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INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN FAMILIES ON STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN CROATIAN LANGUAGE LESSONS

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Summary – *This paper presents the research on the correlation between physical and emotional abuse in families and their achievement in the subject of Croatian language.*

The sample consisted of 602 (337 F and 265 M) students in their second year of high school. The following modified instruments were used in the research: Questionnaire on stressful events in the family (for measuring physical abuse) and Questionnaire on childhood abuse (for measuring emotional abuse). The data on their achievement were obtained from students and school administration.

The results show that students physically abused in the family are low achievers in the subject Croatian language ($M = 3,25$; $sd = 1.067$; $t = 2.108$; $df = 595$; $p < 0,05$), with respect to their colleagues who were not abused. When physical abuse is more intense so is achievement in the subject Croatian language lower.

In analyzing emotional abuse in the family a significant difference between abused students and those who were not amused with respect to their achievement in Croatian was not established. However, it was confirmed that in groups of more extremely emotionally abused children there was a difference with respect to their achievement in Croatian class ($t = 2.098$; $df = 321, 630$; $p < 0,05$). Students who were more frequently emotionally abused have lower achievement results. The discussion points out those traumatic experiences of abuse have the power to hinder development of linguistic and communicative skills, which has an effect on the outcomes in language classes. Considering that literature deeply touches emotions and experiences the correlation of abuse with achievement is not surprising. The conclusion emphasizes improved use of teaching content and methods for easing

problems of abused children and in that respect improving their achievement in school.

Key words: *emotional abuse, Croatian language teaching, literature teaching, school achievement, physical abuse, child abuse*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching practice these days is witness to an ever-growing number of children who cannot realize their personal potential and set goals due to various obstacles which are independent of their abilities and are often located outside the classroom (Cole, et al., 2005). Scientists warn that in addition to intellectual abilities motivation, concentration power, emotional control, functioning in the environment primarily peers and teachers are necessary for school achievement. However, the ability to learn as well quality teaching and exceptional school environment alone cannot suffice for school success. Abuse is often mentioned as the reason which sabotages school demands and hardens achievement of children's potentials. Abuse is defined as permanent or frequent exposure to purposeful violent actions which occur in the context of relationships of responsibility, trust and power in order to inflict physical and/or psychological pain, injury or embarrassment to a child and can result in real or potential harm to health, development, dignity but also influence school achievement (Brasard, Hart, Hardy 1993; O'Hagan, 1995; Evans et al., 2002; in Pećnik, 2003.; Iwaniec, 2006; Bilić, 2008).

A large number of children is exposed to physical abuse, that is, frequent or individual extremely harsh behavior with the aim to inflict pain such as: hitting/slapping, hitting with objects; strong shaking; strong pushing; hitting with fists or feet; pulling hair or ears; but also heavy beatings. The consequences of such types of behavior (bruises and contusions; cuts, slashes, scratches, nose bleeds; broken or damaged teeth; sprains; burns; bone fractures) can be but are not necessarily immediately visible (Pećnik, 2003; Buljan-Flander, Kocijan-Hercigonja, 2003; Bilić, Zloković, 2004).

Emotional abuse entails various types of continuous hostile behavior such as purposeless yelling, ridiculing and mocking; vulgar language and swearing; frightening and threatening; harsh criticism and comparison with others; insulting; inhibition and restriction based on which a child can conclude that it is worthless, unloved and inappropriate (Killen, 2001; Karlović et al. 2001; Bilić, Zloković, 2004; Iwaniec, 2006; Bilić, 2008). In their families, children are usually abused by parents, older brothers or sisters, but also other family members. The consequences of everything mentioned are reflected in a child's emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physical functioning which is related to difficulties in school.

We were interested in how physical and emotional abuse in family influences students' success in the subject Croatian language. Considering that the two fundamental components of this subject are language and literature we analyze

them separately due to their characteristics. The literature consulted emphasizes the influence of abuse on the development of linguistic and communicative skills of children (Coster, Cicchetti, 1993; Van der Kolk, 2005; Cole et al., 2005). Our premise was that that the same also influences students' achievements in the subject Croatian language.

Other studies emphasize strong influence of abuse on the emotional development of a child and its capacity to express emotions (Killen, 2001; Iwaniec, D., 2006). Considering that the content of literary (art) work and teaching approaches reach emotions and experiences of students it was of interest to use how it reflects on students particularly those who are being abused by family.

