EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF STREET CHILDREN IN GEORGIA: NECESSARY REFORMS

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Abstract

Where they exist, current provisions for the care of street children in the republic of Georgia are inadequate and are incapable of ensuring the children's successful integration into the public school system or of providing them with necessary life skills. Data collected from observation, surveys, questionnaires and academic testing conducted throughout a three-year study of four day-care centres for street children proves that the addition of psychological and educational dimensions to the centres' basic social functions, the introduction of specialized staff (notably social pedagogues) and the reform of care provision processes based upon the children's individual needs significantly increases their chances for educational and social integration. This research offers recommendations for reforming the provision of education and care for victimized children in order to enable their successful integration into the public school system based upon an individual approach to their needs and requirements.
Key words*: street children, social pedagogy, educational-rehabilitation centre, life skills, preparedness for and involvement in schools.*

Introduction

The main victims of the republic of Georgia's difficult socio-economic and political situation are children – the most promising part of the country's population. Poverty and social indifference have contributed to the emergence of a category of victimized children known as "street children". These children leave their families and schools for the street, and it is the street that becomes the key vector of their social orientation.

In 2009, the World Bank found that 23.7% of the Georgian population was "poor" and that 9.3% was "extremely poor". Poverty among children was found to be significantly higher than the national average (World Bank, 2009, pp. 2, 152-157). Child labour has become more common. According to UNICEF, in Georgia in 2005 eighteen percent of children between the ages of five and fourteen worked; those aged nine or younger worked in the streets and on market places, often unloading heavy loads at night, and five year-olds worked as beggars. Among the children aged between five and fourteen who attended school, 18.9 percent were simultaneously engaged in child labour (The State Department for Statistics of Georgia, The National Centre for Disease Control, & UNICEF, 2005). An urban survey conducted in four Georgian cities in November 2007 estimated that there were around 1,600 street children in Georgia (UNICEF, & USAID, 2008).

Victimized children need individual help to develop life skills. This development, in turn, requires a complex approach where both the education of the young and of the adults responsible for their upbringing is of primary importance. Most street children in Georgia have not received age-appropriate schooling and are illiterate and innumerate. Children who drop out of school not only lack education but also the essential life skills usually developed as a result of interaction with peers during the educational process, and which are necessary for any person to play a meaningful role in society. The social rehabilitation and inclusion of street children and the realization of their labour potential not only means putting basic principles of humanism into practice but also undertaking a set of necessary measures for the economic stability of a country in which children are part of the economically active population and therefore contribute to (rather than encumber) the national budget.

Scientific research of the issue of a person's life skills started in 1986. The German philosopher and teacher Bollnow (1964) influenced the notion of "life skills", which comprises such human qualities as vitality and courage, joy of life, confidence in the meaning of life, and important and essential skills for living. *Humanism as a Theoretical-Methodical Basis of Social Pedagogy* (Yarkina, 1997) is the first book to provide an in-depth analysis of the issue of life skills. The bulk of the book is devoted to the identification of the essence of life skills in view of new humanistic targets of education. In 1997, Russian pedagogues, sociologists and psychologists began to explore strategic choices for influencing the development of life skills in children suffering from emotional and psychological crises related to the political, social and economic turmoil which characterized the collapse of the Soviet Union and its transition to a market economy. Research into studies of the development of life skills in street children conducted by Russian, European and American researchers was prompted by the similarities which exist between the circumstances in which the problem has emerged and between the ways of addressing this problem. The Soviet Union (of which Georgia was a part for over 70 years) had a uniform system of social rehabilitation for abandoned children; some remnants of this system can still be discerned in the mechanisms for the social protection of the Georgian population, including street children.

There is currently no research available in Georgia which could provide a complex study of the upbringing of victimized children (including street children), nor is this problem currently being studied at a special, interdisciplinary level or on the basis of a set of anthropological sciences with an emphasis on pedagogy.

