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Preparatory Classes as a Form of Preschool Education in Ukraine during the Soviet Period (the 1920s–1980s): The Main Periods and Development Trends

Abstract

The retrospective analysis of the activity of preparatory classes as a form of preschool education in Ukraine during the Soviet period is carried out in the article. The main periods and development trends of preparatory classes during the 1920s–1980s are determined and characterized. It is shown that in different periods of their functioning preparatory classes were not only oriented to the preparation of children for systematic schooling, they also arranged conditions for the lowering of school starting age.

Keywords: preparation classes, preschool education, preparation for the school studies, children of preschool age, primary education, school, Ukraine, Soviet period

Introduction

An important stage in any child’s life is a start of systematic schooling which is connected with the changes of environment for its development as well as with the transformations in the activity, new demands and duties, new social status. Purposeful and systematic propaedeutic educational work helps a first former to adapt to school, influences his successful educational activity in the conditions of intensification of training and training load increment. Preschool

education plays a priority role in the process of solving such problems, because starting from 2010 it has become compulsory for 5-year old children in Ukraine (Zakon, 2010). As a result in recent years the number of children involved in compulsory preschool education has increased; it positively influences their systematic non forced preparation for schooling. At the same time many children do not attend preschool educational institutions for various reasons, and therefore such children often are not enough educated before they start to go to school. One of the alternative ways out may be an arrangement of preparatory groups or classes at secondary schools for children of senior preschool age, this information is underlined in the documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (Lyst, 2014). We should mention that this form of preschool education is not new for modern educational space; it was introduced in Ukraine in the early Soviet period (the 1920s) and has become widespread in the next decades. Therefore, we consider it logical to study the experience of work of preparatory classes during the Soviet period.

A Short Review of Researches on the Theme

Historiographical research showed that the problem of children's training for school was the subject of scientific interest of many scientists in the field of psychology and pedagogics (S. O. Amonashvili, N. M. Bibik, A. M. Bohush, O. L. Venher, V. V. Davydov, D. B. Elkonin, V. K. Kotyrlo, Y. Y. Kravtsova, A. O. Liublinska, O. Y. Savchenko, N. F. Skrypchenko, O. V. Skrypchenko, V. O. Sukhomlynskyi a. oth.). The formation and development of primary education propaedeutic in Ukraine during the Soviet period are revealed in studies written by T. M. Bondarenko and N. L. Klochko. However, these academics pay a great attention to the preparation of children for school in preschool educational institutions, at the same time the peculiarities of preparatory classes are not detailed. L. D. Berezivska, N. M. Bibik, O. D. Zamashkina, Y. P. Kodliuk, O. Y. Savchenko and other scientists studied the peculiarities of the work of preparatory classes functioning during the second half of the 1970s–the first half of the 1980s. Therefore, retrospection of the problems concerning the formation and development of preparatory classes in Ukraine during the Soviet period was not adequately reflected in historical pedagogical researches, and as a result we consider it important to study this problem.

The main aims of this article are to determine and characterize the main periods and development trends of preparatory classes as a form of preschool education in Ukraine during the Soviet period (the 1920s–1980s) in order to obtain new knowledge of the defined phenomenon.

Exposition of Basic Material of Research

Preparatory groups (in 1934 they were reorganized into preparatory classes) began to be organized on the territory of Ukraine in the early 1920s¹¹. However, they were few (only 1.1% of future pupils attended them in 1924–1925 school year (Dijaljnistj Narkomosvity, 1926, p. 35)); such phenomenon was a result of difficult socio-political and socio-economic conditions under which a new original Ukrainian-Soviet system of education was built. The First World War and Civil War, constant changes of state authority, famine, crop failure caused widespread impoverishment of people; the number of homeless children increased. Therefore, the activity of educational policy at this stage aimed first of all at child social protection and welfare. In the middle of 1920s the rise of industry, agriculture, the needs of school practice caused the reverse process — schooling was stabilized, the number of orphanages was reduced, a positive background for the development of primary schools and preparatory groups was arranged. We should emphasize that at this stage such preschool or preparatory groups aimed at the arrangement of such conditions which helped, as the famous Ukrainian teacher S.O. Siropolko mentioned, to lower the age range for the children who would start to go to school as well as to prepare 7–8 years old children for schooling (Siropolko, 2001, p. 675).

