

ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS OCCURRING DUE TO UNFAVOURABLE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM: THE EXPERIENCE OF PEDAGOGUES

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Abstract. *The objective of the study presented in the article is to reveal academic difficulties of primary school pupils occurring due to unfavourable environmental factors and the strategies to overcome them on the basis of the experience of pedagogues. Problematic study question: What academic difficulties of pupils, which are resulted in by unfavourable environmental factors, do primary school teachers encounter and how do they overcome them? 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.*

Academic difficulties of primary school pupils are resulted in by three groups of unfavourable environmental factors: unfavourable factors related to their close environment (family) (the resolution of mutual problems in an inappropriate way, violence in close environment, emotionally cold relationships in their family, the lack of thoughtful and meaningful family leisure time, child's seclusion from one/both parent(s) due to various circumstances, the addiction of one/both parent(s), hypoguardianship and hyperguardianship), unfavourable factors within an educational institution (the mismatch between an educational programme and individual abilities and needs of a child, failure to involve a child in various activities, human and material resources of a school, unsafety of the school environment), unfavourable factors related to a peer group (rejection by peers, bullying, encouragement of a child to behave in a socially inappropriate manner).

The study findings revealed that primary school teachers encounter the following academic difficulties: a lower level of a pupil's interest in his/her environment, the lack of knowledge and experience, the lack of curiosity and inquisitiveness when learning environment, 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 lessons or missing them.

In order to overcome academic difficulties of pupils, teachers render them individual assistance: they make the best use of the opportunities provided by their curriculum (they

individualise and differentiate the learning in a lesson, provide consultations after lessons, if need be, they organise additional lessons), talk with a pupil about the learning difficulties arising to him/her and discuss strategies to overcome difficulties, set learning goals together with a pupils, rethink their teaching style, try various teaching methods, which correspond to a pupil's abilities and needs, and enhance learning motivation, involve child's parents (guardians, custodians), and engage the specialists of educational assistance.

Keywords: *academic difficulties; primary school; pupils; unfavourable enviromental factors; teachers.*

Introduction

The achievements of pupils from unfavourable economic, social and cultural environment are inferior to their peers. This may be affected by learning difficulties arising due to adverse environmental factors. According to data published by the National Agency for School Evaluation of the Republic of Lithuania (2017), a number of teachers are still inclined to distance themselves from falling behind and unmotivated pupils.

The Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania (2011) meanwhile states the teacher's duty to educate pupils based on their abilities, inclinations, and to inform parents (guardians, custodians) about the pupil's educational needs.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasises the diversity of pupils and the right of every pupil to be educated according to his abilities. The importance of individual education is also emphasised by national strategic documents – The National Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030" (2012), The State Education Strategy 2013-2022, The Concept of the Good School (2015). Development according to individual pupils' needs would create possibilities not only to acquire basic knowledge, but also better conditions for abilities to unfold and expand, as well as to reduce the social exclusion that adversely affects pupils' overall achievements, and increases early withdrawal from the educational process.

The Description of Primary, Basic and General Education Programmes (Decree Nr. V-1309 of the Ministry for Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania of December 21, 2015, p. 40) stipulate that „teachers are able to professionally recognise pupils' needs, to discern abilities, learning and socially problematic areas (special educational needs, problematic behaviour, social inequality features etc.) and to seek appropriate solutions in time: to apply educational methods, to cooperate with each other and with educational assistance specialists, interinstitutional teams, parents (guardians, custodians)“. However, the conclusions of the report of the National Audit Office of the Republic of Lithuania „Can the Achievements of Lithuanian Pupils Improve?“ (2017) state that schools and their founders do not identify or are unable to identify all the individual educational needs in pupils, therefore, education for everyone

according to their needs is not guaranteed. It is noteworthy that there is a lack of research in Lithuania analyzing pupils' learning difficulties arising due to unfavourable environmental factors, their identification and overcoming. The report of the National Audit Office (2017) points out that educational needs of the majority of pupils are not identified or identified in a fragmented way, whereas needs arising due to unfavourable social, economic and cultural environment are oftentimes not identified. The aforementioned report emphasises that it is especially important to identify the needs determined by unfavourable social, economic and cultural environment, because their satisfaction reduces exclusion.

