

PARENTAL COUNSELING AND THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract: The education of children with SEN requires a multidisciplinary as well as a multidirectional response, the independence at various levels can only be achieved under these conditions. Family involvement in this process is essential. Therefore we believe that attending a counseling program, parents of children with SEN will get efficient attitudes and educational skills, related to the needs of their children. The study made on a group of 30 parents of enrolled children in a special school, highlights both the children educational needs and changes in parents educational conduct.

Key words: parental counseling, children with special educational needs, education, autonomy

1.1. Introduction

Given the complex reality of the education of children with SEN, a reality that requires not only providing information and acquiring skills, but also needs specialized involvement in order to acquire autonomy, it is required that parents should be involved in this process. As a

consequence of this situation, they also need counseling. The premises of this counseling approach are the following (Dughi, T. 2014) :

- the relationship between counseling members - counselor and counselee (which can be an individual, a dyad, a small group or a large group) - a relationship that aims to identify and mobilize the resources of the counselee, with respect to the development of autonomy in adaptation and integration; the basic feature of the relationship is the alliance and collaboration;
- the counseling content - troublesome situations - given the fact that we define the problem as a conflicting situation caused by the difference between what somebody can or thinks she/he can to achieve and what is required to achieve; the answer will lead to self-discovery, self-awareness, balance, acceptance, development, self-determination;
- the dynamic nature of counseling – the relation is dynamic, goal-oriented and purposeful active, both the counselor and the counselee should have proactive behavior, to use all their resources and bear personal responsibility for their own actions.

1.2. Defining the terms

The concept of “special educational needs” intends to overcome the traditional classification of children into different categories of disabilities/ handicap, using a “no-category” approach for all children. This collocation outlines a sequel of special problems in the educational system, from serious disabilities to mild learning disabilities /disorders. Disabled/Handicapped children have the same basic needs as all the other children: they need affection and security, self-confidence, responsibility and independence, etc. However, they have at the same time, some particular, special needs. Another synonymous expression used for

"special educational needs" is "special requirements / special needs", a collocation which has an extensive meaning, including not only children with learning disabilities or disorders, but also children coming from different social classes and unprivileged families, delinquent children or sometimes children coming from certain ethnic groups. (Dughi, T., Roman, A., 2008)

The modern use of counseling and guidance cannot ignore parents and family involvement. The family along with school plays a key role in developing and maintaining the wellbeing and the bio-psycho-social balance, so necessary to any human being. In most situations, the family is the major landmark in shaping a certain career option for children. Parents are children's primary and most powerful source of learning, emotional support and security. Family may be or may become for a child, an element in developing the personality, a role model to imitate, a stronghold or a battlefield, an area of aggressive narrow-mindedness, stubbornness and monarchy (M. Jigău, 2001).

The major role of school is to support families, so that they trust their own resources and deal with the difficulties they face. The family involvement in improving the education of children with SEN has led to many positive changes, often in radical approaches. In Romania, the families and associations of persons or parents of children with disabilities have contributed substantially, especially after 1990, to the enactment of some actions aimed to improve the quality of schooling for children with SEN. One of the most important tasks of the counselor is to liaise the school - family relation. This requires the existence of a strong relation, based on trust and mutual respect, honesty and good communication.

Parental counseling activities will result in a better understanding and knowledge of the child; in building and developing a positive perception of the personality traits of the child, a perception based on a more efficient apprehension and understanding of the child's behavior; in acquiring educational skills to stimulate the ability to socialize of the child; in getting a good balance between parental educational tasks and looking after the child; in using non-violent strategies to manage the conflicts that may appear; in increasing the children's learning performance; in reducing school absences; in improving child school adjustment; in reducing the risk of having bad behavior. (Dughi, T. 2014)

These aspects will be achieved if parents will manage to acquire minimum of criteria concerning the child, for example: a child needs as much affection, confidence and mental stimulation for his/her psychical development, as he/she needs food for the body; a child has certain rights which should be accepted and respected by society and by parents; a child is a person with special, different character traits in agreement with the age-related development; to educate children means to acquire autonomous behavior, in compliance with the living rules and at the same time personal assertion.

1.3. Objectives and hypotheses of the study

The main objective of the study is to highlight the role of counseling the parents, in order to improve their attitude to educational activity of children with SEN. In this regard, it was designed and implemented an effective counseling working with children program, in order to improve family relationship and the quality of parental educational activity.