Research Objectives

The objective of this research was to explore pedagogical approaches and models at an interdisciplinary level in order to facilitate the creation of enabling conditions for the education, personal development and formation of life skills in street children in the republic of Georgia. The research aimed at enhancing accessibility to education and at integrating literacy with vocational training so that education could become meaningful for street children. The research assesses the causal factors and emerging gaps affecting the education of street children and suggests interventions and responses which the children could be provided with. The research aims to provide strategies for interventions at policy and community level by central and local government, academic groups, schools and civil society organisations.

Methodology of Research

The objectives of this research and the specific nature of the problem in question required a creative analysis and synthesis of social and pedagogic literature and a monographic research of the experience of schools and rehabilitation centres in view of the problem under

consideration.

A special role was assigned to socio-pedagogic analyses, which includes involved and direct observations and express interviews using specially designed questionnaires and dialogue techniques.

The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data. For the quantitative component four different questionnaires were developed for use with children, social pedagogues, vocational teachers and parents. These questionnaires captured the following aspects about street children: factors which led the children to the street; problems they faced on the street; the kinds of support available to them and the social actors providing them; their coping strategies and relationships with parents; characteristics affecting their education, enrolment and attendance in schools; their attitudes and perceptions of basic and vocational education; and, finally, their views about the support networks available to them and recommendations for supportive changes in the education system. For the qualitative component discussion guides were developed to be used by the pedagogues.

Drawn conclusions and developed recommendations are based on the analysis of the results of the survey conducted in educational-rehabilitation centres.

The initial stage of the research consisted of analyzing the problem, identifying a methodological and theoretical basis for the research and for its goals and objectives, and clarifying key concepts.

The second stage involved experimental work among children in educational-rehabilitation centres. A new mechanism for preparing children for public schooling was set up, based upon the method of educating children in educational-rehabilitation centres according to their level of development rather than according to their age. A programme for involving older children in vocational training was also developed, thus enabling them to learn various vocations. For defining life skills criteria and basic indicators in children, questionnaires, tests, express interviews, conversations, and direct and involved observation were employed. The management and mode of operation of educational-rehabilitation centres were analyzed.

The final stage involved processing the results of all the surveys and comparing the data obtained at initial and final stages relevant to the improvement of the level of education and to the quality of visible or invisible changes in children's life skills. Corresponding conclusions were drawn on the basis of gathered material.

Key Issues of Research

Education as Means of Developing Life Skills

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child pays great attention to education, identifying it as one of the most important priorities in the development of life skills. Street children are disadvantaged children who lack access to formal education, primary services or family environments as well as general support.

The involvement of this category of socially vulnerable children in the schooling process is, ultimately, the right course for the state policy on the protection of children's rights, though necessarily requires the preparation of schools in advance. Street children are traumatized children deprived of social contact and interaction. The typical phenomenon of their so-called "social disability" is caused by the shortcomings of their upbringing. Schools should be thoroughly prepared for the admission of such children. In our opinion, approaches to and ways of involving street children in mainstream schooling systems should be identical to those of inclusive education. Caring for street children requires a complex approach within which the preparedness of schools must play a major role.

Social Pedagogues

Children should be provided with pedagogues in educational-rehabilitation centres and schools who are capable of assisting them in meeting all their needs and in the teaching process. The role of social pedagogues in such a situation is of utmost significance for social rehabilitation, the development of life skills and the preparation of street children for school. The profession of "social pedagogue" does not exist in the educational landscape of Georgia despite the obvious need for such recognition, and it is precisely this need that has brought the importance of this profession to the forefront in the research.

Social pedagogy extensively addresses the problems related to the work of social workers and social pedagogues. These problems are analyzed in Belicheva (1993), Bocharova (1999), Yarkina (1997) and others. They pay particular attention to the development of the so-called "professiogram" of social pedagogues. Based upon the study of these materials and upon the existing professiogram of a school teacher, we have developed our own version of a social pedagogue's professiogram.

Professiogram of a social pedagogue:

- Affection for children;
- Deep professional knowledge and love of the profession (keenness, creative talent);
- A high level of professionalism and pedagogic training, general and pedagogic culture, erudition;
- Speaking skills (speech technique, speech culture);
- Organizational skills;
- Culture of pedagogic interaction, pedagogic tactfulness;
- Ability to penetrate the inner world of children and discern their psychological state;
- Ability to apply various forms of instruction;
- Sense of humour;
- Motivation to trust children and their potential capacities; and
- Professional insight and observation.