Party and government decree on General Compulsory Education (1930) played an important role in the development of preparatory groups as a form of preschool education. The document stressed the necessity of preschool education for the children (especially for the children from low-income families) before they started to go to a primary school. Teachers, parents, seniors, pioneer organization as well as students of pedagogical educational institutions were suggested to be engaged into the process of training future pupils (Postanova, 1930, p. 10). The mentioned Decree influenced the formation of a great number of preparatory groups and the number of children educated in such groups increased. For instance, 94.2 thousand children attended preparatory groups in 1932, and 124 thousand children attended them in 1933 (Siropolko, 2001, p. 675).

¹ Since that time, the territories of Central, South and Eastern Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union (hereinafter — the USSR) in the status of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (hereinafter — Ukrainian SSR). In 1939 the western Ukrainian territories were annexed to the Ukrainian SSR. Characteristic features of social and political life in the USSR were the domination of communist ideology, isolationism, forced collectivism, persecution of freedom of thought and speech, explicit russification of the population. Under such conditions, the vector of state educational policy was oriented towards the ideologization, unification, sovietisation and russification of each level of education: from pre-school and primary to adult education. The development of education and pedagogical science was actually determined by communist party congresses and decisions, and was taking place within the context of the Soviet ideological paradigm.

In the first half of the 1930s the following party and government decrees were adopted: The Decree on Academic Programmes and Training Mode in Primary and Secondary Schools (1932); The Decree on the Structure of Primary and Secondary Schools (1934); Typical Timetable and Training Mode for Primary, Secondary and Incomplete Secondary Schools (1934); The Decree on Academic Work, Rules and Regulations in Primary, Secondary and Incomplete Secondary Schools (1935); they defined such organizational bases of preparatory classes activity:

- weekly academic load (no more than four lessons per day);
- arrangement of the school day (classes were given during the first shift no earlier than 8.30 a.m.);
- duration of the lessons (45 minutes: 25 minutes were used for training, and 20 minutes were used for games and physical training classes in the class; there had to be some physical drill during each lesson) (Postanova, 1932, p. 30–31; 1934, p. 36; 3–4; 1935, p. 2–3).

It was forbidden to gather any meeting with the pupils of the preparatory and primary classes, only class teachers and doctors were allowed to talk to the children for a period of 10–15 minutes: such conversations had to be «active and interesting» (Postanova, 1934, p. 3).

In accordance with the curriculum used for the pupils of preparatory classes the following lessons were conducted: mother tongue, arithmetic, singing, drawing and physical culture (it did not matter in which school they functioned, and what language the pupils were taught) (Berezivsjka, 2011, p. 272). As we can see from the Table 1, the attention was paid to the study of the native language.

Table 1. Curriculum for preparatory classes (1939)

№	Subjects	Working Hours per Week
1	native language	8
2	arithmetic	4
3	singing	2
4	drawing	2
5	physical culture	2
Total		18

We should note, that in the late 1930s preparatory classes were levelled. Being under threat of war, the government had to stop maintaining such classes (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1976, f. 5127, p. 154).

So, during the 1920s–1930s preparatory classes appeared to be a form of pre-school education; organizational and content principals of their activity were defined. The functioning of such preparatory classes during this period proved

that the children at the age of seven were able to study systematically under specially organized conditions. As a result a cause was originated to reduce the age limit for admission to school — under seven years of age. Starting from 1944 children at the age of seven were allowed to attend primary classes (Postanova, 1943, p. 73). In our opinion, the lower age limit for the children starting their systematic schooling was a positive decision. At the same time we agree with the Ukrainian scientist-teacher V.I. Pomahaiba who mentioned that this transition was made «mechanically, without particular changes in academic curriculums and programmes» (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1976, f. 5127, p. 154).

The preparatory classes were resumed in the Ukrainian SSR after the Second World War. However, they functioned only in Izmail region, and starting from 1954 in Odesa region just as well (in 1954 Izmail region became a part of Odesa region) in rural areas. The fact is that Odesa region was a multinational one where numerous of ethnic groups lived, particularly the Bulgarians, Moldovans, Gagauzes, Armenians, Albanians and others, who had no opportunity to receive education in their native languages. Therefore, in the course of propaedeutic work with children of national minorities the attention was paid to the process of spoken Russian acquisition and to the training of children who would go to school where Russian was used by teachers²². For such preparatory classes special programmes and training manuals were prepared. Thus, in order to teach Gagauz children (Turkic people who lived on the territory of Ukraine, in Odesa region mainly) a special Book on Training in Russian for Preparatory Classes at Schools with the Russian Language of Teaching, where Gagauz Children are Studied» was prepared (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1958, f. 166, p. 84).