The objectives of the study are:

- To define the parental involvement in educational activities of a child with SEN;

- To develop and implement an effective counseling program for parents of the children with special educational needs;
- To identify the impact that this program has on the parental educational conduct.

The hypothesis that we relied on is the following: psycho-pedagogical activities of the parents of children with special educational needs, leads to training, improving and developing the best educational behaviors of children with special educational needs.

1.4. Sampling

The target group of this research was composed of 30 adults, fifth grader's parents, children with special educational needs, attending **"Sfânta Maria" Special High School Arad**. The parents come from various social and professional backgrounds and their children have various behavioral traits. In this respect some have mental deficiencies, some have behavioral disorders.

1.5. Case study research instruments

In order to accomplish the study, we applied a 15 items questionnaire (including both closed and open questions) related to the degree of involvement and ways of participation in specific educational activities of children and relationships they develop, as well as and a counseling program for families with children with special educational needs. The program consisted of eight group meetings with parents, during which were applied questionnaires and were performed activities, having topics such as: emotional and intellectual needs of the children, ways to encourage learning, leisure with children, limits and opportunities in the collaborating with school.

1.6. Presenting the results

The questionnaires were applied in two phases, in order to accomplish the case study, before and after attending the program of psycho-pedagogical guidance for parents. The program lasted two months, the second semester of 2013 – 2014 school year. The results presented here are a selection of the data obtained and refers to the attitude of parents towards school and extracurricular learning activities of the child.

How often do you meet the teacher during the school year?

The second question of the questionnaire was aimed to capture how is the parent - teacher relationship, specifically whether there is interest in the activities of the child, the problems that arise during the school year and the needs the child has.

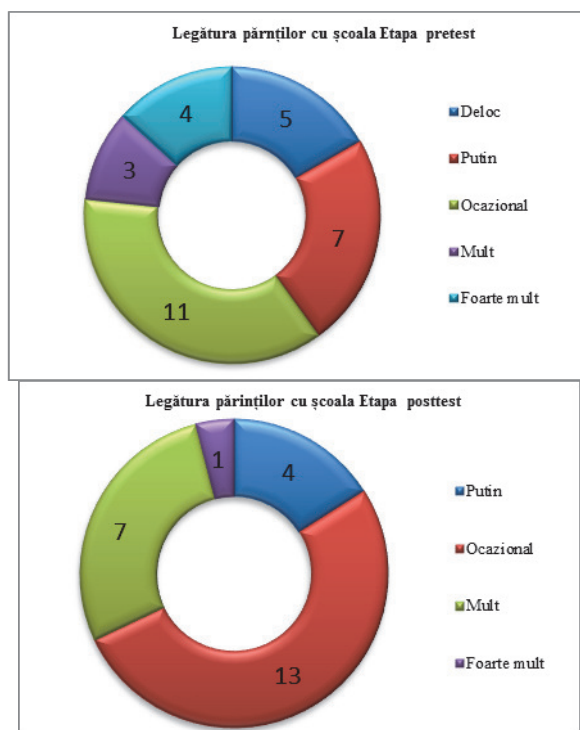


Fig. 1. Charts concerning the frequency of school meetings among parents during the two phases

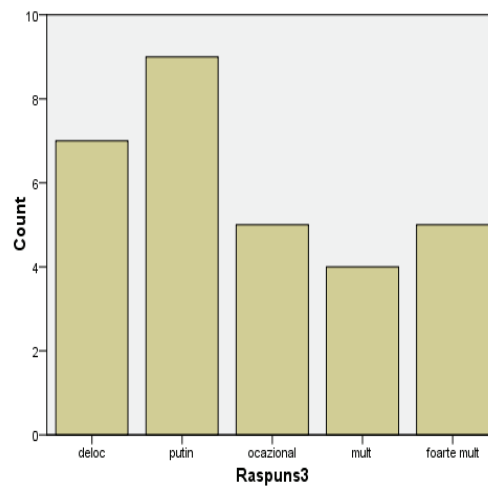
There is a big difference between the answers given before and after the attendance to the pedagogical and counseling program;

First of all, the "*not at all*" answer, wasn't chosen any more after the second phase, which means the parents had changed their attitude towards the child and began to show a greater interest towards the teacher in charge with the child with special educational needs.

The increasing number of "*sometimes*" and "*a lot/ much*" answers suggests a growing interest in the parent – teacher relationship, compared with the answers in the first phase.

