

POST-PANDEMIC EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY INTERVENTIONS IN ROMANIA: PRE-UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

The pandemic, the abrupt suspension of the state of alert, the war in Ukraine and the socio-economic crisis it has created, have taken a heavy toll on all of us, and we are still feeling the negative effects! Rapid changes in the situation, the risk of illness and loss of life, experiencing illness or loss of loved ones, isolation, lack of access to cultural activities, online or hybrid schooling, anxiety and depression have had and continue to have a negative impact on the development of children and adults alike. In such a context, the motivation for learning activity of young schoolchildren has often decreased as has their ability to concentrate and perform academically. The quality of teaching-learning-assessment has decreased and teachers' performance has also changed substantially. Conflicts between children, parents and teachers have multiplied and school seems to have become a torment for everyone.

Keywords: stress; anxiety; depression; motivation for learning activity; development - learning, lifelong learning; educational psychology; parenting; counselling or psycho-educational intervention; teachers; students; parents; school

We are all living in difficult times. Children, teenagers, adults, the elderly, we have all been through and are still going through new life contexts. The pandemic, the sudden suspension of the state of alert, the war in Ukraine and the socio-economic crisis it has created, have taken a heavy toll on all of us, and we are still feeling their negative effects! Rapid changes in the situation, the risk of illness and human loss, experiencing illness or the loss of loved ones, isolation, lack of access to cultural activities, online or hybrid schooling, anxiety and depression have had and continue to have a negative impact on the development of children and adults alike. The ever-changing approach to learning in the pandemic, the overwhelming emotional impact of the war at the border and its negative

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effects have often short-circuited pupils' motivation for learning activity, decreased concentration and academic performance, diminished the quality of teaching-learning-assessment and teachers' performance and facilitated conflicts between children, parents and teachers.

The school became a theater of war, an amalgam of negative emotions and a real torment for everyone. The lives of many parents and children are under the pressure of school requirements, and the lives of many teachers are strewn with personal, professional, financial and often familial dissatisfactions.

We have thus been overwhelmed by a lot of anxieties and stresses that have more or less activated our resilience mechanisms, of adapting in a positive way to unfavourable situations. Thus, those of us whom the pandemic has found to be more psychologically balanced have managed to have a greater capacity for resilience. People with a less balanced structure, associated with some symptomatology or with a seriously disturbed psychological structure developed a lower resilience capacity with negative impact on personal, family, professional and community life. Our children, who are in close emotional contact with us, have also, to a greater or lesser extent, accessed resilience mechanisms, adapting more or less well to the new and difficult situation we are going through.

So, the uniqueness of the human being and its individual reaction to the context caused by the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the socio-economic and political crisis and more recently the threat of global nuclear war, the energy and gas crisis are important elements to be considered. All those involved in education - children, young people and adults (parents, teachers, non-teaching staff) - are affected by these developments. And, in the realm of so many changes, our country has also introduced a new way of organizing the school year, a modular one, with holidays and different grading systems for academic performance, without working on changing school programmes that are too dense, abstract and not sufficiently adapted to the psychological changes we have gone through in the last almost three years, nor to the psychological age-specific characteristics of children who have gone through all these challenges with their families. Children need stability, perhaps changes in education should have waited. From a psychological point of view for children and adults it might have been better. Today we often see in offices a confused representation of how the new school year is going, how content is taught, how students are graded, and how assessments and proficiency exams are taken. Additional anxieties and stresses.

A multi-directional educational act, which considers the whole person, with his or her personal, family, professional (for students, school) and community well-being, is urgently needed. Psycho-educational interventions should therefore focus on children, teachers and their parents. It's hard for everyone! But recent neuroscience research shows that each of

us is a building under construction. The nerve cells that shape us as individuals are in a process of constant organization. Neurologically, we are subject to repeated changes brought about by countless stimuli from the surrounding world. At any age we can learn to live differently! We develop resilient behaviours, we react in a positive way to unfavourable situations in order to adapt actively and creatively at all levels of life: personal, family, professional, community!

Therefore, the psycho-educational offer of the school psychologist should consider all these changes in the lives of our clients: students, parents, teachers.

As far as children are concerned, psychoeducational interventions could consider:

- Psycho-diagnostic assessment to highlight the vulnerabilities but also their resources in relation to school activities but also the level of quality of life given by the activities carried out at personal, family and community level;
- Reducing the stress caused by the particularities of the family system;
- Development of capacities for self-connection, expression and verbalization of emotions and personal needs and activation of resilience mechanisms;
- Developing effective and lasting learning skills;
- Developing motivation for learning activity;
- Development of empathic capacities and socio-relational skills;
- Developing assertiveness, creativity and emotional intelligence etc.

These interventions can be carried out both individually by addressing the whole family system and in groups, by age levels, with specific psycho-educational intervention methods and techniques such as: drawing, painting, clay modeling, plasticine, kinetic sand, collage, puppet play, dramatization, storytelling, metaphorical scenario, music and dance.

