

THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK CONCEPTS IN DEALING WITH LEARNED HELPLESSNESS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

SUMMARY

Strategies for dealing with learned helplessness are a frequently discussed topic in working with children who have learning difficulties. The authors' premise is that the role of a child in a learning process and the relationship established with him/her need to be redefined. The aim of this paper is to find some answers in contemporary social work concepts based on our theoretical understanding, relating to practical experiences and research findings in the project Co-creation of Learning and Help led by the Faculty of Social Work, which was a part of a research conducted with the Faculty of Education. A qualitative analysis of the action research shows that it is crucial to establish an individual working project of help with all who can participate in co-creating help and support for a child's school success and within which children are active co-workers in all work phases in order to prevent

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learned helplessness. Social work also has an important role in school. A social worker, as one of the professionals in a school's counseling service, can, when using contemporary concepts of help, contribute to school success as one of the main protective factors in a person's life.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about the role of contemporary social work concepts in the school environment, especially in the fields of learning difficulties and learned helplessness, are not very common among social workers. But the thesis of the paper is that concepts which are useful in processes of help in social work can also be useful in the educational process. The concepts redefine the role of a child in the learning process and the relationship we establish with everyone involved in a process, which is important in preventing learned helplessness. Social work, as a theory as well as its application in practice, already has an important part in Slovenian schools since social workers have been part of school counselling services in Slovenia for 50 years.

Positive experiences in facing challenges in the school environment are crucial for a child. There is different research available about the connections between school success and success in later life (e.g. Gross, 2008.; Magajna et al., 2008.). A lack of success in school presents a risk for a child's whole personal development. On the other hand, school success protects children from deepening emotional and behavioural difficulties, also when other threatening factors are present in a child's life (e.g. poverty, violence, etc.) (Magajna et al., 2008.). The important fact is that in our society almost all children go to school³, which is promising because in doing so those children have the opportunity to experience respect, dignity, and success. The question for social work is: how and where can we step in and contribute to school success? We tried to find out some answers in the action research project *Co-creation of learning and help*.

The topic of learned helplessness is a current issue in different fields: Walsh (2003.) writes about it in connection with family resilience; Fast and Chapin (1997.) with regard to the elderly, and there are several authors interested in the field of education (Gordon & Gordon, 2006.; Reyes, 2011.). During our project we became aware of the importance of learned helplessness through different sources. Literature is certainly one of them (Ames,

³ *Elementary School Act (1996) states that elementary education is compulsory and free. Almost all children in Slovenia attend elementary school. In fact, only 43 out of 161,887 children who attended elementary schools in Slovenia in the school year 2008/2009 (MESCS; <http://www.stat.si/obcinevstevilkah/Vsebina.aspx?ClanekNaslov=IzobrazevanjeUcenci>) were homeschooled. Elementary School Act (ESC) (Zakon o osnovni šoli - ZOsn), Official journal of the Republic of Slovenia, Nos. 12/1996, 33/1997, 54/2000, 59/2001, 71/2004, 23/2005, 53/2005, 70/2005, 60/2006, 63/2006, 81/2006, 102/2007, 107/2010, 87/2011, 40/2012 (<http://www.uradni-list.si>).*

1990.; Seligman, 1990.; Eccles, Wigfield & Schiefele, 1998.; Gordon & Gordon, 2006.; Reyes, 2011.). Also, the topic was discussed when visiting several services in East Sussex, England, where they have a long tradition of inclusion; learned helplessness is a problem they are facing now. Our co-workers in the project, teachers and school counselors, were also dealing with the question »how much help is too much.« Sometimes they spoke about children with learning difficulties as unable to participate in a conversation:

It is typical for all children with learning difficulties that they don't speak. They don't come with their ideas. Because they are used to it. (Teacher, 8.2)⁴

This experience presented an additional encouragement for researchers in becoming more aware of the importance of learned helplessness.

The main aim of this paper is to present a project within which researchers tried to find answers about the usefulness of contemporary social work concepts in the school environment. The presented analysis is focused on the concept of learned helplessness: how the developed model can contribute to its prevention or in dealing with it.

In the first part of the paper we discuss the concept of learned helplessness, the present Slovenian context of education and social work in schools, and introduce the project. In the second part after the research methodology and results are presented, we discuss the basic findings in connection to learned helplessness.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SLOVENIAN SCHOOLS

The presented project focused on elementary schools. All children in Slovenia have the right to compulsory elementary school education, which is free and lasts for nine years starting at the age of 6. At the moment there are 451 elementary schools in Slovenia⁵

School environment has also been an important working field for social work in Slovenia since the 1950s, when school counseling services were established. In 1962. the first educated social worker was employed in a primary school (Pediček, 1967.). Since then in each school there has been at least one or even more full-time employed school counselors from different professions (e.g. social workers, psychologist, etc.). It is required by law *The organization and financing of education*, (2003.) that each school has a school counseling service which covers a wide range of working tasks (e.g. counseling pupils, their parents and teachers, etc.). The specificity of the tasks of a counselor depend on his/her professional background.

Social workers are expected to work with children and their families on resolving different kinds of complex psycho-social problems, but not so much with problems connected to

⁴ All quotes are direct translations of the spoken Slovene. The number at the end of the quote indicates the number of the individual working project of help (hereinafter IWPH). The concept is explained on page 5.

