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THE ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

INCREASING GROUP COHESION IN 5TH GRADE STUDENTS. APPLICATIONS TO THE *COUNSELING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT* SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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PART I – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

The doctoral approach aimed at the study of the ways to achieve increased cohesion in classes of students, which, as research indicates, has positive effects, among others, in perpetuating this psychosocial phenomenon in other social sub-systems. There is a direct link between the education process provided in schools and social cohesion. From the perspective of social psychology, school experience in student groups is an important source of learning social processes within the subsystems of society, so the classroom can be seen as a miniature society (Babad, 2009). In order for the school experience to allow the development of social learning processes, the school pursues a series of aspects associated with them: learning anchored in knowledge, functional social relationships, experiencing an effective normative system, experiencing positive emotional feelings, learning emotional self-regulation mechanisms in difficult situations. and the efficient organization of time allocated to learning and relationships (Alerby, 2003). Within a class, interpersonal relationships contribute directly to the efficiency of the educational action (Babonea & Munteanu, 2012). Among the factors that exert their influence in establishing or maintaining interrelationships in the school environment are those related to the organization of teaching, school climate, teachers' relationship with students and colleagues, professional training and direct experiences (Giallo & Little, 2003). It has also been repeatedly shown that high levels of cohesion have a positive impact on performance and motivation for active involvement in group work (Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines & Galton, 2003; Thornton, Miller & Perry, 2020).

The strategy used to measure the cohesion in middle school students focused on building, verifying and applying a scale in an educational experiment. The tool was designed by a permanent reference to the results of other studies that indicate the multidimensionality of cohesion, the complexity of factors involved in the relationship between students and its dynamics, including the formation of individual and group identity in the classroom educational process (Hadfield, 1992; Olitski, 2007), the effect of social class environment / psychosocial and axiological climate on motivation to learn (Ghaith, 2003; Jennings, & Greenberg, 2009; Marshall, 2004; Patrick, Anderman, & Ryan, 2002; Patrick & Ryan, 2005), psychological satisfactions derived from participation and the sense of belonging (Baker,

Dilly, Aupperlee & Patil, 2003; Dion, 2000; Hadfield, 1992; Senior, 2004), individual and group school performance (Bulgaru, 2014; Hirschy & Wilson, 2002; Leone, 2009; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Wentzel, 1991) etc. These factors, turned into into operational components of the phenomenon and into indicators used to measure cohesion in student classes, have been used in a number of studies. Thus, Dornyei (2009, apud Anwar, 2016) theorized the three dimensions of group cohesion involved in learning: interpersonal attractions (relationship), involvement of members in the shared task of the group (cooperation) and satisfaction offered by group membership (group membership). These operational components have been adapted to build the indicators targeted in the cohesion scale applied in the doctoral investigation.

The independent variable of the research is a program to increase group cohesion at the level of the fifth grade, with applicability to the school subject *Counseling and personal development*, in the form of an experimental intervention. The choice of the topics, contents and psychosocial approach of the class of students was stemmed from the academic training, the analysis of the official documents, the own professional experience and the study of the specialized literature. The experiment consisted in applying this program to the 5th grade and verifying its efficiency by analyzing the results obtained from the application of the cohesion scale in the pre-experimental and post-experimental phase, respectively. An encouraging factor in this experiement was the fact that the training and assimilation of skills provided by the National Curriculum rely on the principle of flexibility. Following this principle, it was possible to build a program to facilitate the training of targeted competencies, within the current curricular framework.

The experimental intervention program for the fifth grade considered the learning peculiarities of generation Z, aiming to contribute to the formation of subject-specific competencies according to the curriculum, to contain teaching activities based on cohesion indicators and to be adapted to the context of the instructional process carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this exceptional situation that led to changes in the structure of the school year and the forms of organization of the teaching process, respectively face-to-face (with strict distance measures), hybrid or exclusively online, the experimental intervention program was designed to be applied to the classroom regardless of changes imposed by national authorities. Therefore, the experimental intervention program included digital lessons designed in the Vyond program and was called "Virtual teacher -the binder of group cohesion".

