LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS OCCURING DUE TO UNFAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS: THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS

Rita Raudeliunaite
Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

Vida Gudžinskienė
Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

Abstract. *The objective of the study, which is presented in the article, is to identify learning difficulties of primary school pupils occurring due to unfavourable environmental factors on the basis of the experience of pedagogues. Problematic study question: What learning difficulties of pupils resulted in by unfavourable environmental factors do primary school teachers encounter? Qualitative research type was chosen for the study. In the study, the method of a semi-structured interview was used. The study data were processed by using the method of content analysis. 12 pedagogues participated in the study.*
The study findings revealed that primary school teachers encounter three different types of learning difficulties of pupils occurring due to unfavourable environmental factors: academic, social, behavioural and emotional.
Academic difficulties should be associated with a reduced interest of children in their environment, the lack of knowledge and experience, the lack of curiosity and desire to learn something new, a lower level of preparedness for school, attention retention problems, passivity when performing tasks, distrust/doubts regarding his/her abilities, fluctuation, regress or stagnation of a child's progress (learning achievements), reduced interest in learning and poor learning efforts when performing tasks, the lack of learning motivation, getting late to classes or missing them.
Social difficulties are associated to the lack of communication skills (contact establishment, politeness, attention when communicating with others, discipline, self-regulation, conflict resolution) and activity organisation and cooperation skills (ability to prepare tools for a specific activity, consistency when performing tasks; the performance of tasks to the end; the self-evaluation of activity results; involvement in a group activity; to listen to and hear what others say, consulting with others, permission to express their opinion give to others; ability to receive a different opinion and to express their opinion politely, avoidance to downgrade others, offering assistance to others and assistance solicitation, if need be; uttering compliments). The study revealed that primary school teachers also encounter with various behavioural and emotional difficulties.
Keywords: learning difficulties, primary school, pupils, unfavourable environmental factors.

Introduction

Unfavourable environmental factors can be understood or equated with risk factors, the impact of which is widely researched by Lithuanian and foreign scientists. A risk factor is any effect or influence that increases the probability of a problem occurring or the probability of an increase of the current problem or the likelihood of its maintenance (Whitney, Renner, & Herrenkohl, 2010; Christens & Peterson, 2012). The aforementioned authors note that the risk factor in children's development or their combinations create opportunities for the undesirable consequences of their development, such as dropping out of school before completing the 10th form, behavioural problems, the violations of law, the use of psychoactive substances, etc.

Risk factors may be individual characteristics (internal) and properties or environmental conditions (external). Unfavorable environmental factors are environmental conditions or circumstances that inhibit the child's development or even lead to a risky behavior. M. K Gabalda, M. P.Thompson & N. J Kaslow (2010) identify the following environmental factors: the loss of one of the parents due to divorce, separation or death, living in a neighborhood which is characterised by a high level of criminality, poverty, the poor availability of educational, social, health care etc. services. P. R. Smokowski (1998) further classifies these factors into direct ones, that is, the circumstances or interactions in which the person is involved (the microenvironmental region): inappropriate upbringing, peer pressure, etc. and indirect, in which the individual does not participate, but which affects his development and interactions with his loved ones (meso-environmental and macro-environmental regions): a high level of criminality or unemployment, poverty etc., problems in the neighbourhood, territorial or school community (Smokowski, Mann, Reynolds, & Fraser, 2004). Many of the negative phenomena are related and their effects have cumulative properties, i. e., a certain problem is usually determined by a combination of several negative factors.

Unfavourable growth conditions, poor environment, a lack of knowledge and experience increase the risk of failure in learning, complicate the development of both social and learning skills. Studies conclude that children growing up in unfavourable conditions are characterized by poor academic achievements, they perform tasks worse, have little interest in their environment, are identified as having a lack of knowledge and being passive when performing tasks (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007). Children growing in an unfavourable environment have less knowledge, experience, are less dutiful and responsible, less mature in respect of their age, have psychosocial problems and adaptation difficulties more often (Cicchetti & Toth, 2015).

Many scientists (Juodaitytė, 2002; Berns, 2009; Liobikienė, 2009; Grusec, 2011; Pinquart, 2017 etc.) investigate the family influence on a child's psychosocial development. The authors emphasise the quality of relationships with parents, on which a child's knowledge of the world depends, the peculiarities of communication with other people, the ability to establish and maintain successful social relationships with peers. Close emotional relationships of parents with their child are an important factor in his physical and mental development (Samošonok, 2013).

