DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-CARE SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how primary-school curricula in Armenia address the development of self-care skills among children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. The problem is especially important in the context of inclusive education, where independence, social behavior, spatial orientation, and everyday practical skills influence successful participation and adaptation. A qualitative curriculum-content analysis was conducted for Grades I-IV, focusing primarily on Technology, Physical Education, and Mathematics, while also considering the former Social and Everyday Orientation program for Grades V-IX. The analysis asked whether self-care is represented as a distinct area, how relevant content is distributed across grades and subjects, and whether interdisciplinary links support the consolidation of self-care skills. The findings indicate that Technology contains some directly relevant material, particularly in Grades II-IV, including clothing and footwear hygiene, household sanitation, safety, and food-related skills. Physical Education and Mathematics provide indirect opportunities for developing independence, hygiene, spatial and temporal orientation, and organization; however, these opportunities are not systematically framed as self-care outcomes. Overall, the curricula do not provide a coherent or sufficiently comprehensive pathway for developing self-care skills in primary-school children with intellectual disabilities. The study concludes that a dedicated Self-Care section should be incorporated into the Technology curriculum and supported through explicit interdisciplinary connections.

Keywords: *self-care skills, intellectual disabilities, primary education, inclusive education, Technology, Physical Education, independence.*

INTRODUCTION

The early elementary school years (Grades I-IV) are a critical foundation for children's development. For children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities, this period has particular significance. While the acquisition of core academic skills is important, the development of self-care skills is equally essential for future independence, participation, and well-being.

This article examines the role of school curricula in developing self-care skills alongside traditional academic content. It analyzes existing curricula across several disciplines and considers how effectively

they respond to the educational and practical needs of children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. The purpose is to identify strengths and gaps in current curricular provision and to formulate proposals for improvement.

A well-designed curriculum can equip children with the skills required to manage everyday activities more successfully, while early development of self-care can strengthen confidence and independence. Previous work has emphasized the importance of adaptation, social and everyday preparation, and practical independence for learners with developmental disabilities (Gladkaya, 2003; Palikyan et al., 1995; Sarukhanyan, 2009).

In Armenia, the transition toward universal inclusive education has made this issue particularly relevant. Difficulties remain in ensuring that educational provision adequately reflects the practical and self-care needs of children with intellectual disabilities. Harutyunyan (2023) notes broader responsibilities and challenges associated with the development of inclusive education and regional pedagogical-psychological support systems in Armenia.

Self-care skills are fundamental for participation in inclusive schools. They can support active engagement, relationships, independence, and a sense of competence. These skills therefore need to be represented at different levels of school programming and across subjects (Turnbull et al., 2020).

The study addresses seven research questions: whether curricula include a self-care section; how self-care teaching is reflected in educational material; how relevant content is distributed across grades; which areas of self-care are directly or indirectly represented; how self-care is reflected in Mathematics and other subjects; what interdisciplinary connections support self-care; and whether Grade I-IV programs contain sufficient material to promote self-care development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children with moderate intellectual disabilities may experience particular difficulties in acquiring and independently applying self-care skills. Relevant areas include basic daily needs such as dressing, hygiene, and eating; communication; mobility; and emotional regulation. The development of practical independence requires systematic instruction, repeated practice, and opportunities to apply skills in meaningful everyday contexts (Heward & Orlansky, 2010).

Acquiring self-care skills can provide children with greater control over everyday life, reduce reliance on constant assistance, and strengthen self-confidence. Participation in daily activities is also closely connected with quality of life and functional independence. Occupational-therapy literature likewise emphasizes intervention aimed at participation and functional performance among children with developmental delays (Polatajko & Crabtree, 2011).

Historically, social and everyday orientation programs used in special schools addressed areas such as personal hygiene, clothing and footwear, family, housing, transport, organizations, enterprises, and economics. The program referenced by Mezhuev (2002) allocated substantial instructional time to such practical domains in Grades V-IX. Educational material was organized around topics, practical work, and requirements for students' knowledge and skills.