CHAPTER I. GROUP COHESION OF THE CLASS

The first chapter begins with the conceptual delimitations from the pedagogical and psychosocial perspectives, continues with highlighting the particularities of the class of students approached as a social group, captures the stages of a social group formation and analyzes the cohesion of the class as a psychosocial group phenomenon.

This chapter highlights the importance of transdisciplinarity in the analysis of the class of students as a social group by filing the main visions and studies that show the many factors and interdependencies of sociocultural, psychosocial and educational nature that determine the dynamics and effectiveness of a group in terms of efficiency and optimal climate for learning and development. This view led to a synopsis of the theoretical acquisitions regarding the nature and types of groups, extracting from these delimitations and classifications some key concepts useful for the conceptual-theoretical design of this original research. The class of students can be studied as a social group due to the training process, its characteristics, the significance it has for children and the framework it offers to cover the needs of "affiliation, participation, protection, security" (Sălăvăstru, 2004, pp. 127-128), and "differentiating from others and identifying with the group" (Petroi, 2007, p. 274).

The process of cohesion formation is influenced by a number of factors, is measured by specific indicators and has positive effects on the individual level, respectively on the self, but also on the efficiency of a group. Group cohesion describes the degree of integration of the members of a group, so that the sense of belonging is present, often expressed verbally by the phrase "we". The occurrence of this psychosocial phenomenon in the classroom is determined by a number of factors that come from outside or inside the group. The most common sources of increasing or decreasing the level of cohesion in the school group are the following: the satisfaction offered by the group and which would not be felt outside it, the performance obtained in the shared activity compared to the results obtained through individual involvement, the psychosocial climate that is the generator of feelings of security and safety, the extent to which there is interpersonal attraction in which members sympathize, and so on. The formation of cohesion is dependent on the extent to which the needs of the members are met by the group (Sălăvăstru, 2004; Iucu, 2006). Cohesion is also appreciated in connection with the relationships of interpersonal attraction and commitment to the task (Carless & De Paola, 2000), and the way in which the interaction takes place within the group of students or between teachers and students contributes to shaping pedagogical efficiency

(Hatos, 2006), to academic performance in relation to the school climate (Beal, Cohen, Burke & McLendon, 2003) and to academic self-efficacy which is at the same time a strong predictor for cognitive acquisitions (Bratu, 2016, Mih, 2010). In addition, the positive psychoeducational climate in the classroom influences students' perception of the task (Aronson, 2004; Høigaard, Kovač, Øverby & Haugen, 2015).

Then other concepts associated with cohesion are discussed in detail, among which the most important are influence, group decision-making, interactions between members, communication, structure, composition and organization of the group. In many works, these concepts are the basis for detaching dimensions or factors for measuring or assessing the level of cohesion (Cristea, 2015; Neculau & Boncu, 2008), including related to the class of students (Pânișoară, 2015). In order for the group to function effectively, group cohesion must be achieved. At least three components that can be considered as indicators of cohesion are highlighted in the literature (Dowling, 2010): interpersonal attraction (the desire to belong to the group because of the pleasure of other members); commitment to the task (desire to belong to the group due to interest in the task); group pride (desire to belong to the group due to the prestige of belonging to it). The main positive characteristics of a cohesive class group are reflected in the following attitudes and behaviors of students: they are tolerant and mutually acceptable; are willing and happy to cooperate in carrying out their tasks and to be able to work productively for the same goals; are willing to obey the group rules and monitor one another in relation to the rules; they are satisfied with the group experience (Hadfield, 1992).