We should note that the number of children receiving preschool education in preparatory classes during the 1950s–1960s decreased significantly in comparison with the previous period. Dynamics of the number of children attending preparatory classes during 1950/51–1970/71 schools years is presented in Figure 1.

² The majority of children of national minorities, except for Russians who lived on the territory of the Ukrainian SSR, as well as indigenous children — Ukrainians — were deprived of the possibility to obtain education, including primary, in native language. The policy of the Soviet government was focused on assimilating non-Russian peoples in order to create a united quasi-community — the Soviet people. For this purpose the number of schools with Russian language of training was systematically expanding in the Ukrainian SSR. Russian was obligatory studied from the first years of children training, along with their native language at schools with the Ukrainian as a language of training, as well as at schools for national minorities (with Moldovan, Hungarian and Polish as languages of training, which amounted to barely 1% of the total number of schools). In addition, the content of school education did not envisage the study of national history, geography and other knowledge that formed the national genotype of children and allowed to identify themselves with a specific ethno-national community.

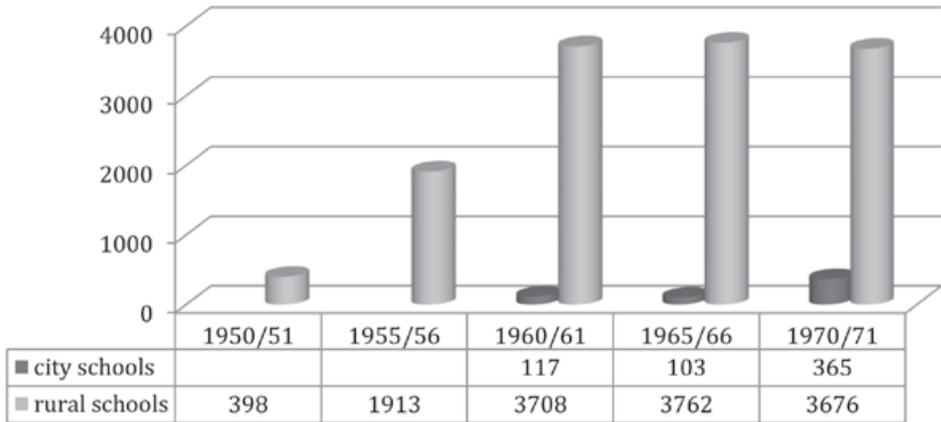


Fig. 1. Dynamics of the number of children attending preparatory classes in city and rural schools in Ukrainian SSR (1950/1951–1970/1971 school years)

As you can see, the number of pupils attending preparatory classes starting from 1950/51 up to 1960/61 school years grew by 8.5 times (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1950, f. 166, p. 1; 1960, f. 166, p. 1). During the 1960s–early 1970s the number of children attending preparatory classes stabilized (nearly 4 thousand persons). We should mention that starting from 1960/61 school year preparatory classes were opened at city schools (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1960, f. 166, p. 1), and starting from 1964/65 school year, they appeared on other territory (2 preparatory classes were opened in Kirovohrad region) (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1964, f. 166, p. 54).

The problem concerning the necessity of preschool education for the future pupils, arrangement of larger number of preparatory classes was constantly discussed by teachers at different conferences and meetings, in particular during 1958–1959 when a new Law on Consolidation of the Connection between School and Life and on the Further Development of the System of Public Education in the Ukrainian SSR was adopted in 1959. However, the problems were not solved.

We should note that during the 1950s–1960s an alternative to the official school appeared, videlicet original schools arranged by V.O. Sukhomlynskyi, I.H. Tkachenko and other educators. Their conception differed from the traditional Soviet classroom practice in fundamentally new approaches to objective, methods, means of training and education. In particular, it was based on humanistic theory, focused on the development of a child's individuality, fulfilling his (her) creative potential, etc. Special attention was paid to the training of children for schooling. Thus, an outstanding Ukrainian teacher V. O. Sukhomlynskyi suggested an original training system for six-year old children before

