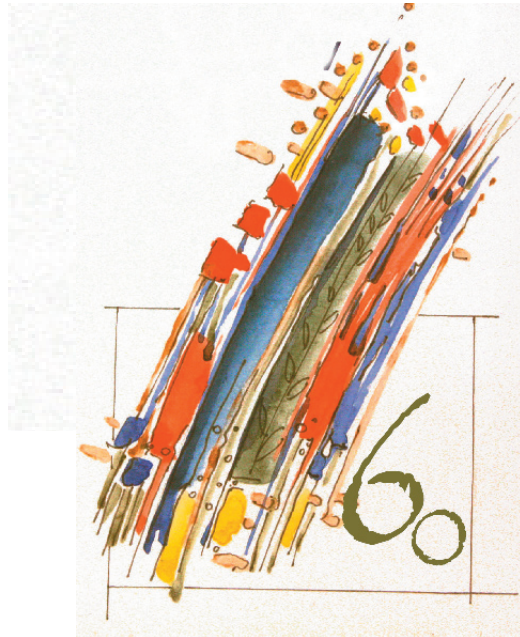


**Prešovská univerzita v Prešove**  
**Pedagogická fakulta**



**Príprava učiteľov v procese školských reforiem**

*Zborník príspevkov z vedeckej konferencie s medzinárodnou účasťou  
Prešov 16. - 17. september 2009*

**Prešov 2009**

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## **Problems of Elementary School Children Faced by Hungarian Teachers<sup>1</sup>**

**Norbert MESKÓ – András LÁNG – László BERNÁTH**

*Abstract: Managing problem children is one of the most difficult tasks teachers face during their work nowadays in our region. Competency based teacher training programs should prepare students with abilities and skills to solve this problem. As part of an international research (Teachers abilities in early identification of developmental threats in children aged 6-10) conducted in Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary we present the findings of our pilot study. We surveyed 30 teachers about their opinion on two questions. (1) Who is a problem child? (2) What kind of problems children in your class are facing? The results intend to be the source of a later questionnaire, which could investigate the topic more particularly.*

**KLúčové slová: problem students - teachers' attitude - attribution of problem behaviour – assessment.**

Managing problem behaviour is essential for teachers to be effective in their work. In this pilot study we examined who teachers consider as a problem student and what are the main problems students suffer from in their classes. The importance of the topic is highlighted by the findings of Torff and Sessions (2005). In their study concerning the perceived causes of teacher ineffectiveness, 242 secondary school principals were surveyed. The most frequently perceived causes were deficiencies in components of pedagogical knowledge—3 in-class components requiring student-teacher interaction (*lesson-implementation skills, ability to establish rapport with students, and classroom-management skills*), followed by 1 out-of-class component (*lesson-planning skills*). Common sense experiences on the other hand make problem students the main cause of ineffective teaching. In our attempt to deeper understand the problem we take a look at the alternative definitions of problem behaviour, and then we address teachers' difficulties in finding the sources and locating the causes of such behaviour, since this is strongly related to interventions to be made.

### **Defining problem behaviour and problem students**

Felleginé (2004) lists three alternate definitions for problem students:

1. According to a subjective, everyday definition anyone who creates a disturbing and difficult-to-handle situation from the perspective of the teacher, can be called a problem student. This definition makes opportunity for a huge variability in teachers' ratings. A student considered problematic for teacher A can be hundred percent problem-free for teacher B. Negative aspect of this definition is the possibility for projection, which should be fought against by professional teachers.
2. The second possible interpretation for problem student - called pedagogic definition - is

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation was sponsored by University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities.

a statistical one. Students who can not behave as the majority of the class can, should be considered problematic. But again the same behaviour could be OK in another school, where the level of acceptance is higher. This definition lacks the possibility to take individual variables into account.

3. The third and optimal complex definition suggests that a child should be named problematic only if her life situation is satisfying and still she presents long-lasting maladjustment.

Felleginé (2004) also emphasises that problematic behaviours should be treated like symptoms. They are not the causes of the problem, but only signs of an underlying difficulty. Problem behaviour should be regarded as a means of communication, and the task of the teacher would be to help problematic children translate their problematic behaviour into words. If we take such behaviours as symptoms, the next step is to search for causes.

