problem under study also increases because today in Armenia the shift to inclusive education is a reality and children with various needs study together. This requires children's independence, sufficient social behavior skills, spatial orientation skills, high-quality performance and many other self-care skills in a wide variety of areas of activity. The level of development of these skills largely determines the success of inclusion and adaptation of these children among their classmates.

Considering the above mentioned, it becomes important to study and analyze school curricula for various disciplines in grades I-IV in terms of how they reflect issues of education and the development of self-care skills for children with mild and moderate mental retardation. This will help to clarify the positive and negative aspects of these programs, the degree of their direct or indirect connection with the issues of developing self-service skills in these children, and to develop appropriate proposals for their improvement.

Keywords: *skills, mental development, physical education, self-service skills, inclusive education, children with mental retardation, school curricula analysis, independence in children, social*

behavior skills, spatial orientation skills, educational inclusion, adaptation in inclusive settings, grades I-IV curriculum, daily activities skills development, teacher experiences in inclusive education, curriculum improvement proposals.

INTRODUCTION

The early elementary school years (grades I-IV) are a critical foundation for all children's development. For children with mild and moderate mental retardation (MMMR), this period holds particular significance. While acquiring core academic skills is important, fostering self-care skills is equally crucial for their future independence and well-being. This article delves into the vital role of school curricula in achieving these goals.

We will analyze existing curricula across various disciplines, examining how effectively they address the educational needs of children with MMMR. Specifically, we will explore how these curricula integrate the development of self-care skills alongside traditional academic content. By critically evaluating current practices, we aim to identify areas for improvement and highlight strategies to create more inclusive and empowering learning experiences for children with MMMR.

This analysis is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, a well-designed curriculum can equip children with MMMR with the tools they need to navigate daily life successfully. Secondly, by fostering self-care skills early on, we can promote a sense of self-confidence and independence that will benefit them throughout their lives. Finally, a curriculum that effectively addresses the needs of children with MMR fosters a more inclusive learning environment for all students (Wang, 2019; Zitomer & Goodwin, 2014; Gladkaya, 2003).

At the same time, it is extremely important through passing quite a long way and implementing universal inclusive education in the Republic of Armenia, to realize that the problem continues to be more than actual since it can generally be stated that in the regions where the transition to universal inclusive education model has been already done the serious difficulties are existing (Harutyunyan, 2023). Most children with MMMR remain in unclear situations, while very few aspects of school education reflect their self-care activity development and the academic part is quite doubtful. The implemented model almost has no grounds, the preparatory work was not carried out or was implemented very incompletely and superficially: the system has changed in one day, and the system running rings have increased or decreased. Here new approach is needed already for the running system adjusting and new calculations for providing necessary support for the transition period (Harutyunyan, 2023).

Self-care skills are fundamental for children in inclusive schools. They empower students to participate actively, build stronger relationships, and contribute to a positive and inclusive learning

environment (Wilhelmsen & Sørensen, 2017; Wang, 2019). By fostering self-care skills, inclusive schools create an environment where children with disabilities feel empowered and capable. This aspect should be highly respected and included in school programs at different levels and within the frame of various subjects (Wilhelmsen & Sørensen, 2017).

Through this exploration, we hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about creating effective and empowering educational experiences for children with MMR in grades I-IV.

EXPLAINING THE STATE OF THE ART OF THE PROBLEM

Children with moderate disabilities face unique challenges in developing and practicing self-care skills. Here are some key aspects to consider related to areas of self-care: basic needs (dressing, hygiene, eating), communication (verbal, non-verbal), mobility (physical therapy, adaptive equipment), emotional regulations (identifying triggers, developing coping mechanisms) (Heward, Alber-Morgan & Konrad, 2018). By acquiring self-care skills, children with disabilities gain a sense of accomplishment and control over their daily lives. This fosters their greater independence, as they become less reliant on constant assistance for basic needs. At the same time, it improves a child's self-esteem, and mastering self-care tasks boosts their confidence and self-reliance. Self-care skills enable children to participate more actively in daily activities which enhance their quality of life. Overall, self-care empowers children with disabilities to take charge of their lives, fostering a sense of independence, improved well-being, and a foundation for a fulfilling future (Wilhelmsen & Sørensen, 2017).