Educational-Rehabilitation Centres

Research started in 2006 in open-type educational-rehabilitation centres in four cities of Georgia (Tbilisi, Rustavi, Chiatura and Gori) and in Public School No. 44 in Tbilisi. Prior to the commencement of research the activity of educational-rehabilitation centres for children was limited to addressing health and nutrition issues alone, although teachers and other specialists working there were in abundance. These centres primarily acted as shelters.

The issue brought forward by the research carried out in these centres was the introduction of education into their working strategy, as one of the children's rights and as a means of social integration and development of life skills. The introduction of this educational component led to the revision of the content and structure of functions of these institutions. Consequently, these institutions added an educational-rehabilitation function to their primary social assistance functions. The results of the research made it possible to rename these institutions educational-rehabilitation centres (ERCs).

According to the research, in order to be admitted to ERCs children are selected by a team of multidisciplinary specialists consisting of teachers (five or six), social workers (six or seven), a doctor and a manager. The centres provide for children aged between six and seventeen, with their numbers ranging from 25 to 50 per month. (This number varies, depending upon the degree of influx of children into the centres.) The majority stay, and have the opportunity to follow the entire course of rehabilitation. Children frequently bring their peers, siblings and sometimes even their parents to the centres (such cases amount to 45 percent of the total,

according to the results of the research).

Attendance at ERCs is voluntary for children and adolescents. ERCs operate a free "come-in and go-away regime". Advised by a pedagogue, children choose learning activities they wish and need. They should, however, be well aware of the necessity of respecting their choice and perform assumed learning obligations, which is the first step towards realizing both their rights and obligations. This is the most outstanding feature which distinguishes these centres from other institutions. These are open-type day centres and it is up to the children to decide to come in and integrate – although the role of specialists in attracting, adapting and rehabilitating children is huge. ERCs are also kept open at night for the most vulnerable, which means that children can spend the night in the centres if they need to.

Every child is provided with textbooks and other school materials. There is no fee for education. The centres follow the national curriculum but since most (98 percent) of the children who are admitted to them are illiterate, an adapted curriculum is required. Children are identified and admitted to centres in the following ways: children who live and work in the street enter ERCs at their own will; children are identified and brought in by social workers; children are brought in by their relatives, guardians or parents; street children are identified by governmental or non-governmental organizations.

For children to be admitted to a centre they must meet the following criteria: a) they must be between six and eighteen years old (children younger than six are also admitted), and b) be living and working in the street. Flexible approaches should be exercised towards children in order to identify their needs and individual requirements.

Identification of Children's Needs

It is important for pedagogues to understand the condition of a child, those social or economic factors which cause a child to leave its home for the street, perform hard work, drop out of school, and become aggressive, reclusive, marginalized, and disappointed. The following methods were employed to identify children's needs:

- Interviews: The research paid particular attention to interviews conducted with children by pedagogues and teachers to learn about and assess ongoing developments. Interviews were conducted on a daily basis and planned together with the children. Various forms of discussions with children were equally beneficial – individual and focus group, pre-planned and spontaneous discussions, discussions initiated by a child or a teacher – and were conducted in the form of questions-and-answers or monologues, arising in the course of learning or informal conversations and depending on needs and circumstances. Interviews helped children think aloud. Based upon this part of the research, it can be said that by means of interviews children, apart from developing listening skills, learn how to clearly formulate their thoughts, feelings or opinions, which represents one of the most important life skills.

Qualitative data collected through group discussions and interviews was analyzed and entered into a database. An interdisciplinary team of specialists then complemented this information with official documentation about the child (for example: birth certificate, documents on any potential medical or other social conditions, etc.) as well as surveys, conclusions and recommendations.

The research examined a number of other effective strategies for information-gathering:
- Sharing and updating information during meetings between pedagogues and their colleagues from the interdisciplinary team;
- The importance of analyzing any available official document concerning a child; and
- The active engagement of external experts (mostly from academic groups) in peer reviews of information-gathering models and in consolidating experts' viewpoints and technical inputs.