⁵ http://www.mss.gov.si/en/areas_of_work/compulsory_basic_education_in_slovenia/.

learning (in this field special educators work together with teachers). This is why one could argue that such a topic, closely connected to learning difficulties and learned helplessness, may have little to do with social work. Our understanding and experiences from the project show a different picture. We argue that a co-creative working relationship, a social work concept developed by Čačinović Vogrinčić (2008.), offers important answers to questions schools are nowadays facing.

Čačinović Vogrinčić (2008.: 19) sees the specificity of this relationship in users and social workers being co-creators of help in a common project, within which all have the task to co-create a share in the solution. If this concept is transferred to the school environment, it means that help for pupils with learning difficulties is co-created with pupils, who are the experts on their lives and experiences, and teachers or school counselors as their respectful and responsible allies.

The first task of social workers (e.g. school counselors) is to establish a working relationship, so that we can define the co-creation process of finding solutions for people's complex problems (e.g. learning difficulties) as an individual working project of help (hereinafter IWPH). The basic elements of the working relationship concept, which make co-creation of solutions possible, are: an agreement to cooperate; the instrumental definition of the problem (Lussi, 1991.) and co-creating solutions; and personal leading (Bouwkamp & Vries, 1995.). Those three basic elements are embedded in the context of contemporary concepts in social work which include: the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1997.); the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994.); co-presence (Andersen, 1994.); and actionable knowledge (Rosenfeld, 1993.).

The crucial factor is to make the respectful participation of people possible. In a working relationship social workers and users create individual working projects for and with people. Working projects are outlines of steps that bring co-created solutions into action (Čačinović Vogrinčić, 2008.). IWPHs are individual because they are created for each person individually; they are working because they emphasize work, collaboration, learning, and the reduction or removal of difficulties. Also, they are projects because they are focused on future, changes, and positive and desired outcomes.

Co-creation in the school environment means that each pupil gets access to his own creativity and support for the development of his abilities. A pupil is an active participant in the learning process and in the process of help in an individual working project.

Although co-creation of help and support is crucial, it is not the usual way of working in our schools. The role of a social worker in school is to support teachers in implementing co-creation in the process within which the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994.) is a leading element of collaborating (in small groups, classrooms etc.). Another important contribution of social workers is ensuring space for children's voices in a school community to be heard. Introducing the concept of co-creation in schools can change school politics.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Martin Seligman developed the Learned helplessness theory which had a major influence on psychological research focusing on depression in the 1970s (Seligman, 1992.). The impact of learned helplessness has been demonstrated in a number of different animal species; its effects can also be seen in people.

Learned helplessness is the belief that our own behavior does not influence what happens next, so when a child with learning difficulties takes such a position it is difficult to reach positive outcomes in the school environment. Reyes (2011.) states that learned helplessness is the belief that our behavior does not control outcomes or results. For example, when a pupil believes that he/she is in charge of the outcome, he/she may think, »If I study hard for this test, I'll get a good grade.« On the contrary, a pupil who has learned to be helpless thinks, »No matter how hard I study for this test, I'll always get a bad grade.« This could be the result of some negative experiences.

Pupils who experience repeated school failure are particularly prone to developing a learned helpless response style. Gordon and Gordon (2006.) define that learned helplessness creates three basic deficits in the child – cognitive, emotional, and motivational – which destroy the child's desire to learn. The motivational deficit stops learning by aborting the child's initiation of responses. It is not true that a child with learned helplessness is not trying, but research shows that these children have learned to be helpless as far as learning is concerned. The child believes he/she has no control over the learning process, and after many failures gives up trying because it hurts too much to try. It is a cognitive deficit since it is a learned, conditioned response. The emotional deficit leads to depression and lower self-esteem.

It is important to support children with learning difficulties in a positive, educationally appropriate way, so that they can experience school success. Especially because, as Valas's research showed (2001.), pupils with learning difficulties are more helpless than their peers. In cases of repeated academic failure, children begin to doubt their own abilities, leading them to doubt that they can do anything to overcome their school difficulties (Reyes, 2011.).

Some characteristics of learned helpless children are (Reyes, 2011.): a) low motivation to learn, and diminished aspirations to succeed in school; b) low outcome expectations implying that they believe that they are powerless to prevent or overcome a negative outcome; c) a lack of perceived control over their own behavior and the environmental events; d) a lack of confidence in their skills and abilities which is manifest in a belief that their school difficulties are caused by their own lack of ability and low intelligence, even when they have adequate ability and normal intelligence; e) they underestimate their performance when they do well in school, attributing success to luck or chance; f) they generalize from one failure situation or experience to other situations where control is possible; g) they focus on

what they cannot do, rather than focusing on their strengths and skills; and h) because they feel incapable of implementing the necessary courses of action, they develop passivity and their school performance deteriorates.

Smith (2004.) emphasizes that pupils with learning difficulties who face repeated failure, give up and do not trust their capacities anymore. Those pupils learn to take over learned helplessness, an attitude against success, and they start to behave as if they are unworthy to strive. Their motivation declines and they give up before they even try to start doing exercises because they see themselves incapable of doing those exercises, or they think that some external factor will prevent them from succeeding. If they succeed they ascribe this to luck or external factors.