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE AND STUDENT SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Numerous research established a correlation between abuse and school success (Kinard, 2001; Shonk, Cicchetti, 2001, Slade, Wissow, 2007). Researchers warn that abused children have developed abilities for learning, however the experience of abuse often influences the possibility to express that ability entirely and even develop it. In other words it these are abuse hindered or damaged abilities which make school success much more difficult. This paper will emphasize the difficulties of analyzing information and emotional functioning, aspects which significantly influence student success in the subject Croatian language and literature.

Difficulties in information analysis of abused children

Growing up of abused children in the environment of fear and instability, inadequacy, and without stimulus can hinder development or cause deficits in abilities necessary for information processing.

Fear and continuous threats can block resources of attention and activate a child's hyperactive, restless system (Dyregrov, 2004). The repetition of trauma interferes with the neurobiological development, particularly the capacity for integrating sensory, emotional and cognitive information into a coherent entirety (Perry, 2002; according to Cole et al. 2005; Van der Kolk, 2005). Due to everything mentioned, children traumatized from abuse have a lot of difficulty achieving the state of "safe readiness" which is necessary for being open to new information. Hyperactivity hinders attention and processing of verbal information, which leads to difficulties in reproducing what has been learned.

The previously mentioned neurobiological research established that the limbic and paralimbic systems of the brain which include intensive emotions become activated when traumatic experiences are enlivened. (see Cole et al. 2005). Considering that those areas are also related to language, a transfer occurs which

hinders language and thought processes. All of that influences the *processing and use of verbal information*, and in that respect the use of language in everyday communication. Allen and Oliver (1998) found a significant correlation between traumatized children and deficit in the receptive and expressive language. Coster and Cicchetti (1993) established disrupted language development which does not only affect linguistic aspects of language, but also pragmatic and narrative functions.

Successful pursuing of a large number of school tasks depends on the „ability to bring the chaos of everyday experiences into linear order“ (Cole et al. 2005, p. 26). Traumatic abuse experiences can hinder the ability of *sequenced organization of materials* which leads to difficulties in reading, writing and verbal communication. In addition, abused children have *minimal experiences in applying verbal methods in problem solving*, and particularly feel *difficulties in extracting key ideas from longer texts* (Coster, Cicchetti, 1993). The reason for that as the authors mention is in their inadequate exposure to positive influences of adults who do not carry out or elaborate their thoughts, decisions and feelings, and they do not encourage their children to do so either. The second reason is growing up in the chaos of insecure homes where they did not meet logically linked relationships. Everything that has been mentioned can be linked to students' success in the subject Croatian language.

Emotional variables influencing the success of abused children

Recently, the attention of scientists has been attracted by emotional aspect, particularly emotional intelligence and their influences on school achievement. It is natural that children start recognizing, evaluating and exploring emotions in their family, and that learning is broadened at school. We agree with the opinions of Saloveyja and Sluytera (1999, p. 40.) who emphasize that “literature is most likely the first home of emotional intelligence”. It is in literature that children start learning about emotions of characters from fairytales, stories and continues to explore in novels and dramas. In addition to learning about *emotional perception* children also evaluate emotions, but also link them with their experience. According to research abused children have *problems with naming and expressing emotions*, and show lower accuracy in recognizing emotions than their peers who were not abused (Coster, Cicchetti, 1993; Cole et al., 2005). Abused children also have difficulties with evoking emotions and lack understanding of other children's emotions. The lack of understanding a different perspective makes noticing different ideas in texts or problem solving from another point of view more difficult and yet those are important elements for success in a number of teaching subjects. Abused children living in the world of “emotional storms and extremes” find it difficult to control inner states and control emotions (Wolfe, 1999; Streeck-Fischer, Van der Kolk, 2005; according to Cole et al. 2005). That is how a *deficit of emotional control* is a most evident characteristic of abused children. All of the above logically reflects final school outcomes particularly in the teaching literature.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The aim of this research was to establish a correlation between physical and emotional abuse of children in families with their school success in the subject of Croatian language and literature.

We assumed that **(H1)** there is a correlation between physically and emotionally abused children and their success in the subject Croatian language and literature.

Sample and research implementation

A total of 602 students from 21 classes participated in the research. Of the 602 students there were 337 female students (56%) and 265 male students (44%). The research was conducted among students in the second year of high school in Osijek, Rijeka, Split and Zagreb. In order to have a representative sample, the participants were students of grammar schools and four and three-year vocational schools. The research was approved by ethical committees of schools and school principals. The note for participants stated the research purpose and stated that participation was on a voluntary basis.