### **Teachers' attribution of problem behaviour**

Attribution is the automatic human need to search for causes of perceived behaviour. It is important to know the causes of behaviour in planning interventions for problem students. In a study by Brophy and Rohrkemper (1981) teachers typically saw the problems as caused by factors external to themselves, typically factors internal to the student. It is clear from these data that teachers do not look to themselves as the causes, in whole or even in part, of classroom behaviour problems, at least the kinds of chronic behaviour problems depicted in the vignettes used in this study. In explaining the results above and their consequences in managing problem behaviour the authors used the paradigm of social psychology of helping behaviour. The likelihood of helping the victim depends on the onlookers' attributions concerning the locus of causality of the victim's problem and the control the victim has over his or her plight. Since in research settings teachers saw behaviour caused by factors controllable and internal to students, teachers' attitude toward helping to solve the problem was quite unprofessional. These attributions are part of the natural human process of making sense of the social environment, but it is rather ineffective and professionally inappropriate for teachers who are expected to be committed to help students. The natural attribution processes and subsequent responses may be appropriate for making everyday decisions, but they seem counterproductive for decision making in the classroom.

In another study by Medway (1979) it was found that teachers held student factors more responsible for classroom problems than teacher factors, and that teachers' attributions varied somewhat for learning versus behaviour problems. They assigned learning problems more than behaviour problems to student ability. So it is meaningful to make distinction between learning and behaviour / discipline related problems.

According to the attributional classification of Bentham (2006) and Chaplain (2006) the following complex classification can be made. In the first round there are three different opportunities where to find the cause of the problem:

1. *within pupils* – personality, part of growing up, children are: intrinsically naughty; need to be managed; have no respect for authority?
2. *within school* – irrelevant curriculum, teachers' incompetence, poorly managed schools, teachers' attitudes?
3. *within the community* – poor parenting, poverty, lack of discipline in the home /community/ society?

Making this distinction has important consequences for coping with problem behaviour in the classroom. *Within pupils* and *within the community* factors are least under the control of the teacher, thus not useful in helping to cope. In contrast *within school* factors are controllable by teachers and therefore easier to change. Lawrence et al. (1986 cited by Chaplain, 2006) found 78 per cent of teachers blamed misbehaviour on issues outside their control. For teachers this will only be the source of immense frustration and aggression toward students or themselves. Still if we consider the most frequent attribution of misbehaviour - factors internal to students - different kinds can have different consequences. Bentham (2006) lists three ways to understand why the students are behaving in such a way (what are the explanations for their behaviour):

1. consequences,
2. feelings and emotions,
3. thoughts thinking processes.

These different attributions open again different possibilities to handle misbehaving children.

To better understand the topic the following pilot study was conducted. The purpose of this study was to trace back teachers' attitudes and attributions of problem behaviour and their personal definition of problem students to develop a questionnaire in this topic.

### **Method**

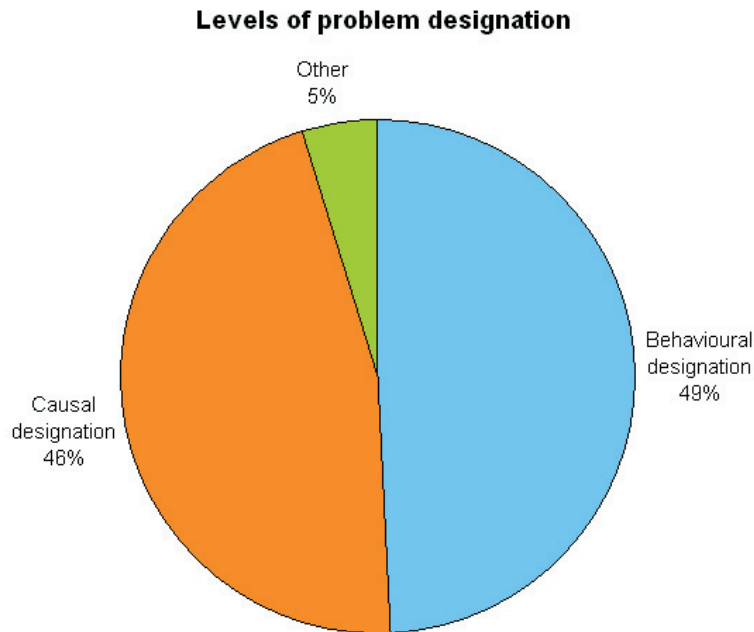
To test our hypotheses we used a simple questionnaire with few personal data about the respondent and two questions: (1) who is a problem child about your opinion; and (2) what kind of problems have children in your class facing to?