The research revealed the need when developing comprehensive questions to prevent confusion in interviewers and to make them understand the question and answer properly in order to ensure the quality of resulting data. The preliminary testing of questionnaires with small focus groups proved to be effective in terms of improving the quality and sequence of questions for wider use. The success of an interview was directly related to the level of pedagogical preparedness.

Prior to the gathering of information, pedagogues were asked to try to answer the following questions:

- What information they needed to learn, and for what purpose;
- How this information could be gathered;
- How to interpret the information; and
- How the information should be used to improve interventions.

The research confirmed the critical importance of gathering information when dealing with street children and when attempting to improve the professional skills and methods of pedagogues. In parallel with the teaching and learning processes, information-gathering helped pedagogues to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of pedagogical approaches and to identify weak areas and effect improvements. Information-gathering was primarily carried out when working with children through direct observation and through conversation both direct and indirect (i.e. listening to their conversations with peers).

Participants

The educational-rehabilitation centres where the research was conducted cater for around 550 children. 400 of them were the objects of direct observation and research (100 from each ERC) and continuously participated in the research process.

The research also observed 50 children who attended research activities and events at random. These children intermittently received ERC services (food, medical check-ups, literacy and numeracy classes, organized supervision of recreation including physical development activities, etc.) designed and provided by the research in conjunction with the mobile team of specialists, which included street educators. The children's trust was won by these activities, and they became open, friendly, and eagerly awaited the mobile team's planned visits. However, these children were not able to take part in the research's educational programme, and potential progress or outcomes of their level of education could therefore not be tested.

Based upon the total number of children in ERCs, one can conclude that 80 percent of children benefiting from the centres were involved in the research. In addition to children the research involved 21 pedagogues, 12 social workers, 117 parents (or other caretakers), and 12 vocational teachers.

Implementation of Research and Results

The research was conducted in several directions and revealed key problems, the analysis and solution of which will help develop life skills in street children. Data was collected through questionnaires, tests, informal discussions and the analysis of documents; intensive on-site visits (in streets, families, schools and ERCs) were conducted as well as formal and informal interviews with the centres' employees.

Biographical data on children was studied at an earlier stage of the research. This data included their age; information on their families (if available); medical information; their reasons for having dropped out of school; information on their attitudes towards harmful habits;

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and information on whether they had been the victims of violence, had worked in the street or had had any contact with law enforcement bodies. Clarification of this data helped build an understanding of the psychological state of each child – state which largely determines the behaviour and aspiration of every person, especially children – and establish corresponding conclusions by analyzing given answers.

Children aged 6 - 17 were interviewed. Particular interest was paid to children who are left beyond the reach of social assistance and who have no notion of rehabilitation centres or of similar institutions.

Statistical Analysis of Data

Quantitative data collected through the questionnaires was analyzed in Excel. The analysis of the variables is presented using simple frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data collected through the group discussions and interviews was analyzed using the content analysis method.

Results of Research

The questionnaires revealed the following:

Reasons for Dropping out of School

Children who were forced by economic factors to drop out of school and earn a living (and often even earn income for their families) were eager to answer the questions. They did not lament their condition, instead viewing it as inevitable. Given the fact that these children earned a living through forms of labour acceptable by law and ethics, and therefore had no contact with law enforcement bodies, they were psychologically more stable. Despite difficult social conditions, some of these children were even proud of their status as bread-winners rather than dependants.

