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**CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL
NEEDS EN GROWING UP IN DIVORCED
FAMILIES- EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES OF
SPECIAL PASTORAL CARE**

- Summary of PhD Thesis-

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KEYWORDS

- SPECIAL PASTORAL CARE
- SPECIAL EDUCATION
- MOURNING RITUAL
- INTERACTIVE STORY
- RESILIENT
- CRISES
- DIVORCE
- INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY
- THE HEARING-IMPAIRED DISABILITY
- PRECONCEPTIONS
- TRANSYLVANIAN REFORMED CHURCH DISTRICT
- CHURCHES

Objectives and hypotheses of research

One of the main objectives of our research was to investigate how students with hearing loss and intellectual disability can mourn the divorce of their parents with the help of an interactive medium and rite provided by the interactive story of Tummy Tony and the Divorce, within the frameworks of the story.

During our research, we also focused on how Parents group sessions could help parents of children with disabilities.

Last but not least, we also investigated how the dialogue between special education teachers and the church can help extend the relationship between children with SEN and parishioners.

With our questionnaires, we have tried to find out what the relationship between parishioners with disabilities and church officials is in the presbyteries of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District: presbyteries of Brassó, Dés, Erdővidék, Görgény, Hunyad, Kézdi-Orbai, Kolozsvár, Küküllő, Maros, Maros- Mezőség, Nagyenyed, Seps, Székelyudvarhely and Torda. Our research aimed to investigate the opinion of congregational leaders and their assistants regarding the prospects of integration within the church. Our research also focused on whose responsibility is the hardships of people with disabilities, their negative discrimination and taking care of them according to the pastors of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District and their assistants, and to what extent they can engage people with disabilities in the life of the congregation, what activities people with disabilities prefer and whether there are parishioners with disabilities who work as volunteers with the congregation.

I. Hypothesis:

During theoretical groundwork, it became clear that children with hearing loss and intellectual disability and their families have to face numerous crisis situations.

We *assume* that Parents group sessions help parents face their children's disability, daily hardships, reactive crisis situations, as well as provide support in processing these.

II. Hypothesis:

We *are searching* for the means which could help children with SEN (kindergarten and primary school children and adolescents) find a normal pace in life, relieving the spiritual tension due to their parents' divorce.

We *assume* that the interactive story Tummy Tony and the Divorce has an important role in the process of mourning for these children.

III. Hypothesis:

We are investigating the reactions of kindergarten children, primary school children and adolescents with SEN to the losses in their past, such as their parents' divorce.

We *assume* that in the process of their mourning, with the help of the interactive story they get the chance to identify with the hero and by this set off on the road to coping with crisis.

IV. Hypothesis:

We *assume* that adolescents with SEN can set off on the road to coping with crisis equipped with moral support as a result of identifying with the hero of the story.

V. Hypothesis:

We are investigating whether, as a result of the confidential relationship emerging from special pastoral care sessions, adolescent students with hearing loss and intellectual disability will be more open to nurture the relationship with their divorced parents.

We *assume* that due to the confidential relationship between us they can understand more easily how important it is to accept the decision of the parent who has moved away after the divorce (or even to get into contact with them).

VI. Hypothesis:

The dialogue about the prospects and barriers of cooperation and the importance of these between special education teachers, pastors and congregational staff can bring along changes: it can make the special pastoral care work more effective, the prejudices and stigmas resulting from ignorance and lack of experience dissolve and the relationship between pastors, parishioners and children with SEN and parishioners with disabilities changes.

We *assume* that pastors of the Transylvanian Reformed Church District and the congregational staff who have people with disabilities in their families and immediate environment are more open to accept people with disabilities and to engage them in the life of the congregation than those who have no contact with parishioners with disabilities.