CHAPTER II. METHODS OF INCREASING THE GROUP COHESION OF THE CLASS OF STUDENTS

The second chapter addresses the organization of the normative system in order to install the sense of belonging to the group (the first indicator of cohesion), the organization of the communication and relational system to ensure the satisfaction offered by the group membership (the second indicator of cohesion), the adoption of effective strategies of conflict management and individual and collective tasks achievement to maintain group cohesion (the third indicator of cohesion).

The normative system in school groups includes two categories of norms and behavioral patterns that are prescriptive for members: the official normative framework formulated at the institutional level; informal norms that develop progressively and have a

spontaneous character. The way in which the two categories are combined is important for the quality of group life (Cristea, 2015; Sălăvăstru, 2004). Class rules and routines are necessary for the efficient functioning of the activity within the group (Fink & Siedentop, 1989). Institutions that promote a democratic learning environment allow students to participate in shaping and setting rules, and the results are highlighted in greater compliance with them and increased levels of discipline of students in school (Maingi, Maithya, Mulwa & Migosi, 2017).

As modern education has become more interactive and progresses in this direction, direct communication and interaction in the classroom play an important role in the educational process (Benediktsson & Ragnarsdottir, 2019). This chapter is based on the synthesis of studies on the system of interactions and communication in the field of contemporary education followed by suggesting a series of ways in which, depending on the form of communication, teachers can organize the communication and relational system in the classroom to ensure satisfaction offered by being a member of the group.

The subchapter allocated to the management of conflicts in the school environment retains the main currents applied in educational strategies. In school, students learn strategies for solving conflicts through programs designed for this topic or by exposing themselves to effective intervention conducted by teachers. In their absence, students perceive conflict as unsolvable (De Cecco & Richards, 1974) and resort to inefficient strategies such as suppression, withdrawal, aggression, coercion (Marian, 2019) or triangulation by involving people outside the class group. Canary (2003) highlights the importance of using argumentation in interpersonal conflict and proposes a number of practical ways to educate the constructive formula for solving the conflict situation in the group.

Maintaining group cohesion is another important topic in the theoretical framework of the paper. The student class group should be constructed as a "psychological group" to ensure small group work and to achieve an active interaction between students (Brumfit, 1984). Some authors (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) argue that classes in certain subjects in the classroom should also be studied as a group, because in a cohesive group, teachers and students enjoy the learning process and are satisfied with the environment if it is pleasant, challenging and supportive. The key factor here is shared motivation. The subchapter dedicated to this topic includes a tabular synthesis of the academic and research literature that explored the functional ways of accomplishing individual and collective tasks within the group, categorized according to a series of indicators of cohesion in the school group

(cohesion between the group of students and the teacher, promoting cohesion among students, promoting cooperation between students, setting group objectives and group constructive norms, assigning roles to students). Within the perimeter of the learning groups in the school, a cohesive group is desirable because: a) it means acceptance established between all its members, which allows the practice to be spontaneous, tolerant and based on trust; b) allows each member to feel comfortable in the sense of knowing the rules of the game, which transfers the burden of "discipline" from the teacher alone in front of the class, to the group as a whole; c) encourages positive feelings as group and individual goals are achieved simultaneously and success is already experienced; d) recognizes the contribution in resources and effort that each member makes, which can provide content for a large number of learning activities, implicitly accepting the variety of information, opinions or diversity of perceptions (Johnson & Johnson, 2003).

CHAPTER III. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SUBJECT *COUNSELLING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT* TO THE FORMATION AND THE INCREASE OF THE COHESION OF THE CLASS

This chapter has been structured in two subchapters. The first approaches the curricular analysis of the discipline Counseling and personal development for the 5th grade and presents the modalities of educational intervention that favor both the formation of specific competencies and the increase of cohesion. The second subchapter focuses on the competencies that contribute to the increase of group cohesion in the class of students. The general competencies are briefly presented, with an emphasis on the specific competencies that need to be developed within the subject.