The basic question is how to prevent learned helplessness and how to deal with it. Most of the emphasis in literature from different authors (e.g. Ames, 1990.; Seligman, 1990.; Eccles, Wigfield & Schiefele, 1998.) is given to learning strategy retraining, helping children develop individualized, short-term goals, and changing their explanatory style. Authors stress that just trying to persuade a learned helpless child that he can succeed, asking him to think positively, and asking him to try hard, will be ineffective. Gordon and Gordon (2006.) introduce some useful methods of changing children's explanatory styles through a cognitive-behavioral training.

Our thesis is that besides the presented strategies of preventing or dealing with learned helplessness, the role of the child in a learning process and the relationship social workers establish with everyone involved need to be redefined.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Work, in cooperation with the Faculty of Education started developing the project *Professional foundations for further development and implementation of the concept »learning difficulties⁶ in primary school* in 2008. The project could be understood in the context of directions from the Republic of Slovenia which had to be followed when applying for the project. The main aim of this extensive developmental-

⁶ *The definition of learning difficulties is very complex and depends on the paradigm that influences the author. In contemporary understanding the interactive perspective of learning difficulties is used, which combines different causes (e.g. pupil's environment, pupil's inner factors) (for more see Magajna et.al. 2008.). In the presented project, participating pupils are defined by the Elementary Schools Act (1996., Article 11) as one of the »special needs« pupil categories. Special needs pupils in accordance with this Act are pupils »without guidance order,« since they experience mild or moderate learning difficulties. Schools are obliged to adapt to these pupils the type and methods of work, and to offer additional tutorials as well as other forms of individual and group assistance. Pupils are defined as pupils with learning difficulties when they exemplify significantly greater learning difficulties than their peers (Čačinovič Vogrinčič et.al. 2009.).*

research project was to analyze, introduce, examine, complement and develop models and strategies of discovering and helping pupils with learning difficulties.

The project was carried out in three sub-projects. Two of these were conducted at the Faculty of Education, where their role was to recognize learning difficulties and develop teaching strategies, while the Faculty of Social Work, in the sub-project *Co-creation of learning and help*, focused on the relational component of help and support, where the co-creation of help was the main concept.

The main aim of this sub-project was to develop and test professional foundations for the co-creation of learning and help, which were prepared by the group of researchers from our faculty, and to supplement and upgrade them with the help of school partners.

The project lasted for three school years and ended in August 2011. In the first year the theoretical basis and research instruments were prepared; in the second school year an action research was conducted in the field⁷, and in the last year data analysis and results dissemination were done.

There were 18 pupils participating in this action research project, 24 parents, 40 school professionals (school counselors, teachers) in nine Slovenian primary schools. Each school chose two children to participate in the project. The conditions were that the children had learning difficulties, and that they and their families were willing to participate.

Working in the field was planned for one school year, which could raise an ethical question about the continuation of help for pupils. One of the goals of the project was also to educate and support school professionals to start using co-creative working relationships in their everyday practice. They were learning about this approach from meeting to meeting, and tried to implement it when they met in IWPHs without researchers. At the end of the school year researchers planned the work for the next year together with all those involved, and school professionals were to continue the process after the project ended.

AIMS AND THESIS OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research was to analyse the practical implementation of the co-creative working relationship in school in connection with learned helplessness. Two basic aims were formulated:

1. To analyse and present the process of work in 18 IWPHs and evaluation of the project;
2. To analyse the results with a focus on the learned helplessness concept.

⁷ *The methodology is presented in more detail in the following pages.*

Regarding the type of research, no classical hypotheses were formulated. In this part of researching, three theses, which were based on the authors' theoretical understanding, framed the research:

1. The concept of a co-creative working relationship in IWPHs can be used and is useful in the school environment to support children with learning difficulties;
2. Co-creating a working relationship in IWPHs ensures the active participation of all those involved in the problem of a learning difficulty towards co-creating desired outcomes;
3. A pupil's active participation in all work phases gives strength and prevents learned helplessness.

METHOD

The authors used qualitative research in which data was obtained through action research (Mesec, 2006.).

The participants in the action research were: pupils with learning difficulties, their parents, teachers, school counselors and researchers. They were all coworkers in IWPHs, which were led by researchers and school counselors when researchers were not present.

Data was collected in the period from April 2009 till June 2010 and analyzed with a qualitative analysis (Mesec, 1998.).

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

There were nine Slovenian primary schools included in the sample. All Slovenian primary schools were invited to participate. Those who responded to the invitation were divided along regional lines because we wanted schools from all regions to participate. There were two criteria in choosing a school: the school had to have participated in two previous projects connected with learning difficulties, and should have attended the professional conference about the concept of working relationships. Based on these requirements nine schools were chosen by drawing.

Two IWPHs were conducted at each of the participating schools. Each IWPH consisted of a pupil with learning difficulties, one or both of the pupil's parents, teachers who worked with the child, and school counselors. In Table 1 basic data about the number of participants in each primary school are presented.

Table 1.
Primary schools included in the project and the number of participants

School code	School	Pupils	Parents	Teachers	School counselors
1	Primary school Angel Besednjak	2	3	3	1
2	Primary school Bistrica Tržič	2	3	3	1
3	Primary school Ciril Kosmač Piran	2	2	2	1
4	Primary school Dobravlje	2	4	2	1
5	Primary school Globoko	2	3	3	4
6	Primary school Janko Kersnik Brdo	2	2	2	1
7	Primary school Polje Ljubljana	2	3	1	1
8	Primary school Polzela	2	2	5	2
9	Primary school Puconci	2	2	5	2
	Sum	18	24	26	14

PUPILS' BACKGROUND

There were six girls and twelve boys, aged from 8 to 13, involved in the project. One of them was in the third grade, two were in the fourth grade, six in the fifth grade, seven in the sixth grade, and two in the seventh grade. Their major problems were learning difficulties in math, Slovene, English, and history. Some of them also had some problems with doing homework and with learning efficiently.

