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Dyslexia and Traumatic Experiences

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Edgar Galindo

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An Intervention Program for Children with School Failure Problems

Abstract. School failure is a chronic problem in many developing countries and also in some developed ones as Portugal due to factors like cognitive deficiencies of children, an inadequate family environment, low SES and bad teaching methods or school organization. The problem persists in spite of many applied measures. It is important to develop effective and simple intervention strategies which are able to cope with the problem at an individual level independently of the cause. The general objective of the following study is to develop cognitive-behavioural training techniques to help children with problems of school failure. 6–12 years old children attending ISCED 1, with academic difficulties because of family problems, social exclusion or poor schooling were trained. Cognitive-behavioral techniques that have been widely used to train persons with intellectual, sensorial, physical or social deficiencies were applied. Results are evaluated in terms of % of attained objectives, time and (subjective) teacher satisfaction. Some results of individual children are shown. Training programs seem to be successful independently of the (mostly unknown) cause of failure or the trained school subject.

Keywords: cognitive-behavioural techniques, school failure, disadvantaged children.

1 Introduction

School failure is a main problem in Portugal and in many other countries. Data published by the European Union (Eurydice, 2011) show that Portugal had the highest retention rate at primary school (ISCED 1) in 2001–2008, but Spain and France have also got the problem. These and similar data are the first signs of an urgent need for intervention at ISCED 1 in order to look for a solution. School failure has often been defined emphasizing the misbehaviour of the child. Faubert (2012) offers a more operational definition: "...school failure, (is) understood as the failure of schools and the school system to provide the appropriate level of, and adequately defined services for, all students to be successful" (p. 4). Common manifestations of school failure are leaving school before ending education, successive failure leaving to a décalage between school year and the chronological age of children (rate of retention) and referring children to special education. Educational agencies have proposed several causes, like cognitive deficiencies

of children, an inadequate family environment, low SES, bad teaching methods or schools. Consequently, several strategies have been applied, like more pre-school education, adapting school to children needs, better teachers, technicians & teaching methods, better relationship between school and social environment and family (Faubert, 2012). They are all probably right, because a real solution implies an intervention at all levels. Nevertheless, the problem persists. One main contribution of Psychology to solve the problem is developing differential teaching methods for individual children. Now, in treating an individual case, the cause of school failure is not the most important point; indeed, most of the time you can only suppose a set of possible causes. At an individual level, it is important to develop effective and simple intervention strategies to cope with the problem independently of the cause. The general objective of this study has been to develop cognitive-behavioural diagnostic and training techniques to help children with school failure problems. The publication of handbooks for teachers and parents with simple and efficient programs is a main goal. School success was defined in terms of a set of skills proposed by teachers; school failure was then understood as a lack of one or more of these skills. Consequently, the specific objectives of this study are: 1) to develop intervention techniques for ISCED 1 based on school defined skills, 2) to apply systematically training programs to attain those skills, and 3) to publish these techniques.

2 Literature

Cognitive-behavioural techniques have been applied widely to treat persons with different disorders. Training children with intellectual, sensorial physical or sensorial deficiencies has already a long history. A set of intervention tools to train a large variety of skills, especially in children, has been developed (see Miltenberger, 2012), including specific learning disorders (Levingston, Neef, & Cihon, 2009). School failure problems have been analyzed by Adelman and Taylor (1993), recommending the use of behavioural techniques; Hallahan, Kauffman and Lloyd (1999) and Wallace, Larsen, and Elksnin (1992) identified several causes of school failure, pointing at the absence of language, social and cognitive previous skills (precurrents), as an obstacle to learn reading, writing and mathematics. The important role of precurrents has been confirmed by Carroll, Snowling, Hulme and Stevenson (2003), Connor, Son, Hindman, and Morrison (2005) and Leppänen, Niemi, Aunola, and Nurmi (2004). Last but not least, Galindo, Galguera, Taracena, and Hinojosa (2009) have applied cognitive-behavioural programs in Mexico to train slum children with intellectual, sensorial, or social deficiencies; this is the basis of the work done in Portugal, explained in this study.

3 Method

3.1 Participants and setting

Participants in this study were low SES 6–12 years old children attending ISCED 1 (1st, 2nd and 3rd school year), referred by teachers because of school failure of different origins (family problems, social exclusion or poor schooling). Especially trained Psychology students worked as tutors on a 1x1 basis. Each tutor became responsible for evaluating and training a child during a semester (15 weeks). Until now, this intervention program has had two phases: A first phase was carried on in Lisbon with 13 children of low income families (2006–2007) and 80 children of Cova da Moura, a slum-like area of Lisbon, inhabited mainly by immigrants (2007–2008); a second phase is presently going on in Alentejo, an underdeveloped rural region in Portugal, where 57 children have been treated since 2013.