ABSTRACT

“I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, nor to hate them, but to understand them.” Spinoza

In June 2005, when I completed my MA studies at the Faculty of Reformed Theology of Babeş-Bolyai University, professor dr. Hézsér Gábor and dr. Bakk Miklósi Kinga handed me a

souvenir, a hand-made postcard with a shell attached to it, and with the quotation: “*Dimidium facti, qui coepit, habet. He who has begun has half done. Horace, Epistles, 1,2,40f*”, followed by the line: *For Tünde in this shell might dwell the pearl of rise’s lightsome pleasure.*

I have started my studies on special pastoral counselling in October 2005 at the “Ecumene” Doctoral School, and along these years whenever I came to a sudden stop, the pearl of rise’s lightsome pleasure “helped” me through my difficulties. I owe thanks to the Lord, who made all this possible for me!

In my final MA paper I have studied *the process of detachment of a hearing-impaired adolescent from the family*. At that time I had been working for several ages at the “Kozmutza Flóra” School for the Deaf as a remedial teacher and I had been facing the special problems of hearing-impaired adolescents, their social, psychological, educational, and spiritual questions. I could not answer many of their questions, as I felt my knowledge quite limited. My desire to competence motivated mostly to go for further research.

The new ways of SEN children’s pastoral counselling is a new topic in Transylvania, very few were engaged in this field of research, and its specificities are less known. I hope that priests, religious teachers, divorced or divorcing parents, SEN children’s parents, and everyone else interested in this topic might find useful information in this paper.

During my work as a remedial teacher SEN children have taught me to love, to be thankful, to accept things, to be understanding, patient, judicious, tolerant, sympathetic, human and the list can go on and on with the beautiful gifts that I have received during my work. It is wonderful how they see the world, society and those who approach them, even if there are situations when – because of their condition – our society full of preconceptions excludes them, thus they become stigmatized.

In the Bible we can read about many acts and parables of Jesus proving how one can accept, admit, and heal those excluded from society. Following the example of Christ, I underline the fact, that it is very important to make them discover their place in this world by small everyday actions.

Structure of research

Our thesis is divided into twelve chapters. In the introduction we specify that the service of specialized pastoral care is a specific slice of pastoral care in a wider sense.

The first chapter, as the title (Introductory thoughts) suggests, contains the introductory thoughts, the objectives and hypotheses and the structure of our research.

In the first part of the second chapter, we outline ideas on special education needs; we define children with SEN and the individual with disabilities. We are looking for suggested and suitable expressions and we present the terminology, definitions and classification systems used in Romania.

In the second subchapter, we review the philosophical mentality related to living with disabilities.

In the third subchapter, through the socio-cultural situation report we present the early rehabilitation models, as well as the operation of the current rehabilitation system. Also here we describe the process of stigmatization and classification and the reactions of stigmatized individuals. Through the social psychological approach, we summarize the special condition of living with disability.

In the fourth subchapter, we present the attitude expressed in the Bible towards people with disabilities.

In the fifth subchapter, we outline the changes of living with disabilities through history.

In the sixth subchapter, through the sociopolitical background, we investigate the paradigm shift in the attitude towards people with disabilities. Also in this chapter, we discuss the notions of integration and inclusion.

In the third chapter, we outline the family background of people with disabilities, the effects of living with hearing loss and intellectual disability on the personality and the importance of parents groups. We give a summary presentation of the notion of crisis, its course, the possibilities of resilient coping and we outline the crises and challenges of children with SEN.

In the fourth chapter, we investigate how children with disabilities survive through the crisis of their parents' divorce and how this affects the development of their personality. Also here we discuss the crises following the divorce both in the case of parents and children.

In the fifth chapter, we point out what a challenge it is for the church to provide pastoral care for people with disabilities and we present several current initiatives.

We dedicate the sixth chapter to stages of path finding. Through the presentations of cases, we investigate what living with disabilities and being a child of divorced parents with SEN means.

What crises these children have to face in Transylvania, how they solved their everyday crises, whether they need any help and support. We present the special pastoral care intervention with the children of divorced parents and we study the effects of the interactive story. Through the use of the interactive story "Tummy Tony and the Divorce" we present how we applied the story as a potential way of coping with crisis. We present how the above mentioned interactive story can be a support for adolescent children with SEN "mourning" their parents' divorce.

