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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AND SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENT SCHOOL FAILURE

Abstract

School failure is an important aspect of students' development and their progression through the process of education, as well as for the functioning of the education system itself. The paper reports the results of a qualitative study exploring the relationship between primary school teachers' perceptions of student school failure and the solutions suggested for its overcoming. Obtained data pointed to the differences of the solutions for the problem of student school failure suggested by teachers with respect to their own time perspective (an orientation towards past, present or future). There were also certain differences in the suggested solutions for the problem of student school failure depending on teachers' conceptualisation of school failure (poor grades or misbehaving), but these differences were less prominent. It has been concluded that it is needed to include the knowledge about the role of personal time perspective into in-service teacher training in order to raise teachers' skills for coping with the problem of student school failure.

Key words: Student school failure, time perspective, conceptualisation of student school failure, teachers, primary school, qualitative study

Introduction

Student school failure is as an important variable for their progress through the process of education, as well as for the functioning of the education system itself. Poor grades, lack of knowledge and misbehaviour make the educational process difficult, thus narrowing the possibilities for students' professional and personal development and their social integration (Džinović, 2010; Malinić, 2009; Maksić & Đurišić-Bojanović, 2004; Spasenović, 2008). A number of studies have shown that student school failure, reflected in poor grades, is connected with disruptions of instruction, absenteeism from the school, negative attitudes towards learning, teachers and parents, as well as with a negative self-perception, low self-esteem, a sense of helplessness, etc. (Gašić-Pavišić, 2005; Malinić, 2009; Milošević, 2004). On the other hand, among students who fail in school there were children with high creative capacities (Maksić, 2010).

The factors that essentially affect student school achievement comprise family context, school context and students' personal features (Малинич & Милошевич, 2007; Milošević & Malinić, 2007). School failure is most commonly defined as a failure of an individual to develop and use his/her own potentials (Malinić, 2009). However, practitioners often treat student school failure as an unfavourable, even a pathological phenomenon attributed to the student (Džinović, 2010). For example, students who fail in school were perceived as "perpetrators" or "victims of circumstances" by school psychologists and pedagogues, whose job should actually involve participation in solving the problem of student school failure (Gutvajn & Ševkušić, 2013). Attributing school failure to students is reinforced in the context of

the findings of the research studying the effects of negative evaluation: the persons with low self-esteem were motivated to confirm the negative image of themselves (Bodroža, 2011).

Student school failure can be considered as their own personal choice aimed at providing resistance to school demands (Džinović, 2004). The prevailing discourse on school failure, obtained in the discussion with underachievers, included the following: the school did not provide a secure path towards the professional success in life; the school was not a context in which underachievers could fulfil themselves; underachievers were not interested in what was happening at school; teachers were not interested in underachievers (Džinović, 2009). Another study, dealing with the life priorities of underachievers, has established that the construct of acceptance by peers was the core construct for being successful in life (Gutvajn, 2010). At the same time, the majority of students who failed said that school achievement was their most significant life priority! It has been concluded that teachers should work systematically on raising students' motivation for school learning and the continuation of education.

The qualitative study on the significance of student school failure for their teachers has pointed to two main topics: the perception of student failure and suggesting the solutions for its overcoming (Maksić, 2014). The majority of teachers reduced the problem of school failure to poor grades and perceived it as a current problem happening here and now (with the dominant orientation towards present). Almost always, the teacher was perceived as the key agent in pedagogical interventions aimed at solving the problem of student school failure. The focus of these interventions was to implement instruction based on engaging the students and producing tasks suited to their capacities, interests and preferences. The suggested intervention for overcoming student school failure most often referred to changing the teaching and learning methods and the behaviour of the teachers. Additionally, one half of participants used words such as 'I think' or 'my opinion is' which implied personal involvement that was interpreted as ascribing higher personal significance to the student school failure (Spiel & von Korff, 1998). Still, other half of participants did not show that type of personal involvement in their answers.

Apart from the dominant concept "student school failure is poor grades" (65.8%), two more concepts were present in teachers' answers: "student school failure is misbehaving" (13.2%) and "student school failure is poor grades and misbehaving" (21.0%). There were noticed three time orientations of teachers in their answers: the present, past and future. The prevailing present-orientation (67.5%) was concentrated on finding the way to overcome student school failure in the current situation. The orientation towards past (15.8%) started from the assumption that there were causes preceding the student school failure which had to be revealed. The orientation towards future (16.7%) pointed to the goals because of which students should be successful in school. The variations in teachers' concepts of student school failure and their time orientation were an incentive for conducting the following study.