The pupil's approach towards learning is strongly influenced by family. The important role that the family plays in the formation of the child's learning skills is underlined by many scientists. It has been established that a child's learning motivation, attitudes, emotional relationships with learning begin to form in the family. According to B.L. Clarke, S.M. Sheridan & K.E. Woods (2009), the strength of learning motivation is conveyed by a pupil's general experience, whereas the experience, which is acquired by the pupil in his family by modeling parental approach to school, learning, is especially important. Studies (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Cicchetti & Toth, 2015) show that the most likely causes of unsuccessful learning in pupils are poor parental possibilities to help them learn at home, low parental education, unemployment of parents, poor material learning environment at home, poverty and the like. M.K. Gabalda, M.P. Thompson & N.J. Kaslow (2010) identify the following environmental factors affecting a child's development: 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, social turmoil and poverty etc. P.R. Smokowski (1998) additionally classifies these factors into direct, i.e., circumstances or interactions, in which the person participates (a microenvironmental region): improper upbringing, peer pressure etc., and indirect, in which an individual does not participate, but which affect his development and interaction with his closest relatives (Smokowski, Mann, Reynolds, & Fraser, 2004).

Relationships in the family, the parenting style employed to upbringing children exert significant influence on pupils' learning difficulty: the resolution of mutual problems in an inappropriate way, violence in close environment, emotionally cold relationships in their family, the lack of thoughtful and meaningful family leisure time, child's seclusion from one/both parent(s) due to various circumstances, the addiction of one/both parent(s), hypoguardianship and hyperguardianship (Grusec, 2011; Pinquart, 2017).

The effectiveness of an educational process is directly depends on the quality of the communication between teachers and pupils. Some researchers (Thijs & Fleisch, 2015; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015) emphasise the shortages of a lesson more, such as the lack of learning individualisation, differentiation, active

learning methods. One more important factor, that might contribute to the emergence of unwillingness to learn, learning difficulties, is improper microclimate at school, which is characterised as the pupil's relationships with teachers, classmates, physical and psychological safety, insufficient cooperation between the family and school (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Minke, Sheridan, Kim, Ryoo, & Koziol, 2014).

To the child, who experienced learning failures, difficulties, not only technical, but also social, pedagogical and psychological assistance is important. The conducted research (The report of the National Audit Office „Can the Achievements of Lithuanian Pupils Improve?, 2017) demonstrated that pupils, having encountered learning failures, very seldom receive necessary assistance.

If a pupil, who encounters learning difficulties in primary forms, fails to receive timely assistance, it may be very difficult to overcome them in higher forms. Therefore, it is important to identify pupils' learning difficulties and their exit strategies as early as possible. It is noteworthy that there is a lack of scientific research in Lithuania, which analyses primary school pupils' learning difficulties arising due to unfavourable environmental factors. Therefore, during the study, an interest was taken to clarify what pupils' learning difficulties, determined by unfavourable environmental factors, primary school teachers encounter. The study data revealed that primary school teachers encounter three types of pupils' learning difficulties determined by unfavourable environmental factors: academic, social and behavioural-emotional. This article, on the basis of the experience of primary school teachers, will discuss only academic difficulties of primary school pupils, which arise due to unfavourable environmental factors, and their exit strategies.

The objective of the study presented in the article is to reveal academic difficulties of primary school pupils occurring due to unfavourable environmental factors and the strategies to overcome them on the basis of the experience of pedagogues. Problematic study question: What academic difficulties of pupils, which are resulted in by unfavourable environmental factors, do primary school teachers encounter and how do they overcome them?

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 academic difficulties of pupils, which are resulted in by unfavourable environmental factors, do primary school teachers encounter and how do they overcome them? 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

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

The study revealed that the aforementioned academic difficulties arise in children due to unfavourable learning environment at home. According to the informants, there is particularly dramatic situation in the families experiencing social risk factors. The environment of the children living under such conditions is dominated by poverty, primitive value orientation, negative psychological climate, the use of alcohol and narcotic substances, the disregard for the norms accepted in society, hence, the child is growing in a highly stressful environment. Such environment implies that a mistaken approach towards the world and himself is being formed in the child, his pedagogical neglect is being identified (Garbarino, 2017).

