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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERVENTION PROGRAM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTIVATION OF THE SOFT SKILL OF RESPECT IN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES STUDYING IN A SPECIAL CONTEXT

Novakos Ioannis

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Abstract

The area of Special Education and Education is an educational system whose tracing and traversal constitutes a difficult undertaking and action. In this sense, the essential, efficient and effective teaching of soft social skills and, above all, respect, to students with disabilities who study in special contexts and structures is very laborious. With this specific scientific and critical review, the design, implementation and evaluation of an intervention program for the development and cultivation of the soft skill of respect for students with disabilities is investigated and discussed. Based on the review findings of this research, it is demonstrated that intervention programs, in the context of respect, should aim at the development of a specific soft skill and not, in a general and vague way, at the improvement of all soft skills.

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Introduction:-

In the field of education, the importance of the development of soft skills in the daily school life and reality of the students who attend the standard school and, in particular, of the students with disabilities who attend the special structures and framework (Sucuoglu & Ozokcu, 2005). In particular, the reasons for the importance of the development and cultivation of soft skills for the harmonious and smooth integration and adaptation of the students of this group into social life must be highlighted and emphasized (Durlak et al., 2011). The importance, however, of soft skills to all people is an undeniable fact and assumption, regardless of the inability of most to give meaning to the particular term and concept relatively adequately. From this point of view, it appears that soft skills facilitate and help students with disabilities and in general with cognitive, emotional, psychosocial and behavioral deficits and inadequacies, to integrate holistically and effectively in the events of school life (Laker & Powell, 2011).

Established, henceforth, it is considered an imperative and inexhaustible need and condition to teach soft skills to the students of the Special Education and Training Units (SMEAE) so that they adapt as best as possible and optimally to their daily environment (Zins & Elias, 2006). However, it should be emphasized that there is an endless list of soft skills that are considered necessary for students to deal functionally with the problems they encounter in their daily school schedule and duties (Airasian & Russell, 2007). Despite all this, it is well known that the skill of respect constitutes a basic cog not only of the spatial, but also of the social-behavioral integration of the individuals of this special group in the pedagogical-teaching activities and conditions of each special school structure and framework. Therefore, it is considered necessary for these students to master the skill of respect –through intervention programs– which involve them in procedures and activities that require the faithful application of this skill (Talavera & Perez-Gonzalez, 2007).

Corresponding Author:- Novakos Ioannis

Based on the above, it can be seen that teaching the soft skill of respect to these students is a good and effective practice of their personal integration and, at the same time, of their substantial inclusive and equal participation in the prevailing culture and operation of these educational structures (Kourmousi, 2012). In the correct and scientifically sound design, organization and implementation of an intervention program to teach the specific skill, therefore, even confounding variables such as the essentially sincere involvement of parents, the mood and belief of teachers in the success of the child must be taken into account program, the different deficits and abilities of each student and many other unpredictable factors (Turner et al., 2014).

In general, it is noted that the integration and application of such intervention programs in the teaching and learning processes of these students, constitutes an innovative/groundbreaking pedagogical strategy and method, whose positive benefits and benefits are successfully reflected in various difficult situations in everyday life their social life (Kourmousi, 2013). Students with disabilities, in other words, cannot learn respect on their own, but with the cooperation and encouragement of their parents, teachers and peers, in all aspects of the social science, of which the school is a part (Kucuker & Tekinarslan, 2015).

The role and importance of teaching the soft skill of respect to students with disabilities

Obviously, it is not taken for granted that students with disabilities develop social skills immediately with their spatial placement in the special context. In this way, it is established that systematic intervention in the specific field is an imperative and inescapable need (Kalyva, 2010). Especially for students with disabilities, the teaching of principles, beliefs and social behaviors during the educational process and action both within the school classroom in part and in school life as a whole is crucial. Therefore, it is observed that even the acquisition of the basic soft skills, one of which is respect, needs systematic teaching and learning for the people who fall into this group and study in the special structures. In short, it is recognized that the development and practice of applying the skill of respect, especially for these students, is a highly demanding and complex condition and principle (Hotulainen & Lappalainen, 2011).

When there is a decline in mild social skills and emotional difficulties, especially in these students, then this combination is a triggering mechanism, which is associated with manifestations of aggressive behaviors, lack of mental stability and often with school dropout (Bossart et al., 2013). Based on the aforementioned, they do not limit their behavior (they do not respect) either in the classroom or in the rest of their daily school life, in establishing friendly relationships with their classmates, in cooperation and in communication with significant others (Cassery, 2013). From this point of view, it is recognized that the skill of respect is, firstly, basic and fundamental for their participation and holistic inclusion in the school classroom and their smooth transition to the sphere of the social scientist, secondarily, and necessary for the development and promoting their academic performance and abilities (Bauminger et al., 2005).

