Practical aspects of the continuous training activities regarding the learning difficulties

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Abstract

The poor performance at school are often triggered by the inability of schools to accommodate to the individual differences, in case of poor conditions, even a small learning disability can transform into a major one, with dramatic impact on the child's entire life. The learning difficulties, most often, occur subtly, so that some children are not identified in time or are mislabeled as slow, lazy, etc. without assimilation capacity. As the information about this issue are insufficiently presented to trainers, there is a risk of confusion, labeling, frustration resulting in school failure, and especially in developing children's/students' emotional and social problems. The proposal and implementation of training programs is therefore imperative to train teachers about the necessary skills to identify and intervene effectively to improve and even eliminate the learning difficulties. This paper focuses on presenting practical aspects of training activities on this issue and on training / practicing skills necessary to support a quality education focused on the needs and each child's potential.

Keywords: learning difficulties, training trainers, skills, training programs, volunteering, efficiency.

1. Introduction

Learning difficulties are nowadays one of the key issues underlying the attention of teachers, parents and researchers, given the findings on the growing number of children / students who do not meet the academic requirements sufficiently, and the increasing number of people affected by this reality. Learning difficulties have multiple causes and, most often they occur subtly, so that some children are not identified in time or are wrongly labeled with non-assimilation, as slow, lazy or uninvolved. As this information about this issue gets quite difficult to trainers - teachers and parents, there is a risk of confusion, labeling, frustrations that have the effect of school failure, especially developing emotional and social problems for children / students. Teachers often feel disappointed, vulnerable, overwhelmed, disillusioned and ineffective, faced with these kinds of challenges.
But the poor performance in schools is often triggered by the inability of schools to accommodate to the individual differences and is known that in poor condition, even minor disabilities can have a dramatic impact on the lives of children. (C. Smith, L. Strick, 2011, p 17)

The proposal and implementation of training programs and various other activities and trainings to build teachers' the necessary skills to identify and intervene effectively to prevent, improve and eliminate learning difficulties is therefore imperative. It's needed, we believe, to truly achieve these targets to develop a “caring consciousness” to the needs of children / students who are in difficult situations, supported by dedication and commitment, by love, affection and faith.

2. An analysis of the needs for the teachers' training regarding the learning difficulties

The University Stefan cel Mare Suceava - Romania, has proposed a number of programs and activities to address the issue of learning difficulties. To determine the training needs of teachers and non-teaching employees focused on the needs of children / pupils with learning difficulties, various activities were carried out through the collaboration between the academics from the Faculty Science of Education at the University of Stefan Cel Mare-Suceava, methodists teachers from The House of Teachers Suceava, the specialized inspectors from the School Inspectorate of Suceava, specialists from the County Centre of Resources and Educational Assistance Suceava and from the Centre for Inclusive Education Suceava, such as: application of questionnaires focused on the need for training pre-university teachers on issues of diversity and learning difficulties in school, consulting pre-university teachers on the pedagogical aspects of children / pupils who have learning difficulties, the analysis of counseling programs and plans and of the proposed recommendations for training teachers, the study of the efficiently intervention on the learning difficulties and intervention in the remedial programs, studying trends on lifelong learning - "lifelong learning" - of adults, in accordance with the requirements of the European society etc.

All this support the teachers' need and the desire to train in education and training students who have learning difficulties to provide an optimal deployment of teaching, and these difficulties are prevented, alleviated and removed. To this end, the teachers must understand the specific of the difficulties in learning to form an objective mindset towards the learning abilities of children. The analyzes made at the county level reveals a relatively large number of children and students with various disorders / disabilities integrated into mainstream education that require differentiated and individualized treatment, curricular adaptations, personalized action plans, contingency plans, speech therapy. Most common disorders in students with learning disabilities are impaired attention, impaired general and fine motor skills with spatial information, difficulties in processing the audible and visual information, deprivation in developing cognitive strategies for learning, disorders of the oral language, a poor vocabulary, reading difficulties, writing difficulties, difficulties in mathematical activities, impaired social behavior, few social relations. Given the fact that the problems that cause learning difficulties don't have as single cause the language disorders, and these data are reported to the school population of only two cities, it can be concluded that the number of children / students who need specialized support is much larger and, therefore, conducting training programs is an absolutely necessary and efficient way to meet the needs of the school population, on the one hand, and of teachers, on the other hand.

Below there are some examples of training and support for teachers, ongoing programs, programs in the planning phase or programs in the evaluation phase for funding.

