QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COPING STRATEGIES AT PUPILS

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study of an intervention program for 3rd- and 4th-grade pupils. It offers pupils the posibility to define coping strategies, stressful situations for them and also those strategies used in school. There were also investigated the teachers and parents' point of view concerning the intervention programs for coping at school level. The investigative design implied a qualitative methodology represented by a thematic analysis realized by means of semi-structured individual interviews. The responses were grouped into categories such as: defining coping strategies, types of problems with which pupils are confronted, types of strategies used by pupils, suggestions and solutions, points of view concerning the optimization program. This stage of the study has demonstrated that young students have a very clear awareness of the problems with which they are confronted and also shown the need for intervention to find solutions.

Key words*: Coping, problem solving, strategies, stress*

1. Introduction

According to Rohrkemper and Corno (1988), an important result of education is for students to learn healthy ways of coping with stress. Stress management programs should therefore rank first in educational psychology. In fact, few researches on stress and coping in the educational environment are published, especially in the primary school environment (Pienaar, 2010), and stress management programs are almost non-existent. Morales-Rodríguez et al. (2012) also evaluated how children cope with daily stress and argued that it is understood in terms of daily life demands and disappointments and may adversely affect students' emotional development (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2012; Richaud de Minzi & Iglesias, 2013). This study highlights the importance of promotion strategies focused on problem solving, strategies involving emotional

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support, improving interpersonal relationships and adopting a positive approach to problems (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2016).

As most of the time it is difficult for specialists to know which are the types of strategies used by the pupils when they are confronted with stressful situations, in this study we investigated the types of coping strategies used by them and the need to implement intervention programs. This exploratory study offers pupils the posibility to define coping strategies, stressful situations and strategies used in school. Before considering possible intervention programs we had to identify pupils' problems, their way of solving them, their desire to benefit from intervention programs and also their point of view concerning the efficiency of an intervention program for 3rd- and 4th- grade pupils. We also investigated the teachers and parents' point of view concerning the intervention programs for coping with stress at school level. Qualitative analysis of coping strategies in the Romanian-Finnish School allows experts to obtain information about coping strategies approached by students to cope with daily stress related to health, family and school in a well-adapted and psychologically healthy social environment contributing to the creation of coping intervention programs.

The study responds to the minus existing in the specialized literature regarding the knowledge of coping strategies among students; such studies can be useful in an increasing number of situations and contexts, both for diagnostic purposes, as well as for psycho-educational guidance and intervention.

2. Research methodology

The investigative design came with the qualitative methodology represented by a thematic analysis realized by the semistructured individual interviews, as described by Hayes (2000) to identify common themes that emerged among the interviewed students. This was first achieved by familiarizing with existing literature specific to stress reported by students. To do this, we referred to the theorized categories as coping strategies in the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist-Revision questionnaire (CCSC-R1, Ayers et al., 1999).

2.1. Participants

The participants sample of the investigative approach had the following component: 30 pupils (15 girls and 15 boys) with the age between 9 and 10 years old, 10 parents, 10 teachers of 3rd- and 4th grades from Romanian-Finnish Secondary School.

2.2. Research instruments

To investigate pupils' opinions we used the semi-structured interview containing 6 open questions: What do you understand by the term 'coping strategies'? What are the problems with which you are faced most often in your daily life (at home, at school and in other places)? Give an example of a problem you have lately experienced? What have you done when faced with that challenge? What are the solutions that you use most often to cope with problems? What is your opinion concerning the coping strategies optimizing programme?

To investigate the opinion of pupils' parents and teachers involved in the research concerning the implementation of a coping program we used the SWOT analysis. There were taken into account the identified weak and strong points, threats and opportunities of the curriculum based on the optimization of coping strategies and there were gathered proposals and suggestions from teachers and parents.

2.3. Procedure

To identify the pupils' opinions we used the semi-structured interview with open questions for 30 pupils. This method of data gathering meant to build an interview guide with predefined questions, which offered the possibility to ask further specific questions for more detailed data. Filling in the interview took approximately 15-25 minutes. To test the hypothesis a qualitative analysis of their responses was realized.

There followed the analysis of the answers provided by the pupils' parents who were involved in the research concerning the program. It was also taken into account the evaluation of teachers' opinions concerning the particularities of a potential curriculum based on the optimization of cognitive coping strategies. We focused on finding weak and strong points, threats and opportunities of the curriculum based on the optimization of coping strategies and there were gathered proposals and suggestions on the part of teachers and parents.

We identified the pupils' opinions concerning the implementation of intervention programs by applying the interview on coping strategies awareness. This procedure allowed confidential interactions and the minimum concern for being judged by others. It took pupils 15-25 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. An interview guide structured the conversations. Firstly,   there   was identified the definition of 'coping strategies', in order to understand the extent to which pupils knew the term. Secondly, we asked pupils to share examples of problems with which they are often confronted. Then we asked pupils to offer an example of a problem with which they had been confronted in daily life, in the course of the previous two weeks.