In view of the theoretical and practical relevance of the topic and the fact that there is a lack of research, which analyzes the learning difficulties in pupils arising due to unfavourable environmental factors, it is pertinent to carry out research in this area. It is particularly important to identify the learning difficulties, which arise from unfavourable environmental factors, in primary school, because in the absence of timely assistance to the child his psychosocial development may be impeded. It is noteworthy that there is a lack of research in Lithuania analyzing the learning difficulties of primary school pupils, which arise from unfavourable environmental factors. Problematic study question: What learning difficulties of pupils resulted in by unfavourable environmental factors do primary school teachers encounter? Research goal is to identify learning difficulties of primary school pupils occurring due to unfavourable environmental factors on the basis of the experience of pedagogues.

Research methodology

Research methods. Qualitative research type was chosen for the study. In the study, the method of a semi-structured interview was used. This article overviews problematic question of the study: What learning difficulties of pupils resulted in by unfavourable environmental factors do primary school teachers encounter? The obtained data were analyzed by using the content analysis method. The qualitative content analysis was performed in the following sequence (Creswell, 2009): the repeated reading of the content of transcribed interview texts, the distinction of meaning elements in the text analysed, the grouping of the distinguished meaning elements into categories and sub-categories, integration of the categories/sub-categories into the context of the phenomenon analysed and the description of their analysis.

The sample of the research. A criteria-based sample was used in the study. The informants were chosen according to the following criteria: 1) primary school teachers working with 3rd-4th form pupils, 2) teachers with at least 5 years of work experience.

The study was conducted in the September – October of 2018 in the primary schools. 12 pedagogues (all women) participated in the study.

Ethics of the research. Personal permission of the informants to take part in the research was sought. The researchers obliged themselves to the research participants not to divulge the information related to the organisation and the informant. The principles of anonymity, volunteerism and benevolence were followed. The teachers of primary schools were acquainted with the goal of the research, the interview questions, and the importance of a reasoned reflection on their experience.

Analysis of research results

The study took interest in what learning difficulties in pupils, which are determined by unfavourable environmental factors primary school teachers encounter. The study findings revealed that primary school teachers encounter three different types of pupil learning difficulties determined by unfavourable environmental factors: academic, social, behavioural and emotional.

When analysing the research data, the following academic difficulties in primary school pupils, which arise due to unfavourable environmental factors, were identified: a decreased interest in the environment, the lack of knowledge and experience, the lack of curiosity when exploring the environment, lack of awareness of the environment, inferior preparedness for school, attention retention problems, passivity when performing tasks, mistrust and doubts regarding their abilities, fluctuations in the child's progress (achievements), the decline or stagnation of progress, a decreased interest in learning and poor learning efforts when performing tasks, the lack of learning motivation, being late for school or truancy (Fig.1).

The informants associate academic difficulties in pupils with a decreased interest in their environment. It is influenced by the lack of educational stimulation in their families: "when parents do not read books to their children, do not attend exhibitions, museums or other events with them they are not in the habit of being interested in their environment" (K). The lack of educational stimulation in families also determines other academic difficulties: a child's lack of curiosity, inquisitiveness when exploring his environment. The informants pointed out that school "is attended by children whose natural curiosity and inquisitiveness are suppressed due to strained relationship in the family, because they are afraid to ask, and, if they ask, they do not receive answers from their parents" (E). Consequently, in the longer term, the child, without receiving educational stimulation and support from his parents, loses the motivation to learn. It is also noteworthy that there are children, who not only fail to receive answers to questions arising to them, but they are also disparaged for asking: "I have already told you..." (B). With negative experience, the child, although he is encouraged by his teacher to ask questions, does not ask. According to the

informants, „when looking at the teacher as an adult person he is afraid to be not heard, misunderstood, disparaged and/or humiliated" (B).
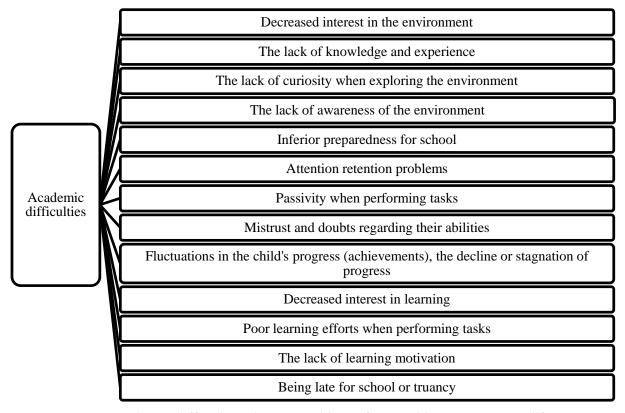
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Figure 1 **Academic difficulties determined by unfavourable environmental factors**

The lack of knowledge and experience is also associated with poor cultural home environment: „the lack of didactic games, children's books also determine the fact that the child possesses poor knowledge about the world around him, does not have the experience of the world exploring" (I).

