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Original research article

Is Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) a good method for social inclusion of poor Slovak children in school? A study focused on social and educational levels

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ABSTRACT

The Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment (FIE) method, as an instrument of social inclusion of children from a socially disadvantaged environment in classroom, is yet to be analyzed in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic. The study objective was to separate qualitative predispositions for effectiveness of inclusion from the FIE method in two areas – social and educational. The methods of the study (conducted in 2015–2016) included a combination of questionnaire investigation and observation during direct work with eight children (seven girls and one boy) who came from a socially disadvantaged environment in the district of Partizánske (Slovakia). The greatest progress in the children at the educational level was found in the increase of their activity and participation in classes. The most significant contribution in the personality-socialization sphere was an increase of children's personal interest, resulting from their intra-factorial motivation for group school activities. The influence of the method on marks and assessment of the pupils was not proved. The conclusions of the study emphasize the need for an interdisciplinary province of special pedagogues (educational, personality areas) and social-healthcare workers (socialization sphere), which are totally absent in the legislation and practice in the Slovak Republic.

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Introduction

At the time of its establishment, Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment was a programme developed for child survivors of concentration camps in the Second World War. These children had considerable problems with adapting to ordinary life as well as to the school environment. Children from marginalized Roma communities also experience stressful living conditions. Seeking the most suitable alternative for social inclusion in education remains an extremely topical and pressing topic today [1,2]. In the 1970s, Reuven Feuerstein's theories of structural cognitive modifiability and mediated learning experience were first used in individuals with decreased brain functionality. Later, Feuerstein developed a method and called it the "Instrumental Enrichment Programme." He used it as an inclusion instrument for children in social and educational spheres. Through the programme, he was able to show improvement of functioning in the cognitive, metacognitive and executive areas in the school and social environments of children coming from poor social classes [3]. More detailed research interest mapping the influence of the FIE method on school and social progress in children coming from poor families dates back to the 1980s [4]. The reasons behind the increased interest were several of Feuerstein's works that stated an improvement of cognitive functioning in adolescents with problem behaviours [5]. In the early 1990s, the positive effects of FIE were proved in the cognitive aspect in poor children in Puerto Rico [6]. Later studies [7] proved it is possible to improve cognitive functions in children with developmental disorders; however, the possibility of diagnosis of such disorders has not been demonstrated. The method can be used both in preschool-aged children [8,9] and university students with specific learning disabilities [10]. Some of the few studies conducted in Central Europe proved that, under the influence of FIE, poor Roma and Czech children could solve problems better and their school results improved too [11,12].

In Slovakia, poor children in segregated settlements (aged from 0 to 14 years) make up more than 40% of the total population living in marginalized settings [13]. For the terminological definition and research process, we profile an age structure of children up to the age of 7–8 years, i.e. the age in which children from a socially disadvantaged environment experience their first contact with the educational environment of school [14,15]. A social environment can be classified as small and large social groups. A small social group has a more intensive influence on children in relation to their development and inclusion. A small social group includes the closest family members, parents, siblings and other blood relatives. A large social group is a community in which children live within a country, or a cultural majority. A large social group can be characterized as a settlement, village, town or country, as well as a school environment [16–18]. Small and large social groups interfere in the economic, geographic and infrastructural conditional factors for life. Individual factors never act in isolation; on the contrary, they act in synergy [19]. People from a socially disadvantaged environment are a socially disadvantaged community. Such social exclusion is manifested in the areas of education, housing, employment, and also health status. We can speak about a multiple

stigmatized group in which disadvantages of various characteristics and intensities culminate [20]. Several studies [21–23] even speak about the phenomenon of a threefold marginalization of inhabitants of segregated settlements. Such segregation includes the geographically defined territory of eastern Slovakia, which belongs to the regions with the highest unemployment rates; marginalization of settlements that are separated from municipalities and the majority population by barriers (natural – river, or artificial – railway crossings, walls); and finally exclusion by own community members in-group. In the study, in terms of the strategy of inclusion of children from a socially disadvantaged environment we focused on social exclusion, particularly in the areas of socialization and education. An antonym for inclusion is segregation, expulsion, or to put it in other words, exclusion of people from society [24–27]. At present, studies on life strategies in inhabitants of socially disadvantaged environments [28] and the relationships between culture and social exclusion [29] are coming to the fore. Children from socially disadvantaged environments, specifically from Roma localities, are influenced not only by exogenous factors, but particularly by endogenous factors of family environment that are not in a synergistic relationship. They are influenced by family environment values, and their families have several key characteristics [30]. In Slovakia, several projects were conducted in the past with the goal of integrating children from a socially disadvantaged environment into the majority society. For the social integration of children, our intention was to use the method of Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment, which is usually introduced through pedagogues and social workers [12]. In the process of social integration, schools play a particularly considerable role in children's socialization.

Material and methods

In the study, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative area was saturated by the questionnaires FIE BASIC I, IVE and EPQ-R, which are based on the structural cognitive modifiability. It is only in recent decades that they have been introduced to experts from our country by lecturers from accredited training centres. The stated instruments were distributed to class teachers, social pedagogues and teaching assistants before and after conducting the qualitative investigation – direct work with children within FIE. In our case, the basic research methods of qualitative data collection were observation, interview and content analysis.

The main sample of the qualitative section included children from a socially disadvantaged environment. Inclusion in the group of children with special needs was conducted by a centre of pedagogic and psychological counselling and prevention, or a centre of special pedagogical counselling (in accordance with the valid legislation of the Slovak Republic). To be included in the sample, a child had to have a minimum of two of the stated assessment criteria, which were defined as: the family setting in which a child grows up in does not meet the primary functions; a family is in material need; at least one parent has been unemployed for a long period of time; at least one parent has not completed compulsory

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