The majority of children interviewed in rehabilitation centres (91%) had previously attended public schools. Most of those children who had never attended public schools (9%) were younger – eight or nine years old. The primary reason for dropping out of school was economic hardship (68%); children lacked textbooks and other items necessary for school as well as appropriate clothing, which prevented them from learning alongside other schoolchildren. 2% of children were withdrawn from schools due to mental problems, 22% dropped out because their parents failed to take care of their education, and 5% stated that they themselves had opted for life in the street since it appealed to them as they felt more free there and were not keen to learn.
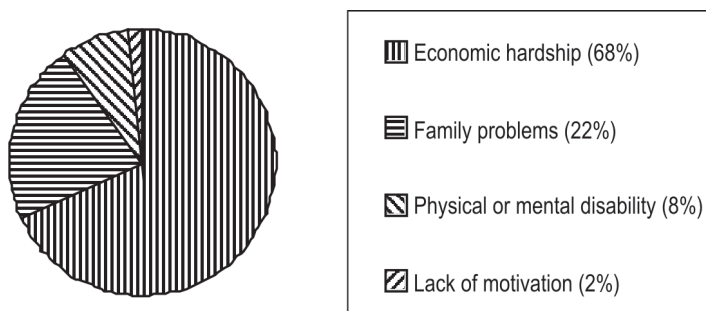

Figure 1.   Reasons for dropping out of school.

As mentioned above, in addition to interviewing 400 children in ERCs the research also interviewed 50 children who have never attended these centres. Of these 50 children, 34 (68%) said they had experienced economic hardships which had forced them to take to the street, 12 (12%) claimed to have been ill-treated and to have fled an unbearable family environment, and 4 children (8%) were unable to explain the reasons for their being in the street.

Attitudes towards Harmful Habits

The majority of interviewed children (64 percent) have tried cigarettes at various times, and 47 percent of those still smoke with varying degrees of intensity; solvent abuse (glue sniffing) affects 13 percent, and 40 percent are absolutely free of harmful habits.
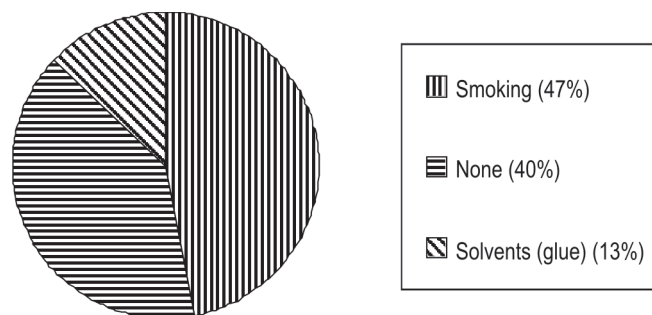

Figure 2.   Attitudes towards harmful habits.

Violence against Children

A significant number of interviewed children (61 percent) were subjected to various forms of violence, often compounded by their parent's alcoholism, forcing them to flee their families. It should be noted that children were less open to talking about this issue. During face-to-face conversations, however, girls would often draw attention to their step-father's attempts to sexually abuse them. Results of confidential talks also suggested that cases of sexual violence against boys are frequent, especially on the part of older boys.

Attitudes towards Education and Profession

Twenty-seven children (6 percent) of those interviewed do not regard it necessary to receive education. A few of them (2 percent) were too young to understand the essence of the issue, whereas the others denied the importance of education absolutely consciously. The necessity of acquiring education was acknowledged by 153 of the children (34 percent); 36 children (8 percent) considered primary education alone to be sufficient, whereas a large part of those interviewed (225, i.e. 50 percent) prioritized vocational education.

Table 1. Attitudes towards education and profession.

Attitude	Number	Percentage
Important	153	34
Not important	27	6
Primary education insufficient	36	8
Only vocational education important	225	50
No answer	2	2

In addition to attitudes to education, the question also referred to attitudes towards professional occupations. The children's replies drew a different picture in this respect. The need to master a profession was acknowledged by 423 of the children (96%). They viewed the mastering of a profession as a means of social survival and give preference over basic education.

When asked which profession they think they have prospects in, the children's answers were distributed as follows: builder (72 children, i.e. 18%), car mechanic (63 – 15.75%), carpenter (54 - 13,5%), hairdresser (45 - 11,25%), athlete (45 – 11,25%), computer specialist (36 – 9%), doctor (27 – 6.75%), actor (9 – 2.25%), teacher (18 – 4.5%), economist (18 – 4.5%), lawyer (18 – 4.5%), locksmith (18 – 4.5%). Some other professions were also named. A few children (4.5%) were unable to answer this question.

