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APPLICATION OF THE "LIFE SKILLS" STRATEGY IN THE BIOLOGY AND CHEMISTRY EDUCATION IN PENITENTIARY CONDITIONS

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An innovation has appeared in the educational world recently – *Life Skills*. Its status is not defined – it is encountered as an approach and programmes, but no doubt this is a strategy aimed at achieving self-oriented education within a lengthy period of time. Influential international organizations like UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), Lions Clubs International, Quest International [4], Utah State Board of Education [12], Washington State University [11], Programs for International Student Assessment /PISA/ [10], etc. reorganize their views in this direction, reflecting the community views on overcoming the informational approach in education [8]. The core of Life Skills envisages such characteristics as lifelong learning, decision making, Effective Communication and Collaboration, Healthy Lifestyle Choices, Accepting Differences etc., necessary for successful adaptation to the ever changing world.

The students in the various schools (professional, evening, etc.) at the penitentiaries are a specific group of society. They are faced with the problem of their re-socialization after doing their time. Their education requires providing them with such knowledge and skills as they would need for social integration in the period after their release. A large part of the prisoner students are deficient as regards literacy, general knowledge, systematic education, experience. There are incompatibilities between their personal qualities, life skills and behaviour patterns, which are contrary to community norms, and society requirements.

Our preliminary studies of the problem found out that the effectiveness of school education in penitentiary[1] conditions is to a large extent impeded by the fact that school as an institution with a definite organisation, programmes, plans, curriculum and forms of work is primarily aimed at educating certain age groups in civil society.

[1] **Penitentiary** a place for imprisonment, reformatory discipline, or punishment, esp. a prison maintained in the U.S. by a state or the federal government for serious offenders. Term accepted worldwide.

Education in the penitentiary schools in Bulgaria at present is done along education programmes approved by the Ministry of Education for normal schools [1,2], corresponding to EU recommendations [8]. Research towards the education of penitentiary school students as well as methods for teaching the individual school subjects, however, are highly insufficient. [5, 6]. There are no data for research done in Bulgaria about the implementation of the Life Skills strategy in penitentiary conditions education in the subjects Biology and health education and Chemistry and environment preservation[2].

The research team's motive for choosing the theme is that there are possibilities for applying the Life Skills strategy in biology and chemistry education in penitentiary schools. We consider that the knowledge (information), values, attitudes and skills acquired by the students-inmates in the education process will help their resocialization[3] in society.

In view of the topicality of the matter, our modest experience and our interest in this area, as well as our belief in the above consideration, we aim our attention at *researching the possibilities for the application of the Life Skills strategy in biology and chemistry education with the object of helping the students with their resocialization after release from prison.*

The subject of the research is the process of biology and chemistry education within the mandatory curriculum of the student in the "A. Zhechkova" Evening Professional School at Sliven penitentiary for the acquisition of life skills helping their resocialization into society.

In connection with that we set ourselves the following ***goals:***

1. Research into the problem about education of students in penitentiary schools from the point of view of normative acts and penitentiary pedagogics.

2. Selection of specific skills from the basic group of Life Skills, according to the specifics of the target group and the chemistry and biology curriculum.

Legal background. Considering the first goal we studied the following legal documents: The Sentence enactment act [1] and Enforcement Regulation for the Sentence enactment act [2]; Directive № R(87)3 for European prison rules and Directive № R(81)17 for the adult education policy [8], etc. The conclusion is that while teaching students in penitentiary schools there should be some provision for realisation of goals aiding their future life in society [5, 6]. This supposes the use of such didactic technologies that would help the prisoner students to adopt society's values and build up models for law abiding behaviour.

The social aspects of the researched problem are directly linked with the idea of profiting from the stay in prison. The idea is realised through various forms of school and out-of-school education. Modern penitentiary pedagogic theory [5, 6] considers *knowledge* and professional skills as *real instruments for social integration and*

[2] For brevity hereinafter referred to as 'biology and chemistry'

[3] **Resocialization –** integration of the individual in society life after serving the prison term.

resocialization. They are also meaningful for the personal autonomy[4] of the prisoners, for their motivation for education during their penitentiary term. This provides grounds for aiming our research at application of the Life Skills strategy.