In an exhaustive sense, the competencies related to the school subject Counseling and personal development are subsequent to the broader concept of social development, which refers, in an educational context, to the way a child develops friendships and various other relationships, but also to the way a child manages conflict with colleagues (Bukowski, Buhrmester & Underwood, 2011), the efficiency with which they acquire communication skills with other people and can process their own actions at a high level of control over the immediate social environment and with a high degree of autonomy (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006), ultimately providing an optimal level of self-confidence and emotional comfort (Denham, 1998). Transferred in terms of analysis of relationships and group dynamics, it is

expected that the stimulation of specific skills related to social development will positively influence the cohesion of the class of students.

According to the national curriculum in force, the contents specific to the subject Counseling and personal development that contribute to the development of competencies pursued through this current original research approach consist of activities that seek to identify personal, situational, relational factors in terms of resources that facilitate or block school learning, on individual and group level and the adoption of ways to facilitate learning progress as a result of increased group cohesion. Thus, I designed a fusion between the competencies specific to the subject *Counseling and Personal Development* (http://programe.ise.ro), ways of educational intervention at the level of the school group in different stages of development and learning activities. The modalities of educational intervention and the suggested learning activities were adapted to the model proposed by Cristea (2015) regarding the development stages of a psychosocial group.

As the experimental intervention program was intended to be applied in a formal context, it was associated with the training activities of the specific competencies found in the subject's curriculum. The association of the general competencies with the specific ones selected to be integrated in the experimental intervention program can be seen in table 1:

General competences selected in the program	Corresponding specific competences
Good relationships with the others in school and extra-school contexts	Recognising a variety of emotions in relation to the self and the others
	Giving positive feedback during interaction
Reflecting on the motivation and the efficiency of the strategies for learning progress	Identificarea factorilor personali și de context care facilitează/ blochează învățarea Identifying personal and contextual factors which facilitate/block the learning process
	Presenting the learning progress using different communication forms

Table 1. The association of the general competencies with the specific ones selected to be integrated in the experimental intervention program (http://programe.ise.ro)

An important note here is that, although the teaching activity is done according to the curriculum, different topics covered by the teacher are influenced by a number of factors: the particularities of the group of students and the needs imposed by the specificity of the class, continuity of information from one year to another, the objectives, culture and educational policy of the school, the relevance and usefulness of the topics for the children, etc. While designing the educational intervention program, it is important to consider the current needs related to the educational agenda. The teaching resources used by the teacher must facilitate the existence of an attractive, inclusive learning environment, in which the promotion and respect of diversity is indispensable.

PART II- THE EXPERIMENTAL PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH

CHAPTER IV. THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of the research was to identify the effectiveness of an experimental intervention program called "The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion", with applicability to the fifth grade, in the classes for *Counseling and Personal Development*, with the view of increasing cohesion.

The objectives of the research are:

O1. Designing a valid scale of measuring the cohesion of the class of students.

O2. Conceiving a program of experimental intervention which is implemented in order to increase the group cohesion of the 5th graders.

O3. Analysing the changes in cohesion indicators following the implementation of the intervention program in the experimental group of subjects by comparing the results from the pre-experimental phase and the post-experimental phase and comparing the results between the experimental group and the control group.

O4. Using the research results in school practice by providing models of good practice for teaching for the school subject *Counseling and Personal Development*.

In an attempt to answer the research questions, the general hypothesis of the research was constructed: the implementation of the experimental intervention program called "The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion" will lead to the increase of the cohesion group of the fifth grade students. The secondary hypotheses of the research were formulated in terms of the direct relationship between the experimental intervention program (independent variable)

"The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion" conducted in the experimental group and cohesion indicators: group membership, degree of involvement and participation of members in shared tasks and the degree of satisfaction offered by membership in the group (dependent variables). Thus, three secondary hypotheses were outlined: (1) The application of the experimental intervention program to the fifth grade students will contribute to the increase of the group membership degree. (2) The application of the experimental intervention program to 5th grade students will increase the degree of involvement and participation of members in shared tasks. (3) The application of the experimental intervention program to the students of the 5th grade will lead to the increase of the degree of satisfaction offered by the membership of the group.