Instruments applied

Measuring physical abuse. For measuring physical abuse (TZ) in family and school a modified Questionnaire of stressful childhood experiences in the family which was constructed according to similar instruments for measuring physical abuse in childhood by self testimony (Wolfe, 1991; Briere, 1992; Straus, Hamby, 1997 according to Pećnik, 2003), which was validated in Croatia and showed satisfactory metric characteristics (Pećnik, 2003). The instrument consists of a questionnaire of physical abuse (7 items) and questionnaire of physical injuries which were a result of physical abuse (6 items). For measuring TZ in family the participants evaluated each item with according to the frequency of such experiences (never – 1, rarely – 2, occasionally – 3, often – 4). Cronbach alpha was 0,76.

Measuring emotional abuse. Measuring emotional abuse in the family (EZ) was done using the modified scale of emotional abuse from the Questionnaire on childhood abuse (Karlović et al., 2001), which contains seven items. The participants had to evaluate the frequency of occurrence of the described behavior in the family on a scale of 4 degrees (never – 1, rarely – 2, occasionally – 3, very often – 4), and the Chronbach alpha for that scale was 0,80.

Data on achievement were obtained from students and checked with the school administration. The instruments mentioned were part of the wider instrument panel applied on a sample; here we mention only those instruments relevant for the aims of this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Variables of physical and emotional abuse in the family were defined as linear sums of exposure to particular types of physical, i.e. emotional abuse. In order to compare students who were physically abused in the family with those who were not physically abused in the family, in their achievement in the subject Croatian language we conducted two analyses. In the first analysis the entire sample of students was divided into two groups depending on the median variable physical abuse, that is, those who are below (not abused) and those who were above the median (abused) and a *t*-test was applied for independent samples. The second analysis was conducted only for examining differences in achievement in the subject of Croatian language between participants who were not abused and those more extremely exposed to physical abuse at home. Those participants were also divided into two groups, those who are below the first quartile borderline on the scale of physical abuse (not abused) and those who are above the third quartile on the scale of physical abuse (extreme physical abuse) and the two groups were also compared using the *t*-test. In the same manner a comparison of emotionally abused and those not abused with respect to their achievement in the subject Croatian language, i.e. we have conducted two *t*-tests, one between groups according to the median, and the second between groups according to the lower and upper quartile on a scale of emotional abuse.

The results show that students physically abused in the family have lower achievement results in the subject Croatian language ($N = 245$; $M = 3,25$; $sd = 1,067$; $t = 2,108$; $df = 595$; $p < 0,05$), with respect to their colleagues who were not abused ($N = 343$; $M = 3,43$; $sd = 1,129$). The second analysis among extreme groups is only a confirmation of the first (not abused $N=136$; $M=3,6$; $sd=1,041$ vs. extremely abused $N=187$; $M=3,22$; $sd=1,072$; $t = 3,212$; $df = 321$; $p < 0,01$). The results obtained lead to the conclusion that physically abused children have lower achievement results in the subject Croatian language. The correlation between physical abuse and achievement in the subject Croatian language is low ($r = -0,92$, $p = 0,025$). The direction of the correlation indicates that if there is greater physical abuse in the family, the overall achievement results in Croatian language are worse, and the low correlation indicates that there is a chain of other factors in addition to physical abuse which share the variance with the success in the Croatian language.

In comparing emotionally abused and not abused children, in cases where both groups are determined according to median, we did not establish a significant difference in achievement in the subject Croatian language ($t = 1,379$, $p > 0,05$). However, when we compared the extreme groups according to exposure to emotional abuse in the family a difference in achievement in Croatian language was established ($t = 2,098$; $df = 321, 630$; $p < 0,05$). Students who were not emotionally abused had a better achievement score in the subject Croatian language than those students who were exposed to more extreme types of emotional abuse in

their families (not abused $N = 181$; $M = 3,55$; $sd = 1,142$, vs. extremely abused $N = 146$; $M = 3.30$; $sd = 1.020$). Based on the results obtained we can establish that in cases of “milder” exposure to emotional abuse in the family there is no difference between the groups. Milder intensity of emotional abuse and particular types such as yelling, swearing, etc. fall into the category of “usual”, allowed, and therefore most likely do not leave such harmful consequences. However, if exposure to emotional abuse is more intense, the consequences, in this case school success, are significant. Therefore, the correlation between physical abuse and achievement in the subject Croatian language goes in the expected direction: students frequently abused, and particularly more extremely abused students have low achievement in the Croatian. The correlation between extreme emotional abuse in the family is also in the expected direction: students exposed to more extreme emotional abuse in their families have low achievement results in the subject Croatian language.