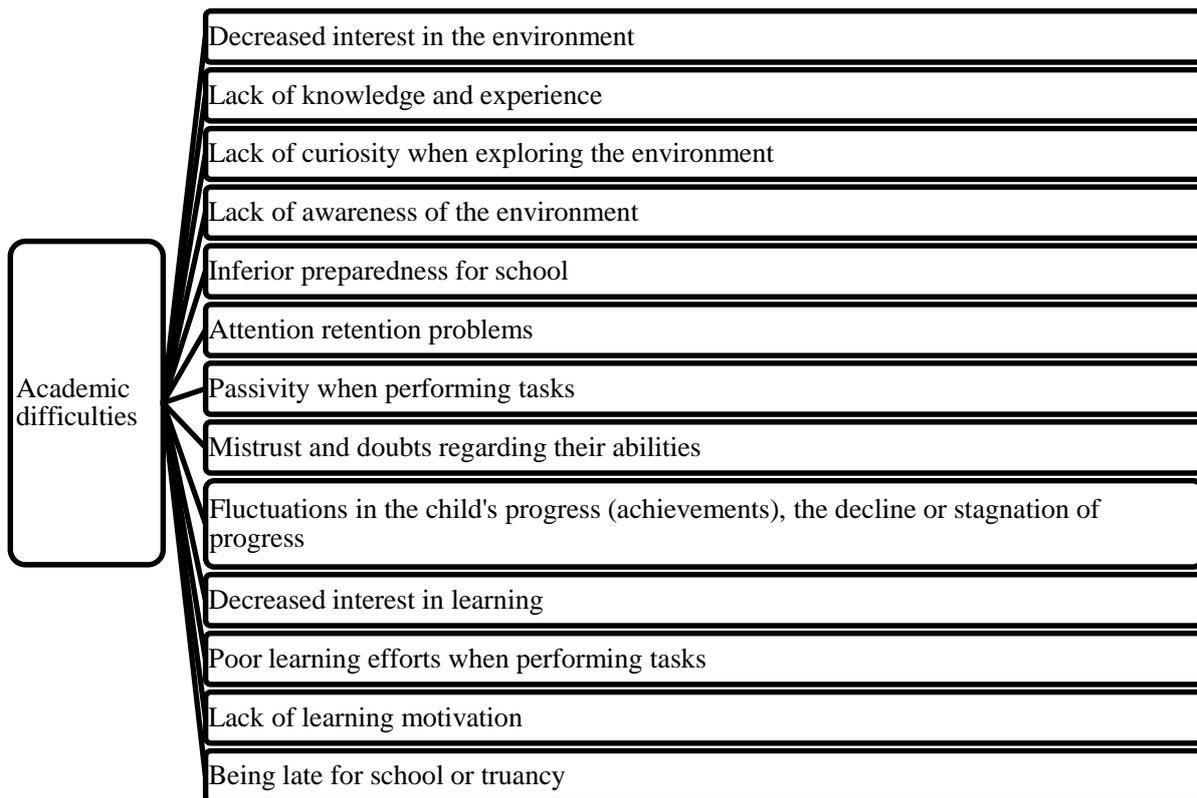


Figure 1 *Academic difficulties determined by unfavourable environmental factors*

On the other hand, pupils' academic difficulties may also arise due to unfavourable educational environment at school. Research revealed unfavourable factors within an educational institution: the mismatch between an educational programme and individual abilities and needs of a child, failure to involve a child in various activities, human and material resources of a school, unsafety of the school environment, lack of collaboration with parents. Teachers indicated unfavourable factors related to a peer group: rejection by peers, bullying, encouragement of a child to behave in a socially inappropriate manner.

During the study, an interest was taken to elucidate how primary school teachers overcome academic difficulties encountered by their pupils. The study data revealed the principles of the provision of assistance to the pupil, the phases and participants of the assistance provision to the child.

On the basis of the experience of primary school teachers, the following essential principles of the provision of assistance to the child were distinguished: orientation towards the pupil and his wellbeing, timeliness of assistance, individuality and reasonableness, continuity, a shared responsibility, teamwork and subsidiarity (Fig. 2).