Are you interested in your child school activities?

The third question seeks to determine the extent to which the parent is interested in the child's school activities; this is a multiple choice question, with possible five answers: *not at all- little- sometimes- a lot/much-very much*.



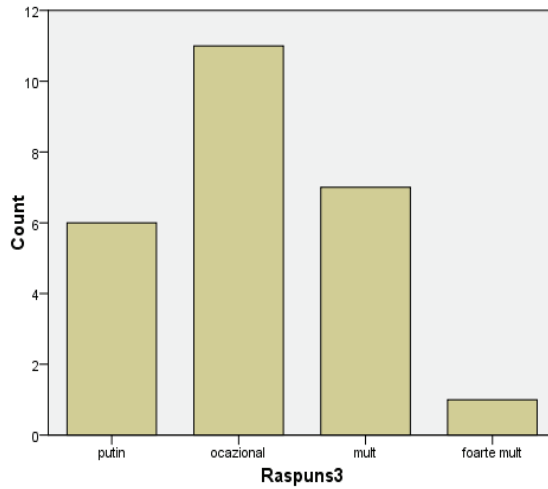
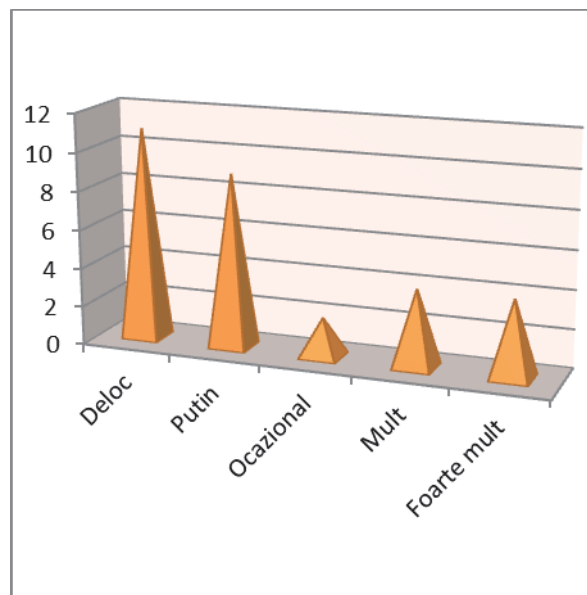


Fig. 2. Comparison charts concerning the parent interest in school activities (before and after the test)

As a result of different answers during the two phases of the research, there is a change of level four. It should be mentioned, that after attending the counseling program, the "not at all" answers was not selected by any of the parents, which shows an improvement of their interest in the activities carried out by the child at the school.

Do you get involved in your child extracurricular activities?



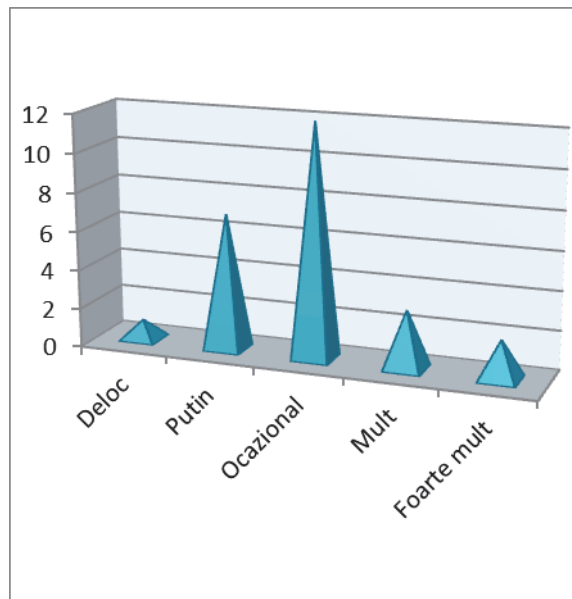


Fig. 3. Comparison charts concerning the parent interest in extracurricular activities (before and after the test)

Comparing the answers during the two phases of the research, there is a big increase, from a low involvement of parents in child school activities, giving the *"not at all"* answer, to choosing, in the second phase, the *"sometimes"* answer; this is just one result of parent participation at the counseling program, which led to a greater concern about the child's extracurricular activities and an improvement of parent-child relationship.

List three of your child's activities in which you have actively involved in.

This is an open question, so the parent could choose the answer; if during the first stage of the research, just a few parents could list three activities of the children, during the second phase the situation changed and each of the respondents listed three activities .