The teachers also admit that the preparedness of some children for school is inferior: "not all the parents take their children to pre-primary education groups regularly" (C), "children, who live in families experiencing risk factors, are accustomed by their parents to skip pre-primary education group allegedly because of illness…"(H), "poor home environment..." (F). Poverty in families, inferior living conditions are one of the reasons for children's learning difficulties. Unfavourable growing up conditions in the family, the lack of emotional relationships with parents do not create conditions for a favourable development of the child (Garbarino, 2017).

Having analysed the responses of the informants, it has been established that the problems related to attention retention also determine academic difficulties. On the one hand, the teachers emphasise a child's inability to concentrate both "due to an undeveloped skill to concentrate" (G) and due to negative experiences

in their closest environment: "due to inappropriate parental lifestyle, the child does not have ensured conditions to get adequate sleep, so it is hard for him to concentrate at school as well" (A). On the other hand, according to the informants, "when the teacher works with a large form it is hard for him to give time for individual work with the child, who has problems with attention retention" (L).

The study participants pointed out that children from unfavourable familial environment are characterised by self-distrust and lack of trust in their abilities: "some children even do not begin to perform a task, because they do not trust themselves" (D). Consequently, the lack of trust in themselves is an obstacle to perform tasks, to participate in various activities both at school and outside school.

The pedagogues also underlined passivity in pupils when performing tasks. According to the informants, "there are children, who perform their task only then when I am standing next to them, they require constant attention" (K).

Another academic difficulty is fluctuations, decline or stagnation of a child's progress (achievements). According to the informants: "the child's achievements fluctuate due to strained parental relationships, an inappropriate behaviour with the child in the family, in the peer group" (F), "due to pedagogical neglect of the children" (C). Thus, it can be concluded that when there is not a sufficient number of educational assistance specialists and/or teachers' aides at school, whereas the teacher works with in an overcrowded classroom and has children with special educational needs, it is difficult to render timely assistance to the child. Therefore, as the study has shown, another academic difficulty is encountered – a decreased interest in learning. According to the informants, "when the child encounters difficulties and neither parents nor educational assistance specialists help the pupil and the teacher to overcome them the child's interest in learning decreases, as well as his efforts to perform tasks" (G). When parents do not appreciate learning and transfer responsibility to the teacher, in the long run, the pupil's learning efforts to perform his tasks grow weaker.

The study revealed that primary school teachers also encounter the lack of learning motivation in pupils determined by an unfavourable microenvironment in the family and at school: "the lack of positive encouragement, boost and praises from their parents" (D), "bullying by peers, non-acceptance, rejection and the like." (I), „the lack of individual approach towards the child in the lesson" (B), "I am creative, I invent loads of tasks, but when you work with 24 children there is no possibility to come up to each child and to help him" (E).

Child's academic difficulties also arise when he is late for school or skips lessons. It is noteworthy that primary school pupils' being late for school or truancy is associated with the lack of parental responsibility, dutifulness and time management: "parental irresponsibility and their lack of dutifulness is the reason behind their children's being late for school or truancy" (L), "poor time management by parents" (A).