Based on the above assumptions and opinions, it appears that over time the development and cultivation of socio-cognitive skills, which include the soft skill of respect, the provision of continuous feedback and the perpetual practice of them and in this case (respect), is the most important pillar both for maintaining the best and most optimal effectiveness of targeted interventions and for the generalization of knowledge (Tzouridou et al., 2001). On top of that, it is additionally demonstrated that the use of educational practices and the creation of didactic intervention programs that contribute towards strengthening the essential inclusion and socialization of these students in the events of social life and reality is a necessary and insurmountable condition as never before (Urton et al., 2012).

In this sense, it is considered correct and effective during the planning and precise identification and definition of the goal-skill of the pedagogic-didactic intervention programs that refer to the acquisition and assimilation of the soft skill of respect (Yoo et al., 2014) should be selected the more recent and optimal methodological intervention techniques, after a thorough and careful assessment of the social potential, weaknesses and deficits of the students of this group (Watkins et al., 2015). The school classroom and in general the entire space of the respective Special Education Unit and Organization, constitute the most ideal pedagogical-teaching fields, where students with disabilities have the opportunity to practice and apply the acquired knowledge in relation to the soft skill of respect (Webb et al., 2004).

However, it must be emphasized and pointed out that the design and development of intervention programs to strengthen and empowerment the soft skill of respect are decisively influenced –either positively or negatively– by

various variables such as the scientific-pedagogical composition and competence of the teachers who serve in special structures, their educational culture regarding the socialization of people with disabilities, as well as their teaching experience (Dobbins et al., 2010). Among others, it is demonstrated by the varied and polymorphic findings of the results of various and many international researches and studies that most teachers who serve in this context, are mostly concerned with managing the behaviors that are the result of the deficit of the soft skill of respect on the part of these students and, less and/or not at all by teaching this skill through appropriate structured and weighted intervention programs for its acquisition and/or improvement (Buonomo et al., 2017; Webster & Carter, 2007).

The process of designing and implementing an effective intervention program to acquire and/or improve the soft skill of respect for students with disabilities, therefore, constitutes a very difficult undertaking since their behavior is characterized by heterogeneity and diversity in practice (Hatzichristou et al., 2006). Under this logic, it is noted that various complex and complex variables make the development and elaboration of such interventions in the educational process, a complex and interactively dynamic, mutually influenced and interdependent process (Austin & Sciarra, 2010). Consequently, from now on, the only way is to apply original scientific and pedagogical-didactic interventions regarding learning the skill of respect, which lead to the in-depth cultivation of their socio-emotional behaviors and, by extension, to alleviating the social dissatisfaction that exists when dealing with of the students of this particular group (Waters, 2011).

Design, implementation and evaluation of an intervention program to develop and cultivate the soft skill of respect for students with disabilities

The acquisition and/or improvement of the soft skill of respect is set as the main and primary goal for the design and implementation of an intervention program for students with disabilities attending special structures. First of all, it is well known that the specific skill is gradually developed by these students through the daily interaction of the educational potential of each specific structure (Eikeseth et al., 2012). Subsequently, it is cultivated through the interaction with their classmates during the teaching process and, in addition, it can be developed and strengthened during the break. The soft skill of respect, per se, is considered an integral part for the daily school functioning of the students of this group, so that they have the possibility and opportunity to participate on equal terms and constructively in teaching and learning (Camargo et al., 2014).

It is evident that the good design of an intervention program to access and cultivate the skill of respect must include the interests of the students who constitute the intervention group (Bateman, 2011). This implies that through the observation of their behavior –which I mentioned in passing– constitutes the most important and weighty –for the success of the program– source of gathering information and recording the activities, the active involvement of the participants and involved students is attempted in all the phases and stages of the intervention (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). More specifically, it is recognized that understanding the interests and unique possibilities/abilities of students with disabilities must be the main priority of the teachers involved, especially during the implementation stage of the program. In this way, the most appropriate reinforcements are used by the teachers, in order to achieve the full participation of all students in the learning process (Gena et al., 2014).

A key part, among others, of the success of the intervention program, is the significant others, especially for students with disabilities, who are their parents (Georgiou, 2011). The tool of interviews with their parents can act as the litmus test for extracting important information for the best possible and optimal planning and configuration of all the implementation parameters of the intervention program of the soft skill of respect (Wei et al., 2015). From now on, the importance of the families of these individuals is highlighted, since they function as a supporting framework for the success of the intervention program. Parents' optimism moderates their children's anxiety levels so that they participate seamlessly in all intervention phases to improve the soft skill of respect and, at the same time, acts as a motivating and psychologically uplifting force during program implementation (Christenson, 2004; Haughney & Browder, 2017).