The research problem in this study referred to the way in which teachers' perceptions of student school failure affected the solutions for overcoming school failure that they suggested. Two research questions were defined:

- 1) What is the relationship between teachers' concept of student school failure and the suggested solutions for its overcoming?
- 2) What is the relationship between teachers' time orientation and the suggested solutions for overcoming student school failure?

Method

Participants: Research participants were teachers (N=105) and school psychologists, pedagogues and headmasters (N=9) from five primary schools in urban and rural areas in Serbia. Participants' age ranged from 22 to 64 (42 on the average), and the majority of participants were female (80.7%).

Materials and procedure: Participants were asked to consider an open-ended question: Imagine the worst possible student, who does not know the subject matter, who misbehaves, who isn't interested in anything, won't study and causes problems. What would you do with him/her? How would you motivate him/her for learning? Participants provided answers anonymously on a blank sheet of paper.

The obtained answers were subjected to thematic analysis guided by data and discussed in Maksić (2014). Consequently, only basic pieces of information about the coding process that are relevant for the present study are summarised here.

Two main topics identified in participants' answers were perception of student school failure and suggestions for overcoming student school failure. Within the perception of student school failure, the analysis revealed two subtopics: the conceptualisation of school failure (poor grades; misbehaving; poor grades and misbehaving) and time perspective (orientation towards past, present or future). Within the suggestions for overcoming student school failure, three subtopics were revealed: activity holder (the teacher, other key holders, the teacher with other key holders); the type of intervention (a pedagogical approach, a psychological approach, the pedagogical and psychological approach combined, a systemic approach); the subject of change caused by the intervention (the student, the teacher, the student and teacher together, a broader environment). It was perceived that some participants answered in the first person, while the answers of others were impersonal. Answering in the first person was interpreted as a higher level of participant's ego-involvement in the issue, including higher sensitivity for the problem of student school failure and higher personal responsibility for its solution.

The process of coding will be illustrated by two examples:

Example 1: I'd give a task to the student to explore why it would be important to learn something that will be useful for him, for example, to obtain a driving licence¹ (A personalised answer; school failure is poor grades; the study participant oriented towards future; the student is activity holder; the intervention is pedagogical; the teacher is subject of change).

Example 2: Conversation with the student; looking for causes of this kind of behaviour; giving tasks appropriate to student's capacity² (A non-personalised answer; school failure is poor grades and misbehaving; the study participant oriented

¹ Dala bih zadatak da istraži zašto bi njemu bilo važno da nešto nauči što bi njemu bilo korisno, npr. za polaganje vozačkog ispita (original answer in Serbian).

² Razgovor sa učenicom; pronalaženje uzroka takvom ponašanju; davanje zadataka koji su prilagođeni mogućnostima učenika (original answer in Serbian).

towards past; the teacher is activity holder; the intervention is pedagogical and psychological combined; the teacher is the subject of change).

Data analysis: Frequency and percentage analysis of participants' responses about the possible practices for overcoming student school failure was carried out with respect to their conceptualisation of student school failure and personal temporal orientation. Comparisons were made only at the level of per cents because of the nature of the available data.

Results and discussion

The comparison of the suggested practices for overcoming school failure provided by study participants who conceptualised student school failure as poor grades, as misbehaving or their combination revealed a few differences among these three groups of participants.

The only case where the participants holding the concept "student school failure is poor grades" differed from the participants holding the concept "student school failure is misbehaving" or those with the concept "student school failure is poor grades and misbehaving" was the one referring to the subject undergoing change during the intervention aimed at solving the problem of student school failure. Those participants who held the concept "student school failure is poor grades" considerably more frequently answered "the student and teacher together" (30.7%) compared to the participants with the concept "student school failure is misbehaving" (20.0%) and those with the concept "student school failure is poor grades and misbehaving" (12.5%).

The majority of differences in perceiving school failure and the suggestions for its overcoming occurred between those participants who held the concept "student school failure is misbehaving" and those with the concept "student school failure is poor grades and misbehaving". The former were mostly past-oriented (46.7%), expressed higher ego-involvement in their answers (60.0%), and most frequently suggested only the "pedagogical approach" (40.0%) or only the "psychological approach" (33.3%) for solving the problem of student school failure. On the other hand, the participants with the concept "student school failure is poor grades and misbehaving" were largely present-oriented (54.2%), provided more impersonal (62.5%) than personal answers, and most often suggested a combined "psychological and pedagogical approach" for overcoming the problem of student school failure (41.7%). The pedagogical approach was focused on the changes of instruction and didactics, while the psychological focused on counselling and other kind of psychological treatment for the student.

Once we compared the suggestions of research participants dominantly oriented towards past, present or future for resolving the problem of student school failure, a number of differences among these three groups were revealed.