they went to school. The main points of his ideas are reflected in his work *I Give my Heart to the Children*. The teacher considered preschool education to be really important for future first formers. Because it is necessary to teach his or her to think, to perceive, to observe before a child starts to study at school (Sukhomlynskyj, 2012, p. 59–60). That is why V. O. Sukhomlynskyi arranged a system of innovative methods, techniques, forms of training and education (lessons of thinking in nature, “travels to the origins of thought and word”, etc.). He mentioned that a teacher played a great role in preparing children for the systematic educational activity, because a teacher was supposed to prepare them for the schooling so that “they would be able to experience more and more joys of life, that learning would not become sad studies” (Sukhomlynskyj, 2012, p. 70). In addition, the teacher had to learn their individual characteristics, to get to know their inner world, level of health, etc. during the year that preceded their schooling (Sukhomlynskyj, 2012, p. 59–60).

Thus, during the second half of 1940s–early 1970s preparatory classes were organized for children of national minorities who did not speak Russian language. The main attention in propaedeutic work was paid to the process of spoken Russian acquisition, because hereafter the children received primary education in Russian. V. O. Sukhomlynskyi suggested an alternative programme for propaedeutic training of six-year old children in the preparatory classes which was realized in Pavlysh secondary school (Kirovohrad region, Ukraine).

We consider the adoption of the Principles of Legislation of the USSR and Union Republics on Public Education (1973) to be the next stage in the development of preparatory classes. At the legislative level it was mentioned for the first time that the preschool education was possible to be received in preparatory classes. In particular, the following information was mentioned in the article 22 of the Principles of Legislation of the USSR and Union Republics on Public Education: “preparatory classes are organized at schools in order to prepare those children for schooling who will not be educated in their native language, and who do not attend preschool institutions” (*Osnovy zakonodatel'stva*, 1973). Since that time a number of preparatory classes and children attending them increased significantly. Thus, in 1970/71 school year 4041 children were trained in the preparatory classes (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1971, f. 166, p. 1), and in 1973/1974 school year already 10046 future first formers attended such classes (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1974, f. 166, p. 1).

We should note that the growth of preparatory classes in number was also connected with the structural and content transformations within the primary education taken place in the early 1970s. Thus, on the one hand shortening its duration to three years, educational content reformation based on new principles (training at a higher level of complexity, speeding up of the process of studies, teaching more theory, etc.) were positive steps forward, prepared conditions

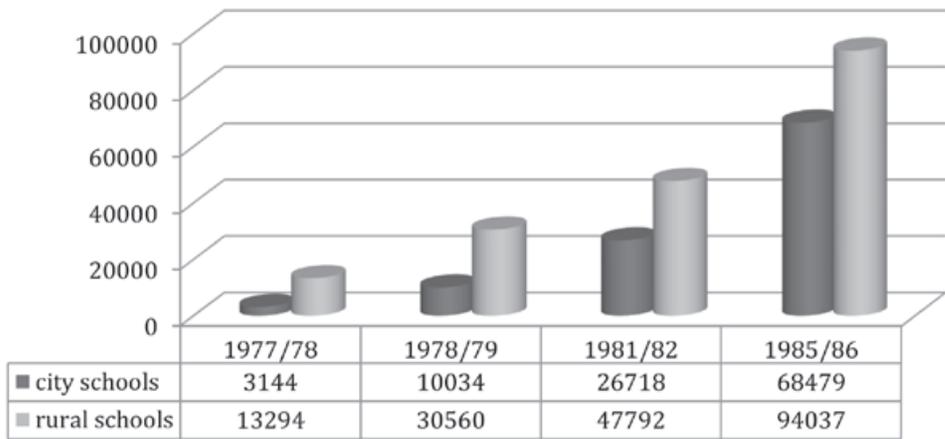


Fig. 2. Dynamics of the number of children attending preparatory classes in city and rural schools in Ukrainian SSR (1977/78–1985/86 school years)

for the development of cognitive activity and independence of junior pupils in the learning process, and on the other hand led to overwork of former pupils; the number of children who had problems with their studies increased, etc. Consequently, there was a question concerning the necessity to maintain relatively equal training of children for regular schooling. Preparatory classes appeared spontaneously at secondary schools and preschool institutions (Skrypchenko, 1996, p. 10).