Having analysed the study findings, it was revealed that primary school teachers associate social difficulties in pupils, which arise due to unfavourable environmental factors, with the lack of communication skills and organisational and cooperation skills in children (Fig. 2).
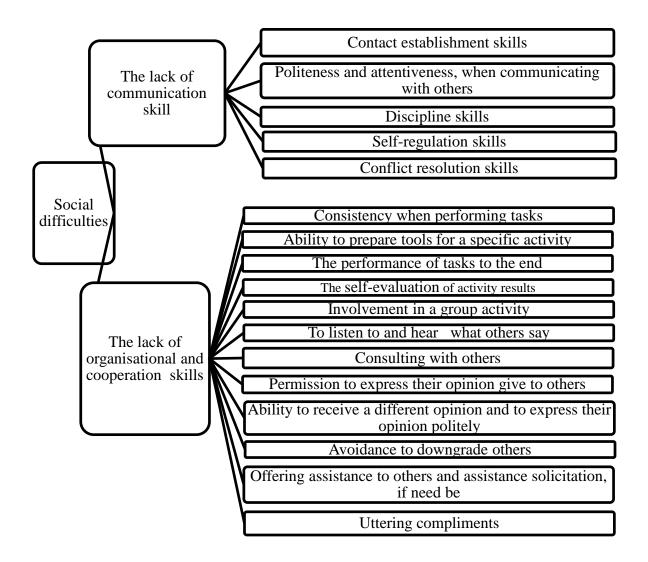
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*Figure 2 **Social difficulties determined by unfavourable environmental factors***

The study has established that social difficulties should be associated with the lack of communication skills in primary school pupils. The informants underlined that: "children do not know how to start a conversation" (F), „they cast their eyes down when you try to strike up a conversation, they reply "yes", "no" or shrug their shoulders" (K). It indicates that pupils lack contact establishment skills.

Another difficulty, which is encountered by teachers, is the lack of politeness and attentiveness, when communicating with others, skills: "there is a lack of

politeness, a simple "thank you", "please" (A), "when talking with another person they do not pay attention to him: they tie their shoelaces, rummage though their backpack, look through the window… "(I). The lack of discipline and self-regulation skills came to light. According to the informants, children "break, transgress classroom behaviour rules, although we have agreed concerning them" (D), "disturb others…" (L), "cannot keep still, they interrupt another person who is talking" (G)".

The lack of conflict resolution skills is also associated with familial environment which is unfavourable to a child's development. Therefore, according to the informants, "children "bring" to school parental conflict resolution model: some of them are aggressive, they shriek, shout, do not control their emotions, fight; others – withdraw…" (E). Consequently, children, having come to school from the families experiencing social risk factors where their social development needs are not satisfied, lack not only communication, but also organisational and cooperation skills.

The lack of organisational skills should be associated with a child's ability to prepare his tools for a specific activity. The informants pointed out that children: "do not have or do not bring the tools necessary for a lesson to school" (B), "do not take out the needed tools before a lesson, although they have them or put everything they have on the table" (J).

Other organisational difficulties, which arise to primary school pupils, are the lack of consistency when performing tasks and the lack of performing of tasks to the end: "when given a task to perform they do not perform it in a prescribed sequence" (C), "they are able, but do not perform their tasks to the end" (B), "when they do not understand a task they do not have a skill to ask, but leave the task unfinished" (F). The study results demonstrated that children lack activity outcome self-assessment skills: "they do not have a developed skill to check a performed task: I have performed it, and that is it" (L).

Primary school pupils lack cooperation skills. It is difficult for children to get involved in a group activity and to work in the group: "they do not know how to get involved in a group activity, submit proposals properly" (D). It is difficult for them to listen and hear what others say: "they hear only themselves, do not listen to what others say", they are used to dictate to others and demand that others do what they tell" (H). Cooperation is hindered by the lack of skills to consult with others, to permit others to express their opinion and to be able to accept a different view and to politely express their own opinion, the underestimation of others. The informants pointed out that when some primary school pupils work in groups: "they do not allow the children, who have a different opinion, to talk" (I), "they are impolite, if the opinion of another person does not coincide with their opinion" (E), „they suppress others, their opinion is the most important" (C),

"there are such arrogant children who demonstrate their own opinion, knowledge by underestimating others" (D).

The study revealed that primary school pupils lack assistance offer to others and request for assistance, if need be, skills. The pedagogues pointed out that: "due to the fact that children lack the skill to request for assistance or receive it, they do not request it in the classroom either" (G), "there are children, who do not request for assistance, but demand it" (A). Children also lack compliment giving skills: "they are not able to praise another person, to thank" (H), "when another person does something good or nice, or has success, they do not praise, do not rejoice because of it, but are inclined to underestimate another one" (I). It is noteworthy that the informants closely associate the lack of children's social skills with academic difficulties. In the absence of sufficient social competence it is difficult for the child to function successfully at school and there is a risk problems, psychological difficulties (Denham, Ji & Hamre, 2010). Ties with their peers and a socially acceptable activity has a protective value. An ability to establish supportive friendly relationships is a characteristic of resilience, children that such child will encounter long-term adaptation, who possess developed social skills, have more friends and maintain better relationships with their peers (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014).