In this connection we carried out a tentative research poll about the prisoners' motivation as regards the length of education, their interest in certain subjects, and the importance they attach to them regarding their preparation for life outside prison. The analysis of the results showed out tendencies in tune with the ones described in specialized literature in Bulgaria [6] and abroad [7, 9]. For a considerable part of the 20 student prisoners polled, the basic reason for attending school is lessening their term length (75%). Only 25 % study to get a higher education. Half of the students take no time for preparation, the rest – up to 15 minutes. Almost 40% of the polled answer that the matter studied in school is not useful for their lives. These data show that most students are not motivated for participation in the education process and do not avail themselves of the opportunity to get a better education. We consider the reason is that the subject matter and the education process do not reflect the specific needs, abilities and interests of this student group.

The strategy Life Skills offers a possibility of overcoming these disadvantages. Applied to education it presupposes:

- An interactive process of teaching and learning;
- Focusing on people's problems
- Seeking a balance between the components knowledge (information), values, attitudes and skills.

We deem that the Life Skills strategy can be successfully applied to biology and chemistry education in penitentiary schools. We consider that details can be highlighted in the subject matter, which would arouse interest and correspond to the students' needs. This will assist knowledge acquisition and the formation of Life Skills, helping the prisoners' reintegration into society after release.

A commission of 7 experts was created for the purpose. It includes specialists in social pedagogics, methodology of biology and chemistry education and teachers in penitentiary schools. An expert assessment was done on the wide range of life skills featuring in UNICEF and WHO documents [4], Utah State Board of Education [12], Washington State University [11], etc. the following life skills were found most suitable, grouped in five groups:

1. Interpersonal skills – active listening, providing and receiving feedback, non-verbal communication, collaboration and teamwork;
2. Character-development skills – self-assessment skills;
3. Values-assessment skills – skills for understanding various social norms, beliefs, culture, sex, differences and tolerance; classification of values, attitudes and behaviour;

[4] **Autonomy** as a personal feature or behaviour characteristics is characterized by the abilities for understanding the nature of the problems and their cause-effect relations, formulating goals, autonomous decision making, accepting responsibility for one's actions, i.e. skills for autonomous coping with problems in life after prison.

4. Decision-making skills – skills for: critical and creative thinking; problem-solving; risk-assessment; finding alternatives; gathering information; information assessment; consequence assessment; goal setting;

5. Stress management skills – skills for: self control, time allocation, coping with difficult situations.

The following conclusions can be drawn and recommendations made as a result of the research:

CONCLUSIONS

1. Penitentiary school education is carried out along curricula and oriented towards goals suitable for students in civil schools.

2. *The Life Skills strategy* is significant for aiding the process of preparation of penitentiary students for their future resocialization.

3. Biology and chemistry subject matter allows the application of the Life Skills strategy in penitentiary school education.

4. The application of the Life Skills strategy in biology and chemistry education supposes the use of adapted didactic technology suitable for the specific target group – prison inmates.

Recommendations:

1. *The Life Skills strategy* should be reflected in the goals component of the biology and chemistry curricula.

2. The adaptation of the subject matter on the basis of the State educational requirements and the *Life Skills strategy* should be done considering the following characteristics of penitentiary students – wide age range, various education gaps, various ethnicity, differences in value systems, depriving educational environment etc.

In view of Bulgaria's forthcoming EU membership and in adherence to the provisions of the Human Rights Convention, the academic community is obliged to find suitable didactic means for aiding the successful resocialization of penitentiary students into society. This is a problem of great social significance. It stems from the present objective social conditions and from the international community's requirements towards our country. This requires the consolidated efforts of scientists from various fields for finding a more effective solution.

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KEY WORDS. The Life Skills strategy; biology and chemistry education; penitentiary school education.

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