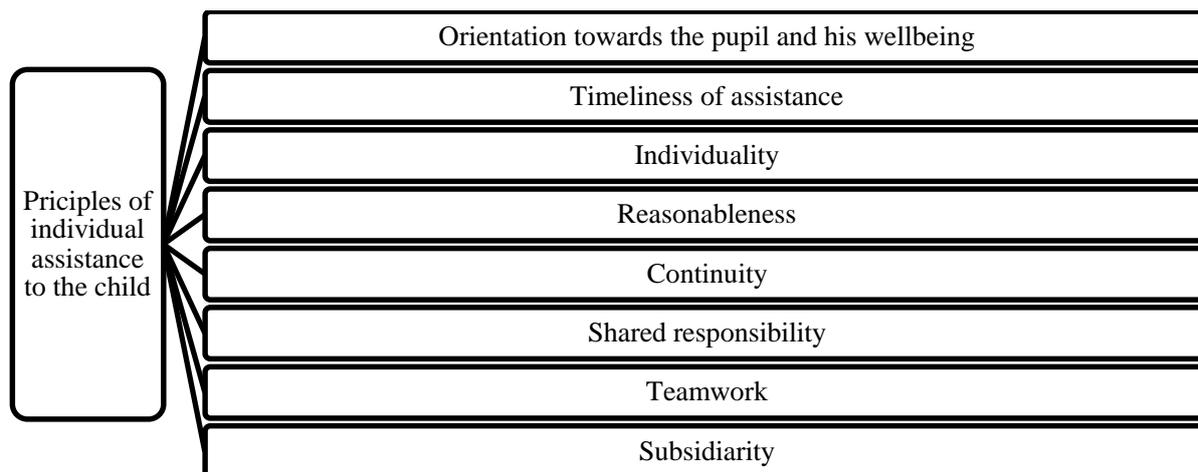


Figure 2 Principles of individual assistance to the child

The study established that when assessing a child's situation and preparing a personalised assistance plan, the most favourable solutions are sought, because when different problems emerge, there are also different methods, tools and time-limits of rendered assistance. When planning and rendering a personalised assistance to the child, firstly, a primary school teacher identifies and distinguishes academic difficulties and renders assistance to the child.

The study revealed that the identification and satisfaction of the child's educational needs is based on orientation towards the pupil and his wellbeing: „decisions are taken in order to ensure the best pupil's interests and the assistance needed“ (A), „assistance is determined by particular needs, and not the needs are adjusted to the existing services“ (I).

The primary school teachers, when talking about the identification of academic difficulties, stressed timeliness, individuality and reasonableness of the assistance. According to the informants: “a pupil must receive a timely and individually suitable to him assistance” (G), „it is important that assistance to the child would be provided as soon as possible and not too late” (C). The informants noted that: “all the decisions made with regard to assistance to a child must be based on evidence resting on the assessment of pupil's educational needs” (E). According to the informants, “the assessment of academic difficulties and educational needs arising from them must be not one-off, but continuous, constantly reviewed process, because only in such a way it is possible to render adequate assistance (K). It demonstrates that primary school teachers, when rendering an individual assistance to a pupil, follow the principles of reasonableness and continuity.

Having analysed the responses of the informants, the necessity of a shared responsibility was distinguished in order to reduce academic difficulties in primary school pupils. As the informants pointed out: “teachers and all the educational assistance specialists working with a pupil and his family have a

shared responsibility for the child's success and everyone helps within the boundaries of his responsibilities” (B), „it is important that the participants of the process of the provision of assistance to the child would share a responsibility“ (J). The primary school teachers also pointed out that any specialist working with a pupil, having noticed certain alarming factors/characteristics, should cooperate with parents and other educational assistance specialists. That means that teamwork is one more and a very important condition to successfully render assistance to a child. It is noteworthy that the majority of academic difficulties experienced by pupils, which are related to unfavourable learning environment, are complex, therefore, the assistance, which is rendered, must encompass various types of assistance, services and facilities of different areas. It goes without saying that, firstly, assistance should be rendered where a pupil is, every specialist working with the pupil must endeavour to help the pupil according to his competences. Hence, due to the principles of a shared responsibility and teamwork and subsidiarity the child can be rendered a timely, appropriate and quality assistance when assisting him in overcoming arising academic difficulties.