Having analysed the study findings, one more group of learning difficulties, which are determined by unfavourable environmental factors, was distinguished - behavioural and emotional difficulties (Fig. 3).
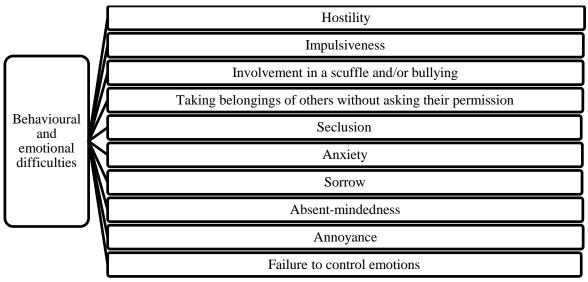

Figure 3 **Behavioural and emotional difficulties determined by unfavourable environmental factors**

The study revealed that failure to satisfy the child's emotional needs, inappropriate mutual relationships and unfavourable psychosocial environment

both in the family and at school affect the expression of the child's emotions and behaviour. According to the informants, children, who have emotional and behavioural difficulties, are characterised by hostility: "there are children, who tend to contradict only in order to receive attention" (E), "when they are accustomed to get what they want in the family, then they demand in the same manner in the classroom as well" (J). They behave on impulse, tend to get involved in fighting and/or bullying: "they talk without waiting for their turn", "they do not know how to resolve conflicts, therefore, they resolve them by fighting or bullying others" (A). The informants pointed out that these children may be characterised by shrinking into themselves ("it is difficult to work with children who become withdrawn, hide their emotions and thoughts" (B), "when you do not see the child's emotions and he does not tell anything the teacher has difficulty understanding whether a task is clear to the child…" (H)) or increased anxiety ("there are children, who are anxious about everything, they have difficulty concentrating" (D), "the child is not able to realise himself due to increased anxiety" (F)).

The study has established that children's sadness, absent-mindedness, irritability and failure to control emotions are on no account a lesser reasons for learning difficulties. The informants underlined that when: "children come emotionally loaded from home: sad, irritated, restless, so it is very difficult to start a lesson, to get them involved in the activity" (C), "there are children, who come without getting enough sleep, unfed or the like and they are unable to concentrate during their lessons", children lack empathy, they do not recognise their own emotions or those of others, therefore, behave on impulse" (B).

The child, who has not had close relationships with parents, is characterised by people avoidance, distrust in people around him, aggression, failure to control himself, the lack of social skills. On the other hand, the child, who feels safely next to his parents, tends to trust other people, possesses well-developed social skills.

Conclusions

The study findings revealed that primary school teachers encounter three different types of learning difficulties in pupils determined by unfavourable environmental factors: academic, social and behavioural-emotional.

Academic difficulties in primary school pupils, which arising due to unfavourable environmental factors, determine a decreased interest in their environment, the lack of knowledge and experience, the lack of curiosity, inquisitiveness. The lack of educational stimulation also determines other academic difficulties: an inferior preparedness for school, attention retention problems, passivity when performing their tasks, distrust of their own strength,

fluctuations, decline or stagnation in the child's progress (achievements). A decreased interest in learning and puny learning efforts, the lack of learning motivation, being late for school or truancy are also the expression of academic difficulties.

Social difficulties are associated with the lack of communication, organisational and cooperation skills in primary school pupils. Children's communication difficulties are associated with the lack of contact establishment, politeness, attentiveness when communicating with others, discipline, self-regulation, conflict resolution skills. Organisational difficulties demonstrate the lack of ability to prepare tools for a particular activity, consistency when performing tasks, performing tasks to the end, the self-assessment of activity outcomes skills. Primary school pupils experience difficulties when cooperating. They have difficulty getting involved in a group activity, listening and hearing what others say, consulting others, permitting others to express their opinion, politely accepting a different opinion and expressing their own opinion, not underestimating others, offering assistance to others and requesting assistance from others, if need be, giving compliments.

Behavioural-emotional difficulties are associated with children's hostility, impulsiveness, involvement in fighting and/or bullying, taking of others' belongings without a permission, shrinking into themselves, anxiety, sadness, absent mindedness, irritability, failure to control his emotions.

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