Most parents actively involved in activities celebrating Mother's Day, carnival, open lessons, First of June, special occasions parties

(Christmas party, Easter etc .), doors open Day, they got involved in organizing trips and also in children's recreational activities (games, walks in the park, hiking in nature).

Which are the qualities of your child?

The question allows the parent to say what best fits the child. Parents have described the child as being "good", "obedient", "sociable", "funny", "sensitive", "clever", "generous", "hardworking", "loving", "friendly" "generous", "beautiful". Noteworthy is that, if in the first phase there were three parents stating that the child had no quality, during the second phase there weren't such answers, all parents describing children with affection and warmth; it can be seen an improved parent - child relationship.

What do you expect from your child's teachers? Write them in order of your priorities.

This question intends to outline the essential features that a teacher must possess; it is an open question, to which each parent has the freedom to give the answer considered appropriate.

There were various answers, ranging from focusing on child activities, teaching him/her intellectual skills such as: writing, reading, calculating, playing with him, the teacher should be fair and punctual, should take care of the child, understand his/her affection, should teach only basic skills, should not to be aggressive and establish a friendly relationship, should be communicative.

Most answers have emphasized three key features that teachers should have: understanding, patience, having the ability to educate each child.

Does the child want to perform activities together with the parent?

The question aims to surprise the bond between the child and parent; it also aims to find out to what extent there is a connection and how much the child wants to perform activities with the parent.

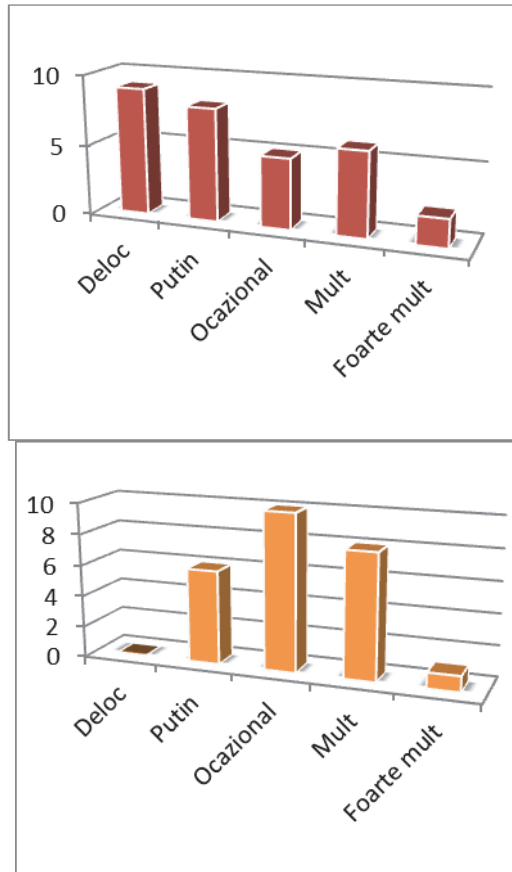


Fig. 4. Comparison charts concerning the child - parent common school activities (before and after the test)

If during the first phase of the research there were "*not at all*" answers, during the second, this answer was no longer chosen by any parent, which suggest the desire of the child to perform activities together with his/her parent; "*sometimes*" answer is chosen by many parents in the second phase of the study

Conclusions

Getting the parent more responsible and involved in curricular activities designed to optimize and increase the quality of educational and therapeutic process is necessary and important, both for the child and the teacher. After centralizing and analyzing the data in the questionnaires there were drawn a number of conclusions, all proving the need to implement counseling programs for parents of children with special needs in kindergartens and schools.

The findings show that after taking part in the counseling program, there is an improvement in the parent – child relationship and parent – teacher relationship; the parent has now a close emotional attachment to his/ her child, keeps in touch with teachers, is concerned about evolving capacities of the child, he/she gets involved in school and extracurricular activities of the child; there is a better understanding of the child, the parent's feelings are of warmth, love and friendship.

The counseling situations have made easier the self-knowledge and interrelationship processes, each person enjoying the new relationships established within the group, getting support from the others, taking notice of the favorable, open environment, the trustful climate. These have led to active involvement, exchange of experience and personal sharing. Since the first meeting, it has been taken notice of the effectiveness of these meetings, each member having the feeling that she/he is understood, has felt secure and valued. Now, they feel more confident in relation with the child, they know better his abilities and desires and have learned new ways to overcome certain life situations.

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