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COUNSELING OF CHILDREN COMING FROM DISADVANTAGED ENVIRONMENTS TO PREVENT FAILURE AND AVOID SCHOOL ABANDONEMENT

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Abstract *The democratization of social life imposes education preparing children and adolescents to face their limits and with the condition of satisfying personal needs in the context of reciprocal social relations. The existence of students who do not adapt to the requirements of the educational environment represents the reality of any educational system. In Romania, this phenomenon is highlighted by the low school grades, low test scores, second examinations and grade repetition, absenteeism and school abandonment.*

The significant proportion of students with school difficulties requires the reassessment of this problem and finding new solutions for preventing school failure in disadvantaged children by the ratio between the institution and their individual and family characteristics. Individual determinants of school difficulties are often backed-up by the institutional determinants and cause some children to enter the downslope of failure or partial achievement of learning potential. Through a proper task mediation, by encouraging the transfer from similar learning activities, by learning strategies and concepts, through personal development activities and optimization of emotional and social skills, the child may acquire the ability to overcome the typical performance level and to access a higher performance level.

Keywords: *communication, conflicts, barrier, information, message, inefficient communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the research

This study aims at counseling children from disadvantaged environments by applying a customized intervention program and investigating the opportunities for personal development to increase adaptation capacity to a specific context of learning to overcome school difficulties and to avoid school abandonment.

The research objectives are the following:

- To identify the initial socio-emotional development levels and three cognitive functional domains: *attention and executive functions, language, sensorimotor functions* in children from the experimental and control groups.
- To develop cognitive functions in the three domains (*attention and executive*

functions, language, sensorimotor functions) and socio-emotional skills in children by applying the customized intervention program.

- To evaluate the neuropsychological development in the three domains established and the socio-emotional skills of children after applying the customized intervention program.
- To define the utility of customized counseling programs for children from disadvantaged environments.

Research hypothesis

By implementing a customized intervention program during counseling hours with children from disadvantaged environments, the reduction of school abandonment as well as the appearance of continuity between pre-school and school levels is achieved.

Research subjects:

This research was conducted on a total of 100 children aged between 5 and 8 years old, enrolled in regular schools.

2. TOOLS USED IN THIS RESEARCH

a) Developmental neuropsychological assessment – NEPSY¹ NEPSY is a tool intended to assess neuropsychological development of preschool and school children, created by Marit Korkman, Ursula Kirk, Sally Kemp. The test was developed in three phases: experimental, standardization and validation, during 1987-1997, in the United States of America. Standardization of neuropsychological assessment of development-NEPSY battery on Romanian population was conducted in 2005, by SC COGNITROM-Cluj Napoca.

The most common types of assessments with NEPSY tool concern:

- a) neuropsychological status of the child;
- b) extended or selective assessment for a deeper analysis of specific cognitive disorders;
- c) full neuropsychological assessment.

b) Socio-emotional adaptability assessment scale

In order to assess the socio-emotional adaptability and the socio-emotional maturity level of preschoolers we have designed the *socio-emotional adaptability assessment scale*.

Objective: To identify strengths (resources) and weaknesses (vulnerabilities) in preschool children.

Customized intervention program

This program provides an insight on how we can help children become happy, to have an unconditional self-acceptance and to become active subjects in their own learning process. The program will provide a range of real life situations that are applicable to children from all socio-economic and cultural environments. Different situations will be addressed: poor performances in tests or at school, dealing with unfairness and rejection, coping with disruptive family situations and inducement to violence and school abandonment by the group the children belong to. The activities will use the game as a method of teaching and learning to make the children aware that they are in a learning situation and to determine them to use rational thinking skills, to develop unconditional self-acceptance, to experience problematic emotions and to stop destructive behaviors. The methods used are inspired by classical psychodrama (J.L. Moreno) and from the structural-cognitive changeability theory (mediated learning) of Professor R. Feuerstein.

The program contains "exciting lessons" adapted both to educational framework and to counseling framework and presents a stimulus activity adapted to the development level, aimed at developing the skills necessary to cope with this stimulus and containing summarizing questions and sequences which allow children to make the transition from intellectual insight to the direct application of concepts and skills in real life.

The ascertaining experiment, as a preliminary step of the research, aimed at identifying age, gender, neuropsychological development level and socio-emotional

¹ Korkman, M., Kirk, U., Kemp, S. 2007. *A developmental neuropsychological assessment*.



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development level differences of the subjects in the two groups.

We started from the assumption that cognitive functions can be developed and streamlined to optimize the integration of children from disadvantaged environments in order to overcome school difficulties and to avoid failure and school abandonment by initiating training to compensate gaps and to ensure the development and intellectual acquisition of children, by implementing a customized intervention program.

With reference to the purpose of the present research, that of counseling children from disadvantaged environments to reduce absenteeism and to prevent school abandonment, we recorded the values of school attendance where the children are enrolled.

The analysis reveals the following results: 12% of the subjects in the experimental group and 8% in the control group had a low frequency, 68% of the subjects in the experimental group and 62% in the control group had an average frequency, and 20% of subjects in the experimental group and 30% in the control group had a high frequency.

First, we were interested to see if the experimental group and the control group are equivalent in terms of the degree of neuropsychological development of children, given that the assignment into groups was done randomly. In order to verify this, the subjects from the two groups were tested using NEPSY battery of tests, measuring three complex cognitive domains selected from the five domains of the test.