Depending on a problem arising to the child, its complexity, strength, difficulty and deviation from a pre-existing and known to the teachers situation, the phases of assistance to the child may change and vary in between (e.g., the pupil came school with clear health problems, with the symptoms of suspected physical abuse and the like – a teacher's reaction and actions will be of one manner, whereas, if the pupil came to school having not learned to read or write, a teacher's reaction and actions will already be different). At school, three phases of the assessment of pupils' educational needs and the ensuring of the satisfaction of those needs can be distinguished. The first phase is the phase of identification of the child's academic difficulties by the teacher and the rendering of an individual assistance while he cooperates with the family: „when I notice that the child has difficulty at doing anything, firstly, I talk with the child“ (D), „in the event of difficulties, I assign additional tasks to the child, I consult the pupil, I ask parents for assistance“ (L). The informants emphasised that it is important to monitor and to record a child's progress and to build humane and child supportive, motivating relationships: „based on evidence, I adjust the child assistance plan, I present the tasks in accordance with his level“ (K), „it no less important to rejoice in the child's changes by praising the child, informing his parents about the progress and to motivate the child by other means“ (H). According Deci & Ryan (1985), students who experience sensitive, responsive and positive interactions with teachers perceive them as more supportive and are more motivated within the academic contexts of schooling (Yunusa, Osmana, & Ishak, 2011, p. 2638).

The primary school teachers also, if academic difficulties occur, adjusts educational content, learning methods to the pupil's learning needs, assists the

child in performing his homework, organises additional lessons and consults pupils and their parents, organises the learning assistance of pupils themselves.

The study revealed that, during the first phase, a pedagogue, while rendering academic assistance to the child, also consults and cooperates with educational assistance specialists (a social pedagogue, psychologist). To some children, the aforementioned assistance is sufficient in order that academic difficulties would be overcome.

The study data demonstrated that, if the assistance rendered by teachers does not produce envisaged effects and the child's academic difficulties persist, then, during the second phase, not only the teacher renders assistance, but he also employs educational assistance specialists. According to the informants, „when I see that, although I work individually with the child, my assistance is not sufficient, I ask specialists for assistance“ (B), „if child's academic difficulties arise due to psychological problems, I address a psychologist“ (F), „when a child does not attend school, often comes without his homework done or has other social problems (untidy clothes, unwashed...), firstly, I talk with parents, if the situation does not change, I ask a social pedagogue for assistance to the child or regarding closer cooperation with the family“ (J). However, I am forced to acknowledge that the primary school teachers, while sharing their experience, noted that: „it is difficult to communicate with parents experiencing divorce, because they have shrunk into themselves, are aloof and often have stopped taking care of their children“ (K), “it is difficult to establish contacts, to communicate with the child, when his parents are concerned with their career and think that the child, his academic and social affairs have to be taken care of only by school” (F). The informants also noted that: ”unfortunately, oftentimes children, who are growing in the families abusing alcohol or having other addictions, not only do not receive parental assistance or support, but also do not have normal conditions for learning”(A), “Child neglect, the lack of control and little commitment to school, conditions to overcome academic difficulties are not created” (D). The informants also stressed that strained relationships both in the family and with the child, tension in the relationships between parents and teachers are also an obstacle for the child to overcome his academic difficulties.

When the teacher provides academic assistance to the child, cooperates with educational assistance specialists and his parents, that is to say, after all assistance resources have been exhausted, and the child's academic difficulties are still not reduced or are increasing, the teacher, with the parents' consent, addresses the Child's Wellbeing Commission of the school concerning the assessment of the child's educational needs and the establishment of an individual plan of assistance provision for a limited period of time. According to the informants: „if the efforts made are of no avail in assisting the child in overcoming academic difficulties, I ask the Child's Wellbeing Commission's for assistance“ (G). When the allotted

time limit to provide individual assistance to the child expires the Child's Wellbeing Commission assesses the effectiveness of the assistance. The results are discussed with the child and his parents. The informants pointed out that, during this phase, the results of the provision of the assistance to the child may be twofold: positive changes or academic difficulties remain not overcome. The primary school teachers rejoice when „parents get involved in the assistance actively, children's achievements are improving“ (I), „it is great when an unmotivated child starts experiencing success and begins to eagerly learn“ (C). However, if the child's academic difficulties persist and there is evidence that special educational needs arise to the child and it is necessary to adjust the programme, once again, with the parents' consent, the Child's Wellbeing Commission is addressed. According to the informants, „it is unpleasant, however, that it is necessary to appeal the Child's Wellbeing Commission, because neither the child, nor parents make any effort“ (E) or „although both parents help and the child makes efforts, and I individualise, differentiate tasks, lead additional lessons, but child's academic achievements are not improving“ (A). The Commission has an opportunity to address the Department of Pedagogical and Psychological Service concerning the exhaustive assessment of the child's special educational needs. If special educational needs are established, a primary school teacher, with the help of educational assistance specialists, adjusts the general education programme to a particular child.