As students are frequently exposed to such isolated types of physical and emotional abuse, but also to multiple abuse (e.g. physical abuse is usually accompanied by emotional abuse) we were interested in how that relates to their achievement in the Croatian language. A high correlation was established ($r = .506$) between the total exposure to abuse (physical + emotional) and success in the subject Croatian language.

The results obtained are in harmony with the consulted research around the world which tested the relationship of abuse and success in the mother tongue (Ecenrode et al., 1993; Kendall-Tackett, 1997; according to Bilić, 2008). However, at this moment we are not familiar with any similar research conducted in Croatia. In discussing the results we will begin with the nature of the subject and the manner in which Croatian language is taught which are in a specific way related to some characteristics of abused children.

Abused children's achievement in the subject Croatian language

The task of *language teaching* is a) acquisition of linguistic regularities, grammatical, orthographic and discourse norms and b) their application in everyday communication. Language acquisition is a complex procedure strongly dependant of the psycho-cognitive capabilities of the student.

Some personal variables of abused students can affect their achievement in language learning. As previously elaborated, abused children have a problem with: learning verbal information, understanding causality, sequenced organization of materials, use of verbal information in problem solving and communication. It is logical that all of the above will reflect on the achievement in Croatian language. The elaboration of the analysis of low achievement of students who are abused can be seen in the following:

a) Acquisition of language norms and regularities by abused children will hindered due to the state of hyperarousal And state of absence caused by traumatic experience which makes successful analysis and storage of verbal information

more difficult. That is an important reason which affects the achievement in this subject.

b) The second reason for more difficult acquisition of language content can be related to the problem abused children have in the use of verbal information in problem solving. That This finding can be explained by the transfer which hinders language and thought processing and is conditioned by the activation of intense emotions due to enlivening the traumatic experience in the limbic and paralimbic brain system (Streeck-Fisher, Van der Kolk, 2005; according to Cole et al. 2005).

c) The third possible reason for low achievement by physically abused children in the subject Croatian language can be attributed to specific deficits in the receptive and expressive language which are determined by conditions in which the children were raised as Allen and Oliver (1998) state in their research.

d) Furthermore, a characteristic problem with ability of sequential organization and cause-effect relationships can significantly affect acquisition of content and achievement, especially grammar due to the specificities of this subject area. Problems which abused children have with analysis and use of verbal information in various forms of communication were as previously explained a result of the conditions in which they were growing up. Research and studies emphasize that abused children had inadequate stimulation which is indispensable for developing language, and minimal experiences in the use of verbal methods (Cole et al, 2005). Therefore, the traumatic experience of abuse has the power to distract development of linguistic and communication skills. The hindered ability of children to learn and analyze verbal information and use language as a means of communication has an important influence on their overall school success.

It is also important to mention and also use in practice the possibilities of **positive influence of language teaching**. Clearly structures rules, in addition to the teacher's help in the organization and production of tasks can help abused children in getting used to a sequenced structure. The possibility offered by various language exercises can help in improving communication skills. Everything that has been mentioned can positively influence their school success.

Abused children's achievement in teaching literature

We have stressed that the correlation between abuse and success in this subject is in the expected direction, i.e. frequently abused students have low achievement in the subject Croatian language. Difficulties which abuse of all types leaves on information processing, information analysis and the system of concentration, which was explained in the previous chapter, can certainly influence their success in literature. However, it is important to mention that the consequences of abuse most strongly affect the emotional development of a child and its capacities for expressing and creating relationships. Considering that in literature teaching (and other arts) emotional and moral content is prevalent, it can be expected that children will react to them.