Finding the way - how can interactive storytelling help children with hearing loss and intellectual disability cope with their parents' divorce?

„Pastoral care is a very dangerous job, like dancing on a tightrope.”-Piper writes¹.

In children's pastoral care, Städtler-March² a German hospital pastor pursues numerous aims: the first aim is to sense the children, then to observe them, value them for themselves, accompany them, carry conversations with them - all this adjusted to their communication level. Apart from conversations, other means of communication are also used during the pastoral care contact sessions: drawing, tales and games can be used with every age group, all of them being different forms of contact. The book of tales needs to be carefully chosen so that it can be the basis of the communication, and so that it can relate to the issues that need to be discussed.

¹ Hans-Christoph Piper: Invitation to talk, Topics from the field of pastoral care, Calvinist Theological Faculty, Debrecen, 2003, 15.o.

² Städtler- March, Babrara: Pastoral care of children/ pastoral care in children's hospital. Michael Klessmann: The manual of clinical pastoral care, Calvinist Theological Faculty, Debrecen, 2002, 148-149.o.

Studying Städtler-March's activities, we were contemplating on which elements to use in the pastoral care sessions, which ritual elements to implement in this relationship that would best help children with SEN to express their feelings, to let their voices be heard and not to let them "dance on a tightrope". Finally, we have found what we were looking for: "Storytelling can help" - whispered a voice from inside. That was the point when, besides possessing a basic understanding of children's psychodrama, I started researching the psychology of storytelling and the quest for the perfect tale. In the following I would like to briefly outline this journey.

Implementation of the interactive tale entitled "Tummy Tony and the Divorce" as a "mourning ritual" in our pastoral care helping sessions

„There is no way to become original, you have to be born for that. I might not be original, but sometimes I am hoping...Then my thoughts and experiences might come to surface.” - Hellen Keller.³

My objectives:

At the beginning of our work, after having chosen the interactive story very carefully, we have set the following objectives:

- to find out, through conversations with the experts involved in dealing with the children of divorced parents (social workers, school psychologists, doctors, pedagogues), how children with SEN have coped with the types of crisis they have encountered and what types of crisis these have been, and whether they need help and support in coping with their current crisis?
- to provide children with a potential crisis coping technique by using the case of Tummy Tony, the little dog and his divorced parents that our interactive story features
- to provide students with hearing loss and intellectual disability with the opportunity of getting inside the character and "mourning" their parents' divorce within the frameworks of the interactive tale by using the story as a "mourning process"
- to help students verbalise their feelings through processing the story

³ Keller Helen: The story of my life. Prugg Verlag, Eisenstadt, 1976, 59 o.

- to equip students during the pastoral care sessions with spiritual support for their crisis coping journey
- to avoid communication traps during the communication sessions, to understand and correctly decipher codes by using constructive communication methods
- to help the children realize how important it is to respect and accept the decision of the parent that has moved away from home by going through the experiences of the “mourning rites”

During the conversations we considered important the following:

- emotional support
- reevaluation of the life losses life of students with hearing loss and intellectual disability living in a success-oriented society that does not accept pain and suffering
- relief from sense of guilt

During the conversations I was aiming to follow the example of Rogers in keeping a balanced participation in the discussions of conflict and critical life situations. The atmosphere of our conversations was characterized by sincerity and patience, above all. The focus of our attention was to understand the emotions of the students by integrating in their personality the feelings causing anxiety and fear.

In my opinion, the best help for the children of divorced parents, beyond love and security, is if they can see their parents efficiently cope with their own divorce. Just like for every child, for children who live with a disability too, security is more important than insecurity, even if at first this generates bad feelings in them. During our conversations, I was trying to discuss with the students the future concerning them, as well. It was not tackling the past or the problems in their parents’ marriage that was important here, but clarifying their future through the example of the characters in the story, making them realize, just like Tummy Tony the hero of the story, that they have not lost their parents, they have not been left alone, that their parents still love them.

