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**PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF ADOLESCENTS WITH  
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: APPROACHES TO DIAGNOSIS**



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**Abstract**

The research was initiated within the framework of the RGNF grants: 07-06-00361a "Comprehensive Social Adaptation Programs for Children with Developmental Problems concerning the Quality of Life Criterion" (2007-2009) and 10-06-01283a "Social and Labor Rehabilitation of Children and Adolescents with Disabilities as a Quality of Life Improving Factor" (2010-2012). The given article is devoted to the issues of self-determination of adolescents with mental retardation in various spheres of life, which are determined by objective characteristics of their quality of life. The raised problems also made it possible to determine psychological and pedagogical maturity to choose a particular profession. The authors used three sets of tests (the first and third sets of tests were created by the authors; the second set was represented by diagnostic kits adapted for children and adolescents with mental retardation by E.A. Klimov). The empirical evidence was gathered using the results of the tests made by 220 adolescents. Having studied the state of professional identity, the authors drew the conclusion about the need for step-by-step support of adolescents with mental retardation and justified a set of measures to include them in the social environment, create a certain infrastructure at schools, and organize the interaction with parents (legal representatives), secondary vocational education organizations and employers in the region. Professional orientation formation involved the development of interests that encouraged the individual to be active and stimulated their efficiency. The results of the study have been used in the activities of General Education Organizations in the Irkutsk region.

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## 1. Introduction

Preferences for a certain profession and an emotional attitude always base on professional ideas and serve as a starting point for personal development goals and set objectives for professional identity.

Statistics show an annual increase in the number of students with disabilities in educational institutions of the Irkutsk region, and the prevailing nosological group was made up by more than 60% of children with mental retardation (intellectual disabilities), who can continue their education in regional educational organizations of secondary vocational education (technical schools, colleges) after finishing school.

Most of the professional programs designed for this group of students are aimed at training qualified workers (plasterer-painter, tiler, carpenter, furniture assembler, seamstress, plant grower, etc.). It should be noted that since 2018, not only students with mild mental retardation but also students with moderate mental retardation take vocational training courses in the region. All this underlines the necessity for the students' professional identity during their studies at school.

Pryazhnikov and his colleagues believes that the choice of the profession does not happen at random, it is necessary to form the initial individual's professional attitudes. These attitudes are transformed and developed in the process of professional training and improvement leading to the formation of both professional soft competencies and the professional personal orientation as a whole (Pryazhnikov, 2003; Pryazhnikov et al., 2018).

The ideas of professional identity lie in the conscious finding of a suitable type of professional activity, the implementation of which is necessary not only to ensure material well-being (at least on a minimum level), but it also brings moral satisfaction and gives meaning to all life activities in a specific cultural-historical (socio-economic) situation (Molchanov et al., 2019; Pashinova, 2018; Sheppard & Unsworth, 2010; Wehmeyer, 2020).

The analysis of scientific researches (L.S. Vygotsky, G.E. Sukhareva, S.Ya. Rubinstein, A.R. Luria, M.S. Pevsner, S.L. Mirsky, G.N. Mersyanova, G.M. Dulnev, V.T. Khokhrina, etc.), together with long-term teaching experience at regional schools, allow us to assert that mentally retarded adolescents' professional identity has a specificity that is closely related to the level of their social representations. The main problem is not the lack of conditions for obtaining professional education, but the lack of motivation for this group of students to obtain a profession and further work independently.

The leading role in professional identity belongs to the orientation of the individual, which is understood as the characteristics of the main person's interests, needs, inclinations, and aspirations. It would be appropriate to quote S. Ya. Rubinstein:

What does a student who finishes an auxiliary school strive for: does he want to work, read, play sports, or do his main aspirations consist in the desire to have fun, to consume what his parents and the state can give him? (Maller, 2019, p. 78; Serov, 2006, p. 32; Starobina, 2016, p. 158)

The term "auxiliary school" has not been used in the national education system for a long time, and children with mental retardation study in special schools and municipal educational institutions in the

Irkutsk region at the place of residence, but the problem of professional identity still demands due attention from researchers and educators-practitioners because of the manifestations of social dependency, consumer attitude towards others, lack of values related to the results of their own and other people's labor.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The effectiveness of mentally retarded children's and adolescents' professional identity is determined by the following tasks:

- medical examination of learners' state of health to determine the reasons that facilitate or hinder the process of professional learning;
- identification of students' social perceptions and professional preferences;
- determining the needs of the regional labor market in specialists of a particular profile of activity, based on students' health status.