However, programs designed for older students were not fully suitable for the self-care needs of children in Grades I-IV. They did not establish self-care as a sufficiently distinct and developmentally appropriate area for younger learners. Moreover, sections such as transport, communications, employment, and trade could be too complex for younger children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities to use independently.

In practice, the absence of a dedicated self-care program for primary-school students has meant that teachers may rely either on programs originally intended for older learners or on their own professional knowledge and experience. Such an approach cannot by itself guarantee systematic preparation for independent life. General education subjects and interdisciplinary connections nevertheless offer important opportunities to teach, practice, and consolidate theoretical knowledge and practical self-care skills.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative curriculum-content analysis. The main materials analyzed were school programs for Grades I-IV in Technology, Physical Education, and Mathematics. The analysis also considered the former Social and Everyday Orientation program for students with intellectual-development difficulties in Grades V-IX in order to compare the extent to which self-care content had previously been represented.

The unit of analysis was curriculum content that directly or indirectly supported self-care, independence, hygiene, household functioning, spatial and temporal orientation, food-related skills, clothing and footwear care, and organization of everyday activities.

The analysis was guided by the following research questions:

- Is there a section on self-care?
- How are issues of teaching self-care skills reflected in the educational material?
- How is self-care material distributed across grades?
- What areas of self-care are directly or indirectly reflected in each subject curriculum?
- How are self-care issues reflected in Mathematics and other subject curricula?
- What interdisciplinary connections can support the teaching and consolidation of self-care skills?
- Do Grade I-IV school programs contain educational material that sufficiently promotes the development of self-care skills in this group of children?

The curriculum materials were reviewed comparatively, with attention to explicit self-care content, indirect opportunities for skill development, developmental progression across grades, and gaps in the coverage of practical independence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TECHNOLOGY

The educational material of the Technology subject for Grades I-IV was developed to familiarize students with different areas of practical work. In Grade I, the material is presented mainly through illustrated workbook activities. Topics include the surrounding environment, tools and materials, work with natural and artificial materials, plants, and setting the table for tea and coffee.

Analysis of the Grade I material shows that it contains very little explicit information aimed at forming self-care concepts in children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities. The topics on setting a table for tea and coffee are among the few that provide direct visual material related to everyday self-service. Most other topics contribute to general development but are not directly connected with self-care.

The Grade II Technology curriculum is broader and combines illustrations with short explanatory texts. Its content includes preparation of materials for work, work with various objects and materials, birds and animals, growing and caring for flowers, holiday cards, seasonal compositions, trees, technical details, and rules of hygiene for clothing and shoes. Among these topics, the rules of clothing and footwear hygiene, cleaning, and care are directly connected with self-care.

The Grade III-IV Technology curriculum includes more material directly related to self-care. Relevant content concerns clothes and shoes, button fastening, sanitary and hygienic requirements for the home and furniture, kitchen utensils, safety rules for heating devices and gas, and food-related topics such as food requirements, sanitary conditions for food preparation, simple food preparation, and food storage.

These areas are important for developing everyday practical skills. They can support children in maintaining cleanliness of rooms, clothing, and footwear; following safety requirements; and making more independent choices related to food preparation, storage, and use. Nevertheless, important areas remain outside the scope of Technology, including broader household self-care, orientation in space and time, use of cutlery, and independent behavior during meals.