3.2 Instruments and materials (training programs)

Each training program has roughly the same structure: 1) A general objective and a set of behaviourally defined specific objectives, 2) a definition of precurrent skills, 3) training phases and/or steps, 4) setting, 5) procedures (shaping, model training, instructions, etc.), 6) quantitative evaluation (% of correct responses and/or attained objectives), 7) motivational aspects. The following programs have been developed as a basis for further adaptation to each individual case: 1) Basic Behaviour (Precurrents): Self Care, Motor Coordination, Discrimination of Forms & Colors, Pre-reading, Pre-Writing, Verbal Behaviour, Temporal & Spatial Relationships. 2) Academic Behaviour (1st, 2nd & 3rd school years): Reading, Writing, Environment, Mathematics, and Portuguese. 3) Social Behaviour.

3.3 Procedure

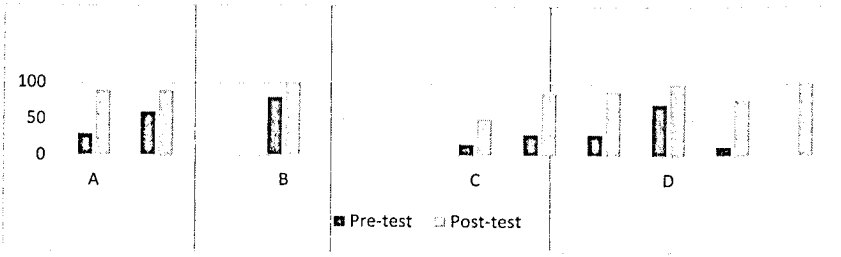
Each child was evaluated individually, looking of the existing and failing skills, according to the learning aims defined by his/her teacher; the core of the evaluation is a direct behavioural observation, but an analysis of existing reports on the child is also included. Evaluation proceeded as far as possible, trying to identify lacking precurrents to academic skills. A list of problems was made for each case; on this basis, a hierarchy of intervention aims was defined and an individually tailored program for each skill was designed. In the first phase, training programs were applied 4 hours a week during at least one semester on an individual basis (1 tutor x 1 child); in the second phase, time was reduced to two hours per week. A token economy was introduced (Ayllon & Azrin, 1968). The level of success of each training program was evaluated in terms of a) % of attained objectives

(or correct responses to a program), b) training time, and c) (subjective) level of satisfaction of the teacher. A child was due to attain at least 80 % of objectives (or correct responses) in order to be considered successful. As a result of this individualized procedure, the nature, duration and amount of trained programs greatly varied from child to child.

4 Some results

A handbook containing intervention programs and results of the first phase is ready for publication (Galindo, in press). Therefore, I will show as an example some results related to the second phase, emphasizing that the main interest is to show the effects of training in each individual child. *Figure* 1 shows the results obtained by four children in school year 2013–1014, independently of the trained subject. The percentage of correct responses obtained in a pre-test (in black) and a post-test (in grey) is shown. In all cases, there is an improvement in the post-test compared with the pre-test. Child A had improvements in two subjects (30 % to 90 % and 60 % to 90 %); child B advanced from 80 % to 100 % in the only trained subject; child C shows mixed results in two subjects, from 16 % to 50 % in one (good, but still not successful) and from 30 % to 87 % in the second; child D showed great improvements in general, from 30 % to 89 %, from 72 % to 100 %, from 13 % to 78 % (almost successful) and even from 0 % to 100 % of correct responses.

Figure 1. Individual Results Obtained in Some Training Programs by Four Children



5 Disscussion

Results show an apparent improvement of academic behaviour in all cases, as a probable consequence of intervention. Similar results have been reported by authors treating school failure with cognitive-behavioural techniques (Carroll et al., 2003; Connor et al., 2005; Leppänen et al., 2004). Teachers reported significant positive changes in all cases, but sometimes they complained a child had improved

its behaviour but still had academic problems, because some children were trained in precurrent and/or social behaviours rather than in reading & writing. These results seem to show applied programs are successful to train a set of skills, whose absence may cause school failure problems. Notwithstanding, more research is needed with other children, skills, ages, etc., in order to make a sound contribution to the solution of school failure at an individual level.

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