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**SPECIFIC FEATURES OF ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN  
WITH SENSORY DISORDERS AND MULTIPLE DISABILITIES**

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**Abstract:** The article is focused on the communication with children with special educational needs. The main topic is alternative communication with children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities. It explores the phenomenon of communication, citing current definitions developed by a number of authors, which place the emphasis on different aspects of this complex and multilayered process, with a special focus on alternative communication with the groups of special needs children mentioned in the title.

The issue is investigated from a special pedagogical and from a social perspective.

The author is especially interested in the exploration of the multiple strata of communication (the universal, functional and specific levels). Apart from the different forms, contents, methods and means of communication (the last of which is most commonly discussed in Bulgaria), the article is focused primarily on the important methodological issues related to this topic.

One of these basic questions of methodology is the attempt not to place at the center of this process its bi-directional nature, its algorithm or code (sign language, Braille writing system, etc.), but instead to focus on the personalities of those involved in the interaction, their initiative, relationship and goals manifested in different communication situations (mutual influence, emancipation and therapy). Particular emphasis is given to therapy, i.e. the way of influencing the communication behavior of children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities. It is not viewed as a unilateral process (stimulus-response), but as an interactive one, based on mutual influence. The relationship between the communicators is of utmost significance.

Communication is characterized by a number of specific features. Those can mostly be found in the specificity of the communication situations (for example the interactive situations in the following pairs of communicators: deaf – hard of hearing; deaf – deaf; deaf-blind – deaf, etc.), in the presence of an intermediary (for example a sign language interpreter) and above all in the personalities of the communicators. They change the quality of communication. It is for this reason, and not just because of the different means of communication, that this interaction is defined as “alternative”, or more precisely, it is an alternative to the communication of children without disabilities.

Based on the analyzed information, the author formulates a number of inferences and recommendations. The main conclusion is the following:

When discussing alternative communication with children with special educational needs, the focus should shift from the specific means of communication towards the equally socially important quality of the complex process of communication, which is centered on the personality of the handicapped child.

**Keywords:** children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities, specific features of alternative communication, new model to discuss communication

Human communication has remained a topic of interest for scientists from different fields and countries. One of the primary reasons underlying this unceasing interest is the significance of communication for the human condition, as well as its exceeding complexity, multifaceted nature and the many different levels at which this process takes place. It is a well known fact that etymologically the term “communication” originates from the Latin word *communicato*, which can be translated as “transfer”. The modern meaning of this word has undergone substantial changes and has been enriched. The idea of communication has evolved and has acquired new significance. This is evidenced by the first definitions of this complicated process, which generally reflect the idea of transmitting a message or information. Despite the nuanced definitions from the earlier period of the study of this phenomenon, the process is still regarded as linear and believed to follow a simple pattern: communicator (who conveys a message) – medium – receiver (who receives the message). This linear model severely limits feedback, which in turn cannot influence the encoding of the subsequent messages of the communicator.

Without discussing in greater detail the evolution of the term “communication”, we can point out that retrospectively it was viewed above all as an information process.

Later on researchers began to see communication as an act of interaction between the interlocutors, characterized by the establishment of interconnection and mutual influence. This changed significantly the content of the term with regard to human communication. It began to be viewed within new conceptual frameworks and different patterns of communication were described, which superseded the familiar linear model.

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The interactive model is one of those newly developed ideas. It includes feedback, which in turn allows for the modification of the communication process by the participants, i.e. it makes it possible to change its form, content and overall conduct.

The transactional model includes turn taking and role reversal between the communicator (sender) and the recipient, which leads to dynamic changes in the process of communication.

The linguistic model places the emphasis on the creation, understanding and interpretation of signs and their significance by the participants in the process of communication.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of all communication models developed over the years. What stands out is that their creators do not claim to pursue a universal model, but to explore the process of communication in all its different facets. Researchers unanimously agree with the notion that the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one mark a qualitatively new stage in our understanding of this phenomenon. Representatives of different fields of science have begun to regard and investigate communication as a process characterized by multiple aspects and layers. This is further evidenced by the fact that presently communication is understood in a completely new perspective and at a different level – it is seen as a social phenomenon, a social process. For example, Burkhart. P. (2000, p.p. 309-312) distinguishes three levels included in the definition of communication:

- Universal level (transfer, transmission of ideas);
- Functional level (the goals of communication emerge);
- Specific, subject-oriented level (interpersonal communication, communication in a specific social environment, between different institutions).

It is important to emphasize that modern thinking places communication at the heart of human nature and its various manifestations. This belief is also expressed by S. Mateeva (2002). In recent years, the three primary goals of communication have been formulated:

- Influence. The communicator attempts to influence the thoughts and behavior of the receiver through the use of arguments or other means.
- Emancipation. This goal relates to the formation and development of the ability to communicate, i.e. to play both the role of communicator (encoding and transmitting messages) and recipient (decoding other people's messages). By actively participating in the communication process, the individual personalities emancipate themselves; they become independent.
- Therapy. This goal of communication is related to treatment and rehabilitation. It plays an essential role in the rehabilitation of children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities.