#### *Respondents*

40 (10-10 pieces) questionnaires were distributed to elementary school teachers in four region of our country. Apportionment was as follows: (A) Budapest is the capital city with more than 2 millions of citizens, (B) city of Pécs is a center of the South-Hungarian region with about 170.000 citizens, (C) town of Szekszárd with a population of about 34.000, and (D) a little village, Hosszúhetény with ca. 3300 inhabitants. Out of 40, only 27 questionnaires were returned. Average age of participating teachers was  $43.0 \pm 9.54$  years, teaching experience was  $20.31 \pm 10.65$  years. Average complement of the class was  $24.81 \pm 9.91$  students. In an average class there were more boys ( $13.46 \pm 6.02$ ) than girls ( $11.43 \pm 5.13$ ). According to teachers' evaluation the average percent of problem child in their own class was about more than one quarter of the complement ( $26.35 \pm 26.0$ ) with high standard deviation.

## Results

We've put two questions to the respondents but the answers were statistically similar, so we didn't differentiate between them in the following analyses. After collecting and classifying all the answers we have created two main categories. First cluster is (I) *Behavioural designations*. It contains all the answers which depict the problem as a certain behaviour of the pupil. Second cluster is (II) *Causal designations*. These answers rather contained reference to the cause of the problem. Figure1. shows the distribution of this two kinds of answers.



**Figure1. Two main levels of designation of the problem.**

Next categorization shows the problem designation groups. These categories were constructed by the authors based on questionnaire data (post hoc).

1. Behavioural designation.
  - a. Cognitive problems
  - b. Problems in following rules and norms
  - c. Aggression (verbal, interpersonal, physical)
  - d. Problems with interpersonal borders and roles
  - e. Self-control problems
  - f. Problems with social integration
2. Causal designation.
  - a. Students' handicap
  - b. Emotionally insufficient family
  - c. Absence of resources in the family
  - d. Different social standards in the family compared to the school
  - e. Institutional (school) or professional (teacher) insufficiency
  - f. Constant personality traits of the student

Figure2 and Figure3 shows the distribution of the categories in each level of designation.