MEASURING INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The action research was conducted during five meetings in each school, occurring approximately every two months from September till the end of June. Each meeting was recorded by researchers with the help of some prepared forms, which were measuring instruments for the qualitative analysis. The forms were developed before the researchers went into the research field by the research group. Forms categories were based on researchers' theoretical understanding of the IWPH (e.g. the agreement to cooperate, the instrumental definition of the problem (Lüssi, 1991.) and co-creating solutions, the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1997.), the ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994., etc.).

For the purpose of this paper different forms included in the analysis are:

1. a form for recording the process of work:
 - After each IWPH meeting, researchers completed the form »Form A1. PARTICIPATION IN IWPH_researchers_monitoring meeting.« In this way they wanted to record the whole process of working in an IWPH with the help of prepared

categories (e.g. sources of strength, risk factors, agreement to cooperate, etc.).

2. forms connected with the evaluation of work:

- At the first meeting of IWPH, researchers completed the form »Form 0.BASIC INFORMATION AT BEGINNING_expectations« with which we wanted to find out the expectations of all the involved about the collaboration in IWPH. We wanted to find out what participants expected from our project, what their personal goals were, etc.
- At the third supervisory meeting,⁸ we made a brief interim evaluation with teachers and school counselors (»Form A3.1. PARTICIPATION IN IWPH_professional workers_the interim evaluation«). We wanted to identify the professional workers' satisfaction with the project, their problems and wishes.
- We also made the final evaluation of work in an IWPH with all the participants at the last IWPH meeting (»Form A3.1 PARTICIPATION IN IWPH_final evaluation«), within which we wanted to identify their (dis)satisfaction with collaboration in the IWPH, with the way of working, etc.

DATA PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

Two sorts of qualitative material were included in the research: 1) the material gathered with researchers' recording the process of work; and 2) the material from the evaluation of IWPH, which was made in the middle and at the end of the process (interviews with all the participants about their experiences with the IWPH, achieved goals, etc.).

The gathered material was analyzed by qualitative analysis (Mesec, 1998.). The material, obtained from the forms for evaluation, was analyzed according to the classical method of qualitative analysis (open coding of meaningful units according to research focus, integration in parent categories, defining relevant categories, and the formulation of grounded theory).

The analysis of the material, gathered with the forms for recording the process of work, was made in two steps: first we wrote down the grounded theories about the IWPH (first for each meeting, and then for the whole process of one IWPH); second, we made a classical qualitative analysis of all grounded theories. For the purpose of this paper three categories were analyzed: 1) agreement on co-operation and evaluation of goals achievement; 2)

⁸ *The supervisory meeting was a meeting where researchers met with the teachers and school counselors of each school included in the project. These meetings were organized at each school before an IWPH meeting and were led by the researchers. At the supervisory meetings teachers and school counselors reported about their success and problems in working with pupils, and researchers supported them in learning and using co-creative working relationships in practice.*

problem and desired outcomes definition – a work plan; and 3) agreements for the future. In addition, the material from evaluation of the project was analyzed (see Table 2).

When analyzing these categories and the material from evaluation forms, the research was driven by a special focus on learned helplessness. From the coded evaluation material we gathered those codes which were in our theoretical understanding connected with prevention of learned helplessness (see Table 2). The codes are presented in rows. In columns all participants in the evaluation of an IWPH are listed and the sign (+) marks who stated what as important in the project. The content of Table 2 is presented in the evaluation part of the Results section.

Table 2.
Evaluation of the project

Codes from evaluation, connected with prevention and dealing with learned helplessness	Teachers	School counselor	Parents	Children
Collaboration of all the involved in an IWPH is better	+	+	+	
An opportunity to look at the problem from different points of view	+	+	+	
A child is involved in the IWPH	+	+	+	
Open space for conversation	+	+	+	
Emphasis is on solutions, not on problems	+	+	+	
Conversation is based on a strength perspective	+	+	+	
Agreements are made with all involved in IWPH	+	+	+	
Agreements are respected	+	+	+	+
All the involved have an opportunity for searching new ways of learning	+	+		+
Conversation is about an individual child and his/her specific learning difficulties	+	+	+	
Emphasis is on helping child also in classroom	+			
Joining a child	+	+		
Solutions are co-created	+	+		
Children are co-workers in a conversation	+	+		
A child's voice is heard	+	+		+
Support to a child	+	+		+
A child is seen as an expert from experiences	+	+		
All involved especially a child have an opportunity to express wishes and needs	+	+	+	+
A problem is solved immediately	+			+
Continuity of help			+	
Illustrated material	+	+	+	
Progress of a child	+	+	+	+

RESULTS

PROCESS OF WORK IN AN INDIVIDUAL WORKING PROJECT OF HELP

On the first IWPH meeting the researchers took time to establish a co-creative working relationship with the **agreement on co-operation**. All participants were invited into the working relationship and an IWPH. The basic concepts and the way of working were explained.