In 1973 *Programme for the Preparatory Classes Functioning at Those Schools where Children were Educated in Hungarian and Moldavian* was prepared; it dealt with the description of knowledge the future first formers should acquire in the preparatory classes (Programmy, 1973). Later on the Ministry of Education of the Ukrainian SSR issued a letter for teachers of preparatory classes known as “Training and Educational Work in the Preparatory Classes” (1976) (Savchenko, 1976).

Taken into consideration the importance of propaedeutic training of future first formers, and probably in order the preparatory classes did not appear spontaneously and to regulate their activities, the Ministry of Education of the USSR and the Ministry of Finance of the USSR prepared a document called “On Opening of the Preparatory Classes” (1977). It was reported that starting from September 1, 1977 preparatory classes could be opened at city and rural secondary schools if necessary (Lyst, 1977, p. 31). As we can see, the requirements of teachers concerning preparing of children for regular schooling mentioned in the late 1950s started to be fulfilled only 20 years later. We do not deny the importance of this document in the course of the development of pre-

school education; but at the same time we are inclined to think that it was adopted behind time.

Soon the Ministry of Education of the Ukrainian SSR adopted a Decree known as «On the Preparatory Classes at Secondary Schools and the Organization of Work in them» (1977). It was indicated that preparatory classes should be opened at all types of secondary schools where six-year old children who had not attended preschool institutions should be trained in accordance with specially prepared curriculum and programmes before schooling (Nakaz, 1977, p. 12). Taking into consideration that the majority of rural children did not attend preschool institutions, preparatory classes were opened mostly in rural areas. The number of preparatory classes and children attending them increased in number every year. Thus, in 1977/78 school year 16.4 thousand of children attended preparatory classes (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1978, f. 166, p. 14), and in 1978/79 school year 40.6 thousand of children were trained in such classes (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1979, f. 166, p. 33). The number of children educated in preparatory classes increased in the next years, and in 1985/86 school year 162.5 thousand children attended them (it was the maximum number) (TSDAVO Ukraine, 1986, f. 166, p. 18), as shown in Figure 2 prepared on the basis of statistical reports of the Ministry of Education of the Ukrainian SSR.

The preparatory classes aimed at the following main tasks which were defined: physical, moral, labour, and aesthetic education of children, development of their mind and speech, formation of observation skills, analysis of the natural phenomena and social life, development of interest to study, formation of skills to behave (Prohramy, 1977, p. 2). Therefore, in accordance with the curriculum (Table 2) almost 70% of the class hours were devoted to physical training, eurhythmics, music and singing, drawing and modelling, artistic and technical design and modelling, reading. Special attention was paid to those lessons where hygienic skills; cultural behaviour at school, at home, in public areas; self-help skills were formed. The Programme concerning preparatory classes also aimed at preparing children to study their native languages and mathematics in the first class. For the purpose of general and social development of children a new integrated course called «Acquaintance with the Surroundings» (prepared by N. M. Bibik, N. S. Koval) was introduced into the curriculum. A great attention was paid to the maintenance of sequence between preschool and primary education links while choosing and structuring of education content (Prohramy, 1977, p. 3–4). So, taking into account children's psycho-physical peculiarities the Programme provided for the formation of children's knowledge, abilities and skills using understandable material, and it created the background for successful studying in the first class of secondary school.

Taken into consideration the age-specific peculiarities of six-year-old children the following conditions for the educational process arrangement in the

Table 2. Curriculum for preparatory classes (1977)

№	Subjects	Working hours per week
1	native language (reading and writing, speech development)	4
2	preparation to study mathematics	3
3	acquaintance with the surroundings	4
4	physical training, outdoor games	5
5	drawing, modeling, applique	3
6	design	2
7	music, singing, eurhythmics	3
Total		24

preparatory classes were suggested: there had to be no more than 25 pupils per class; the lesson had to continue no more than 35 minutes; the dynamic pauses were obligatory; absence of marks and home tasks; the attention was paid to the dominance of game activities; the additional holidays were introduced; extended-day groups were organized at classes; beauty sleep was obligatory, three meals a day; a long walk in the open air, etc. (Programy, 1977, p. 5). We consider it positive that V.O. Sukhomlynskyi's experience concerning the preparation of six-year-old children for schooling was widely used in the system of work of the preparatory classes (Skrypchenko, 1996, p. 10).