Table 1. Content of the Technology subject in Grades I-II

No.	Content area
1	How to prepare material for work
2	Work with various objects: appliqué, seed mosaic, foil, colored paper and cardboard
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

No.	Content area
10	Details of technical objects
11	Rules of hygiene of clothing and shoes, their cleaning and care

Table 2. Self-care-related content in Technology, Grades III-IV

Area	Examples of content
Clothes and shoes	Types of button fastening; necklaces and bracelets made of buttons
Sanitary and hygienic requirements	Apartment and furniture hygiene; kitchen utensils; safety rules for heating devices; gas safety rules
Food	Importance of food; general food requirements; hygiene in food preparation; sandwiches; meat foods; boiled potatoes; refrigerator storage of perishable foods

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The analysis of primary-school Physical Education programs indicates that physical-education methods and activities have considerable potential to support self-care skills in addition to their primary motor-development objectives. Relevant work can be organized during lessons, extracurricular clubs, games, sports activities, and spatial-orientation tasks.

Examples include changing clothes before and after lessons, preparing and putting away sports equipment, moving safely around the gym or playground, determining location and direction of movement, maintaining personal and sportswear hygiene, following self-care routines during exercises and games, developing posture and a culture of movement and communication, and performing activities that strengthen orientation in space and time.

These activities can contribute indirectly to self-care and independence. However, the curriculum does not systematically identify them as self-care outcomes. The sections on gymnastics, athletics, and games do not provide specific exercises or explicit theoretical and practical requirements focused on self-care for children with intellectual disabilities. This limits the consistency with which such skills can be taught and assessed.

MATHEMATICS

The Mathematics curriculum for Grades I-IV also offers indirect opportunities to support independence and self-care. Completing mathematical tasks requires students to use objects such as rulers, pens, triangles, and squares, organize materials, work independently, and orient themselves in microspace.

The curriculum also introduces spatial and temporal concepts that are relevant to everyday functioning, including left, right, forward, hour, minute, and day. Such concepts can contribute to orientation in space and time and therefore have practical relevance for self-care.

Nevertheless, the Mathematics curriculum does not contain explicit educational material or special conditions designed to consolidate self-care skills alongside the main mathematical objectives. Its contribution remains indirect rather than systematic.

OVERALL DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that the three subjects differ in the degree to which they can support self-care. Technology provides the strongest direct connection, particularly in Grades II-IV, but its coverage remains incomplete. Physical Education and Mathematics provide useful contexts for practicing independence, hygiene, organization, and orientation, yet these possibilities are not formulated as explicit self-care learning outcomes.

The findings therefore point to a curricular gap. Existing educational material can support selected components of self-care, but it does not form a coherent developmental sequence across Grades I-IV. The lack of explicit interdisciplinary connections further reduces opportunities to reinforce skills across contexts.

In practical terms, a separate Self-Care section within Technology would allow schools to organize developmentally appropriate content around hygiene, clothing, food, household activities, table skills, spatial and temporal orientation, and independent participation. These outcomes could then be reinforced through Physical Education, Mathematics, and other subjects.

CONCLUSIONS

The educational material of Mathematics in Grades I-IV is primarily directed toward elementary mathematical knowledge and concepts; its contribution to self-care is indirect. Physical Education similarly creates useful practical situations but does not explicitly define self-care knowledge and skills as expected outcomes.

Technology contains the most directly relevant self-care content, especially in Grades II-IV, yet a substantial number of important everyday skills remain outside its scope. Across the analyzed subjects, the available material is insufficient to solve the practical task of systematically developing self-care and independence in children with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities.

No clear interdisciplinary framework was identified for developing cultural-hygienic, household, spatial-orientation, temporal-orientation, and other self-care skills. Further analysis of subjects such as Drawing, The World Around Me and Myself, and Native Language may identify additional opportunities for reinforcing these skills.

The study is limited to curriculum-content analysis and does not include direct observation of classroom implementation, teacher interviews, or assessment of student outcomes. Future research should therefore examine how self-care-related curriculum content is actually taught and how children apply the acquired skills in school and everyday contexts.

Based on the analysis, it is important to develop an exemplary Self-Care program or a dedicated Self-Care section within the primary-school Technology curriculum, together with pedagogical conditions and interdisciplinary mechanisms for its systematic implementation.

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