I find very important for the divorced parents to tell their children the following, which I have expressed during the follow up meetings with the parents:

-Why did they get divorced? - to give a realistic answer that their children would understand. To let them know that the decision they made was very hard but they could not find a better solution.

-To help the children understand that even though they are divorcing or have divorced because they do not love each other anymore, they still love them and divorce does not mean that they want to separate from them. I tried to explain the children that this was the best solution their parents could find.

Reasoning for choosing the instruments (interactive story, drawing, games) in the “mourning rites”

Mourning is „*a very important psychological process in the health of a human being.*”⁴, says Kast, therefore we should not deal with it as a “weakness”. Mourning is the sign of a period of psychological process period in a person’s life, the restoration of a healthy life balance.

After careful thinking and brainstorming about what is the best way to introduce the mourning process into our conversations with the children with special education needs, we decided that the interactive story telling is be the best option. These consecutive meetings were not counseling sessions, but rather listening sessions. Reaching beyond the helpless “*what can I say?*” statements, these sessions provided peace, stillness and a state of “*here and now*”. During these conversations, “*the mourning individual could open up*”, could talk out the emotions and thoughts that had been trapped inside. By offering the children the opportunity to “*mourn their loss*”, we wanted them to understand that “*it is ok to be sad*”, “*it is ok to mourn.*”

The notion of the *mourning-trunk*⁵ that Petermann uses was of great help for us in the work with the children going through the mourning process. He summarised the practical significance of the mourning-trunk in five steps⁶:

- confrontation with death

⁴ Kast, Verena: The mourning process, Budapest, T-Twins Kiadó, 1995.

⁵See: „Trauer-Koffer”, Petermann, Anna-Christina: Schulseelsorge – ein junges kirchliches Handlungsfeld im Schulalltag un in Krisenzeiten. LIT Verlag, Berlin 2011. 46-53. o.

⁶ Petermann, Anna-Christina: 2011. u.o. 79. o.

- acceptance of reality and loss
- providing time for remembering
- providing time and opportunity for saying goodbye
- providing a “*visible, new place*” for the dead

Petermann saw the mourning-trunk as a creative and a personal way for the children to process mourning. The duty of the pastoral care worker is to provide the situation in which the mourning individual(s) can experience the support, the stability and the healing power of the community. The spiritual benefit of the mourning-trunk is that it opens up the trust in God and hope in the mourning individual and it provides new motivation for life. This activity of the ritual helps in realising that fear, insecurity, feeling lost and anger are real feelings, and thus provides a unique way of expression for the reality of death and separation. Peterson claims that the mourning-trunk rites sessions are group sessions with an escalating character⁷. The essence of these sessions is to get the mourning and parting individual express both verbally and by symbolic activities the feelings and emotions that have not been expressed due to the suddenness of the death.

These pastoral care meetings and conversations can help children with special education needs in bringing to the surface unanswered questions from deep down, in cases of being stuck in the processing losses or help with faith issues.

We thought that in the case of children living with hearing loss or intellectual disability, it would be much more practical to use the **interactive story telling** because this way we could reach their feelings and thoughts in a more efficient way, as well as help them be able to process, or in some cases mourn, the loss resulting from the divorce of their parents. This could not have been achieved using an regular tale. Along with the story we were also using **drawing** and **games** as indirect instruments. In our opinion, these activities are very important instruments in helping the children process and express their experiences, feelings, thoughts and hopes.

Children are able to express their experiences on paper in a very specific and meticulous way. The drawings are able to talk about feelings, emotions and experiences that the children

⁷ Petermann, Anna-Christina: 2011. u.o. 81. o.

have forgotten about or cast to the depth of their subconscious. On the paper, while drawing, every painful memory can be tamed by the creative power of the child's imagination.