Factors which can make achievement difficult

Literature classes are usually dominated by emotions: from emotional motivation, reading a text, emotional pause prior to expressing the experience. Often, while analyzing a literary work, characters' emotions are also analyzed and discussed. What the characters discuss is something that students relate to their experiences, or they experience an emotional recall.

a) Students are often asked to describe, express their feelings. The reactions to such types of tasks are different, depending on the intensity of the experiences trauma. We believe that it important to mention that a number of abused children will have **problems in expressing their feelings**, at times even complete inability to verbalize. Other students might be prone to suppression, and their aim is to repress embarrassing content and painful emotions from their conscious self. A third group of students are unable to confront their emotions, transpose their thoughts to some nicer topics. This is referred to as cognitive distraction. One group of abused children has emotional outbursts, that is, express their emotions without delay or thought, as if wanting to rid or free themselves from everything. This manner can be explained by the problem abused children have with **emotional regulation**. The number of those on whom the analyzed content can provoke deeply repressed experiences is not small, and therefore situations in which teachers witness very strong and unexpected painful reactions is not infrequent. Teachers who are not familiar with the problem of abuse or with the manners in which students react can misinterpret student behavior as incorrect, inactive or disinterested for work which can reflect their achievement. The problem of expressing feelings was explained in the introductory part by conditions in the family where feelings are not expressed. Children in such families often suppress anger, sadness, helplessness and therefore their identification and verbalization of emotions becomes disrupted with time (Shield, Cicchetti, 1998).

b) Abused children have particular **difficulties in understanding the perspective of others**. As abused students often experience lack of understanding and no compassion from the important others, they have difficulties in understanding and comprehending others. That will make character analysis more difficult (moral, psychological, spoken, social, etc.) For the same reasons they have difficulties in noticing different ideas in texts and problem solving from a different point of vies. Rejecting different points of view should be added to this and the reason for that is no understanding on the side of the others (Cole et al., 2005). Considering that teachers or other students often represent different opinions, misunderstanding is inevitable.

c) A distorted possibility to notice **cause and effect** relationship, caused by growing up in families which were not dominated by logical relationships and actions, will affect analyses in general, and therefore even literary work analyses. Success in this subject will be affected by difficulties abused children have in extracting key ideas from longer texts as well as their inability to elaborate ideas,

all conferment by other research (Coster and Cicchetti, 1993; Van der Kolk, 2005). Possible causes which make abused children achieve better in the subject Croatian literature were mentioned. However, we want to point to some specificities of literature teaching which can influence and improve achievement of abused children. It is very important to alert teachers to therapeutic possibilities of literature, and the relevance of offering help to abused children while teaching.

Possibilities for positive influence and motivation which literature offers

Literature teaching can help abused children in several ways:

a) For part of the abused children, literary works and their interpretation can help in freeing tension and purification of emotions. It is known that part of the students find a substitute for their wishes through literature and realize their goals even if in imagination. In a certain way, literature is “a correction of life and represents the most valuable replacement for the insufficient life” (Hauser, 1977 p. 64.). Basing their postulates on Freud’s postulates on art as composition and mean for calming, the same authors stress that it is often the comforter. Because of the possibility to find consolation and replacement especially for feelings an large number of abused students can with positive reinforcement of their teachers, “get into” reading or creative writing and catch on to the saving link. For example, the described situations which remind them of what they had experiences, can help them make a clearer view of the problem and seeing how other people cope with it. Considering that abused children open up with difficulty, the awareness that there are others with a similar experience going through the same difficult situations, helps significantly.

b) Literature, in general, **encourages thinking and creating new insights**. However, „literature first and foremost inspires and helps a man towards ethical principles and aesthetic challenges, in search and finding oneself within the big and mysterious world and in forsssing at least some of the difficulties which await on the road of life“ (Pandžić, 2001, p. 6.). Often, the mere reflection of events of life that are difficult, tense, even intolerable are presented in such a way that they can be overcome, can have a calming effect on abused children and restore hope.

c) The aim of literature is not only to ease problems and offer help in handling life’s difficulties. Literary works often aspire to improve a person, and encourage a person to make more **definite steps in the fight for dignity**. Literature seeks answers and encourages new reactions. It affects our emotions, and through them it affects our will and preparation for taking action. The parts mentioned, if used in a quality manner in the teaching process can significantly help children and especially abused children. Abused children with learned helplessness, disorientation, need help in searching for goals and need encouragement to act. We mentioned some general reasons, which can, in teaching practice, encourage abused children to pay more attention to literature. We assume that such concrete help can affect student achievement. Therefore, well directed literature teaching

