ANALYSIS OF COGNITION STRUCTURE OF STUDENTS HAVING EMOTIONAL, BEHAVIORAL AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: ASPECT OF INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The article presents the international research on cognition and the situation analysis of students who have emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties that lead to early school dropout. The main features of students who are not motivated for school attendance are problems in the family environment and behavioral manifestations that lead to social conflicts. The method of the in-depth interview was applied during multiple individual meetings with the student. Twenty-one students from four EU countries at the age from 13 to 20 years took part in the research. It was set that the student's difficulties and strengths at school, de-motivational and motivational aspects, weak points, problems of positive self-evaluation, coping strategies, helping thoughts, advice and wishes about future are the main inner psychological problems that are reflected in the student's acting in their environment.

Keywords: emotional, behavioral disorders, learning difficulties, problems at school and family, learning de-motivating, motivating aspects

Introduction

Early school dropout usually is the result of personal, social, economic, educational and family-related factors, strongly intertwined and leading to cumulative disadvantage (EUROSTAT, 2015). The policy of EU Council discussing the problems of the reduction of early school dropout underlines that adolescents need appropriate measures. The majority of early school leavers have emotional and behavioral difficulties and special educational needs.

Students with emotional and behavioral difficulties are often described as mischievous, poorly educated, with lower school attendance, and this is influenced by lower learning outcomes, leading to lower secondary education and early school leaving (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). It is important to underline that the same problems usually are met in VET (vocational education amd training), because students with low learning motivation remain at risk to stay out of any education, training or employment forever. Vulnerable groups are especially affected: such as young people who have been in care and those with special educational needs (EUROSTAT, 2015). Vaughn, Bos (2015) state, that 15-25% of all students have some type of learning or behavior problem. Reducing the average of the European rate of early school dropout by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees (EUROSTAT, 2015). Consequently, the statistical data show that early school dropout of students with emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties have long-term negative effects on social development and economic growth. The activation of the motivation of this group of students is also specified in the document of the European Commission (Reducing early school leaving key messages and policy support, 2013).

Students with EBLD (emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities) are at higher risk of social exclusion, unemployment, antisocial life style and, in some cases, imprisonment. EUROSTAT (2015) data indicate that young people with non-completed secondary education and more or less affected by unemployment are more likely to depend on social benefits and have a higher risk of social exclusion. It affects their lifetime earnings, well-being and health. Lack of employment often influences the occurrence of delinquency. Youth with disabilities are also at a higher risk of the involvement in the juvenile justice system. Numerous studies show that students with special needs and those with emotional or behavioral disorders or learning disabilities are arrested and incarcerated at a higher rate than their nondisabled peers (Garfinkel & Critchley, 2013). Some of the studies revealed that the vast majority of adult criminal offenders have perpetrated acts before 18 years of age. Emotional, behavioral and learning problems later transform to delinquent behavior. Moffitt (1993) states that the early stage of delinquency is antisocial behavior. Antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence is categorized to behavioral disorders, impulsiveness, stealing, physical and psychological aggression, bullying, running away from home and truancy (Farrington, 2005). Antisocial behavior appears to be a developmental trait that begins early in life and often continues into adolescence and adulthood. He further emphasizes that if antisocial behavior starts at early age, the persistence and chronic of these behaviors can be differentiated by the age of the antisocial behavior onset.

Risk factors at home include antisocial parents, parents suffering from depression, family poverty, marital problems, large family size, history of family violence, involvement of parents in drug and alcohol abuse and poor parenting practices (Phaik, Chong, Habibah, & Jegak, 2010). These factors can also originate from the child's personal characteristics such as interests, attitude, and temperament. Other external factors include the individuals' past expectations, which can influence their interpersonal relationships (Phaik, Chong, Habibah, & Jegak, 2010). The analysis of the problem shows that some instruments for detecting lack of motivation, setting predispositions of delinquent behavior are highly needed in our educational environment.

Object of the research: Analysis of the cognition structure of students having emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties.

The aim of the research – to contribute to the solution of the problems of students with emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties in order to reduce early school leaving and promote students' engagement.

Methodological approach and methods of the research

Research based on the theoretical issues of narrative therapy states that the person is the person and the problem is the problem (O'Connor, 2014; DeMille & Montgomery, 2016). In narrative therapy, we distinguish the problem from the person, believing that the problem is produced and reproduced inside a social and cultural context and that the person may choose between the problematic story and other alternative stories in his/her life. The identity of a person is fluid and is constructed during the conversations that he/she has with himself/herself and others. In Narrative Therapy Interviewing, we externalize the problems in the life of students, who have emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties. We use the Names for the Problems that make a student separate himself/herself from the problem and explore the impacts of the problem on his/her life. The student evaluates these results and justifies these evaluations according to his/her intentions in life, values, hopes and dreams for his/her life. In this way the student who has emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties can understand that his/her life is not only dominated by the problem but there are also other parts of his/her life that do not go with the problem story.