We think that with the help of the children's drawings, we can find out a lot about them, not only about their feelings and emotions, but also about their outlook on life and their perception of the world. We think that children don't draw the things they see, but the things they know about them. Drawings can be much more sincere and deeper than words, they talk about the way children see the world: their fears and hopes, their personality and intelligence, about how they feel in their families, what they lack within the family, about their potential physical, emotional and spiritual problems.

We are aware of the fact that interpreting children's drawings is a very popular and well explored field, but to really understand these drawings is not an easy task. I need to underline hereby that we did not want to fall into the trap of unnecessary and unreasonable explanations and theories about children's drawings. Rather, we were trying to decode the messages in these drawings in a simple way only using the symbols that we considered significant and relevant to the subject. Our opinion is that explaining the children's drawings is not only the job of psychologists or graphologists, but parents, teachers and pastoral caretakers too can give a thought to the messages of these in order to be able to help.

Due to the fact that the children who have special education needs are unable or limited in their abilities to verbally express their feelings and emotions, their drawings and games talk about everything they are unable to verbally share. We assumed that by using the method of the interactive story telling we could establish a closer relationship with them. The story helps us understand the relationship between the child with special education needs and their divorced or separating parents. Using the interactive story telling we were trying to find out what the real issues were that children with special education needs were struggling with, where they were in the process of their grief about the divorce of their parents and where we could help?

During the conversations with the children with hearing loss and intellectual disability (only in cases where needed) we were also trying to find out if they could "mourn" the loss of their parents' divorce using the magic mirror of the interactive story. Would these children who had the chance to mourn their past losses and their parents' divorce be more open to nurture their relationships with the separated parents?

The reason we chose Gyurkó István and Vincze Melinda's interactive story "Tummy Tony and the Divorce" was that we found this to be the simplest and clearest for them to understand. According to the authors of the story, this came into being with the purpose to explain what divorce was and to help children process the inevitable changes in their life. This is not a regular story; it is very interesting due to its interactive nature. The hero of the story is Tummy Tony, an extremely lovable fellow whom the children can easily relate to. The story presents an idealistic situation, the family of a little dog, Tummy Tony, whose parents are going through a divorce. The language of the story is simple, easy to understand. Every page is accompanied by a picture that relates to the words on that particular page, it has got interactive tasks, pantomime and colouring pages. In order to get our children understand the essence of the story, we adapted and reprinted the text of the story substituting the notions hard to understand with easier ones.

Before starting the pastoral care sessions, we found it important to consult other colleagues involved with the children. Also, after the sessions with the children I spent a lot of time analysing and processing my feelings, as well.

In the seventh chapter we give an account on the work with parents groups.

In the eighth chapter we present the results of the questionnaire survey.

At the end of the research, in the ninth chapter we draw the conclusions. In the tenth chapter we are searching for possible directions for continuing our studies, we present our future plans related to the dialogue between special education teachers and the church, with special regards to the prospects, tasks and importance of cooperation through the Sensitization programmes.

The eleventh chapter contains the appendices; the family portraits, drawings of children's homes and other works made during pastoral care sessions also appear. The last chapter, the twelfth contains the bibliography.

Personal conclusions:

During my career as a remedial teacher I have heard many times from parents the same that special literature outlines: “*the child does not even realize a cultured change*”. From the beginnings I have studied how kindergarten and school, respectively public school life can become a potential place which can offer safety for the child in a disturbed period of his life, caused by the divorce of his parents. How can kindergarten, school, college help to balance the vulnerability suffered during domestic conflicts by these children, who have become troubled, aggressive, irrepressible, careless, neglectful, or even reticent, unusually silent, furthermore, completely different.

During our special counselling sessions I have tried to make SEN children understand, that although the marriage of their parents is over, the parent–child relation is not. These children have to understand that their parents love them as much as before their divorce. It is this that the interactive story is all about, a story that I have used as a “mourning rite” during our meetings.