The majority of differences in the perception and the suggested solutions for overcoming school failure appeared between future-oriented and past-oriented participants. Future-oriented participants answered personally more frequently (73.7%); most often held the concept "student school failure is poor grades" (73.7%); largely advocated "the pedagogical approach" in overcoming school failure (42.1%), and most commonly saw "the student and teacher together" as the subject of change aimed at overcoming school failure (42.1%). On the other hand, past-

oriented participants were less personally involved in their responses (16.7% answered in the personal form); they most commonly held the concept “student school failure is poor grades and misbehaving” (50.0%); they favoured “the psychological approach” in overcoming school failure (44.4%) and most often perceived “the teacher” as the subject of change aimed at resolving the problem of school failure (44.4%).

It seems that past-oriented teachers perceived student school failure as a complex phenomenon, involving poor grades and misbehaviour, but at the same time answered impersonally, focused on the psychological intervention and saw the teacher as the activity holder and the subject of change in the intervention. The teachers oriented towards past perceived the problem of student school failure in all its complexity, but one can wonder whether they set too high demands to themselves in relation to its overcoming. Special attention should be paid to the belief of these teachers that they are the ones that should change in order to solve the problem of student school failure. A possible constructive direction of these changes should be towards acquainting the teacher with the implications of their beliefs and providing encouragement in redefining their attitude towards student school failure within their role as a teacher.

An expression of higher personal involvement in the problem of student school failure by providing more frequent answers in the first person in future-oriented teachers is a promising finding. It is interesting to note that the future-oriented teachers were more focused on poor grades within student school failure, which may point to their more realistic approach and a concentration on the part of the problem that is more important and more urgent for them. It may also be a result of a better and more rational assessment of the meaning of this problem, based on their awareness about the responsibility and expertise of teachers for this aspect of the problem. Consequently, future-oriented teachers preferred the pedagogical approach as the type of intervention and perceived the student and teacher together as the subject of change aimed at solving the problem of student school failure. It can be assumed that future-oriented teachers had more consistent and more realistic attitudes towards the concept of student school failure and their own role in coping with this problem.

Time orientations evident in teachers’ perceptions of student school failure can be related to the time perspective theory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999; Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004). Time perspective is a basic aspect of individual subjective experience which is demonstrated as a relative dominance of past, present or future in a person’s thought. A negative view of the past causes aversion and carries pessimism, while a positive view reflects a glowing, nostalgic view of the past. A positive view of the present implies hedonistic enjoyment in the current moment, and a negative fatalistic is based on the belief that the future is predestined and uninfluenced by individual actions. The future-orientation is characterised by planning for and achievement of future goals. Academic failure of children of low socioeconomic status is related to their present orientation, while educational environment is future-oriented (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). On the other hand, the prevention of school failure can be successful primarily in future-oriented children.

There are several limitations to this study that have to be considered when making generalisations of the obtained results. A convenient sample was used,

which, besides teachers, comprised school expert associates and management. Larger and more differentiated samples of teachers, expert associates and school management should be used because of the different roles they play in the educational process. It is also necessary to study the differences in the beliefs of class and subject teachers. The second group of study limitations refers to the use of a very simple instrument that pointed to the importance of teachers' time perspective for their attitude towards student school failure. It would be desirable to apply the instruments measuring the time perspective, such as Zimbardo's inventory (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Relevant sources of data can be obtained by focus groups discussing student school failure and by an individual study using an interview, too.

The research study presented in the paper was a small qualitative study, which only pointed towards some relations rather than confirmed them. Further research is necessary, but it is clear already that teachers should be introduced to the factors that can shape their perception and behaviour in the classroom, such as the personal time perspective. The majority of research participants were present-oriented, which is in keeping with the findings of the study on the time perspective of Serbian citizens (Kostić & Nedeljković, 2013). In addition to teachers' perspective, it is important to investigate the time perspective of students who fail in school. How can we make compatible the time perspective of teachers and students who fail in school? How can we arrive at an optimally balanced time perspective on an individual level, where the past, present and future component are interwoven and flexibly utilised depending on the demands of the situation and person's needs and values?

Conclusion

The findings of the study dealing with the relationship between teachers' perception of student school failure and the solutions suggested for its overcoming have pointed to the conclusion that the solution of the school failure problem is under the influence of perception. Teachers' engagement is more determined by their time orientation than by the concept of student school failure, perhaps because of the reason that the conceptualisation is also influenced by time perspective as a basic individual feature. Educational implications of time perspective in perceiving student school failure in order to overcome the problem of student school failure can be derived on at least two levels: from the need to introduce the teachers to the phenomenon of time perspective and its influence on individual's opinions and actions to the need for different approaches and designing different programmes of in-service teacher training for teachers with different time perspectives.

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