The first sample of students, the one which will validate the cohesion scale, included a number of 580 secondary school students (grades V - VIII) from several schools in the North-West region of the country. The sampling was exhaustive, the respondents being students belonging to the classes included in secondary school institutions, comprising 48% boys and 52% girls, 85% of the students being from urban areas. The rural environment is significantly less represented than the urban one, but the objectives of this research phase did not aim at refining the validation analysis of the scale by residence areas, therefore the distribution of the sample by residence areas is satisfactory. On school cycles, the distribution of the sample was balanced, about a quarter of the sample being represented by the four secondary school classes.

The second sample consisted of 626 students attending the 5th grade divided into two groups, to whom the instrument for measuring the level of cohesion was applied, both in the pre-experimental and in the post-experimental phase. The two groups of the sample of 5th grade students were theoretically selected, including students of 5th grade enrolled in secondary schools, in urban and rural areas, in 4 counties (Cluj, Bistrița-Năsăud, Alba and Arad). Some of these classes were included in the experimental group and another part in the control group. The control group consisted of 303 students and the experimental group of 323 students. Those in the experimental group benefited from the intervention program, applied to the subject Counseling and personal development. This group included 164 boys and 159 girls, with 286 students in urban areas and 37 students in rural areas. Both groups of students were tested with the same instruments.

The independent variable was represented by the intervention program implemented in the school subject Counseling and personal development, addressed to fifth grade students.

The structure of the educational program includes: a) presentation note; b) the organization of the teaching activities and their correlation with the general and specific competences and with the cohesion indicators; c) methodological suggestions. Following the general competencies to be formed during the secondary education cycle, the experimental intervention program includes activities, such as "Harmonious relationship with others in school and extracurricular contexts" and "Reflection on the motivation and effectiveness of strategies for progress in learning" (http://programe.ise.ro)

Regarding the specific competencies to be formed during the 5th grade, the experimental intervention program was built in accordance with the recommendations of the school curriculum. The activities suggested here include the recommendations from the official school documents for the formation of a number of four competencies: "Recognizing a variety of emotions experienced in relation to oneself and others", "Giving positive feedback in relationships with others", "Identifying personal and personal factors context that facilitates / blocks learning" and "Presenting progress in learning, using various ways of communication" (http://programe.ise.ro). These correspond to the indicators of class cohesion - dependent variables - provided by experimental research (degree of group membership, through relationships between students, degree of involvement and participation in shared group activity and satisfaction with group membership, by identifying benefits that students get from the group). The 15 activities corresponding to the general, specific competencies and indicators followed are described in detail and include the number of hours allocated, the methods of development and the contents of the program "The virtual teacher-a binder of group cohesion", illustrated in the descriptive Annexes of the doctoral thesis.

The research tool is a standardized questionnaire specially designed for the current research as a Likert scale with five answer variants, the scale being proposed for validation. Items include elements (themes) that have been validated as relevant by other research that has followed statistical relationships between cohesion indicators and other variables (Bettenhausen, 1991; Carron & Brawley, 2000; Erdley, Nangle & Gold, 1998). However, these elements have been adapted to the objectives of my research.

The questionnaire includes, in addition to the questions concerning the socio-demographic data of the respondents (age, class and residence), a number of 24 items that measure the dimensions of cohesion, and of these 12 are rated negatively. The questions of the questionnaire cover three indicators of cohesion, namely: the degree of belonging to the group, the degree of involvement and participation of students in shared tasks and the degree

of satisfaction offered by being a member of the group. In the pre-experimental stage, the scale was applied among middle school students to identify the extent to which children understand the questions asked and can relate to it through one of the answer options. In the post-experimental stage, the cohesion measurement scale was applied again to the same two groups and statistical analysis and data processing were performed to evaluate the effectiveness of the experimental intervention program on increasing the level of cohesion in fifth grade students. The questionnaires were administered to the students from the groups of 5th grade students at the end of the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year.