Professional orientation is based on the study of the peculiarities of the psychophysical development of each student together with the regional factors. Mentally retarded people lead a rather sedentary lifestyle, so it is important to form a student's motivation to acquire a profession that is in demand in the regional and (or) municipal labor markets. And concerning the Irkutsk region, professions related to wood processing are in demand (carpenters, joiners, furniture assemblers, wood Fellers, sawyers); professions related to cooking (kitchen workers, cooks, bakers, confectioners, semi-cooked manufacturers); professions related to the construction of buildings and their servicing (tilers, plasterers, painters, bricklayers, building maintenance workers); professions related to agricultural work (stockmen, greenhouse workers, flower growers, plant growers).

## **3. Research Questions**

It should be noted that the professions listed above are available for people with mild mental retardation, taking into account typical pathopsychological and pathophysical disorders.

The system of work on mentally retarded children's and adolescents' professional identity should be aimed at forming ideas about the professions suitable for this group of people. It is necessary to exclude several professions related to intellectual and communicative abilities that require increased physical abilities and responsibility for the lives and health of others (Starobina, 2016).

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to show the possibilities of mentally retarded adolescents' identity in various spheres of life, which are determined by objective characteristics of their quality of life: health and socialization, and also make it possible to specify psychological and pedagogical maturity and readiness to choose a particular profession.

## 5. Research Methods

It is advisable to start such work with the diagnosis of the teenager's possibilities and readiness to master any professional activity. Three sets of tests can be used as a diagnostic tool (Afanasyeva, 2016). These tests can be supplemented concerning the specifics of the children under examination and professional activity that the career guidance work is aimed at. The first and third sets of tests were created by the authors, the second set of tests was represented by diagnostic kits adapted for children and adolescents with mental retardation by E. A. Klimov (as cited in Pryazhnikov, 2003). The purpose of the test questions was to identify opportunities for mentally retarded adolescents' self-realization in various spheres of life, which were determined by the objective characteristics of their quality of life: health and socialization, and also made it possible to determine psychological and pedagogical maturity and readiness to choose a particular profession. Doing these tests was also aimed at promoting the teenager's awareness of the opportunities to engage in a socially useful activity.

Each question of the test suggested choosing the most suitable answer that corresponded to the respondent's natural expression of the quality under evaluation, which affected his possibility of acquiring a professional activity. Each expression of personality characteristics was evaluated in points arranged in descending order, the lower the score was, the smaller the restriction imposed by the expression of this quality on the subject's ability to acquire professional activities was.

## 6. Findings

In total, 220 adolescents (aged from 12-14) living in Irkutsk and the region were examined. The tests showed that 110 teenagers were developing normally and the rest of them were mentally retarded. The participation of healthy adolescents was necessary to identify the peculiarities of mentally retarded children's professional identity in the context of normative development.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to fully present the results of the study within the framework of the article, so we will focus only on certain aspects.

The first stage of the survey was divided into three sections: "Health", "Socialization" and "Psychological and pedagogical prerequisites for readiness for performing a professional activity". The test was supposed to be done independently. Teenagers who found it difficult to answer the questions on their own were helped by their parents or teachers.

The section "Health" detected no adolescents with mental retardation in the first group (10-20 points); only 15% of those who scored 20-40 points had a sufficient level of health to acquire certain types of professional activities. A significant number of teenagers (70%) scored 40-60 points, the level of their health allowed educators to conduct career guidance work aimed only at meeting personal needs, but not aimed at actually acquiring a profession. The level of health of adolescents who scored 60-90 points (15%) allowed the teachers to arrange separate therapeutic activities for them such as art therapy, garden therapy, etc.