However, in order for the specific intervention program to be considered effective (National Research Council, 2001) it must be governed by some basic and fundamental principles such as: a) it should include 20 hours of intervention per month and be applied throughout the school year, b) to be accompanied by the provision of advisory directions and instructions to the parents of students with disabilities, c) to stand out for the frequency of opportunities used (Niditch et al., 2012) systematically when teaching the specific skill, d) to contribute to the strengthening of cognitive skills and, not only to the development and cultivation of social interaction and functional

and spontaneous communication, e) to continuously cultivate the skill – a goal with the ultimate aim of improving their daily school life, f) to have the possibility of generalizing the of an intervention program in social development, where the maintenance of the effectiveness of the skill to be mastered and/or improved will be checked, g) to apply the intervention –when the conditions allow it– in the general school, as the students of the target group have more proportionate opportunities to carry out through the interaction with their classmates without disabilities finally mastering the skill, h) to constantly redefine the teaching objectives of the intervention program, based on an assessment of the needs of both these students and the their families, i) the staff should be particularly experienced and qualified to participate in the intervention after evaluation and/or specialized training, j) the intervention should be implemented from the moment a deficit and impairment of the target skill is identified in the students of the group and, k) to evaluate in the short-term, medium-term and long-term the maintenance of the results of the intervention (O'Connor, 2016; Reichow & Wolery, 2009; Sperry et al., 2010; Weissberg et al., 2015).

On the basis of the aforementioned, moreover, it is noted that an intervention program is considered to be socio-educationally valid and effective, when the participation of parents in each program, the personalization of the educational program and, most importantly, the measurably maintaining its results in depth are ensured time (Gutman et al., 2012). In addition to others, it has been observed that there are, in addition, some factors that are related and inextricably intertwined with the success and effectiveness of the intervention (Makrygianni et al., 2018). Specifically, it is the mental potential of the students who participate in the intervention, as it has been proven that students who have an IQ above 50 reap greater benefits during its implementation. The speed of acquisition and retention of new skills, early intervention and possession by students of play, sociability, communication, self-care and imitation skills are also decisive front-loading factors influencing the success and/or failure of the intervention program (Gena, 2001; Mruzek et al., 2012).

Pedagogical interventions to develop and strengthen the soft skill of respect

The soft skill of respect is a basic social skill that needs systematic teaching to students with disabilities. Through respect, in other words, the students of this group understand the importance of waiting in line, answering questions that facilitate interaction and communication, respecting the wishes of others and greeting others (Chan et al., 2009). The above constitute a difficult condition for achievement, since their daily school life is not characterized by predictability, structure, organization and stability (Kasari et al., 2011). This intervention has been implemented repeatedly with positive results in recent years in the context of Special Education and Integrative Education. Despite this, it can be seen that over time until today, there are not many empirical studies regarding the group cultivation of the soft skill of respect among the students of this particular group (Carter et al., 2012).

In this sense, it is found that through the development and cultivation of the soft skill of respect, their successful and successful adaptation to the school everyday life of the special context is left to a very large extent (Doll et al., 2014). This implies adherence to the routines and patterns that govern their educational everyday life both inside and outside the classroom, ability to function autonomously and integrate into the school program as a whole and strict adherence to the principles and rules of behavior (Deppeler, 2012). However, it is pointed out that in order to effectively achieve the specific set general and specific goals required for the development and cultivation of the soft skill of respect, these students must have skills related to impulse control, as well as organizational, social and motor skills of autonomy and self-care (Cohen et al., 2010).

Pedagogical teaching techniques and practices, therefore, are used to effectively (Geiger, 2012) deal with the most important social, psycho-emotional and behavioral difficulties and inadequacies that –most of the time inherently– disabled students who study, especially in special structures (Primary and Secondary Education). Given this, it is observed that a variety of scientific-pedagogical procedures are used to teach and learn the soft –social– skill of respect, which are inescapably intertwined with the rules that govern their school life in general and, at the same time, improve and promote constructive holistically their participation in the educational process (Drakos, 2011). However, it is stated that the reduction of deviant behaviors and reactions of these students due to the deficit of the specific skill, must be accompanied by alternative effective ways and forms of teaching other functioning and communication behaviors, especially during their presence at school (Gena & Kymissis, 2001; Hatzichristou, 2011).