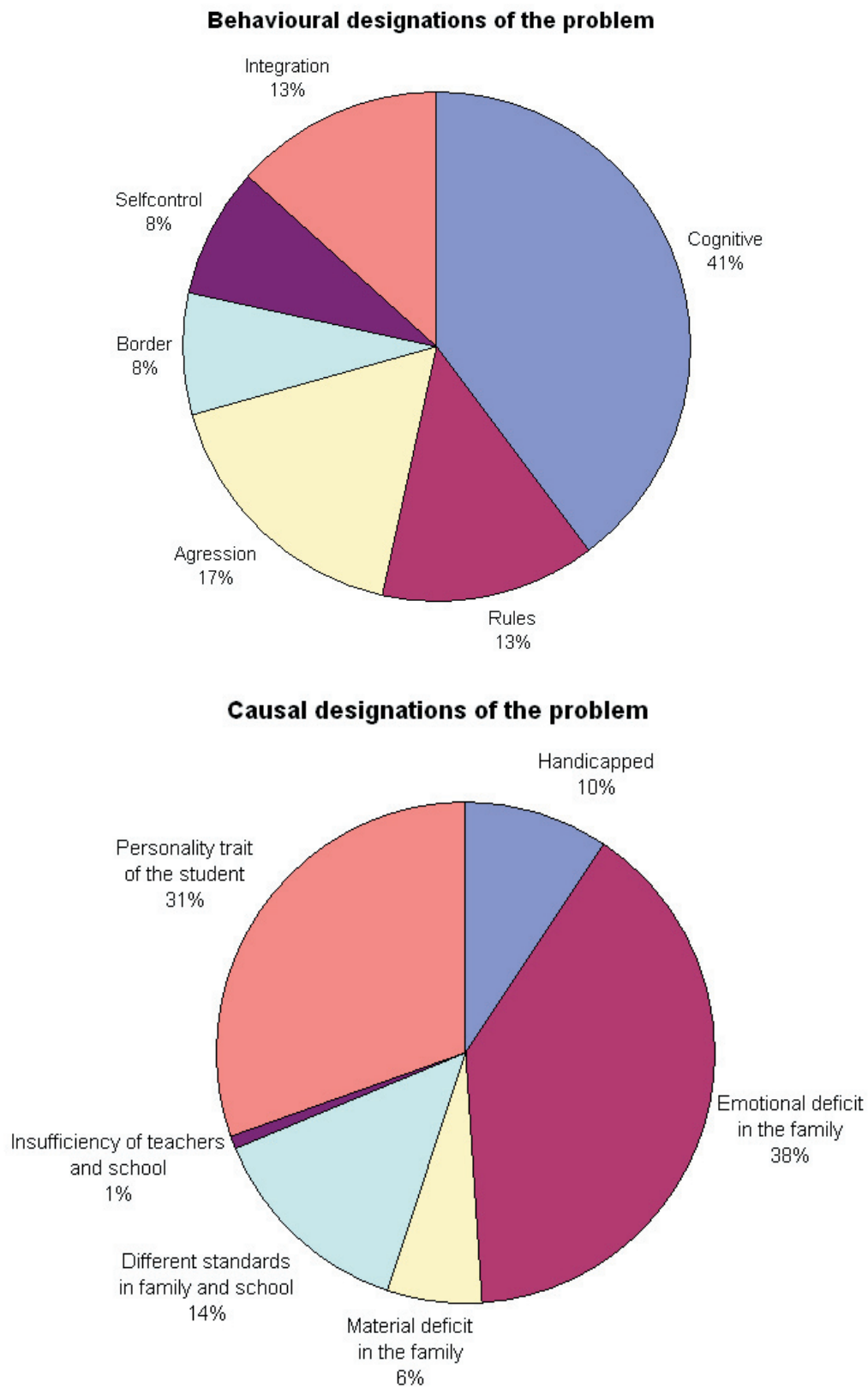


Figure2. and Figure3.

## **Discussion**

Attributional processes are automatic in human life. Even if asked for signs of superficial behavioural problems, almost in half of the answers elementary school teachers named causes of problems instead of symptoms. It is important in two different ways.

First, it is important because naming the cause of the problem instead the problem itself is a kind of self-defence or putting away problems. This becomes more evident if we consider the types of causal problem designation: more than 50 percent is connected to the family of the student, and only one single teacher named institutional and professional insufficiencies as the cause of problem behaviour. Besides blaming the families for difficult-to-handle situations in school, it can also reflect the social expectations faced by teachers, namely to solve family problems in schools. Since teachers are incompetent and unauthorized to do this, this attributional bias of teachers becomes a source of frustration. This highly effects the well-being of teachers in the classroom, which in turn causes bad classroom climate.

The second consideration is partly mentioned in the paragraph above. Different loci for the cause of problem open ways for different interventions. Problems attributed to student behaviour and institutional insufficiencies are most easily manageable. 62 percent of behavioural problem designation comes from cognitive disability of students, problems concerning rules and border/role problems. These problems can have a common source, namely early schooling. Despite the widespread school maturity examination, the decision lays in the hand of the parents. They often decide to school children to avoid embarrassing situations. Personal counselling for both students already in school and parents, and scaffolding fall-behind students could give a reasonable solution for the situation. Considering causal designation of problems, only solution for 1 percent (insufficiencies of school and teachers) is really a matter of education. Alteration in teacher training programs and quality based (instead of quantity based) compulsory postgraduate programs could eliminate the problem.

As for the methodological part of our study and our aim to develop a questionnaire, the following considerations should be made. It is important to selectively ask for causes and signs of problem behaviour, since only asking for naming the problem seems to cause conceptual confusion in teachers. A later questionnaire should further address the problem of managing problem behaviour.

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