After that, we asked the pupils to describe what they had done to solve the problem. Then, they were asked to describe solutions they use very often to solve the problems. In the end, we asked them to express their point of view concerning a coping strategies optimization program in school. We also investigated the opinions of 10 parents and 10 teachers concerning the optimization program, by filling in the SWOT analysis.

3. Results

The qualitative data were analyzed using the thematic analysis – as described by Hayes (2000) – to identify common themes, which showed up among the investigated participants. The responses were grouped into categories such as: Defining coping strategies, Types of problems with which the pupils are confronted, Types of strategies used by pupils, Proposals and solutions, Points of view concerning the optimization program.

3.1. Defining coping strategies

Regarding the meaning of coping strategies (*What does coping strategies mean?*), 21 pupils did not provide any answer and 9 pupils answered by giving examples of strategies they use when they are confronted with problems. The answers referring to coping strategies were split into five categories:

- calming down (e.g., A. S.'s answer: *"First of all, I calm down and then I sit with my mother and think about how I could solve the problem"*);

- engaging in game activities (e.g., C. R.'s answer: *"I play on my computer/watch Youtube – if I become upset at home; I play with another colleague if I become upset with other colleague at school"*;

- emotional expression – reconcilement (e.g., V. S.'s answer: *"I go and I reconcile with that person"*);

- problem solving (e.g., *"I solve the problem by the help of my mind"* - N. N);

- releasing techniques (e.g., *"I hit a toy and I calm down"* - N. A.).

Two of the participants defined strategies such as: "*solving something*" - I. I. and "*strategies mean to go to a person and tell that person not to do that anymore - C. A.*" (problem solving strategies and confrontation strategies).

3.2. Types of problems with which pupils are confronted

The answers concerning the types of problems (What are the problems with which you are most often confronted?) were classified into eight categories, following the analysis performed:

- disturbing classes by the pupils (N. I.'s answer comprises a summary of all the participants' answers: *"A colleague disturbs the class and so I get a low mark"*);

- conflicts with brothers (A. I.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I quarrel with my brother"*);

- fights with colleagues and friends (S. A.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I still fight often with friends and colleagues"*);

- quarrel with one's parents (O. A.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I quarrel with my mom almost always"*);

- bulling (A. P.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: "*I have a colleague who mocks me at school"*);

- concerns, worrying (V. S.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I am worried, very hard stuffs"*);

- homework (I. S.'s answer comprises the summary of participants' similar answers: *"When I have to do my homework)*;

- computer (A. F.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"Time spent on computer"*).

Among the 30 participants, there were just 3 who did not give any example concerning current problems; the rest of 17 mentioned problems with which they had been confronted in the past.

3.3. Types of strategies

Among the 30 pupils, three of them responded that they did not know how to solve the problem. The answers of the 27 participants - concerning what they had done to solve the problem (What did you do when you had that problem?) were classified into four strategies, as a consequence of the analysis: problem-solving strategies, self-control, avoidance strategies and non-adaptive strategies.

A number of 8 participants used problem-solving strategies and V. S.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I tried to solve it"*. A number of 4 participants used self-control and V. M.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I calmed*

down and I didn't care about it". A number of 7 participants used avoidance strategies and C. L.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I left him alone"*.   A number of 8 participants used non-adaptive strategies and *A. O.*'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I behaved badly and I expressed my emotions*".

3.4. Solutions to problems

The answers referring to solutions for the problems were grouped into eight categories: problem solving, refocusing on a plan, non-adaptive strategies (dropping out), avoidance, support strategies, emotional adjustment strategies. Out of the 30 solutions, six of them reflect coping strategies and refocusing on a solution plan. The following answers summarise the participants' answers:

"*I give myself some time to think of what I should do*" - *M. I.*; "*I think deeply to see where it started or what I could do to make everything all right*" - A. *R.*; "*I sit and I solve the problem with the person involved*" - L. V.; "*I think of several possible solutions and then I use the best of them*" - N.A.; "*I have tried to solve it*" - V. S.; "*I think about it*" - M. A.

A number of 5 participants gave answers which were grouped in the category of non-adaptive strategies (non-involvement, dropping out), and B. I.'s answer (*"I give up*") and that of S.H. ("*I don't know*") comprises a summary of participants' similar answers.

A number of 2 participants gave answers which were grouped in the category of avoiding strategies and T. T.'s answer *("I go to my room*") comprises a summary of participants' similar answers.

A number of 5 participants gave answers which were grouped in the category of support strategies and A. D.'s answer ("*I talk to my mom and my primary school teacher*") comprises a summary of participants' similar answers.

Examples of strategies of emotional adjustment: V. M.'s answer ("*I cry in my pillow, I count to 10*") comprises a summary of similar answers from participants who used emotional adjustment strategies.

3.5. Points of view concerning the optimization program

The answers referring to the point of view concerning the program (What is your opinion on an optimization program for problem-solving strategies?) were grouped into seven categories:

- personal self-knowledge (A. I.'s answer comprises a summary of the participants' answers: "*My opinion is that this program will help me with my life*");

- managing one's emotions (V. M.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"The program is useful, as we can better understand our emotions and facts"*);

- cognitive development (A. R.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"I think the class is important; it makes us think"*);

- social development (S. A.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: (*"Yes. It is necessary as we must stop the fights"*);

- emotional development (N.B.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: *"It teaches me about my emotions"*).