2.1 The program Impact - learning difficulties

Following these findings, we proposed a continuous training program of teachers from pre-university education, entitled Impact - learning difficulties, that wants to meet, on the one hand, the real needs of teachers who often face difficulties in the activities with children / students, it aims to familiarize and gradually sensitize teachers on this issue, with identifying the alarm signs announcing the presence of learning difficulties, the appropriation of study, proposing an educational partnership, etc; on the other hand, it responds to the urgent needs of children / students who have problems in terms of understanding the issues of space, time, planning and organization problems, problems with determining the basic idea of social perception, etc. and who need support in learning. The goal of the program is the formation and development of the necessary skills and competences of pre-university teachers for the effective conduct of education and training activities for children with learning difficulties., and the
objectives of the program include:
• Identifying ways to support students with learning difficulties to obtain academic progress, increase self-esteem, motivation, valuing and social integration;
• Enriching teachers' personal repertoire with strategies adapted to the individual needs of children with learning disabilities;
• Design and conduct training situations with methods and techniques to approach children with learning disabilities.
• Organize and implement individualized/ customized plans to correct, repair, improve / remove learning difficulties.

Promote a friendly school and a student-centered learning; To ensure a quality education, the program aims the formation and / or the development of pedagogical and teaching skills, counseling and assistance for the personality development, scientific and social disciplines by the proposal to study: Learning difficulties and differentiated education (discipline focused on understanding the problems regarding learning difficulties, identifying the cases and the appropriate action to support students and develop programs that meet their different needs). Teaching Communication (communication practice in terms of focus on the student and on the quality of the relationships between teachers and students) Pedagogical advice (empowering students in the efficient conduct of counseling children / pupils with learning difficulties and also their parents) School and community (students get familiar with the strategies to develop effective relationships between school and community).

The program's activities focus on promoting a results-oriented education and valuing the potential and uniqueness of children / pupils, on promoting a flexible school, open to the students' needs, able to respond to the most diverse and complex educational situations, also by structuring various educational offers, motivating for the people involved.

The training program's curriculum is personalized for the students' needs, it adapts the training issue at both the local and the origin of the target trainees, taking into account the level of knowledge and the needs of students. The program described is in progress, and the teachers participating in the training activities claim to have gained confidence in their own ability to cope with extremely complex problems such as those encountered in working with students who have learning difficulties and also with their parents.

2.2. The program Speech therapy elements

Given the results of the investigations that analyzed the teachers' training needs for this topic, we propose a training program titled Elements of speech therapy for preschool and primary teachers to largely compensate for the lack of speech specialists and to engage teachers in activities with the pupils and with students from primary school to identify different speech disorders and support children with such disorders or poor vocabulary to prevent learning difficulties that usually accompany them.

The program aims to organize some training workshops focused on knowledge and identifying the main characteristics of children / students with such learning disorders: discrepancy between ability and performance, academic difficulties, memory, social aspects, perceptual and motor skills, cognitive skills, attention, etc.; special exercises to identify the most common disorders: dislalia, dysgraphia, dislexical disorders, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, voice disorders, stuttering etc. and also general teaching methods of intervention in case of learning difficulties; activities of organizing and conducting counseling programs and also activities to practice effective communication, of training metacognitive skills, of recording the student's progress and personal and emotional development strategies.

2.3. Volunteering - a form of effective practice

Another way of training in the issue of learning difficulties is involving students and teachers in volunteering in various organizations, associations or foundations, with specific education activities, counseling, and therapeutic activities with children / students who have different types of disabilities with impact on the learning activities.

The graduate and the postgraduate students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University are involved in such volunteer programs, developing activities to support children in day care centers (the orphans) organized by FARA Foundations, Save the Children Foundation and Ana from Suceava, activities consisting of:
supporting the children in solving homework and implementation of remedial actions like - recreational activities - coordination games, musical activities, communication, relationships that provide children the opportunity to express and act in a friendly atmosphere, an opportunity to develop confidence and a positive image of self, - participation in extracurricular activities; - educational projects, visits, trips, festivals etc. - support for parents with children who have different types of disabilities by organizing / coordinating meetings for socialization with children in kindergartens and schools.

Students, postgraduate students / teachers are thus involved directly in pedagogical intervention programs under the supervision of specialists, and the impact of such experiences is extremely valuable for the training in teaching career in general and, in particular, the problem regarding the learning difficulties

2.4 The program Tele-mentoring - counseling and professional development of teachers

As the period beginning in any profession, and therefore the teaching career, is often fraught with emotion, fear, even insecurity in taking decisions or carrying out activities under optimal conditions, there should be a regular contact with mentors or specialists to support those in their early career. And for this support to be effective, we chose a technology equipment such as videoconferencing that provides real opportunities in training and development.