The researcher invited all to establish the working relationship and an IWPH, she explained the way of working, as well as the roles of the participants in this school year. (1.2)

When making an agreement on cooperation researchers thanked all for participating in the project and for being present at the meeting. Then they started to talk about the way of working. They stressed the meaning of all being involved in a meeting, because every member of the IWPH contributes to co-creating solutions. They invited all into a cooperative partnership in a project. Also, the timeframe for the work was verbalized. They stressed the meaning of co-presence (Andersen, 1994).

[...] in the hour and a half that is available they research where the difficulties are and what the desired solutions are, and start to work toward the co-creation of possible steps to agreed goals. (9.1)

Special attention was given to a child. They stressed the meaning of the child's membership in the group, which was not obvious for all members and about which they had to make special agreement in some of the groups. The meaning of co-creation with a child was especially stressed.

[...] who especially established a working relationship and agreement in co-operation with Andraž⁹. (8.2)

The ritual of making an agreement ended with each member agreeing to participate in the IWPH.

At the beginning of each next IWPH meeting most researchers ritually renewed the agreement, whereby each participant had the opportunity to add something to it, to ask if something was not clear, etc. In two schools in which the researcher did not renew the agreement after the first meeting, they also did not just start working immediately. Before the working conversation they took time to chat.

At the beginning the researcher started to chat with a girl and her mother about their jewelry. (1.1)

A safe working space was also created with an invitation into a conversation from the strength perspective.

⁹ Names of children are changed.

The researcher started to paraphrase previous meeting from the strength perspective: »When the father was here [...] (the researcher paraphrases) [...] you told us a sentence, that you remembered educational material. We started with the big success in history, when you got an excellent grade. We know, that you are good at things that interest you, and what you showed when you had a cast, is listening – you have a gift for listening carefully and a desire to succeed. What happened in Math? You said: »Because I didn't write, I understood better than my schoolmate.« You discovered then: »If I listen, I understand very well.« At the end of the meeting we concluded: listening, concentrating on a lesson is your strength. (1.2)

After the »warm-up« phase, or after the agreement was made, the researcher usually invited (from the second meeting on) the participants to **check** how successful they were at **achieving goals or implementing the agreements**. In this way research of possible positive movements in the direction of desired outcomes was made.

[...] they continued the conversation with checking possible positive movements in the direction of agreed, desired goals, and implemented desired outcomes for the next time they see each other. (6.1)

In most cases agreements were implemented, in some cases partially. The analysis showed that sometimes a pupil implemented agreements, but teachers' and school counsellors' tasks remained unfinished. In most cases pupils did not implement agreements made on an »in-between meeting« without researchers. For those the analysis shows that these agreements were made without the pupil or for the pupil, even though he was present at the meeting. There were also some cases in which the pupil did not implement a co-created, concretely formulated agreement, even though he contributed with an idea about the task. When agreements were not implemented researchers invited all to research what had to be done, said and looked for, and if the agreement had to be reformulated.

The researching of agreements implementation offered an opportunity to celebrate the progress of a pupil, which was seen soon after starting co-operation. Participants reported about the progress on different fields: e.g. marks, reading, writing, self-dependence, communication and self-confidence.

After checking the agreements from the previous meeting the conversation continued towards **forming the instrumental definition of help** (Lüssi, 1991.) and **co-creating solutions**. In the problem definition and co-creation of desired outcomes from the pupil's context arose different, concrete topics (e.g. helping at multiplications, writing, organizing school work, etc.). In some IWPHs from meeting to meeting the topic stayed the same, while in others it changed.

Here is an example of the process of an instrumental problem definition:

Rok: »I write ugly and I always did.« Others didn't agree.

Rok redefines the problem: »Well, if I try. But I need time – I can't if I want to write fast.«

Researchers continue to explore with Rok: »How do you deal with this in school?«

Rok: »If the text is short, I take time, if it isn't, I don't. The problem is, because then I can't read.«

Researcher: »Do you have any idea how you could?«

Rok: »I could write at home and practice, but I am not in the mood for it.«

Researcher: »What should be different?«

Rok: »Teachers should speak slower.« [...] (1.2)

In most cases all participants created the definition, in some cases the pupil himself/herself did it, in some cases the problem was defined without the child. Taking care of a child's cooperation in all phases of work was the special concern of researchers from the beginning of cooperation. Different knowledge to ensure co-creation of good outcomes was used. They explored positive experiences from the past.

»Anže expressed what had helped him – teacher's additional explanation of the word and also adjustments at tests (e.g. a bigger sheet of paper).« (7.2)

They paraphrased from a strength perspective.

A researcher paraphrases at the end: »What do we have »on the table,« about what can we lean on: photocopies, keywords, you practicing at home, and you writing slower. What is the most attractive to you?« Rok: »Keywords!« Researcher: »Great, next time you will report how it went with writing keywords.«(1.2)

They used different techniques that could provide support in exploring (e.g. elements from Solution focused therapy¹⁰, illustrated material¹¹, etc.).

»With the help of scaling questions the researcher finds out that the pupil thinks that learning assistance helps, it also helps that they practice and write in the lesson [...] he will notice improvement when only half of the text he writes will be marked with red.« (8.1)

It is important to hear the child's perspective and understanding of the problem. Only then we can together research ways toward success, and we can expect a child's involvement in the solution. In a concrete case a pupil showed how existing ways of helping, which could be obvious for adults, were not always right for her.