I think that we have to release to death not only our beloved persons, but also ourselves. Some of our concepts, if their time passed away, we have to let die. We have to give up many things, if the time has come. In these situations we have to mourn. If we are not able to do this, but we hang on to the past, we cut away ourselves from the future. During the process of mourning a series of tasks arise, that the “mourner” has to solve. The four stages of mourning, formulated by Kast, cannot be concretely delimited: the stage of denial, the stage of erupting emotions, the stage of search and separation, building a new relation with ourselves and the world, which is similar to the inner mourning a child when he mourns the marriage of his parents. I believe that each and every SEN child, who experienced the divorce of his parents, if he can or has the need for it, has the right to “*mourn*” the unity of the family and the emotional security that he had lost with the divorce, therefore when building up the relations of special pastoral counselling I have tried to focus on this aspect.

I have studied a whole series of “mourning rites” that SEN children have to deal with:

– they have to become aware of the fact that their parents’ marriage is over, they have to face reality,

- they have to make themselves independent of the parental conflicts,
- they have to deal with the experience of losing one of their parents,
- they have to deal with the naturally arising anger and self-reproach,
- they have to accept the finality of the divorce, so they have to abandon the desire to “re-unite” their parents,
- they have to be realistic in judging the possibilities of human relations, without placing over the experience of their parents’ failure onto their actual or future partner relations.

At the “Kozmutza Flóra” School for the Deaf I have tried to introduce a new kind of “mourning rite” for the children of divorced parents, using the interactive story-book. In accordance with Walleirstein, introducing a new kind of “mourning rite”, we were searching for acceptable alternatives with the pupils, alternatives that I have presented within my case studies.

The new ways of SEN children’s pastoral counselling is a new topic in Transylvania, very few were engaged in this field of research, and its specificities are less known. I consider that my experience and knowledge that I have collected during my process of finding the way and counselling SEN children and their parents is unique. I would like to believe that by trying to find the way, I have learnt not only to live with God, but to mourn with Him.

*As a consequence, I would still join those people, who consider it important to consolidate the positive judgement of society and of the members of the church. **I fight, together with many of my colleagues with the same mentality, for the world to be OUR WORLD, OF ALL OF US, and all SEN children, all persons, members of the congregation with intellectual disabilities would not be stigmatized!***

In my opinion *it is very important for everyone to be aware of the fact that SEN children and persons with disabilities are not invalids, just simply “different”!* I believe that the first step in the congregational integration of the disabled is the *diminishing of preconceptions and the “annihilation” of half-truths.* I am aware of the fact, that there are no generally valid wonders, magic potions, we cannot eliminate all preconceptions at once. I think that it would help a lot in changing the preconceptions of church leaders and other colleagues

from the congregation if we could find the specific motive force of the concrete attitude (the given preconception). It is well known that preconceptions can come from the automatic take-overs of cultural influences, from the specificities of discovering the social world, from the inner dynamic of personality, and from many other aspects. I think that it is important for us to create an adequate atmosphere already at religious classes and preparatory meetings, which should assure a better understanding of our fellow members with disabilities, thus we can prevent the formation of future preconceptions.

It is important and necessary to *make it clear also to the members of our congregation, that living with a disability is a condition, and it is not equal to sickness.* Regarding the quality of life of SEN children, the quality and richness of the social network surrounding people with disabilities, and the grade of fulfilment related to normal conditions, the attitude of the colleagues from the congregation is the most important tool of measurement. In my opinion the support of church leaders and colleagues determines the condition where SEN children and people with disabilities feel themselves safe within the church.

I consider that the *sensibility training series for priests, colleagues and members of the congregation, based on the model of contact hypothesis,* would be quite useful also because thus *they could experience the condition of being stigmatized by preconceptions, together with all its emotional aspects. In my opinion personal experience, meetings with SEN group leaders (who are in fact people with different types of disabilities) would be a step for both priests and colleagues or members of the congregation in the ecclesiastic integration of people with disabilities.*