Another approach that was used in the research is Schema of Cognitive Behaviour (CBT) that is based on a premise that early maladaptive schemas, which are related to EBLD, develop in childhood and are based on damaging experiences with parents, siblings, or peers. Schemas may remain dormant until they are activated by situations relevant to a particular schema. Scott (2009) defines schemas as broad, pervasive themes regarding oneself and one's relationship with others, developed during childhood and elaborated throughout one's lifetime, and dysfunctional to a significant degree. Schemas interfere with the student's attempts to get the core needs met within each domain. Consequently, early maladaptive schemas that are related to EBLD are: 1) Formed on a basis of the child's interactions with his/her environment; 2) Resistant to change; 3) Activated by relevant situations. As early maladaptive schemas are significantly influenced by the behaviour of the student's parents and teachers, their contribution in diminishing children's difficulties is of key importance.

The structure of the in-depth interview instrument supporting the cognition of emotional, behavioral problems and learning difficulties was composed according to the analysis of scientific literature (Vaughn & Bos, 2015; Phaik, Chong, Habibah, & Jegak, 2010; Chen, Vansteenkiste, Beyers, Boone, et al., 2015). Nine diagnostic areas were singled out (Difficulties at school, Strengths at school, De-motivational aspects, Motivational aspects, Weak points, Problems of positive self-evaluation, Coping strategies, Helping thoughts and advice, Wishes about the future). Combining the narrative and cognitive approaches, the method of the in-depth interview was applied during multiple individual meetings with the student. The interview data were proceeded applying content analysis, defining the main aspects of the cognition of the student's emotional, behavioral and learning problems.

Participants of the research

21 students from Normundas Valteris Youth School (LT), Aldini-Valeriani institute (IT), VET Schools in Plovdiv and Ruse (BG), St. Zeno's Vocational School, Kirchseeon (DE) at the age from 13 to 20 years of age took part in the research[1].

Analysis of the research data

The research reveals that in all the countries-participants the situation of students who have emotional, behavioral problems and learning difficulties the general social situation is rather equable (Table 1). We present a generalized summary of the content analysis that was done in all the countries-participants, using the same instrument of the in-depth interview.

Table 1. General characteristics of the students' situation

Family situation	• part of the students live in the children's care house; • they usually live in incomplete, divorced families (mothers live with boyfriends, stepfathers); • usually in family there are more than 2-3 children; • problems in families (alcohol use, destructive behavior); • weak relationship with family members.
Behavioral features	• motivation problems, demotivation because of the suspension and bad grades, lack of motivation; • behavior problems: they often get involved into fights, are suspended because of improper behavior during lessons, have a high level of truancy; demonstration of noncompliance and disrespect; they use inappropriate language; neglect the rules; aggressive behavior; juvenile delinquency; • they are distracted during the lessons; lack of motivation about the school contents, passive participation; lack of interest in all school subjects; they are suspended because of discipline issues; • attention problems, impaired concentration, hyperactivity; • various disabilities: mental disability, remarkable difficulties in learning various subjects.

According to the findings, the family environment has direct links to the child's behavioral models and it is proved by the research conducted by Phaik, Chong, Habibah, & Jegak (2010). The scale of behavioral disorders is rather wide but it is common for students of the countries that participated in the research. In general, it can be stated that any problem in family relationships determines behavioral problems that differ by their intensity, level of harmfulness, aggression, interruption of contacts with the wider environment. The behavioral problems that were set in our research correspond to the findings of Moffitt (1993), Farrington (2005). In adolescence, behavioral problems are revealed in the school environment more than generally in the societal life, that is why teachers face these problems first.

The instrument of the in-depth interview conditionally distinguished the behavior supporting areas and the behavior non-supporting areas. Positive behavior supporting areas: strengths at school; motivational aspects; coping strategies, helping thoughts, advice; self-evaluation; wishes about school and the future. The areas that do not support positive behavior are difficulties at school; de-motivational aspects; weak points. The summarized research data obtained from different countries have been presented according to the behavior supporting areas and the behavior non-supporting diagnostic areas.