The proposed project - Tele-mentoring involves advising beginner teachers, particularly those in disadvantaged areas (remote villages, who have more difficult access to specialist support, in areas with minority and so on), and those working with children / students who have difficulties in learning through videoconference in order to provide in real time and efficiently the necessary support. Specialists - mentors, teachers, psychologists, counselors, speech therapists, methods can communicate with the teachers that need support via videoconference, according to an established schedule, offering expert advice depending on the practical problem they face / the - eg the problems related to diagnosing certain disorders, organizing an intervention, curricular adaptation or solving conflicts program, etc.

In this way, the teacher receives a fast feedback , expert advice, receives the best solutions in critical situations, can communicate openly to share their own experiences and, thus, can improve their educational experiences. The support offered to teachers during their beginnings and not only provides some comfort and safety, and those who win are both teachers and especially children, their parents, the school community etc. We believe that developing a mentoring system that uses this technique may have real advantages and can be adapted both in initial teacher training, in the development of teaching practice stages, in the exchange of best practices etc.

2.5 The program to support children with immigrant parent

In Romania, migration is a large and obvious phenomenon with obvious negative effects on families and especially on children who remain at home, nowadays there is a large number of children/pupils with parents abroad who work and support their families, but national education policies are not targeted enough for these categories of students who need special education services. Similar is the situation of children who return home after certain periods of time where they lived with their parents and were trained in different educational systems, and when they return they have adjustment and social-emotional problems and therefore learning difficulties. These children feel abandoned, often develop states of shyness, nervousness, fear towards school in general and depression which sometimes influence the activities and hence the school results. Experts believe that "the aggression of the children belonging to the home alone generation, their refusal to accept that they have problems, the pain caused by the lack of parents makes them at maturity a generation of social non-integrated adults (HC Catalano, 2009, p.39) if, we add, there is not an effectively intervention in this regard.

In the county of Suceava there has been a number 300 of children with one or both parents working abroad, left in the care of grandparents, relatives or even the state. The proposed program focuses on the needs of this category of children / students and consists of educational activities for recovery, compensation or social, emotional, moral and cognitive redress, preceded by activities of training the teachers focused on courses and trainings regarding pedagogical knowledge of children with the immigrant parents, building strategies centered on differentiation and individualization, learning based on cooperation, reflective strategies, cognitive and meta-cognitive reflections on their own educational strategies, enabling learners / teachers to work with domain experts:
psychologists, speech therapists, counselors, support teachers or doctors, but also with representatives of the local community.

Recently, the Ministry of Education in Romania concluded a partnership agreement for the implementation of the project *Mother loves you* belonging to *Associazione delle Donne Romene in Italy* - ADRI, which aims to help children to communicate with their parents who work abroad, audio and video (through Skype available in public libraries). This way, there is a healthy emotional and social development of those children who, without their parents could become vulnerable (www.edu.ro). This initiative is extremely beneficial and will have a truly valuable impact in working with this type of children. We believe, however, that expanding the free access to the communication system in the school area, not only in public libraries and also the genuine involvement of teachers and counselors to facilitate the meetings between children and parents through this virtual application could streamline the efforts in this direction. Based on these findings, we conclude that the program can be improved by the proposal of extending the area of the activities for the teachers' training with empowerment sessions in informing and counseling the children, but also the parents who are for long periods away from their children.

3. Conclusions

The need to conduct continuous training programs and some activities of enabling teachers to work with students who have learning difficulties is imminent. The described programs focus specifically on forming and developing some essential skills, we believe, to cope with professionalism to these challenges, we mention below some of the highlights:

**Methodological skills:**
- Designing curricular pathways adapted to children/pupils’ with learning difficulties need; The proposal of flexible and creative learning situations according to the child/pupil's individual profile; The adaptation of the methodological and procedural, material and temporal resources, to the specific of learning difficulties; Building and implementing differentiated and individual teaching strategies with students who have learning difficulties;

**Communication and relation skills:**
- Valuing the social relations of the class and school to promote cooperative learning, the differentiated use of communication strategies in order to improve the educational process; Adapting to different and/or unforeseen situations for the operational solving of the educational problems;

**Psychosocial skills:**
- Forming/developing strategies o stimulation and monitoring of the social interactions with students, Forming psycho-relational capacities necessary for constructing a suitable framework for the effective educational activities; Identification and proposal of effective strategies for school-community partnerships to ensure participation and school success.

**Career management skills:**
- The participation at the own professional development by capitalizing the opportunities and selecting the most effective strategies; The affirmation of a personal teaching style and a personal development of the career;

We believe that a special attention given to this area by the competent institutions - universities, training centers etc. in initial and continuous training of teachers with professionalism and efficiency is a priority and a response to the ethics of responsibility for the future, to which we must all resonate.

References


