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UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE  
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## CAN WE IMPROVE CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH WITH WHYTRY PROGRAM?

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*Introduction.* The WhyTry Program is a strength-based approach aiming to help young people overcome their challenges and improve outcomes by emphasizing their self-determination and strengths when solving problems. They are taught social and emotional principles through a series of 10 pictures reinforced by music, videos and physical activities teaching a discrete principle. *Aim of the study.* The goal of the paper is to try answering the research questions about the possibility of developing a more positive perception of their future, and improving classroom behavior, attendance, and grades by participating in the program. Differences from pre- to post-intervention in the areas of attendance, grades, office disciplinary referrals, and students' scores on behavioral rating scales were measured. Pupil and teacher perceptions of motivation were also examined. *Materials and methods.* A mixed-methods design was utilized to examine effects of WhyTry Program. Pre-intervention data were collected for pupils' attendance, grades, office disciplinary referrals, and behavioral rating scales, after which, the WhyTry Program was implemented. Following the intervention, the same type of data was collected. The pilot project took place at three primary schools in Stip, R. Macedonia from February-June 2014, for 8 weeks. The population of pupils, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, selected to participate in the program had to meet one or more of the following criteria by the end of the first semester of the school year: failing three or more classes, having seven or more absences, displaying inappropriate behaviors indicated by two or more behavior incident reports. A convenient, purposeful sampling method was used to randomly select 38 pupils from a pool of 76 who met participation criteria. Data measurement tools used for pretest and posttest were WhyTry Measure and Behavior Rating Index for Children (BRIC). *Results.* The results indicated that there are significant differences on two measures: WhyTry Program Measure ( $t=-.2.98, p=0.02$ ) and BRIC ( $t=2.60, p=0.01$ ). The three areas on WhyTry Program Measure (My Belief) in which the pupils' showed the most improvement were self-control, perseverance, and using support network. The pupil behaviors listed on the BRIC that were most improved included: feeling happy and relaxed, paying attention in class, finishing a job or task, controlling their temper and decreasing behavioral problems in classroom. Phenomenological methods drove the qualitative data collection and analysis through observations, student interviews, and teacher interviews. *Conclusions.* The present study showed similar results

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*and outcomes compared to other research studies of the WhyTry Program, such as increased grade point average, decreased behavior problems, improved self-efficacy, increased willingness to persevere, and pupil's positive perception of future. The future direction should be to expand the implementation of WhyTry Program in R. Macedonia and compare results to other studies.*

**Key words:** *improve; children; mental health; WhyTry Program*

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary research which focuses on developmental trajectories and risk factors of behavioral problems and disorders discovered that problematic behaviors at early age do not have transitory characteristics. They are precursors of behavioral problems which emerge and develop in childhood and adolescence, and continue later on in adulthood (Miloseva, 2013). Therefore, preservation and prevention of mental health through implementation of strength based programs are one of the priorities in mental health policy in modern societies.

The WhyTry Program is an early intervention, multi-sensory (visual, audio, experiential) life skills program. It is based on Solution Focused Brief Therapy, Social and Emotional Intelligence and Multi-Sensory Learning principles (Moore, 2008). The WhyTry Program combines a series of ten visual analogies with multimedia and physical activities to teach students social and emotional skills and to deal with life's daily pressures. Each visual analogy teaches a life skill to help youth thrive. For example: "Seeing Over the Wall" allows struggling students to see beyond their daily problems and gain a clear vision of the future, "Jumping Hurdles" is the ultimate lesson in "jumping back up" each time you fail, "Tearing Off Your Label" teaches that negative labels can hurt your future, and positive labels can help you achieve your goals, etc.

Bearing in mind that risk factors emerge in childhood and early adolescence, the basic motivation for this research is to implement early intervention program and to evaluate its efficacy in terms of reducing some risk factors such as: truancy, behavior problems in school, low academic achievement, school disengagement (Moore, 2008; Minor, 2009; Tammy, 2010). The main goal of the study is to explore the possibility of helping primary school pupils to develop a more positive perception of future, and improve classroom behavior, attendance, and grades by participating in the program. The other goal is to explore pupils' motivation for success.

## METHOD

A mixed-methods design was utilized to evaluate implementation of WhyTry Program. We used various quantitative as well as qualitative data acquisition

techniques and analysis. Pre-intervention data were collected for pupils' attendance, grades and classroom behavior, operationalized through behavioral rating scales. The WhyTry Program was implemented after that. Following the intervention, the same type of data was collected. The project took place at three primary schools in Stip, R. Macedonia from February-June 2014.

### **Sample**

A convenient, purposeful sampling method was used to randomly select 38 pupils from a pool of 76 who met participation criteria. The population of pupils, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, selected to participate in the program, had to meet one or more of the following criteria by the end of the first semester of the school year: failing three or more classes, having seven or more absences, displaying inappropriate behaviors indicated by two or more behavior incident reports.

### **Measures and instruments**

The following instruments were used: *WhyTry Measure-My belief*; *Behavior Rating Index for Children (BRIC)*, Stiffman, Orme, Evans, Feldman, Keeney (1984); *Attendance reports*; *Grades reports*. Assessments included pre and post evaluation test forms completed by both the teachers and the youth themselves. The pupils completed a self-report for the *WhyTry Measure*, pre- and post-intervention, and the teachers completed a teacher-report for the *BRIC*, pre- and post-intervention. Attendance records and grades were recorded from pupils' report cards. Qualitative data were collected through observations and interviews with pupils and teachers.