Five participants consider that the program is not important and seven of them did not express their opinion linked to such a program. Eighteen pupils consider that this programme will contribute to solving their conflicts related to self-knowledge, managing one's emotions, cognitive, social and emotional development.

We shall further present the point of view expressed by teachers, concerning the items of the SWOT analysis of the coping intervention program. The qualitative data were analyzed using the qualitative methods of constant comparison and analitical induction, in order to identify common themes which occured among the interviewed participants. The answers were grouped into categories such as: strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, threats. From the data gathered from the teachers of 3rd and 4th grades, we found that the strengths of such a program would improve the abilities of confronting stressful and difficult situations, would build self-esteem, decision making, creativity, assertiveness, problem solving, resources discovering; pupils have the opportunity to learn how to manage their conflicts with other pupils and adults. As far as opportunities are concerned, the teachers consider that such a programme could reduce the number of conflicts among pupils and that the activities would be interesting for them.

The answers of two pupils, A. D. and A. A., comprise a summary of participants' similar answers:

"The children have the opportunity to develop themselves, their self-knowledge; they can confront some stressful situations and learn to ask for help anytime they need" - A. D.

"If children learn how to solve their problems as of the age of 10, they will become honest adolescents, adults with critical thinking, which is what this country really needs." - A. A.

The teachers' answers concerning the weaknesses and threats focus on the lack of involvement of parents in such programs, due to their busy life. As it is not a school subject which exists in the

enrollment registers, it is considered not so relevant. Development programs for 3rd and 4th grades do not exist in public schools.

A. S. and S. O.'s answers comprise a summary of participants' similar answers:

A. S. considers that it is a need for "*a lot of consistency in applying this method, a long time to infiltrate these strategies into the child's personality*". S. O. considers that elder boys *"are more cautious towards such problems; it is difficult for them to express their feelings".*

Other threats are: overloaded curricula, high expectations of parents, too many hours spent by children at school. R. C.'s answer comprises a summary of participants' similar answers: "*a class with 12-14 pupils is too large to conduct such activities effectively*".

The parents' answers were grouped into categories such as: strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, threats. From the data gathered from the *parents* of the pupils of 3rd and 4th grades, we see that such a program is very necesary for the pupils' self-esteem and for teaching them to mediate various conflicts. Such a programme is an opportunity for pupils to learn the art of planning and solving problems and part of them consider that this program should be continued at the upper grades.

E. P. and M. M.'s answers comprise a summary of participants' similar answers:

E. P.: *"The development of the abilities to discover and learn about the relationship between the emotional and the rational*".

M. M.: *"Mobilisation of cognitive resources to facilitate efficient adaptation to stress*".

As far as the opportunities concerned, N. P. mentions as an opportunity of this program: "*building a coherent and full program of stress management".*

Strengths and opportunities reveal the benefit of developing the pupil's background. A. M.'s answer comprises a summary of the participants' answers: *"There is no effort for the parents", "the child trusts the psychotherapist, the program impacts the pupil's background and he/she does not perceive that he/she goes to the psychologist to correct something*".

The answers concerning weaknesses and threats can be grouped like that: the overloaded curricula, a low number of hours allocated to this programme, violating confidentiality, Romanian society, lack of acknowledgement about coping.

R. S. and E. P.'s answers comprise a summary of participants' similar answers:

R. S.: "*The overloaded curricula and the low number of hours allocated to this programme; the confidentiality of the pupil can easily be violated and he cannot take it serious the class activities*".

E. P.: *"It is not a permanent program"*; *"Personal development class which includes coping strategies is not available at every level of the schooling curricula, namely primary, secondary and high school; "Romanian society is insufficiently prepared to give credit to emotional intelligence, coping strategies, the importance of the possibility of some trauma to occur in connection to stress events"; "The superficiality of parents and educational sciences experts"; "Precarious education as far as coping strategies are concerned".*

Pupils' answers concerning coping strategies show the need for information and instruction. The interviewed pupils do not know much about cognitive coping strategies. The pupils easily illustrated types of problems with which they are confronted. A relatively small number of children use problem-solving strategies when they are confronted with problems and do not know the steps they should take. 70% of pupils want a programme to help them develop. The teachers' answers were solid arguments for implementing a coping intervention program.

3. Conclusions

The answers of pupils, parents and teachers provided an opportunity for reflection and, at the same time, further confirmation of the need to design and implement a curriculum (program) focused on optimization of coping strategies at pupils. This stage of the study demonstrated that pupils have a very clear awareness – starting with childhood – of the problems with which they are confronted, as well as the need for intervention to find solutions.

Limits and future directions

Future studies should analyze the efficiency of personal development curricula for grades 0-2, giving the specialist the possibility to create individualized programs of personal development for each grade together with a pluri-disciplinary team: programs of creative problem solving, programs of emotion management, programs of planning and organizing, cognitive development programs. The schools should make efforts to design practical ways for teachers and psychologists to promote coping strategies among pupils through educational interventions.

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