A part of the problem is that Maja does not attend additional classes to receive extra help in English, and that explanation provided there doesn't help her, because there is a different teacher, who she understands even less than her teacher.

¹⁰ Elements from Solution focused therapy that were used in our project were: scaling questions, miracle questions, the questions of exceptions etc. For more see Jong & Kim Berg (2002).

¹¹ Some children, involved in the project, had difficulties expressing their thoughts, wishes etc. Researchers prepared illustrated material (illustrated scales, faces with different moods, etc.) to help them express themselves. The goal was to hear children's voices.

Maja: »He explains something and then I am totally confused.«

Researcher: »Do you have any experience with him, even though you aren't attending that class?«

Maja: »Yes, he was once substituting for my teacher. He was lecturing about the Present Simple. I didn't understand him a bit. It was only clear to me, when our teacher came.« (1.1)

The researcher led the conversation in such a way that they focused on exploring what is possible and positive, and what desired outcomes would be. They explored with all participants what specifically each could contribute.

Meetings of the IWPH ended with summarizing agreements from the process of work with the aim of clearing out the co-created help plan. Agreements defined a concrete, short-term task for each participant.

»At the third meeting all of the participants accepted an agreement that the class teacher would prepare shorter instructions for exercises, so Matic could work without time pressure. He will, on his own, ask the teacher if he didn't understand something. The school counsellor will invite his next year's class teacher to the next meeting.«(6.1)

The analysis shows that the whole process of work was developed in the way that mobilizes a child's participation and strengths, which is crucial for preventing learned helplessness. In the discussion section more details about the process in connection to learned helplessness are presented.

EVALUATION

When researchers asked all the participants about their expectations at the beginning of the project, their first impression was that the model was great because it enables the cooperation of all the involved: a child, teachers, a school counselor and parents.

School workers and parents wanted to try out the model because they saw the opportunity for each participant to get something from it, especially if working this way created the possibility for a child to perform better in school. They liked the focus on the future, on solutions, on co-creation of support and help in a way that each gives his/her share. Children's expectations were mainly connected with their wish for teachers to hear their request for help and explain learning material in an understandable way.

The evaluation in the middle and at the end of the project showed that the expectations of all participants in the IWPH were basically realized. As we can see from the Table 2, teachers, school counselors and parents reported that they cooperated more and better with each other and had an opportunity to look at the problem from different points of view.

»I think we achieved a lot together. We work better together now. I collaborate better with a pupil, as well with his parents – I call them to come to school. Also, the mother calls me.« (Teacher, 9.1)

In the opinion of teachers, school counselors and parents it was a good experience for a child to be involved in the IWPH, because in this way he/she had an opportunity to express his wishes and needs. A child's voice could be heard. Collaboration in the IWPH was an opportunity for all the involved to express their wishes and needs.

»I can tell that everyone could tell his opinion – each from his point of view.« (Parent, 1.2)

Mainly because of a child's involvement in the IWPH most teachers and school counselors noticed the difference in their attitude towards a child. Teachers reported that they put more emphasis on helping a child, also in the class during lessons, and on making agreements with a child, and not only giving commands.

»The main difference is that I am now much more attentive to a child's wishes and needs – I try to make space for a child to hear his voice. I try to join a child, to ask him what he is good at. Then I make a space for a child, so he can decide where and how I can help him.« (Teacher, 1.2)

Also school counselors reported that they give more space to a child, that they know how to involve him/her.

»I am closer to the pupil. I also have the opportunity in a lesson, in smaller groups, to ask her if she doesn't understand something. But now she already asks a lot during the lessons. There is more communication, also eye contact, if nothing else. I didn't pay so much attention before.« (School counselor, 3.2)

Most participants perceived a child as an important co-worker in the conversation, as an expert for his/her experiences. In their opinion this contributes to the child's cognition of how important it is that he/she is involved in the co-creation of help and support for him/her. Including the child in planning help and support for him/her was an opportunity for searching new ways of learning.

»It helped me a lot when we agreed that I can have bigger letters in math and in natural science.« (Pupil, 7.2)

But on the other hand, especially some teachers reported that they would need extra time to truly get used to the child's involvement in the IWPH.

»Earlier we collaborated with each other, but without a child. It is different if the child is involved. And I think I will need some time to get used to this.« (Teacher, 5.1)

As we can see from the Table 2, teachers, school counselors, and parents were satisfied because working in the IWPH was arranged in a way that enables open space for conversation and for co-creating solutions.

»It was not easy to collaborate all the time, sometimes we had some problems, especially because we didn't manage to arrange the adjustments for Anže as quickly as his mum would have liked. But this experience was very important for all of us: it is not necessary that everything goes well in a working relationship. We can have some conflicts, but it is important

that we can solve them together. Then you see things differently and this doesn't mean the end of the working relationship.« (School counselor, 7.2)

They liked the way of talking with each other: the emphasis was on solutions not on problems, and on a strengths perspective. They were satisfied because in the IWPH meeting we were talking about an actual child and his/her specific learning difficulties. Parents and children especially liked the continuity of help, which enabled immediate problem solving.

»I am satisfied because I had the opportunity to tell immediately in which segment I need help.« (Pupil, 7.2)

This way of working in the IWPH enabled making agreements with all the involved, especially with a child. Besides making agreements, it is also important that these agreements are respected, and what was also stressed was that all were involved in the IWPH.