During the entire collection of data, experimental design and intervention I made sure that the research was carried out according to the ethical standards imposed by the scientific investigation and in consensus with the professional deontology of the researcher.

CHAPTER V. THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

In the pre-experimental stage, the assessment tool was designed, and the importance of this research objective lies in the fact that formulating the scale items in such a way that they respect the students' level of understanding is indispensable in measuring the level of cohesion of the class. As the scale was validated, the methodological objective was achieved.

A second goal set for the pre-experimental phase - testing of groups of respondents (experimental group and control group) before applying the intervention program to measure the differences in cohesion indicators - was then achieved. The pre-experimental research showed that the results at the values given to the cohesion items by the students of the two groups do not register statistically significant differences. The populations of the two groups in the sample were considered methodologically validated to be part of the sample of experimental research and that of post-experimental testing, in order to achieve the research objectives. The collection, processing and statistical analysis of research data from the post-experimental phase took place according to the first objective set - measuring the level of cohesion and evaluating the effectiveness of the experimental intervention program to increase cohesion in the experimental group.

The second objective of this stage of the research was then achieved, namely to evaluate the effect of the independent variable of cohesion in the classes of students (grade V) in the experimental group - on its three indicators - by comparing the results of cohesion indicators, measured by the cohesion scale, for the two batches. Following the comparison by batches, for the post-experimental stage some relevant conclusions emerged. Significant

differences in the scores of cohesion indicators given by students in the two groups appear at the level of the 3 cohesion indicators (degree of group membership: a difference of 0.71 points; degree of involvement and participation in shared activities: a difference of 1.14 points; satisfaction with membership: a difference of 1.27 points).

In the experimental group, there is a greater gender homogeneity in the assessments given to the cohesion items, even if the differences are not statistically significant, compared to the gender scores given by the students in the control group, where girls and boys seem to be more polarized in appreciations. This leads us to the conclusion that educational intervention has a role of integrating students in the fifth grade specific climate, even if, as it is known, girls and boys at this age tend not to carry out many activities together.

Compared to the results of the scores from the pre-experimental phase, in the post-experimental stage the tendency to rate the higher degree of group membership is more pronounced in boys than in girls, but this is observed only in the experimental group, the control group keeping the values before the stage. intervention, where boys have lower scores than girls on all three indicators.

Following the configuration of the results according to the environment of residence, it resulted that, in the experimental group, students from rural areas had lower scores than those from urban areas, for all cohesion indicators (degree of group membership and degree of involvement and participation to shared activities), this trend being maintained in the control group. However, the effect of the program was also positive on rural students, because before the experimental intervention, rural students had low cohesion scores for all indicators, compared to urban students, which changed significantly in the post-experimental phase, although the gap with students in urban areas is maintained in favor of the latter.

However, the higher values in the cohesion scores that appear in the experimental group compared to the control one, is an indicative result for the effect of the independent variable of the cohesion in the class of students, with positive effects mainly in the rural environment.

From the comparison of the results obtained for the experimental group, in stages, several trends are configured, from which the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The tendency is highlighted that, for all three indicators, the scores given by students are significantly higher in the post-experimental stage than in the initial one. The largest differences by stages appear in the first two indicators of cohesion, which means that the changes perceived in students regarding the dimensions of cohesion are strong and

constantly marked by the respondents in the experimental group, in the second stage (for the first and second indicators of cohesion: the degree of group membership 0.8 points difference and the degree of involvement and participation in joint activities 0.96 points difference). At the last indicator, the satisfaction offered by the membership of the group, the experimental group recorded a score closer to that of the control group (0.50 points difference). The interpretation is that the cooperative and integrative profile activities applied in the experimental program had a positive influence on the students participating in the educational program, in this sense the reports on the feeling of belonging and involvement and to a more moderate extent those related to the satisfaction given by being a member of the children's team, being encouraging for the usefulness of the intervention.