The problems encountered by children in primary school may be different from those of children in the middle school or high school years and in individual/family psycho-educational interventions they must be addressed from the perspective of the characteristics of the family system. School-related difficulties can be overcome by children and adolescents when they are realistically supported by their family members (parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc.). A common denominator seems to be a profound decrease in motivation to know, to learn, to discover, to do homework. Effective and thorough learning skills seem to be affected at all levels. And the number of hours of tutoring seems to be immense for both young and old. This has a boomerang effect, with children and teenagers overloaded with school work and a lack of age-specific recreational activities. Managing personal agendas with those of parents to bring benefits

on other levels of life: personal, family, community, setting school goals, performance standards between parents and children/teenagers seem to be effective solutions to break the vicious circles that maintain the student's lack of interest in the learning activity required by school. Private school students seem to be more fortunate. The safety and comfort offered by the school, frequently between 8.30 and 16.30/17.00, the community created by age level, the time spent together for study, meal, recreation, the material base existing and handled in the classes, maintain more strongly the interest of children and teenagers in school and in the learning activity in general. In addition, teacher responsibility and the level of involvement seem to be higher than in state schools and high schools. The Romanian curriculum is equally dense and less practical. Here again, the teacher's art of extracting the essentials from the textbook content, of using interactive methods for thorough learning can make school more interesting and the learning activity easier. The unnatural hours in the middle of the day, between 11.30/12.00 and 17.00/17.30/18.00/19.00, the absence of lunch from students' daily life can bring great problems to students' relationship with school and learning activity. For young children, the logistics of before-school, school, afterschool until 18.00 / 19.00 can be extremely tiring, beyond the different styles of supervisors or teachers working at the same time with children of different levels, from different schools, with different themes and textbooks. Resistance to effort, level of concentration and attention, frustration, tolerance levels are on top of extremely low anxiety, depression and high stress levels. Teacher/supervisor cooperation becomes extremely poor, and children together with their parents end up completing their homework after 8 pm. Such a regime is not likely to motivate a child for school work!

Psycho-educational interventions for parents can also focus on identifying the level of quality of life, the problems they face and the state of mental health altered or not by a series of anxieties, stressful situations or depression. Psychological counselling for a good management of everyday life, for a real connection to one's own self, a good management of marital, parental, filial parenting relationships and of professional and community life is urgently needed. Individual or group sessions focusing on information about the psychological age-specific characteristics of children/teenagers are also extremely useful. Knowledge of the negative effects on the psychological development and mental health of children/teenagers who have experienced the pandemic is also very important for parents. Such information enables adults to better understand what their children's needs are and to provide the necessary support to meet them. Frequently, parents are aware of the need for security, parental presence and affection, the need to play and/or the need to escape from the sphere of overloaded responsibilities, which children have unwittingly and unintentionally taken on. Lack of motivation for learning activity, lack of time, lack of effective learning skills, low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their own ability to

cope with school demands, stress of doing homework and the need to avoid confrontation with learning activity at school, interaction with colleagues and the teacher are also information that parents become aware of their child/ teenager with the help of the educational psychologist. Together they then build and agree on strategies for the child's/ teenager's recovery, for overcoming the problematic situations they face. Changes occur in the family system, in the way they relate to educational actors at school and in their interaction with the child's/ teenager's school and extracurricular activities.

Psycho-educational offer for children and parents can be supplemented by intervention strategies for teachers. Of course, the receptivity for such services will be found in private settings where teachers and parents alike have the will, desire and financial resources for such psycho-educational intervention. Let us not forget that, beyond their profession, teachers are also people who have experienced and are experiencing the same stressful situations specific to the contemporary context of life. The offer of personal optimization for a good management of one's own life should be within the reach of every teacher in the salary package which could bring a huge plus to the way of relating to pupils and their parents. A teacher with a balanced emotional life has a greater availability for the increasingly varied demands of young children, who seem increasingly difficult to control and guide along the path of knowledge. Also, providing discussion and guidance sessions on the main difficulties in the teaching-learning-assessment process in the classroom with an educational psychologist can substantially increase the quality of learning for children/teenagers. It should not be forgotten that there are many primary school teachers trained through the retraining process, with three years of university studies, often done at a distance or modular, with very few hours of teaching practice. Five years of teacher training, five years of studying psychology, pedagogy and pedagogical practice, with assistance, guidance, design and support of lessons with the best/renowned teachers, give a special quality to the training of those who start out on the path of knowledge for young children. And among teachers, for reasons of low pay, lack of optimal conditions for carrying out activities, we often find teachers who enter teaching with grades of all embarrassment: 1, 2.50, 3, etc. the only condition for occupying a post in education is to take the tenure exam. You don't get tenure, you get a substitute anyway, given the large number of vacancies in education. Unattractive, unproductive seems to be the job of being a teacher today. Therefore, a continuous, additional psycho-educational training of primary, secondary and high school teachers would certainly increase the quality of teaching-learning-evaluation. And in addition, addressing children and teenagers considering the possible negative effects of the post-pandemic period, the war in Ukraine, the socio-

economic crisis and the threat of nuclear war worldwide can increase students' well-being and implicitly their motivation to know, to know, to learn. Reducing anxiety, depression, stress, lack of security in students must be in the attention of psychologists, parents and teachers in order to increase readiness for learning activity and academic performance while increasing the quality of life for all!

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