### **Quantitative and qualitative data collection**

Several types of quantitative data were accrued pre- and post-intervention: (a) grades (b) attendance (c) office disciplinary referrals (d) the *WhyTry Measure* (e) the *Behavior Rating Index for Children (BRIC)*.

Qualitative data were recorded during 2 pre-intervention weeks. The observations lasted one hour per week in different school settings. The data were recorded on a different observation chart for each pupil. Observation data were typed from the field notes. Additionally, 30-minute, semi-structured interviews were conducted with pupils and teachers individually. The interviews included parallel inquiries for pupils and teachers (e.g., motivation for school success, self-esteem, positive attitude, reasons for behavior). Once the intervention phase began, the pupils participants attended the WhyTry class, for one hour each day, Monday through Friday, for 8 weeks. Three days a week were used to teach the visual analogies in the students' regular classroom (e.g., "The Motivation Formula"; "Get Plugged In"; "Reality ride"; "Lift the Weight"; "Seeing Over the Wall"; "Climbing Out"; "Jumping Hurdles", etc.).

Two days a week focused on the kinesthetic/team building activities that correlated to the analogies. These activities were done in the classroom, gym, or outside depending on the nature of the activity. During the 2-week post-intervention phase, a second round of 30-minute interviews with pupils and teachers was completed.

## RESULTS

There were two different types of analyses – the quantitative analysis has examined intervention effects, while the qualitative analysis has explored student and teacher perceptions of motivation and school success.

### Quantitative analysis

A t-test for dependent samples was calculated in order to assess the difference in means between the pre-test and post-test.

Table 1 – Comparison of Pretest and Posttest data measures

Variable	Pre	SD	Post	SD	Mean Change	t	p
Grade Point Average	1.88	0.55	2.03	0.49	0.13	-1.43	0.21
WhyTry Measure	92.50	12.85	107.60	16.98	15.90	-2.98	0.02*
BRIC	31.30	4.20	26.76	4.15	-3.95	2.60	0.01*
Attendance	19.60	8.90	23.3	17.35	7.45	-2.11	0.15

As we can see in Table 1, the average pupils GPA did increase by 13 percent from 1.88 at pretest to 2.03 at posttest. The results indicated that there are significant differences on two measures: *WhyTry Measure* ( $t=-.2.98$ ,  $p=0.02$ ) and *BRIC* ( $t=2.60$ ,  $p=0.01$ ). The average score from the *WhyTry Measure* did increase from 92,50 at pretest to 107,60 at posttest indicating an increase in pupils' beliefs about themselves with regards to their attitude toward school and teachers, self control, perceptions of their future, perseverance, ability to cope with challenges and using support networks. The three areas on *WhyTry Measure* in which the pupils' showed the most improvement were self-control from 17.75 at pretest to 21.05 at posttest, perseverance from 12.30 at pretest to 13.40 at posttest, and using support network from 19.89 at pretest to 23.05 at posttest. The average score on the *BRIC* did change from a pretest total of 31.3 at pretest to a posttest total of 26.76 indicating pupils' behavioral problems in the classroom did decrease by 14 percent. The pupil behaviors listed on the *BRIC* that were most improved included: feeling happy and relaxed, paying attention in class, finishing a job or task, and controlling their temper.

### Qualitative analysis

From numerous observations of pupils, and interviews with pupils and teachers, the major theme that emerged was motivation. Within the major theme, several subtopics became apparent – learning, friends and family:

1. *Learning*. The majority of pupils stated that the most important reason for coming to school was motivation for learning. Teachers also mentioned that pupils want to learn in order to achieve their goals in life and to be successful at something.

2. *Friends*. The majority of pupils referred to the importance of friendship and the satisfaction they have in various activities with friends at schools. Teachers believed too that the social aspects of school were very motivating for pupils.

3. *Family*. The majority of pupils pointed out that they wanted to make their parents, or family, happy and proud of them. Some of the teachers pointed out that pupils are motivated by rewards at home (e.g., presents for good grades) and at school (e.g., Project activities, excursion trips).

## DISCUSSION

Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis we can conclude that the WhyTry Program is an effective intervention. It improves some aspects of the children's mental health and reduces risk factors such as: truancy; behavior problems in school; low academic achievement; school disengagement (Moore, 2008; Minor, 2009; Tammy, 2010). Besides that, important insight into motivation, especially in subareas learning, friends and family, was gained through the observations and interviews.

Pupils exhibited significant differences from pre- to post-intervention in the several areas on the behavioral rating scales. The present study showed similar results and outcomes compared to other research studies of the WhyTry Program, such as increased grade point average, decreased behavior problems, improved self-efficacy, increased willingness to persevere, and pupil's positive perception of future (Wymore, 2007; Baker, 2008; Moore, 2008; Minor, 2009; Wilhite, 2010; Tammy, 2010).

The most important limitation of the study refers to the quality of instruments. Future studies should use instruments with better psychometric characteristics, as well as multisetting, multisource, and multimethod assessments. Also, the small sample size reduces the possibility of generalization. Inclusion of control group in further research design would improve validity of the study.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has similar positive results and outcomes compared to other research studies of the WhyTry Program, such as increased grade point average, decreased behavior problems, improved self-efficacy, increased willingness to persevere, and pupil's positive perception of future. The future direction should be to expand the implementation of WhyTry Program in the Republic of Macedonia, and to compare results to other studies.



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