The program in 2000 included 13 main sections: personal hygiene, clothing and footwear, family, housing, transport, organizations and enterprises, economics, etc (Grenier, Patey & Grenier-Burtis, 2022). From grades V-IX, 68 hours were allocated for each year of study for this subject. The educational material of each section was presented according to the following structure: topic, practical work, basic requirements for the knowledge and skills of students children with mental retardation.

At the same time, from class to class, both the topics presented, the content of the educational material, and the requirements for the knowledge and skills of these students became more complex.

An Armenian translation of a program called "Social and Everyday Orientation" used for many years by teachers in special schools across the republic has been significantly cut down. This includes both a reduction in the number of program sections and the amount of teaching materials and time allocated to completing it.

In general, noting the importance of these programs for the development of social and everyday orientation of these students in grades V-IX, it should be emphasized that they were not very suitable for the development of self-care skills for students in grades I-IV.

Firstly, these programs did not have a separate section on self-care, and secondly, such sections

of the “Social and Everyday Orientation” program as “Transport”, “Communications”, “Employment”, “Trade”, were very complicated for students with MMR, and as practice shows, these children almost did not use these services without external support.

Consequently, for MMR students in grades I-IV, the main goal of these programs was not solved. And, thus, preparing these children for practical independent life, and, first of all, in the field of self-care failed.

There's no self-care program specifically designed for these elementary school students. Because of this, teachers in special, inclusive and regular schools have to rely on one of two options: a translated Russian program meant for older students (V-IX grade) that focuses on daily life skills, or their knowledge and experience.

Naturally, such an approach cannot provide a solution to the main task facing these schools - the education and development of self-care skills in mentally retarded primary school students, aimed at preparing them for independent life.

In the aspect of the problem under study, we also studied and analyzed school programs for students of grades I-IV in the disciplines “Technology”, “Physical Education”, “Mathematics”, “Drawing” and other subjects, as well as interdisciplinary connections in teaching these students skills and self-care skills.

Literature data and the work experience of teachers indicate great opportunities for general education subjects and interdisciplinary connections for learning and consolidating acquired theoretical knowledge and practical skills in self-care and developing independence in these children.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSES

Within the frame of this study, we have studied and analyzed school programs for grades I-IV in the subjects of “Technology”, “Physical education”, and “Maths”. The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. *Is there a section on self-care?*
2. *How are the issues of teaching self-care skills reflected in the educational material?*
3. *How the material of self-care is distributed among classes in the curriculum?*
4. *What sections of self-care are directly or indirectly reflected in the subject curriculum?*
5. *How are self-care issues reflected in other subject curriculums: Maths, Drawing?*
6. *What are the interdisciplinary connections for teaching and consolidating self-care skills for MMR?*
7. *Do school programs for grades I-IV contain educational material that promotes the education and development of self-care skills in this group of children?*

Based on the objectives of this study, we also studied and analyzed the school program “Social Everyday Orientation” for students for grades V-IX with mental development problems, which was actual until 2012. Today, instead of this program, these classes include the subject “Basics of Life”, and for students of grades I-IV - the subject “Technology”.

Unfortunately, in all types of educational schools in Armenia (special, inclusive, regular) there is no special subject concentrating on self-care programs for these students.

But as noted above, for three decades in a special school, a program for social and everyday orientation for students of grades V-IX was acting during the Soviet period. This program was translated into Armenian and most schools worked according to it for many years, then some schools switched to working according to the Russian social and everyday orientation program (Grenier, Patey & Grenier-Burtis, 2022). These programs included (albeit only for students in grades V-IX) separate sections on self-care, so we will also focus on the analysis of these programs.

Being more concrete, it is interesting to mention as a sample the educational material of the “Technology” subject for students of grades I-IV of special, inclusive and regular schools was developed by a group of authors and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia in 2011.

The educational material of each class has specific content aimed at familiarizing students with individual sections of work.

Thus, in the first grade, the educational material of this subject is presented in the form of a workbook, without textual content, but in colorfully illustrated pictures and drawings. We present the main sections of this workbook:

- What is available in our environment?
- Who has created all this?
- What tools will we use?
- Where from to get the necessary material?
- Work with natural and artificial materials;
- What plants do we know?
- How to set the table for tea and coffee?