At some schools, in spite of our effort to ensure a place for a child's voice to be heard, we still met some children that had difficulty expressing their wishes and opinions. Researchers prepared some illustrated material to help. Teachers, school counselors and parents were enthusiastic about this material and saw it as very helpful for children.

The important message for our project is that all the participants saw children's progress from the beginning of the project in different fields (improvement of grades, higher self-esteem, better organization of school work, etc.).

In the evaluation the participants spoke about the importance of similar things that were stressed in the process analysis. They experienced the co-creative working relationship concept as an opportunity for collaboration and solutions co-creation, in which a child has an important role as an expert for experiences. These are important ways of dealing with learned helplessness.

DISCUSSION

METHODOLOGY

There are some methodological limitations of this study which could make the results less valid and reliable and therefore have to be outlined before we continue the discussion:

- measuring instruments: the forms were prepared in advance based on our theoretical understanding. During the fieldwork we found they were too complex to fill out, and as well, when analyzing, some important details from the process were missing. Researchers tried to fill out the forms as precisely as possible; some IWPH meetings were tape-recorded and more details could be seen. The forms were not tested in advance, since we were focused on developing a good way of recording in cooperation with school workers that would be based on field experiences.
- data processing and analyzing: the forms were analyzed by the researchers. On one hand this can be an advantage (an insight into a process), but one could object that

the analysis is too subjective. To improve this a third person, who was not involved in the project, should also analyze the forms.

- the reliability of the results focused on learned helplessness is in question because the forms did not include prepared criteria for indicating learned helplessness in the process of work in advance. So the analysis of the connection between learned helplessness and co-creative working relationship is indirect.

CO-CREATIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIP AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

The analysis of 18 IWPHs that were going on in Slovenian schools in the school year 2009/2010 shows that the concept of a co-creative working relationship can be used in the school environment. We can also claim that the concept contributes to the prevention or dealing with learned helplessness of children with learning difficulties, because results show the active role of a child through the whole process and progress of a child in different fields connected to school success. As learned helplessness relates to poor grades and underachievement (Reyes, 2011.), the first step is surely the support for school success in an individual way for each pupil, co-created *with* the pupil when joining him/her and all of those involved in a problem to become involved in a solution. It is important to ensure the space for the child's voice to be heard.

At the beginning of the project we borrowed the idea of Sheila McNamee (2007.) that learning is possible on the foundation of collaboration and conversation with children. This idea has been confirmed in working in the IWPH: in education the concept of work based on relations – the concept which demands that we give up the idea of simple transfer of knowledge from a teacher to a pupil and replace it with understanding that people co-create knowledge in common activities – leads us to desired, positive outcomes. Each IWPH connected a pupil with all of the adults who are important for helping and supporting him/her to overcome or lessen his/her learning difficulties. As we can see from the results of the evaluation teachers, school counsellors and parents were also satisfied because they could collaborate all together in the IWPH. When working this way they saw the opportunity for each participant to explain his/her understanding of the problem, and at the same time to research solutions with all of the people involved. This is a very important new experience for pupils because learned helpless children often think that they do not have any control over the outcome of a situation.

Each participant entered into the IWPH with his/her own story, his/her own understanding of the problem, and solutions, and one of the main tasks of the researcher – who was leading the process of work – was to ensure that everybody's voice was heard and was taken seriously. Agreement about co-operation, in which the researcher explained the basic concepts and defined tasks, was one of the factors that made it possible for participants to

listen to each other. They were already invited into a task where learned helplessness is prevented or can be dealt with (the importance of everyone, each having a share in a solution, working from a strength perspective, solution building, etc.). Accepting the participation in the IWPB by each member already meant that they would be active in the decision-making and in choosing a specific work framework: to be involved in defining a problem and co-creating solutions with the clear message that we all have to start co-creating solutions here and now. Giving special attention to a pupil as a crucial co-worker in a project was not a new experience only for a child, but also for adults. In this way a path towards co-creating, which surely prevents learned helplessness, was enabled.

Checking and celebrating the success in achieving agreed goals from previous meetings was also a way to prevent or deal with learned helplessness. It is important for all members, especially for a pupil to see the progress or a difference from the last meeting. This is a way to develop children's belief that ability is incremental, not fixed; that is, effort increases ability and skills (Reyes, 2011.). We agree with Tollefson (2000., in Reyes, 2011.) who recommends that we help children see success as improvement. We need to avoid communicating children that success in school means they need to perform at the same level as other pupils. When we help children see success as improvement, states Tollefson (2000., in Reyes, 2011.), we are encouraging them to expend effort to remediate their academic difficulties. In addition, we are training them to focus on strategies and the process of learning, rather than outcomes and achievement.

In our project, sometimes some agreements were made without the pupil or were made for him/her. In these cases pupils did not have an opportunity to contribute their share to solutions – their share was imposed, and mostly those agreements were not respected. These experiences were a matter of common learning how to really ensure the process of co-creation, and they show the importance of making agreements with all the involved – not without the participants or for them. In the evaluation of the project, all the participants also emphasized the meaning of making agreements with and respecting all the involved. Making agreements with all, especially with a pupil, opens space for researching how a pupil will manage to implement the agreement and concretize all the tasks that should be done. In this way we can avoid putting too much load on a pupil, which could lead to learned helplessness, i.e., if a pupil feels incapable of implementing the necessary courses of action, he/she can develop passivity and his/her school performance deteriorates.