The study revealed that pedagogues emphasised the significance of the cooperation between school and parents which has a direct impact when overcoming both academic, behavioural and other difficulties arising to a child. The informants pointed out that „it is impossible to bring about changes, establish cooperative relationships with parents without resolving the problems existing in the family: parental addictions, the lack of parenting skills and the like“ (A). According to the teachers, when resolving the aforementioned problems it is important that other institutions, which assist in resolving the problems of family functioning, would also get involved. A risk factor according to S.D. Whitney, L.M. Renner & T.I. Herrenkohl (2010), B.D. Christens & N.A. Peterson (2012) is any effect or influence enhancing the likelihood of a conception or emergence of a problem, the increase of an existing problem or its maintenance. It is underlined that risk factors may not only cause or form prerequisites for a problem to emerge, but may also maintain the problems which emerged earlier or to enhance their further progress.

It is noteworthy that the informants devoted a lot of time to the building of positive relationships between teachers and parents. According to the informants, parents should participate in good faith in the educational process of the child at school, „to get the feeling of the responsibility as the educator of their own child not only in the family, but also at school, and not to distance themselves from

school by transferring all responsibility on a teacher“ (E), „to overcome arising difficulties in good faith while cooperating, and not by creating unnecessary tensions“ (D). According K.M. Minke et al. (2014), teachers who believe that parents are capable of involvement and see it as important to invite parent participation may issue more invitations to involvement and create greater opportunities for interaction with parents. When these relationships are productive, they appear to exert a significant, positive effect on children's academic success. On the other hand, teachers who have had negative experiences can develop stereotypical beliefs about parents and reduce their efforts to engage them.

Conclusions

The study revealed that primary school teachers encounter the following academic difficulties: a decreased pupil's interest in the environment, the lack of knowledge and experience, the lack of curiosity, inquisitiveness when exploring environment, an inferior preparedness for school, attention retention problems, passivity when performing his tasks, distrust/doubts regarding his abilities, fluctuations in 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.

The teachers, while attempting to overcome pupils' academic difficulties and rendering individual assistance to the child, follow the principles of orientation towards the pupil and his wellbeing, timeliness of assistance, individuality, reasonableness, continuity, a shared responsibility, teamwork and subsidiarity.

The study established that the provision of individual assistance to pupils may encompass three phases. During the first phase, the main provider of the assistance is a primary school teacher, who closely cooperates with a child and his parents. The teacher does the following things: he exploits the possibilities of the educational plan (individualises and differentiates learning in the lesson, consults after lessons, if need be, organises additional lessons), talks with the pupil about learning difficulties, which arise to him, and discusses strategies to overcome difficulties, sets learning goals together with the pupil, rethinks his teaching style, tries various learning methods, which are in line with the pupil's abilities and needs and encourages learning motivation, involves the pupil's parents. To some children, the aforementioned assistance is sufficient in order to overcome academic difficulties.

If the assistance provided by the teacher does not yield the envisaged results and the child's academic difficulties persist, then, during the second phase, the assistance to the child is not provided not only by the teacher, but also by educational assistance specialists depending on the child's needs. When all

assistance resources have been exhausted, but the child's academic difficulties are not decreasing or when they are increasing the teacher, with the parents' consent, addresses the Child's Wellbeing Commission of the school concerning the assessment of the child's educational needs and the establishment of an individual plan of assistance provision. If the child's academic difficulties persist and there is evidence that special educational needs arise to the child and it is necessary to adjust the programme, with the parents' consent, once again the teacher addresses the Child's Wellbeing Commission, which has an opportunity to address the Department of Pedagogical and Psychological Service (DPPS) concerning the exhaustive assessment of the child's special educational needs. If special educational needs are established, the primary school teacher, with the help of educational assistance specialists, adjusts the general education programme to a particular child and works according to the recommendations of the DPPS.

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