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First-graders' agency as a factor of intellectual resource use in overcoming the adaptation crisis

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Abstract

This study explores the general criteria of agency (according to K.A. Abulkhanova) - readiness and capacity to use one's abilities, personal qualities, mental capabilities and skills to solve problems. We have focused on the issue of first-graders' agency during the period of age crisis and crisis of adaptation to school learning. 81 pupils were involved in the research; the data were collected three times in the first grade and at the end of primary school – in the fourth grade. It is proven that only first graders with a high level of agency, whose inner schoolchild position (ISP) was already formed before starting school (as a result of the age crisis), use their intellectual resources to solve adaptation crisis problems. These agency criteria remain in force until the end of primary school, the research shows.

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1. Introduction

The term “agency” is used in philosophy and psychology, generally to refer to the ability of individuals to direct their conscious activity to achieving goals. Agency, as a behavioral concept, is an individual's sense of what they can do and what they think they can do. A. Bandura defines agency as the ability to intentionally influence one's functioning and the course of environmental events [1]. M. Hewson determines agency as a condition of activity rather than passivity. It refers to the experience of acting, doing things, making things happen, exerting power, being a subject of events, or controlling things. This is an aspect of human experience [2]. H.R. Markus and S. Kitayama prove that psychological process organization (e.g., attention, perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, interpersonal relationship) depends on the cultural and social specification of agency [3].

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In Russian psychology the conceptual term of agency has synonyms: “subjectivity” and “subject activity”. Different aspects of agency (subjectivity) were considered by S.L. Rubinstein and his scientific school, K.A. Abulkhanova, A.V. Brushlinsky, A.N. Leontiev, D.A. Leontyev, E.A. Sergienko, V.N. Slobodchikov and many other psychologists. According to K.A. Abulkhanova, the general criteria of agency (subjectivity) are the following: self-development, readiness and capacity to use one's abilities, personal qualities, mental capabilities and skills to solve problems, conscious self-organization, initiative and responsibility in activity [4]. Agency formation in childhood means a gradual development of a child's self-consciousness as a result of several age crises. For example, the result of 6-7 year age crisis is formation of “the inner schoolchild position (ISP)” (L.I. Bozhovich) [5] – the next level of child's agency.

V.I. Slobodchikov defines agency formation as the main task of the personalization stage (7-18 years) – «the culmination period of personal development» [6]. Our study focuses on the problem of a pupil's agency during the periods of normative crises (age crises and crises of adaptation to the next levels of education). In this article we describe the role of first-graders' agency in intellectual resource use to overcome the adaptation crisis successfully. We hypothesized that first graders with a high level of agency whose ISP was formed before starting school (as a result of the age crisis) will use their intellectual resources to solve adaptation crisis problems. Whereas first graders with a low level of agency, whose ISP was not formed before starting school, will not use their intellectual resources in full: this category of pupils has problems in learning, behavior, negative emotional state despite their intellectual capacity.

2. Method

81 first-graders from municipal school of Obninsk took part in the empiric study. Their parents were informed and gave their consent to the survey. The inner schoolchild position was measured with the ISP technique (T. Nezhnova [7]) three times during the first grade: in September, February and May. Intellectual abilities were measured with the help of the Raven Progressive Matrices test (RPM) [8] in September. The ISP technique is a short interview about school, containing questions about the child attitude toward different elements of school life: classes, teacher, marks etc.

The result of the pupils' adaptation crisis was estimated in accordance with B.F. Lomov's systemic approach. The adaptation criteria (information, behavioral and affective) in the first grade were estimated by the expert assessments method in May.

The adaptation criteria in the fourth grade were estimated using the expert assessments method and academic performance analysis. Fourth-graders were also surveyed using RPM (J.Raven), CPQ (R.Cattell) [9], Sociometry (adapted version of T. Repina [10]), School motives questionnaire [11].

Data analysis was performed using the k-means method of cluster analysis, Mann-Whitney U-test and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The Statistica v.13 software program was used for computations.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Specifics of overcoming the adaptation crisis

To begin with, we divided all the pupils into clusters with similar ISP dynamics. Cluster 1 (52%) includes pupils with high agency: their inner schoolboy position (ISP) was formed before the beginning of the school year. Cluster 2 (27%) includes pupils with ISP, formed during the first half of the school year. Cluster 3 (21%) includes pupils with low agency: their ISP wasn't formed during the first school year. The ISP differences between the clusters were proven by the U-test: between Clusters 1 and 2-3 in September ($U = 0, p = 0,00$), and

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