Table 2. Behavior supporting areas

Strengths at school
Subjects and activities that students like: some school subjects, in which students are successful, are preferred most of all; The most preferable subject at school is physical education; sports; practical activities; work with IT; Making experiments and executing practical tasks; getting better in mathematics; homework and project-based examination. Diligence and ambitions to master difficult subjects: the student likes to learn, it is a great deal to learn; Master difficult subjects in spite of discouraging former experiences. Support and appreciation by the peer group: interactions with classmates; at school students together with friends are dreaming about the future. Things that matter to students: when teachers talk about things that matter to students and make them feel more relaxed, there is no pressure that they may have an exam; Students are appreciated at school.

Motivational aspects
Personal development: learning useful competences to find a good job; school prepares them for "life". Interaction with others: communications with friends; talks with the school psychologist, school social educator; talking with people and having fun; having friends on the whole; Not being alone at home; Being not bullied and sidelined any more in the new school means being accepted by classmates and having confidential interaction with everybody finally again. Interesting study subjects – physical education, arts, sports activities, IT lessons; When teachers dare to let decide students the topics of project lessons; Involvement in the school project activities. Mutual help among students: opportunity to help weaker students. Acknowledgement and awarding: pride of good behavioral and didactic results; The "good" teachers who talk with them and are interested in their personality; The feeling of being appreciated in spite of learning or mental disabilities.

Positive self-evaluation
Personal development: school is useful for personal development; The ability to achieve a goal if wanted; Becoming more self-confident and determined; Becoming more skilled in presentations and more creative; Good social skills; Not giving up. Creating a positive relationship with others: willingness to help others; helping others; to find friends; Better at establishing relationships; To be accepted and supported by classmates, teachers; Teachers give all their time to students. Skills for the future: to learn to communicate; to apply school knowledge in real life; Opportunity to continue studies in professional training; Remarkable diligence, learning success after all the problems in the past.

Coping strategies, helping thoughts and advice
Competences gained at school matters: students think that competences gained in school would help them in the job career, would guarantee the financial and social welfare; Thinking that school gives useful competences to achieve a good job. Importance of the parents: involvement of parents in communication with children; talk with their parents; Dare to ask the parents for help at home; Strengthening relationships: to strengthen contacts with the school social educator and school psychologist (to work on the emotional and cognitive aspects of unfavorable behavior); Dealing with the problems: talking about their worries with someone who can help and try to understand them; Not to get angry at them; trying to defeat difficulties; Psychological counseling; Ask the parents and siblings for support to memorize; Talking to somebody where you can feel secure; Absence from school activities and going "somewhere else" when the school becomes hard; Dare to ask teachers and classmates for help; Thinking carefully about the situation and making a plan. Foster positive emotions, not to give up: trying to avoid negative emotions; thinking about positive aspects; standing tall after the failure and bad marks; Individual learning strategies: to apply the approach of individual learning strategies modifying and adapting school programs; dare to slow down teachers who are talking too quickly; To organize trainings for school staff concerning the special issues of communication with children having emotional disturbances. Attention to students' hobbies: at school students prefer to do whatever they want and like to do (to play computer games, to play and chat with phones, to check FB and Instagram); Doing what you want to do; listening to music; Rewards: when they know that something pleasant will come after they finish their lessons and homework; Promised rewards by parents.

Wishes about school
Wishes related to school subjects: to have more lessons of physical education, IT and arts; To have less homework and compulsory after-school activities; Easier teaching materials and more attention to individual needs of children; More practical activities; The learning process will be focused on the most important things; to become bigger, more of the *American* style, where the student will choose the study subjects and during the different classes will be with different students (not always the same classmates); Students could be able to go out and do different things; Wishes related to teachers: more helpful teachers; personalization of students' school career; Teachers explaining in a better way; Teachers will respect students more and will talk with them after the classes – they will be more interested in students' personality; Teachers will be nicer, they would not have favorite students and would give higher grades, would be more easy-going, not so strict and caring only about the rules and would try to motivate the students more; Teach how to cram/memorize (learning techniques); Teachers will not write unjustified absences and students will be able to visit only the classes that they find interesting; Wishes related to the psychological climate in school: not to feel fear and discrimination at school; Not to be sidelined, being laughed at and bullied by classmates ever again.
Wishes about the future
Economic self-sufficiency: to have prosperous life (good job, high salary, home, family, social status); getting a job; To have good and well paid jobs, which will allow them to have "good life" – apartment, car, family; To work something they like (home-based job, own business, etc.); Having a driving-license and perhaps even a car of their own, having a profession and employment to pay all this; Family creation: making their own family; Dreams to have a family and kids; Thoughts about the change of a living place: some of them want to emigrate from their state; Thoughts about emigration; Thoughts about living in secluded places; To be independent by living alone in an apartment; Wishes related to parents: want their parents to stop drinking; More close contacts with parents.