The teenagers' results of the tests in the section "Socialization" showed that 35% of the respondents scored 20-40 points, but even though they had a sufficient level of socialization, they had a narrow understanding of a suitable profession. They did not correlate their personal qualities and their capabilities

in performing a particular professional activity. The level of socialization of 40% of adolescents with mental retardation, who scored 40-60 points, allowed them to focus on the development of activities to meet only personal needs, but not aimed at the actual acquiring a profession. 25% of respondents, scoring 60-90 points, could not indirectly evaluate the level of their social preferences. A generalization of the adolescents' haphazard answers indicated the possibility of their participation in self-care and garden therapy.

The survey in the section "Psychological and pedagogical prerequisites for readiness for professional activity" revealed that adolescents with mental retardation were not included in the first group (10-20 points), and, first of all, this was due to the presence of deviations in cognitive activity.

Only 10% of the respondents of the group scored 20-40 points, most of them showed well-established mechanical psychological and pedagogical prerequisites for professional activity. The majority of adolescents with mental retardation (70%) scored 40-60 points, showing a level of readiness that allowed them to participate in activities that contributed to meeting personal needs, but was not aimed at actually acquiring a profession. 20% of the respondents who had the level of formation of basic professional ideas about adult labor activity scored 60-90 points.

The analysis of the prerequisites for professional activity among adolescents with mental retardation indicated the need for a clearer focus of the educational process on professional identity. Knowledge, skills, and abilities formed within the framework of the development of adapted basic general education programs should have a clear professional orientation, taking into account the individual characteristics of the psychophysical development of each student.

The second set of tests involved determining the professional preferences of adolescents in the study groups. The questionnaire was compiled based on the differential diagnostic questionnaire of E. A. Klimov (Pryazhnikov, 2003), which included 20 pairs of statements that made it possible to determine adolescents' professional preferences. Our adaptation of the questionnaire was based on the characteristics of adolescents with mental retardation. The professions were as follows: nurses, assistant teachers, housekeepers, locksmiths, and builders. The preference of adolescents was given to the areas of "man – man" (37%) and "man – technology" (31%). The professional sphere "man-nature" was less requested, only 29% of the respondents expressed such interest.

Opportunities for mentally retarded adolescents' professional identity were largely limited, and the prerequisites for acquiring the profession were poorly formed. Besides, the understanding of labor skills and the preference for a particular profession was characterized by the limited ideas about professions they had and the respondents found it difficult to evaluate their capabilities, and most often they showed an uncritical attitude. The results of this testing indicated that it was necessary to organize additional work on the professional identity of people with mental retardation.

The third set of tests "Questionnaire of choice of professions by fields of activity" was conducted only for adolescents with mental retardation to determine a more specific inclination in the field of professional activity and professions. The respondents expressed a great interest in professions connected with the service industry, medical and pedagogical spheres: housekeepers, shoemakers, teacher assistants, nurses, etc.). A much smaller number of teenagers would like to engage in the production of industrial goods or construction, whereas folk crafts were not very popular among the respondents at all.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of the study show that mentally retarded adolescents' professional identity should be implemented step by step with their inclusion in the social environment, creating a certain infrastructure at schools, and organizing interaction with parents (legal representatives), secondary vocational education organizations, and employers in the region. The formation of the professional orientation involves the development of an individual's interests to encourage them to be active and efficient. Since 2012, the results of the study have been used in the activities of general education organizations in the Irkutsk region. Schools strengthened the subject area of "Technology" according to the profiles implemented in the education process earlier ("Sewing", "Carpentry", etc.), and 92% of schools updated the syllabus of this subject area by introducing new labor profiles that were quite popular in the regional labor market, including "Cardboard-binding", "Shoemaking", "Cooking", "City farming", "Plastering and Painting", etc. It is noteworthy that the involvement of this group of students in various exhibitions, competitions, subject Olympiads, reviews, festivals, and other events at the regional level contributes to professional identity. This approach should be used to build a system of activities to form mentally retarded children's and adolescents' professional identity which includes a set of measures, content, methods and techniques that will be described in future publications.

Thus, we can conclude that the process of career guidance is aimed at students' professional identity formation. If we consider the correlation between these processes, we can say that career guidance is an external process (when a student is influenced by a set of measures), and professional identity is an internal process (the formation of a conscious choice of profession). These two processes directly depend on the social environment and the whole organization of work in this field.

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