has the potential to offer help to abused children: easing and freeing tension, offering consolation, clearer view of the problem, and encouraging constructive activities. It is especially important to emphasize that reactions to particular tasks can be different, depending on the strength of the trauma experienced. The research results suggest that reactions, which can elicit anger or rage in abused children, or simply touch on their deeply hidden content, are more present and which can have a negative effect on their relationship towards the subject and their achievement. In this part we want to emphasize the correlation between the content of art work, and the teaching approach as the initiator of internal processes. We are referring to external stimuli which strongly touch students' experiences and emotions (internal experience). This is followed by reactions which can have an effect on the following: a) student's thoughts and attitudes (internalization) or are visibly declared (external reactions). Both external and internal reactions can evoke positive and negative consequences. As stated, facilitation of emotions, insight or catharsis together with proper teacher guidance can have a positive effect on learning outcomes. Other consequences evoked by the content of the art work and teaching method, such as anger, suppression, etc. can evoke a negative attitude towards the subject, even irritability and thus have a negative effect on achievement. Considering that the effect of abuse, particularly physical is often anger, the result of our analysis suggests that abused children are more likely to have more negative marks in the Croatian language with respect to their colleagues who were not abused.

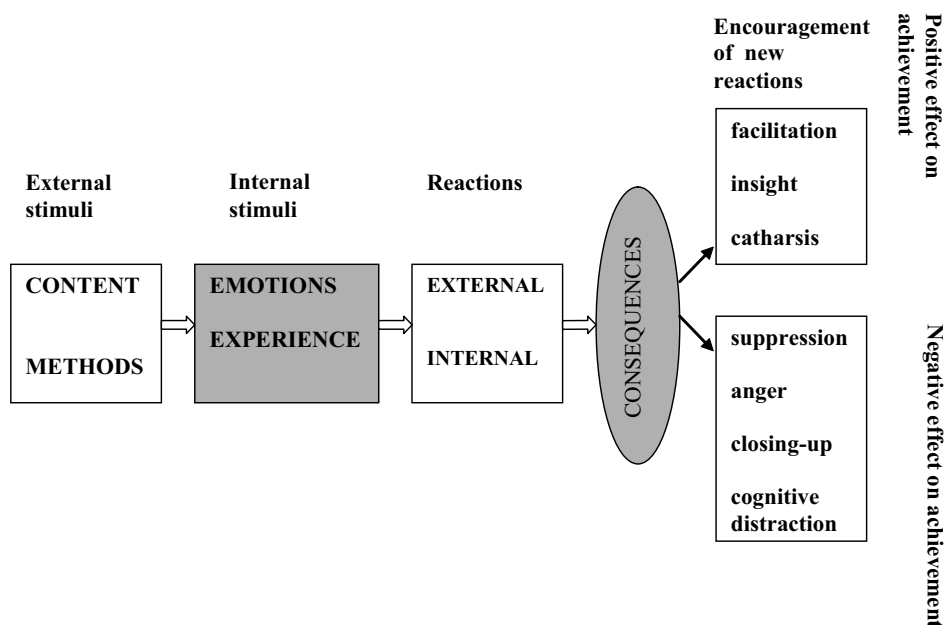


Figure 1: Theoretical model of the influence of literature on the achievement of abused students achievement

Considering that teaching literature, regardless of whether it evokes positive or negative connotations, deeply touches the emotions and experience, it does not surprise that it is related to achievement of abused children. Similar results can be expected in other related subjects (art, music, film, drama, philosophy, sociology, psychology). Research on the correlation of success in the above subject could significantly ease comprehension and offer help in school to abused children. This research also initiates some other questions: How does abuse in the school context influence achievement in various subjects, especially what kind of results do abused children achieve, that is, those children who are exposed to the most extreme types of abuse.

CONCLUSION

This research established that physically abused children in their families are lower achievers in the subject Croatian language. Their achievement deteriorates with respect to the intensity of the physical abuse. As for emotional abuse in the family and achievement in the subject Croatian language, a significant correlation was not established. However, children who are extremely emotionally abused in the family have a low achievement rate in the subject Croatian language.

We assume that abuse can be a predictor of achievement in those subjects which are content wise and teaching wise related to emotions and experience of students, i.e. with problems of abused children. The results obtained suggest further research of deeper and more specific relationships between characteristics of abused children and their school achievement. Current research of particularly negative relationships between abuse and school achievement should be directed towards research in finding assistance in learning and in achieving better school results for abused children. What is more, attention should be directed towards better use of teaching content for easing problems, better achievement and greater cohesion with “learning for life” for all students, including those who are abused.

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