To achieve the objective of identifying the initial neuropsychological development level in the three cognitive functional domains: *attention and executive functions, language, sensorimotor functions* of the

children in the experimental and control groups, we executed graphs showing such development levels, by using SPSS statistical processing program.

We associated to this objective the following hypothesis: *we suppose that initially, between the two groups of subjects there were no significant differences in the three basic cognitive domains: attention and executive functions, language, sensorimotor functions.* Following the analysis and interpretation of data, this hypothesis was confirmed.

Upon a first data analysis we obtained for the mental operation diagnosis test the following results:

The recorded low scores (52% of the subjects in the experimental group and 46% in the control group - *well below the desired level*, 46% of the subjects in the experimental group and 48% in the control group - *below the desired level*) reflect deficits in the ability to assume and to generate new solutions to problems and to plan the strategy. Difficulties encountered in visual and auditory attention tasks suggests that the subjects are deficient in terms of attention - poor attention, impulsivity, or both. For the third level, the *limit level*, the results obtained (2% of the subjects in the experimental group and 6% in the control group) show poor attention and vigilance for repetitive tasks, impulsive reactions or difficulties in applying complex rules. None of the subjects in the two groups is included in this domain *at or above the desired level.*

In the domain of language the subjects did not reach the *desired and above the desired level* corresponding to age category. In the category *well below the desired level* 6% of the subjects in the experimental group and 4% in the control group were included, in the category *below the desired level* 74% of the subjects in the experimental group and 72% in

the control group were included, and in the category *limit level* we found 20% of the subjects in the experimental group and 24% in the control group.

Low scores in this domain of language reflect generalized speech and language disabilities, learning disabilities that are based on language, i.e. scarce perception and auditory-phonological analysis which negatively affects language understanding and learning. The difficulties in accessing language labels can be caused by poor updating of sound - symbol associations and of the spoken word - written word links involved in learning how to read and write.

Following the analysis and interpretation of data, the subjects showed values below the average for their age, as follows: 38% of the subjects in the experimental group and 38% in the control group were included in the category *well below the desired level*, 38% of the subjects in the experimental group and 44% in the control group showed values *below the desired level*, and in the *limit level* 24% of the subjects in the experimental group and 18% in the control group were included.

Poor performance in this domain indicates difficulties in organization, sequencing and quick and accurate monitoring of fine digital movements, difficulties associated with the language, reading difficulties and attention disorders. Also, we can conclude on the existence of difficulties in fine motor coordination required to reproduce positions - inefficient processing of tactile and kinesthetic information. For subjects included in the lowest levels, the presence of a high degree of impulsivity, a constant lack of planning and estimating the degree of difficulty of the task are obvious.

During the preliminary stage we were interested in the degree of socio-emotional maturity of children. To assess the socio-emotional adaptability of children we designed a specific psycho-diagnostic tool: *Social and emotional adaptability assessment scale in children*.

The following results were obtained in the sociability dimension that includes relation, participation and receptivity items:

40% of the subjects in the experimental group and 36% in the control group are included in the low level of sociability category, 52% of the subjects in the experimental group and 58% of the control group are included in the average level category and 8% of the subjects in the experimental group and 6% of the control group are included in the high level category.

This dimension measures the ability of social integration of children providing them with rules, habits, ways of thinking and spatial-temporal frames in accordance with the social environment in which they develop. The high percentage of subjects included in the low and average level of socialization requires intervention in order to increase adaptation to the social group.

The results obtained in the dimension involvement as engagement and active intervention capacity in a task, resulting in increased individual performance, with the items: compliance with rules, curiosity, initiative, are distributed as follows: 66% of the subjects in the experimental group and 62% in the control group are included in the category low level of involvement, 34% of the subjects in the experimental group and 38% in the control group are included in the average level category.

Independence, expressing the will, emotional stability, self-confidence were measured in the self-esteem dimension. The results obtained are included in two categories only, namely 76% of the subjects in the experimental group and 78% in the control group are included in the category of low level of self-esteem, 24% of the subjects in the experimental group and 22% in control group are included in the average level category of this dimension.

From the above observations and presentations it results that there are no significant differences between the children in the experimental group and those in the control group in terms of how they were evaluated by experts and hence in the degree of socio-emotional adaptability.



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3. CONCLUSIONS

Through this paper I wish to emphasize the importance of counseling children in forming their personality and in their preparation for life.

The increasing number of school failures and abandonment, of delinquent or unhealthy behaviors, of emotional disorders among students, indicate that the school should be doing much more in this direction. To meet these real needs, the Ministry of Education and Research proposes in the new National Curriculum the introduction of the optional study discipline "Counseling and Orientation" for all three levels of schooling: elementary, secondary school and high school. The new study discipline meets the basic needs of any child and adolescent: self-knowledge, communication skills, creativity, decision-making and problem solving.

Conclusions after applying the customized intervention program on children.

Present life exigencies, the need to cope with complex problems and changes in various activity sectors have made adaptability a priority issue.

This social background supposes education preparing children and adolescents to face their limits and with the condition of satisfying personal needs in the context of reciprocal social relations.

Children do not learn through abstract concepts and pure reasoning but through feelings and involvement. Thus, affection becomes the channel for cognition.

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