Those are the most important points that we are going to analyze further.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“Technology” subject

An analysis of different sections of a first-grader’s workbook for the “Technology” subject shows that the material presented only with pictures and drawings contains almost no information about the

formation of ideas and concepts of self-care for children with MMR. Here, only the last topics (“How to set a table for tea” and “How to set a table for coffee”) to some extent contain visual material in two pictures, aimed at forming an idea of what should be on the table.

The rest of the material presented in pictures and drawings in the workbook, although important for the general development of children of this age, is almost not connected with the issue of self-service (Hovsepyan, Harutyunyan, Aghajanyan & Verdyan, 2014).

The educational material for the “Technology” subject for the II grade is much larger, not only in terms of the number of pictures and drawings, but it also contains a short text that reveals the main illustrated material of the presented section.

The content of this subject includes 50 sections, the text of which is accompanied by illustrations of relevant drawings and pictures. The main sections are shown in the Table 1:

Table 1.

Content of the “Technology” subject in grades I-II.

1	How to prepare material for work
2	Work with various objects: applique, mosaic with seeds, working with foil, colorful paper and cardboard, etc.
3	Birds and their varieties
4	Animals: elephant, lion, hare
5	Sea fish
6	Growing and caring for flowers
7	Holiday cards
8	Compositions: spring, summer, winter, forest
9	Trees
10	Details of technical stuff
11	Rules of hygiene of clothing and shoes, their cleaning and care

As it is mentioned the field related to self-care is highlighted with yellow and within the context of other topics it is relatively small. We have not presented many sections here, since they are a continuation of the material taught in the first class: working with natural and artificial materials, appliqué, dolls made of dry straw, working with legos, and things related to this kind of thing.

An analysis of the content of the educational material in these and other sections of the subject “Technology” of the grade II shows that here again there is very little specific material related to the problem of self-care. Only the section “Rules of hygiene of clothing and footwear, their cleaning and

care” directly addresses the issues of developing self-care skills in mentally retarded young schoolchildren (Hovsepian, Harutyunyan, Aghajanyan & Verdyan, 2014).

The educational material of the subject “Technology” for grades III and IV differs in the content of the same subject for grades I-II, both in quantity and in issues related to the education of self-service in these pupils. Here, as well as in grades I-II, many topics move from class to class: working with paper and cardboard, what tools we will work with, etc. We will not dwell on these and other similar topics, since they mainly contain material that promotes the general development of children and almost does not address the problem of self-care.

It was also stated that in the educational material of the subject “Technology” for grades III-IV, there are several topics directly related to the issues of education and the development of self-care skills in certain types of activities (Table 2).

Table 2.

Content of the “Technology” subject in grades III-IV.

1	Clothes and shoes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• types of buttons fastening;• necklaces and bracelets made of buttons.
2	Sanitary and hygienic requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• sanitary and hygienic requirements for the apartment and furniture;• kitchen utensils;• safety rules for using heating devices;• gas safety rules.
3	Food: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the importance of food in human life;• general requirements for food products;• sanitary and hygienic requirements for food preparation;• interesting sandwiches;• types of meat foods;• boiled potatoes;• quickly perishable foods should be stored in the refrigerator.

This material is very important for the education and development of daily very important skills and abilities in primary school children with MMR. They will help them independently comply with

sanitary and hygienic requirements for the cleanliness of rooms, clothes, and shoes, know the rules for using them, etc. Educational material related to nutrition issues, self-care when selecting, storing and using food, maintaining a diet, etc. is also important.

At the same time, it should be noted that a significant part of the sections related to the development of self-care skills in retarded students remained beyond the scope of the subject “Technology” (Hovsepyan, Harutyunyan, Aghajanyan & Verdyan, 2014). These are primarily household, self-orientation in space and time, rules for using cutlery, self-service at the table during meals and other sections.

“Physical education” subject

Based on the objectives of the problem under study, it also becomes important to analyze another school subject “Physical education” in terms of how it reflects the issues of education and the development of these children's self-care skills and abilities.

The study and analysis of primary school physical education programs indicate that the means and methods of physical education, in addition to solving basic problems, have great potential for promoting the development of self-service skills in mentally retarded students.

This work can be organized both in physical education lessons, in extracurricular club activities, and in other various physical education and sports activities: gaming, educational, sports, spatial orientation, etc. These can be a wide variety of exercises, tasks, specially made-up situations, organizational forms and methods of their implementation.