2. Before participating in the activities included in the experimental intervention, the third cohesion indicator was best represented in the opinions of students in the experimental group (satisfaction resulting from group membership, by identifying the benefits of belonging to the group). In the post-experimental phase, the emphasis shifts slightly; thus, the highest increase in the score occurs at the second indicator, the degree of involvement and participation in shared activities. Educational intervention is, seemingly, especially useful in this direction.

3. By gender, in the pre-experimental phase, the girls in the experimental group had, in all cohesion indicators, higher values of the scores compared to boys, a differentiating trend by gender that is maintained in the post-experimental stage and which is predictable, according to studies which describe gender differences in the stages of children's development, showing that sociability, social commitment and communication are more pronounced in girls compared to boys (Iluț, 2009; Malkin & Stake, 2004). In the post-experimental phase, the boys of the experimental group better rate the degree of group membership, which is a notable effect of the intervention, analyzed by students' gender. Thus, we can say that a benefit of the experimental intervention program is the stimulation of the feeling of cooperation and sociability in boys, which is a plus of activities, although it was not a specific objective of the research.

4. Analysisng the answers by area of residence, in the post-experimental phase the scores for all indicators increased, both for students in urban and rural areas, but there are some differences. The rating from students in rural areas reaches more modest values both before and after participating in the intervention program compared to those in urban areas, and the configuration of scores in the postexperimental stage shows a proportional

increase in score values for students from both backgrounds. However, the differences between urban and rural areas were not significantly reduced as a result of the intervention. The result suggests the need for such programs to be tailored to the specific needs of children / classes, so as to achieve the objectives more effectively. Certain activities that may be more appreciated by students in urban areas or include more familiar elements, may not have the same effect in rural areas, and vice versa.

5. The sense of belonging to the group and the degree of involvement and participation in shared activities have the highest score increases (an average of about 0.8 points difference in the scores given by students from both backgrounds), while the satisfaction offered by membership of the group, both in urban and rural students increases moderately (0.5 points for students in both environments). These differences lead to potentially fertile suggestions. Although the weak statistical significance and the small number of rural students require caution in interpretation, we still advance the idea that such programs can bring significant benefits to schools in villages, where the variety of school activities is often lacking and designed to promote cohesion and relationships in larger groups of children. However, as mentioned above, in order to equalize the effects of educational programs on areas of residence, it is necessary to adapt intervention programs to the specific needs (learning, cultural, socio-family, etc.) of each school, class, groups of students.

With various nuances and interpretive openings made during the analysis of the results, we showed that the three secondary hypotheses are confirmed.

Based on these results, a general conclusion of the post-experimental research can be issued, which is convergent with the general hypothesis from which these research approaches started: "Implementing the intervention program called "The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion" in Counseling and personal development classes will lead to increased group cohesion in fifth grade students".

CONCLUSIONS

The general conclusions of the research, outlined following the interpretation of the results, are anchored interpretatively in the academic literature, allowing both theoretical and applied discussions and openings.

Among the *personal contributions* of this doctoral approach, the most relevant are:

A. At the conceptual level, defining the main cohesion indicators in relation to the competences of the subject Counseling and personal development required conceptual framing based on acquisitions from the literature (theories and research in this field of wide disciplinary intersection), in conjunction with the analysis of official documents. (educational methodologies, curriculum, accepted teaching styles, etc.). Meanwhile, the research strategy was outlined, the premises and objectives being consistent with the established indicators. The contribution here is conceptual, due to the development of a specific framework of research that did not have a prior model, or at least was not found, in this form, among the academic references consulted.