Analyzing the results of the research it is obvious that there are more areas supporting positive behavior at school than negative areas. The statements of the students show that they like some school subjects especially those in which pupil are successful (physical education; sports). Another part of school activities is connected with practical workshops. It means that the learning content for students with emotional, behavioral problems and learning difficulties must be orientated to subjects keeping their interest to attend lessons and supporting their relationships with peers. As motivating factors for school attendance, learning of useful competences to find a good job, preparation for "life" were mentioned as well. These statements are pointed out by Spehrianazar, Ghasemi, Carvalho, et al (2017). Our research reveals that contacts with the school psychologist, school social educator, talking with people and having fun also motivate students to be at school. It partly denies the idea that students with EBLD do not want contacts with specialists or classmates. They need to talk, to discuss their problems and it is one of the ways of preventing early school dropout. The involvement in project activities, the need for mutual help among students, the opportunity to help others are the activities that show the need for appreciation, the need to have positive social contacts in spite of difficulties in the learning process and sometimes the fears to be cast out. All the abovementioned activities support the student's personal development in becoming more self-confident and determined; becoming more skilled in presentations and more creative. Positive behavior is supported by the students' understanding that competences gained in school would help them in the job career and in future relationships. Special attention is paid to the relationships with teachers and parents which could be described as talking about their worries with someone who can help and try to understand them and defeat difficulties, getting psychological counseling, not getting angry at them, talking to somebody and feeling secure, daring to ask teachers for help, knowing that there is something pleasant after finishing their

lessons and homework, promising of rewards by parents. These wishes were expressed talking about positive experience at school and planning students' future life activities.

A few areas were detected talking about the situations that do not support positive behavior at school. It was shown analyzing the research data concerning students' learning difficulties at school, weak and de-motivating facts (Table 3).

Table 3. Areas not supporting positive behavior

Difficulties at school
Lack of interest and motivation – it raises difficulties in focusing in lessons, boredom; Emotional dissatisfaction: the student dislikes school, does not like classmates, and does not endure them; Insecurity: is being bullied by the classmates, feels constant fear not to understand, to be humiliated; feels the teacher's detachment; Problems in learning the subject's content: homework, lessons are not interesting, too long, difficult to learn; students feel "insecure" in theory; Issues related to the teaching style: shortening of the lessons' explanation or talking too fast, oral examination in front of the class; teachers are not objective toward students; students are humiliated, forced to abide by the discipline; Too long working day at school: the day usually starts early in the morning and finishes late in the afternoon.
De-motivating aspects
School is pointless: teaching materials are not interesting; They find lessons not relevant to their interests and needs, repetitive and cannot find out how all this will serve them in the real life; Lack of development of practical skills; Students would like to begin to work instead of studying; They feel wasting their time; Complicated study programs: complicated study programs according to the abilities of the students; Students do not know what to do during the lesson; Too many requirements and tasks; Anxiety of the exams; Feeling anxious to get any graduation at all; Psychological climate at school: prejudice attitudes, intimidation, humiliation, bullying; constantly being vexed and distracted by classmates; provocations among students; Negative attitude from teachers: teachers are angry and do not like their work; teachers talking too quickly make the students feel that they do not understand the contents of the lessons; Teachers do not explain comprehensibly what to do and in which way in order to succeed; Unsupported learning environment: squalid school environment; Time pressure during lessons makes the students feel that they do not to understand the contents of the lessons.
Weak points
Negative attitude from others: being vexed and distracted by classmates; Being bullied and sidelined by classmates; unfavorable attitude to the students coming from the lower parts of society; Learning disabilities: impaired concentration; Feeling forsaken with memorizing problems; Problematic comprehension abilities; Behavioral problems: lack of discipline outside the school; talking too much during lessons; Lack of interest in general for social activities; Outside school problems; Bad influence of parents and friends; Problems in relationships with teachers: teachers' "helplessness" in managing teacher-students relations; Feeling helplessness and unbelief of teachers and school staff in the success of their own work.

The main aspects of learning difficulties occur when students face the need to keep attention, to demonstrate activeness during the lessons. Too long lessons, difficult content, high speed of learning were mentioned as well. Another aspect is emotional dissatisfaction conditioned by poor relationships with staff and classmates, insecurity at school and fears concerning academic fails. It is important to point out that emotional dissatisfaction is provoked by the teaching style and negative teacher's attitudes to students having EBLD (oral examination in front of the class; teachers are not objective toward students; students are humiliated, forced to abide by the discipline).

