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Leveling classes as a form of individualization of studies of pupils at primary school in Ukraine (the second half of the seventies — the eighties of the 20th century)

Abstract: The article deals with the attempt to analyse the work of the leveling classes as a form of the individual studies of the slow pupils from the primary classes in Ukraine in the second half of the seventies — the eighties of the 20th century taking into consideration actual questions of modern primary education. The author pays attention to the results of the long-term experimental research; they showed the appropriateness of the functioning of this educational form.

Keywords: leveling classes, differentiation, individualization of studies, primary education, junior pupils, experiment, educational failure, Ukraine.

Dynamic modern social processes in Ukraine influence reformation of the educational sphere, general high education in particular. Among the main trends of this process are differentiation of studies; providing of the individual educational way for pupils' development taking into account their personal needs, interests and abilities (these points are stressed in the National Strategy of the Educational Development in Ukraine for 2012–2021 years) [6]. At the same time the attention must be paid to those pupils who have problems with their studies because of different reasons. Especially it is very important to help such pupils when they are getting primary education, because this period is suitable for laying the foundation of the general educational and sociocultural competences which are necessary for further successful studies; also the desire and skills to study are formed.

Appropriately we can refer to the domestic historical pedagogical experience, to the period of the second half of the seventies — the eighties of the 20th century in particular, when active search, experiments and introduction of new forms of differentiation and individualization of studies of pupils at primary school (especially those who have problems with their studies) took place in Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR further). Leveling classes were among such forms.

A historiographic search has showed that different aspects of activity of leveling classes are described in Ukrainian and Russian scientists' works (M. V. Bohdanovych, Yu. Z. Hilbukh, H. F. Kumarina, N. F. Skrypchenko etc.). The problem of differentiation and individualization of studies in USSR at the mentioned chronological period is the subject of investigation of the Ukrainian historians of pedagogics (L. D. Berezivska, L. S. Bondar, T. V. Vozhe-

hova, N. M. Hupan, N. P. Dichek, O. V. Sukhomlynskyi etc.). The aim of this article is to reveal the peculiarities of the activity of the leveling classes as a form of the individual studies of the junior pupils who had problems with their studies in the second half of the seventies — the eighties of the 20th century in USSR.

We should mention that the first experimental classes of individual studies or leveling classes on the territory of the former Soviet Union were opened in Estonia SSR (1969). Their formation was caused by the fact that it was very difficult to organize individual work with pupils who had problems with their studies and development in the conditions of the ordinary classes. The pupils of the V–VII classes who lagged behind took part in the research. The results of the three-years experiment showed that only 50% of the pupils were able to cope with the knowledge gap and were not behind the program requirements. Consequently the Estonian scientists came to the conclusion that correction work with the slow pupils must be started at the primary school [2].

In July 1975 Ministry of Education board in USSR made a decision on the organization of the experimental inspection concerning the appropriateness to form the classes of knowledge leveling for the pupils of the II–III classes at the eight schools of Donetsk region [9, 25]. The group of scientists (experts in didactics, special methods, development, psychology, physiology, logopedics) from the research institutes of pedagogics and psychology in USSR (M. V. Bohdanovych, Yu. Z. Hilbukh, I. S. Diomina, A. P. Koval, V. V. Kumarin, H. F. Kumarina (scientific supervisor), N. F. Skrypchenko etc.) controlled the experiment. It gave the opportunity to study the effectiveness of the new form of the individual studies fully and in detail [5, 44].

We would like to analyse the peculiarities of the organization of the teaching and educational process of the leveling classes formed during the experiment. The leveling classes were formed for those pupils who lagged behind their studies. They had undergone medical and pedagogical examination beforehand and then were taken to the leveling classes by parents' approbation. Psychophysically deviated pupils were sent to the special educational institutions.

In order to put the individual studies into practice the number of the pupils was shortened half, there were only 18–20 pupils for a class. Only those professional and experienced teachers who had undergone the appropriate training worked with these slow pupils. Each leveling class had the extended-day group and it was possible for the teacher to give individual help to the pupils in time. The studies were put into practice according to the school plan and programs for the primary classes of the secondary schools. That is why the pupils of the leveling classes were taught simultaneously with the pupils of the ordinary classes. If a pupil had coped with his knowledge gap he was taken to the ordinary class and another pupil could be moved up into his place. Consequently the contingent of the class was not permanent [3, 32].