A wrong approach that does not correspond to the essential causes of the appearance of behaviors related to the lack of the soft skill of respect, on the other hand, is likely to act as a trigger of a new deviant and problematic disruptive and oppositional behavioral reaction, which will be worse than initially unwanted behavior (Division for Early Childhood, 2007). An intervention program, therefore, must be characterized by pluralism and the variety of

utilization of a wide number of pedagogic-teaching methods, techniques and practices. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out once again that changing unacceptable forms of behavior on the part of students with disabilities –due to the deficit/absence of the soft skill of respect– constitutes a very difficult and many sometimes impossible task and action. Hence, persistence and stability are required in the implementation of the intervention program so that it yields the maximum and the expected benefits for the students exist. In short, it is a time-consuming process, where the reactions and behaviors of students who need change must be prioritized (Pedagogical Institute, Ministry of Education and Lifelong Learning, 2011).

More specifically, it is considered that the implementation of pedagogical interventions must be long-term, that is why they must be implemented for 20 hours per month and for at least one whole school year and set a maximum of three goals that need change and are related to the acquisition and/or improving the soft skill of respect. As far as new pedagogical practices are concerned, they must be introduced and taught gradually, so that both students and teachers have the required time to get used to and consolidate them (Dodge, 2006). Also, there must be a modification of these interventions, if it is observed that they do not work based on the initial design of the intervention program. In addition, other factors that exist in the home of these students must also be taken into account, which is why the specific interventions only concern the school area. Under this logic, it is considered critical to continuously monitor the contribution of pedagogical interventions to the successful implementation of the specific program, in order to provide the correspondingly necessary feedback, through which all those data and information that are useful for decision-making will be drawn concerning the progress of the respective program (Doni & Giotsa, 2017; Gena & Makrygianni, 2017; Moutavelis, 2017).

Pedagogical interventions, therefore, aim to develop the skills and, in this case, the soft skill of respecting students with disabilities, who due to neurophysiological disorders and deficits have delayed their development and/or present impairment based on the expected (Aykir & Tekinarıslan, 2012; Galanis & Gena, 2017). In the light of this logic, it is noted that the purpose of intervention programs is prevention and, of course, not repression. In this way, it is observed that the main goal and pursuit of the programs in question is –through the change of conditions and the teaching of socially acceptable and understandable behaviors– replacing, preventing and modifying –for the better– the manifestation of deviant and dysfunctional behaviors and actions of these students. The restructuring of the daily schedule, the change of the way of interaction with these students as well as the restructuring of the activities they have to carry out, constitute practical pedagogical interventions to modify their teaching and training conditions (Gelastopoulou & Papamihalopoulou, 2020).

Conclusions:-

Obviously, the strengthening and/or many times the acquisition of the soft skill of respect by students with disabilities, constitutes the basic pedagogical and practical logic of the design, implementation and evaluation of the various intervention programs. The use of activities that develop and cultivate the soft skill of respect for students with disabilities is therefore always the main purpose of designing such a program. Certainly, for a program addressed to the individuals of this particular group to be considered successful, its interventions must be extended and directed to the various psychosocial dimensions and aspects that make up the whole of their being. In other words, it must be mentioned that at the end of the program the students with disabilities must be able to effectively face the challenges and demands of everyday school life and life. More specifically, their social development and evolution must be such that it has a positive impact on all areas of school and social science and becoming.

The specific interventions are designed for application to groups such as students with disabilities studying in the special context, hence they are always focused on preventing the development and avoidance of anti-social and dangerous behaviors and actions. Also, it must be structured and shaped in such a way and form, so as to encourage and motivate these students in the direction of meaningful application of the soft skill of respect being taught and learned. In addition, it should not be infused with didacticism, but on the contrary, should strengthen and strengthen their self-esteem, self-concept and self-confidence. The point that is interesting and must be highlighted for the effectiveness and at the same time the success of the intervention programs, however, is the generalization of the newly acquired and/or developing and cultivating soft skill of respect to –another context and environment– where there are other unknown and persons unimportant to their family, school and social existence and functioning.

Given the circumstances, it is found that the sure success of intervention programs concerning the development and/or improvement of soft social skills such as respect is ensured by the criterion and the factor of the physical context which is the school of attendance of the students who are the target group of the intervention. In a few

words, it is considered that the design and especially the implementation/development of a program to modify and/or improve a specific behavior must be the product of group involvement and work of all actors (educators, parents, local community) involved. Finally, it appears that the observation of their play during the breaks is a safe marker and guide for the selection of the most recent teaching goals for the design and implementation of an intervention program, especially for students attending Special Education and Training School Units, the subject matter of their searches, questions and discussions and, most importantly, the way and form they communicate about all issues, problems and situations with others. All of the aforementioned demonstrate that, as a whole, the intervention programs concerning the individuals of this group must aim exclusively at the development of a specific soft social skill and not generally at the positive reinforcement and improvement of all skills that fall under the category of cognitive, psycho-emotional, social and behavioral.

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