Thus, in physical education programs for students in grades I-IV in special and regular schools, the following sample tasks, exercises, motor actions, organizational forms and conditions are presented, which to some extent contribute to the education and development of self-care skills and abilities and independence in this group of children:

- changing clothes before and after physical education lessons and physical education and sports activities or events beyond class time;
- preparing sports equipment and gym for training sessions, games, and events;
- cleaning and folding sports equipment after educational and extracurricular physical education classes;
- building, changing lanes and moving around the gym or playground, determining one’s location, direction of movement, speed of movement, etc.;
- maintaining physical exercise hygiene, cleanliness of the body, sportswear and shoes;
- compliance with the elements of self-care and independence when performing physical exercises, tasks, participating in games, etc.;
- performing exercises and tasks to develop correct posture, manner of movement, culture of

behavior and communication, which are very important for self-care in various fields of activity;

- exercises in walking, running, and playing activities performed with objects (balls, hoops, jump rope, clubs, etc.) and without them, aimed at developing the skills of orientation in space and time.

These and many other exercises and tasks presented in physical education programs for students in grades I-IV are primarily aimed at solving the main problems of physical education of children with MMR; they only indirectly relate to the problem of developing self-care skills in these schoolchildren. The educational material of the section on gymnastics, athletics and games does not contain specific exercises, tasks, or motor actions aimed at the formation, development and improvement of self-care and independence skills in these children.

These sections of the school curriculum in the subject “Physical education” do not develop or present the basic requirements for theoretical knowledge and practical skills in self-care for students in grades I-IV with developmental problems, which they should have in this subject by the end of the school year.

“Math” subject

Familiarization with the "Math" program for grades I-IV of special and regular schools indicates that this subject, its educational material, assignments, and exercises have great potential for promoting the development of skills and abilities of self-care and independence among these young schoolchildren (Wang, 2019). Performing various educational tasks in a mathematics lesson, related to the use of many objects (ruler, pen, triangle, square, etc.), requires this student to be able to work independently, navigate in micro space, be independent of others, and serve himself.

It has been established that in the “Math” subject program for grades I-IV of all types of schools under consideration, educational material is provided to some extent that helps to promote the formation in mentally retarded children of such spatial and temporal orientation concepts that they need in the field of self-care, such as “left”, “right”, “forward”, “hour”, “minute”, “day”, etc.

However, in general, in various sections of the “Math” subject for grades I-IV there is no educational material and special conditions aimed, except for solving basic problems, at promoting the development and consolidation of acquired skills and abilities of self-care and independent orientation in space and time in this group of primary school age children.

Thus, underlying the importance of the subject “Technology” and the educational material presented in it for the general development of these children in grades I-IV, it should be emphasized that the content of this subject and the form of presentation of educational material as a whole do not contribute to the development of self-care skills for children with MMR. Considering that in special

and regular schools under consideration, there is no "Self-Care" subject for children with MMR, the importance of including a separate "Self-Care" section in the "Technology" subject becomes evident.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be stated that the educational material of the subject "Math" of grades I-IV is aimed mainly at the formation and development of elementary mathematical ideas, concepts and knowledge in mentally retarded students, but that these programs contribute to the development of skills in these children and self-service skills need not be mentioned.

The educational material of these school subjects, to some extent, indirectly contributes to the development of self-service skills and the manifestation of independence in children with MMR, but this is extremely insufficient for solving this important practical task. We have not identified any interdisciplinary connection between the primary school disciplines under consideration in matters of assistance in the education and development of cultural, hygienic, economic, household, self-orientation in space and time, and other self-service skills in these younger schoolchildren.

The analysis and research of other school subjects of grades I-IV ("Drawing", "The world around me and myself", "Native language") should be conducted with the main attention on solving the principal task of the subject, issues of education and the development of self-care through the educational material of these disciplines.

Considering the above-mentioned facts, it is important to find effective ways to develop an exemplary "Self-care" program for children with MMR in primary school and the pedagogical conditions for its use.

Inclusive education can be a catalyst for changes in the educational process, which will lead to an increase in the quality of education.

Empirical research shows that many teachers believe they need "special skills" to teach students with special educational needs. However, experience shows that to involve students with special educational needs in the general education process, quality, understandable and accessible teaching is necessary, which contributes to increasing the activity of students and the quality of learning.

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