It is also important, when checking agreements, not to lead the conversation in a way to impose feelings of guilt on a person who did not do the tasks. The agreements which were not realized offer opportunity for further researching, for new understanding, for reformulating steps towards the desired outcome.

Working from the ethics of participation and a strength perspective is certainly a way to prevent or deal with learned helplessness. In the IWPB, researchers explored positive experiences from the past; they focused on what is possible and positive and on pupil's sources of strength. In this way all participants, but especially the pupils, can see their capabilities

and what their skills and abilities are, etc. Also the evaluation confirmed that participants were satisfied with conversations based on a strength perspective. Reyes (2011.) stresses the importance of helping learned helpless children recognize and take credit for the skills and abilities that they already have.

Establishing and maintaining a co-creative working relationship with a child who has learning difficulties helps us tackle the three basic deficits Gordon and Gordon (2006.) define as those that create learned helplessness. In the IWPH the child (as a main collaborator) experiences the sense of participation as a basis of overcoming a motivational deficit. The child's new experience that he/she can control the learning process helps him/her also deal with a cognitive deficit. Experiencing success in different school fields raises self-esteem and prevents an emotional deficit.

Inviting a pupil to be an active participant in all phases of the conversation, making space for his/her perspective, taking him/her seriously ensures co-creation of the IWPH in a way that prevents learned helplessness and supports the pupil to experience school success – which is one of the main protective factors in a person's life. Cooperation in the IWPH is not about persuading a learned helpless child that he/she can succeed, asking him/her to think positively, and asking him/her to try hard, which authors (Ames, 1990.; Seligman, 1990.; Eccles, Wigfield & Schiefele, 1998.) say is ineffective. It is about providing an opportunity for a child's experience of success.

CONCLUSION

We would like to conclude with a statement from a school counselor, who described some important experiences with the work in the project, also connected with learned helplessness:

[...] I have an impression that we in both IWPHs very precisely talked about the current situation, expectations in specific tasks. These two children are becoming more competent from month to month. This has been noticed also by people who don't have anything to do with the project. For example, just the other day at the teachers' conference one teacher said in front of everyone that Damir has very much improved in a sense that he knows what he doesn't understand or know. He himself asks for help. [...] (7.1)

The concept of a working relationship brings a new paradigm of leading a conversation and establishing relationships between pupils and adults. As Gordon and Gordon (2006.) stress, it is important to establish a non-threatening, friendly environment when working with learned helplessness. To ensure a different kind of cooperation every voice is needed, every voice needs to be taken seriously, and then co-creation of desired outcomes can begin. The active participation of all the involved in a problem of learning difficulty in the IWPH leads towards progress and school success which can be best evaluated only through the perspective of an individual child.

The review of the processes of work in the IWPB and evaluation of the project confirm that it is possible to transfer the concept of co-creative working relationships from social work to schools, and that this concept is useful in supporting and helping children with learning difficulties. The concern about a lack of utility of the concept refers to the systemic obstacles connected with time and organizational problems, which could make implementation of the model into a school system more difficult. Finding answers on how to make it possible for the maximum number of pupils is a future challenge for our work, which is an important topic we did not examine in this paper, where the focus was more on the concept of work in connection to learned helplessness.

A child's active participation is the best prevention of learned helplessness. In an IWPB the child is constantly invited to participate, his/her strengths are highlighted, celebration of small successes motivates further development, experience of success gives hope, and a feeling of control over events results in outcome expectations increasing. These are the ways for a pupil to experience that they can make a difference, or if we borrow Gordon and Gordon's (2006.) metaphor: »We just have to help pupils to find the way to turn on their switches.« An IWPB, in which co-creation of desired outcomes leads the work, gives an opportunity for »switches to be turned on.«

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**ULOGA SUVREMENIH KONCEPATA SOCIJALNOG RADA U SUOČAVANJU S NAUČENOM BESPOMOĆNOŠĆU
KOD DJECE S PROBLEMIMA U UČENJU**

SAŽETAK

Strategije suočavanja s naučenom bespomoćnošću česta su tema u radu s djecom s poteškoćama u učenju. Autorica polazi od stajališta da treba redefinirati ulogu djeteta u procesu učenja kao i vezu koja se s djetetom uspostavlja. Cilj rada je pronaći odgovore u suvremenim konceptima socijalnog rada temeljenim na našim teorijskim stajalištima, a u vezi s praktičnim iskustvima i rezultatima istraživanjima u projektu Sustvaranje učenja i pomoći u školi koji je vodio Fakultet za socijalni rad, a dio je istraživanja provedenog s Pedagoškim fakultetom. Kvalitativna analiza akcijskog istraživanja pokazuje da je ključno utvrditi individualni radni projekt pomoći sa svima koji mogu sudjelovati u sustvaranju pomoći i potpore školskom uspjehu djeteta i u okviru kojeg su djeca aktivni sudionici u svim fazama kako bi se spriječila naučena bespomoćnost. Socijalni rad također ima važnu ulogu u školi. Socijalni radnik, kao jedan od članova stručnog tima u školi, može primjenom modernih koncepata pomoći pridonijeti školskom uspjehu kao jednom od glavnih zaštitnih čimbenika u životu osobe.

Ključne riječi: školski uspjeh, suradni odnos za sustvaranje, akcijsko istraživanje, evaluacija.