Research and analysis of the individual characteristics of the pupils taken to the leveling classes showed many typological problems: negative attitude to the studies and school in general; lack of self-confidence; undue fatiguability; low efficiency; undevelopment of educational interests; poor results [5, 45]. Therefore searching for the ways to cope with these problems became one of the main tendency of the experimental work for the teachers and scientists.

During the experiment it was established that the main factor concerning the effectiveness of the work of the leveling classes is rather uniform contingent of the class. It gave the opportunity to teach (using frontal work in particular) taking into account the tempo of learning typical for the particular group of pupils. Considering undue fatiguability of the pupils the lessons were planned in such a way that the period of the pupils' active attention was used in the most effective way. Thus the process of getting of new knowledge was carried out at the beginning of the lesson; the process of checking pupils' knowledge was not marked out as a separate grade level. Additional lessons being given during the individual work to the slow pupils from the ordinary classes were not used for the leveling classes. This form of the work caused the increase in the teaching load and as a result the pupils suffered from mental fatigue and

overwork, they felt bad and their attitude towards the studies was a negative one etc. We consider it positive that the slow process of getting of new knowledge was not compensated in an extensive way (by the increase of educational time) but in an intensive way (by the maximum using of educational time). H. F. Kumarina, the scientific supervisor of the experiment, mentioned that rather uniform contingent of the pupils created favourable conditions for the realization of the developing function of education. Moreover under conditions when the children had the same level of educational abilities they were not sensible of their inferiority and their development was not restrained [5, 45–46].

We should point out that one of the ways as for the solving the mentioned problems was changing the manner in checking the knowledge, abilities and skills of the slow pupils. Thus analyzing value judgement the teachers did not fix pupil's mistakes but they paid attention to the positive sides of his (her) activities. The teachers tried to accentuate every (even if it was not great) success of the pupil [5, 47]. As a result the mark was transformed from the "punishing instrument" into the instrument of motivation and stimulation of the educational activity.

Among positive moments we should mention the following: calm and friendly atmosphere; teacher is interested in the results of the pupils' studies; the teacher is trying to find out every pupils' latent abilities, to identify the positive personal qualities and to rely on them during the teaching and educational process; creating the feeling of success in studies. As we can see favourable conditions for the development of the positive motivation in studies and forming cognitive interests etc. were created within the leveling classes. We consider such changes as a move towards the humanization and child centrality of the teaching and educational process.

We should notice that during the initial experiment period the leveling classes were formed by means of the pupils of the II–III classes who were lagging behind. But the experience of the first year of the investigation showed that during the educational process the teachers had to give the new knowledge according to the program of the appropriate class and at the same time to cope with the pupils' educational gaps concerning the previous period; to re-teach and re-educate the pupils; to develop the wish to study and to go to school etc. That is why the teachers made the following conclusion: the priority task of the activities of the leveling classes must not be coping with the educational failures but prevention of this negative phenomenon. The members of the theoretical and practical conference taken place in June 1976 in

Donetsk (in a year after the beginning of the experiment) admitted it reasonable to open leveling classes starting from the first year of studies, not from the second one [4, 70–71]. It was surmised that forming separate classes of pupils with low abilities to study from the very beginning would help to avoid educational failures, “moral distress,.. emotional experiences connected with the realizing their own low educational abilities in comparison with the children of the same age cause it is the initial stage towards the dissatisfaction of oneself, of the school and studies” [5, 50]. This approach makes the teachers’ work easier: “there is no need to waste time and make efforts coping with the educational gaps of the pupils for the first class, to brake wrong stereotypes concerning the skills in the educational work,.. to overcome the negative attitude towards teaching and school in general, to re-educate pupils which is always more difficult...” [5, 50].