Not interesting and not understandable content of learning was pointed out as a de-motivating factor (complicated study programs according to the abilities of the students, students do not know what to do during the lesson, too many requirements and tasks, anxiety

of the exams, feeling anxious to get any graduation at all). Students indicate that knowledge gained in the classroom is hardly applicable in the real life and at the same time the lack of practical skills was mentioned. The teacher's behavior with the EBLD students is a strong de-motivating fact. Students were talking about double standards for those who have problems in academic achievements – prejudice attitudes, intimidation, humiliation, bullying. Sometimes students mentioned poor professional motivation of the teacher: teachers are angry and do not like their work; teachers talking too quickly make the students feel that they do not understand the contents of the lessons; teachers do not explain comprehensibly what to do and in which way in order to succeed. Students with EBLD face negative attitudes from classmates (being vexed and distracted by classmates, being bullied and sidelined by classmates, unfavorable attitude to the students coming from the lower parts of society).

Generalizing the research data we have revealed that the situation of EBLD is complicated and needs multidisciplinary approach. Among the problems that occur for the EBLD students, specialists, teaching staff, parents and society there are environmental and psychological factors that could lead to the solving of problems. The research has revealed that the problems the EBLD students face are common for all the countries that participate in the research. Their worries and troubles, their need to be recognized as persons, their future expectations presuppose the idea about some common personal features and style of life that society faces in spite of cultural and socioeconomic differences.

Conclusions

Students with emotional and behavioral difficulties are often described as mischievous, poorly educated, with lower school attendance, and this is influenced by lower learning outcomes, leading to lower secondary education and early school leaving. Early school dropout of these students have long-term negative effects on social development and economic growth

Behavior supporting areas were set up: subjects and activities that students like, diligence and ambitions to master difficult subjects, support and appreciation by the peer group; mutual help among students, acknowledgement and awarding, creating a positive relationship with teachers, classmates and parents; development of skills for the future, gained competences at school, ability to deal with the problems; applying of individual learning strategies; attention to students' hobbies; positive behavior of the teachers and good psychological climate in school.

Positive behavior is not supported by emotional dissatisfaction, insecurity, problems in learning the subject's content, issues related to the teaching style, complicated study programs, psychological climate at school, negative attitude from teachers, unsupported learning environment, negative attitude from others, behavioral problems.

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Summary

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The aspects of international experience on the analysis of the cognition structure of students having emotional, behavioral and learning difficulties have been presented. The main features of students who are not motivated for school attendance are problems in the family environment and behavioral manifestations that lead to social conflicts. Using theoretical approaches of cognitive and narrative therapy the method of the in-depth interview was applied. Twenty-one students from four EU countries at the age from 13 to 20 years took part in the research. It was set that the student's difficulties and strengths at school, de-motivational and motivational aspects, weak points, problems of positive self-evaluation, coping strategies, helping thoughts, advice and wishes about future are the main inner psychological problems that are reflected in the students' acting in their environment. The majority of early school leavers have emotional and behavioral difficulties and special educational needs. It is important to underline that the same problems usually are met in VET (Vocational Education training), because students with low learning motivation remain at risk to stay out of any education, training or employment forever. Vulnerable groups are especially affected: such as young people who have been in care and those with special educational needs.

The instrument of the in-depth interview conditionally distinguished the behavior supporting areas and the behavior non-supporting areas. Positive behavior supporting areas: strengths at school; motivational aspects; coping strategies, helping thoughts, advice; self-evaluation; wishes about school and the future. The areas that do not support positive behavior are difficulties at school; de-motivational aspects; weak points. The summarized research data obtained from different countries have been presented according to the behavior supporting areas and the behavior non-supporting diagnostic areas.

Positive behavior is supported by the students' understanding that competences gained in school would help them in the job career, in future relationships. Special attention is paid to the relationships with teachers and parents which could be described as talking about their worries with someone who can help and try to understand them and defeat difficulties, getting psychological counseling, not getting angry at them, talking to somebody and feeling secure, daring to ask teachers for help, knowing that there is something pleasant after finishing their lessons and homework, promising of rewards by parents. These wishes were expressed talking about positive experience at school and planning students' future life activities.

The teacher's behavior with the EBLD students is a strong de-motivating fact. Students were talking about double standards for those who have problems in academic achievements – prejudice attitudes, intimidation, humiliation, bullying. Sometimes students mentioned poor professional motivation of the teacher: teachers are angry and do not like their work; teachers talking too quickly make the students feel that they do not understand the contents of the lessons; teachers do not explain comprehensibly what to do and in which way in order to succeed. Students with EBLD face negative attitudes from classmates (being vexed and distracted by classmates, being bullied and sidelined by classmates, unfavorable attitude to the students coming from the lower parts of society).

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