B. The design, validation and implementation of the scale in the experimental research approach is an important methodological contribution of the doctoral thesis. Following the preliminary results obtained by testing the scale, my research benefited by a basis for guidance in interpreting subsequent research data and a useful means of measuring the cohesion perceived by students. At this level of the practical approach, the shortage of tools for analyzing cohesion in the classroom (correlated with the educational program developed within the subject) was a challenge to achieve a necessary and, I consider, important measurement scale in the wide area of school education.

C. The implementation of the experimental program (independent variable) represents a practical contribution with solid potential for replication and development in further research. The fact that this program also made available digital materials for possible online activities ("The virtual teacher-binder of group cohesion"), within the integrated classes in the subject "Counseling and personal development", adds value to this application contribution and can be an optional curricular resource to help develop cohesion parameters in students.

D. Combining the research objectives (increasing cohesion) with the curricular objectives (the instructive-educational process based on the school curriculum) is an empirical contribution that captured the relationship between the pedagogical and the psychosocial component, not only in school but also in teaching.

The paper also opens up some new potentially fertile *research perspectives*. The result of the experimental research through which the most significant increase of score after students' participation in the educational program appears at the indicator of involvement and participation in common activities is consensual with the results of studies that followed the

relationship between cohesion and learning, the trend of positive association between these variables also mentioned in previous sequences of general conclusions (Bulgaru, 2015; Anwar, 2016; Hirschy & Wilson, 2002; Leone, 2009; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Wentzel, 1991).

Extending the discussion and advancing possible application openings, we undertake the assumption that this experimental intervention program, which has proven to lead to increased cohesion in the group of students, is also a resource for improving school performance, as indicated by several similar practical designs. (Bulgaru, 2015; Leone, 2009).

Furthermore, the data highlighted by the doctoral investigation conducted align with the trends indicated by the academic literature on the direct positive relationship between cohesion and pro-social orientation (Organ & Ryan, 1995), a premise explored through our experimental intervention, and namely the existence of a positive association between team cohesion and the strengthening of supportive behaviors, a relationship mediated by the influence of the mood of the group, through common interests and goals of the members.

Finally, this research is in addition to those conducted on the subject of transmitting values using school group dynamics, an extremely current and fertile topic at the level of knowledge (Bettenhausen, 1991; Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009; Kaymak, 2011). Through the obtained results, this doctoral research is also oriented towards that perspective, the factor of reproducing values through classroom interactions being outlined as a direction that should be explicitly addressed to educational policies and instructional-educational strategies.

By arguing *the relevance of the research approach*, I first demonstrated that the scale is a valid tool for measuring students' perception of cohesion and can possibly be applied in larger research, possibly following more complex statistical relationships in the future.

Secondly, I consider that the relevance in the development of the knowledge brought by the program "The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion" is significant, because its integration within the tasks related to the discipline *Counseling and Personal Development* has been successful. The way in which the activities of the program were oriented towards the development of the general and specific competences of the school subject proved to be effective, being carried out harmoniously within the hours allocated to the subject in question. In addition, the study considered the specificity of the generation of children to whom this program was dedicated, the adaptation of the designed activities being made based on the values and profile of generation Z explicited in the academic literature. In the same sense, I considered the adjustment of the way of carrying out the activities according to the constraints

appeared with the Covid-19 pandemic, the online form of application of the program still allowing its taking over and replication to several children, from several schools and counties simultaneously. Beyond the disadvantages of the online form of teaching-learning, this type of interaction also has some advantages.

The practical relevance of the program consists in the existence and experimental application of "The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion", as an educational resource (teaching materials in digital format). The results showed that there were increases in all cohesion parameters after the experimental application, the improvements being more obvious in the size of participation in group tasks and involvement in shared tasks, which enhances group performance in the classroom, but also the dimensions personal and social development of students. This result allows us to conclude that, at a practical level, the "The virtual teacher- a binder of group cohesion" educational program can be replicated and eventually extended to other classes of the secondary school.

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