During four years of the experiment the scientists were gathering facts (tests data, psychological tests results, observation diaries, materials of parents’ questioning, journals with fixed conversations with teachers and pupils, direct observation over pupils) which gave the opportunity to make the conclusion about the effectiveness of the new form of studies. Thus 82% of the junior pupils from the leveling classes improved their marks. The research showed that the majority of the slow pupils could study the program of the primary school in the fixed three-years term of studies. The experiment showed that the organization of the leveling classes influenced positively not only pupils of these classes but facilitated successful studies of the pupils of the ordinary classes as well. The teachers of the ordinary classes noted that it was easy for them to work in the classes without slow pupils: they had the opportunity to teach effectively, to offer the pupils creative tasks, to solve difficult problems with the pupils, to develop pupils’ interests and abilities [4, 70].

Therefore the results of the first stage of the experiment (1975–1979) were positively judged by the Ministry of Education board in USSR (April 13, 1979). The decision to continue the research was passed and as a result the number of the leveling classes in Donetsk region was enlarged and new leveling classes were opened in all regional centers in USSR [10, 3]. Leveling classes’ work was regulated by the Statute of experimental educational leveling classes at the secondary schools in Ukrainian SSR (August 14, 1979). The main point of the document was the questions about forming of the leveling classes and organization of the teaching and educational process in them. The positive moment is the fact that the

main tasks of the leveling classes were not only coping with the educational failure of the young pupils but prevention of this negative phenomenon. So these classes were formed not only with the pupils of the II–III classes but the pupils of the first classes who lagged behind the children of the same age because of different reasons (temporary mental retardation, pedagogical neglect, physical weakness etc.). We also would like to accent that one of the main characteristics of teaching in the leveling classes was individualization of studies [7, 27].

We should mention that during the second stage of the experiment (1979–1982) the attention was paid to the finding out organizing and psychological and pedagogical conditions for the successful studies and development of the pupils of the I–III classes who lagged behind the children of the same age and studied at the leveling classes. As a result of the four-years research the following favourable conditions were ascertained: rather uniform contingent of the class, the opportunity to control school-hours, experienced and skilled teachers, diminution of the number of the pupils in the classes. It was accented that high results could be obtained when these conditions are simultaneously followed but not one after another or separately [1, 20–22]. At the same time some problems were not solved during the experiment: the methods concerning pupils’ selection to the leveling classes, effective teachers’ training, methodological support, the expedience of the transferring the pupils from the leveling classes to the ordinary classes etc. Moreover the increasing of the number of the leveling classes (there were 118 primary leveling classes where 2050 pupils were studding in 1982–1983 school year [11, 17]) arose the question of providing such schools with highly experienced teachers and speech therapists; the question concerning the forming of appropriate material and technical support for the teaching and educational process etc. [1, 25].

But the general results of the long-term research finally confirmed that the experiment in the leveling classes (started in the schools of Donetsk region and spread on the other regions of USSR) demonstrated its value in practice. Its results proved that if necessary it is appropriate to organize leveling classes at the secondary schools as an effective form of the individualization of studies and as a means of overcoming and prevention of the educational failure and lagging behind the studies and development of the pupils of the I–III classes [1, 26].

Since 1983 the results of the experiment were put into mass practice. Leveling classes were opened at many schools in USSR. Their functioning was deter-

mined by the Statute about leveling classes at the secondary schools in Ukrainian SSR (September 9, 1983); it gave detail information concerning the questions of the forming of such classes, organizing of the teaching and educational process and control after leveling classes [8].

Therefore studying and analysis of the peculiarities of the leveling classes in USSR in the second half of the seventies — the eighties of the 20th century (taking into consideration the actual problems of modern primary education) make it possible to draw the conclusion that this form is an effective one concerning prevention and overcoming of the educational and development failures of the junior pupils. The favourable conditions for education and development (diminution of the number of the pupils in the classes; highly experienced teachers; rather uniform contingent of the class; educational intensifica-

tion; paying attention to the educational progress; the existence of the extended-day group; positive emotional atmosphere etc.) help to individualize the work with the pupils, to carry out their educational and social rehabilitation.

It is very difficult to answer the question whether leveling classes are necessary nowadays. But we hold the opinion that differentiation of the educational conditions is more effective than the differentiation of the educational content at the primary classes where the children with different levels of training, skills and cognitive process development are taught. Based on the ethical principles we believe that if there are such classes at modern schools they must be renamed into the classes of the individual studies or classes of the heightened pedagogical attention etc.

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