In 1981, the Ukrainian SSR began an extensive experiment in the preparatory classes in order to find out whether it was possible to start systematic training of children at the age of six at secondary schools with optimal training load (Postanova, 1981). Without going into the detail concerning its organizational and procedural aspects, we should note that in the process of complex experimental studies (teachers, psychologists, hygienists, physiologists took part in it) (1981–1985) carried out in Nizhyn district (Chernihiv region), Volnovakha district (Donetsk region), Radehiv district (Lviv region), the city of Ordzhonikidze³ (Dnipropetrovsk region), the possibility and the appropriateness of the systematic teaching of children at the age of six were proved; the forms of organization of educational process, content and teaching methods were identified; instructional and teaching materials were prepared; the peculiarities of the process of training, education and development of children under new conditions were revealed; economic, personnel and management aspects in the transfer to teaching children at the age of six were studied (Havrylenko, 2016, p. 14–15).

³ The city from April 2, 2016 is called Pokrov.

In order to support and control the activities of preparatory classes, to carry out an experiment on teaching children at the age of six, the Laboratory of training and education of six-year-old children was opened at the Research Institute of Pedagogics of the Ukrainian SSR, and a lot of famous scientists worked there (N. M. Bibik, M. S. Vashulenko, L. P. Kochyna, N. I. Podhorna, O. Y. Pryshchepa, N. F. Skrypchenko (she was a head of the Laboratory), I. O. Shkolna). During the period of its functioning (1976–1985) scientists prepared the programmes for all types of training activities for preparatory classes (teaching reading, writing, working with a child's book, mathematics, acquaintance with the surroundings, manual work, physical training and aesthetic education); they also prepared textbooks and tutorials for six-year-old pupils and manuals for teachers; they published a lot of articles in pedagogical journals on difficulties in teaching six-year-old children; trained teachers, educators, heads of schools in order they were ready to teach and educate such children (Skrypchenko, 1996, p. 10–11). Therefore, the scientists working at the Laboratory made a significant contribution into the primary education propaedeutic, created conditions for the systematic schooling of children at the age of six.

In accordance with the party-political Decree called «On further Improvement of General Secondary Education of Youth and Conditions of Work in Secondary Schools» (1984) starting from 1986/87 school year a transfer to teaching children at the age of six began. Therefore, preparatory classes practically ceased to exist. In 1991 their number was about 10 in Ukraine (Havrylenko, 2016, p. 15).

Thus, during the 1970s–1980s preparatory classes were considered as a form preschool education at the legislative level; they appeared in all regions of Ukraine and the number of children attending them in the middle of 1980s increased (160 thousand children at the age of six attended such classes). We consider the following items carried out during this period to be positive: the development of training and methodological materials for the preparatory classes carried out by scientists at the special Laboratory of training and education of six-year-old children; the accumulation of experiences concerning training and development of children at the age of six and arrangement of appropriate conditions for the transfer of children to the systematic schooling starting from the age of six.

Conclusions

The conducted retrospective analysis of the work of the preparatory classes in Ukraine allowed coming to the following conclusions: preparatory classes as a form preschool education played an important role in the development of pri-

mary education propaedeutic during Soviet times; their functioning arranged conditions for lowering the age range concerning the beginning of systematic schooling. We consider it appropriate to define the following periods of their development, underlining the characteristic trends of each of them: the 1st stage (the 1920s–1930s) — the formation of preparatory classes as a form of preschool education; the determination of organizational and content principles of their activity; the arrangement of conditions for the transfer of children to the systematic schooling starting from the age of seven; the 2nd stage (the second half of the 1940s– the beginning of the 1970s) — the functioning of preparatory classes as a form of training the national minorities' children in Russian; the emergence and realization of the original authorial system of preparation of six-year-old children for schooling at V. O. Sykhomlynskyi's school: the 3^d stage (the beginning of the 1970s–1980s) — the recognition of preparatory classes as a form of preschool education at the legislative level; the quick increase in their number on the territory of Ukraine; the development of the training appliances for preparatory classes carried out by the scientists of the laboratory of training and education of six-year-old children at the Research Institute of Pedagogics of the Ukrainian SSR; the accumulation of experience in training six-year-old children and arrangement of appropriate conditions for the transfer of children to the systematic schooling starting from the age of six. We hope that these findings will be interesting to the international academic audience.

The presented historical and pedagogical research does not claim to fully and comprehensively cover the stated problem, it opens the space for further study and analysis of the work of the preparatory classes in Ukraine, in particular within the comparative aspect with similar processes in European and world educational systems.

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