To summarize, a more in-depth understanding of the nature of communication reveals its fundamental basis (human nature), its goals, the functions of the communication process and the communicator (Grinder, J., 1996), the types of communication [according to Karshakova, R. (2003, p.p. 10-14), those are information-based, educational, recreational and persuasion-oriented], the discourse, the communication strategies (DeFleur, 1992), the nonverbal components of communication (Gorelov I. N., 1980), the significance of social interest (Stoykova, Zh. Dobrova, 2017), its impact on human behavior and action, as well as on human stability and socialization. The theoretical understanding of communication is based on a new concept, which goes beyond the framework of behaviorism (stimulus-response). Many contemporary in-depth studies into the nature of this phenomenon, conducted by researchers in different fields of science, reach conclusions that underline its exceeding complexity and comprehensiveness. In terms of complexity, communication can be compared with the complexity of the human being itself and nowadays this phenomenon is receiving more and more attention from various fields of science.

A number of Bulgarian researchers have explored the specific characteristics of the communication with children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities (Vl. Radulov, 1995, 2004, M. Tsvetkova, 2014, 2015, D. Tsokova, 1996, Ts. Popzlateva, 1999, V. Katsarska, 2008, 2016, Sl. Lozanova and many others).

The aforementioned authors and a number of other researchers discuss in great depth the disorders observed in these children – their etiology, symptoms, the consequences of the presence of the disorder, matters related to the care provided to these children, as well as their upbringing, education, rehabilitation, encouragement and development of their personalities. The exploration of the questions presented above has shifted its focus from the disorders and accompanying deficits to the personality of the child and its strengths. For example, V. Katsarska (2015) regards the etiology of the disorder as an interaction between the individual and the impact of the negative factor. Vl. Radulov (2004) emphasizes in many instances the personal strengths of the children with visual impairment and focuses his attention on the negative impact of parental overprotective behavior. M. Tsvetkova (2014) presents convincing evidence that blind children and those with multiple disabilities are capable of mastering mobility programs that allow them to become independent and not to rely exclusively on a personal assistant or a sighted guide.

The specialized literature on this topic also describes the communication challenges faced by these children. However, the focus still falls mostly on the means of communication. Based on the understanding of the significance of communication and the difficulties that children from the aforementioned groups encounter in mastering spoken language, the attention of these authors is focused on alternative means of communication – finger language, sign language, the Braille writing system, Makaton, contact-based (or tactile) finger language (which consists of changing the positions of the fingers and slight hand movements designed to portray or mimic the shape of every letter or its equivalent), the Block method (tracing large, print letters on the palm of the hand), tactile sign language (where signs and gestures are performed by touching the palm of the hand), combinations of contact based finger language and sign language, etc. These means of communication are described in great detail and depth. There are a number of sign language dictionaries, many descriptions of finger language signs, the methods of learning and utilizing them are explored, and the benefits of their applications as well as many other related issues are studied and discussed in scientific literature.

All of this research is extremely important both for science and for the people with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities. Above all, it helps to focus the attention of society at large on these problems, but it also encourages the development of the strengths of each individual affected by such a disorder and in this way assists them in their self-actualization.

However, when the phenomenon of communication is viewed in a more comprehensive or general way, it becomes clear that this is not sufficient. The means of communication described above are simply one of its aspects. According to many scientists, communication is characterized by multiple different components, some of which may not have even been explored yet. For this reason, the presence of alternative means of communication does not suffice to define the communication of children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities as alternative. This characteristic could be proven or rejected on the basis of in-depth study of the other aspects of the communication performed by these children – its goals, meaning, types, functions, environmental factors, discourse, culture, experience, its impact in different communication situations and pairs of communicators (deaf-deaf, blind-sighted, etc.) To illustrate this metaphorically, it is not so important what vehicle we are using to move and travel – what matters is the movement itself.

It is obvious that communication is characterized by a number of specific features. They are found not only in the methods and means of communication and the substantial differences between them and spoken language, but also in the following aspects:

- The means of encoding messages
- The means of decoding messages
- The meaning of the message
- The level of initiative demonstrated by the communicators
- The reciprocity in the communication process
- The less extensive experience of these children in terms of general life, language and communication
- Their functioning in different microenvironments (often there are fewer of those compared to the microenvironments experienced by children without disability)
- The insufficient use of the means of pre-linguistic communication (body language, eye contact, etc.)
- The impact of the disorder on different spheres of life
- The position of the child in an environment populated by other children with the same disorder and by children without disability (how they feel, how they enter into dialogue with one another).

Studying all of these characteristics and the connections between them would allow us to draw with a great degree of precision scientific conclusions on whether alternative communication in the aforementioned groups of children is present or absent. If the former is the case, it will be possible to describe the specific features of the alternative communication manifested in these children. If the latter is true, we will be able to study the communication in those children, which retains the basic characteristics that are typical of this phenomenon and are exhibited by every other person.

## CONCLUSION

When discussing alternative communication with children with special educational needs, the focus should shift from the specific means of communication towards the equally socially important quality of the complex process of communication, which is centered on the personality of the handicapped child. A more thorough investigation of the specific features of communication in children with sensory disorders and multiple disabilities is a project for the

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future. It would require the combined efforts and experience of experts, as well knowledge sharing in the scientific community at large.

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