Table 2.   Professions children consider promising.

Profession	Number of Children	Percentage
Builder	72	18
Car mechanic	63	15.75
Carpenter	54	13.5
Hairdresser	45	11.25
Athlete	45	11.25
Computer specialist	36	9
Doctor	27	6.75
Locksmith	18	4.5
Economist	18	4.5
Teacher	18	4.5
Lawyer	18	4.5
Actor	9	2.25
Other	9	2.25
No answer	18	4.5

Attitudes towards Learning

Two factors of a child's attitude towards learning coincide: an objective factor – dropping out of school due to economic or family problems and taking to streets – and a subjective one – a mere childish laziness.

Among educational subjects, boys favour mathematics, foreign languages and history, whereas the majority of girls prefer studying Georgian and literature. Almost everyone expressed their interest in sports; interest in football, for example, is almost identical: boys – 98%, girls 89.9%.

Table 3.   Subjects children enjoy learning.

Subject	Number of Children	Percentage
Mathematics	72	18
Foreign languages	63	15.75
Georgian language and literature	62	15.75
History	46	11.5
Music	36	9
Geography	26	6.5
Biology	18	4.5
Sport	54	13.5
Other	18	4.5
No answer	54	13.5

As regards the learning process, more children (52%) prefer to attend lessons periodically rather than systematically. This attitude is conditioned by several factors:

- Lack of time (children work);
- Lack of motivation to study;
- Limited learning abilities, which, in turn, undermines the motivation to study;
- Undervaluation of the importance of education;
- Outdated teaching methodology, which makes the learning process less attractive for victimized children;
- Complexity of textbooks, their inadequacy compared to pupils' abilities. Lack of textbooks needed for inclusive education.

Discussion

Forms of Rehabilitation for ERC Beneficiaries

Teaching of Street Children

A key problem to the enrolment of street children in public schools is still the lack of criteria for their distribution among classes. Should the children be distributed into classes by age or by their abilities and level of development? The key priority in this process is normally the level of the child's development, but such an approach sometimes creates unusual situations where, for example, older children find themselves alongside much younger ones in a single class.

The key criteria for the placement of children in public schools should be their age and its appropriateness with respect to the age of the other pupils, whereas in ERCs – in contrast to public schools – children should be placed according to the compatibility of their level of development with the learning stages, irrespective of their age. The main goal of ERCs is to identify and eliminate shortfalls in the development of children and to provide them with as much age-appropriate education as possible, in order to facilitate the age-appropriate integration of these children into public schools. The achievement of this goal largely depends on the child's age – the earlier the intervention into the development of the child, the easier it is to attain the key objectives of developing its life skills and preparing it for school. Older street children who have never studied at school and have recently fallen under the care of ERCs find it difficult to obtain a public school certificate. Without such a certificate it is impossible to receive vo-

cational training according to current Georgian legislation. We strongly believe that whilst the Georgian education system fails to ensure access to general education for all (in this case, street children), the law should enable victimized adolescents without a compulsory school education to receive complete vocational and technical training.

One of the main goals of the research was to develop a teaching method and programme that would be tailored to meet the individual needs of children and to develop their capacities and abilities. Cooperation-centred learning and teaching was applied to ensure confidence and success among children. Hypothetically, this approach was thought to facilitate efforts to integrate street children and to strengthen their personal and social relations.

According to the research, a teacher first identified the level of a child's development against his/her age through interview and by using textbooks and other visual learning aids. Children were then divided into four groups, referred to as "steps". The curriculum, accordingly, consisted of four "steps" or levels. The first step consisted of the material taught in the first, second and third years of public school; the second step covered the material of the fourth, fifth and sixth years; the third step comprised the material of the seventh and eighth grades; and the fourth step that of the ninth grade. The experience of the centres has shown that on several occasions children failed to meet any of the levels. The curriculum of each step was naturally abridged as much as possible by selecting material and simplifying methods of delivery; preference was given to key issues during the selection and use of material.

Principles of team as well as individual work were applied as learning methods. One of the key aims of the pedagogic approach was to help children develop skills for independent reasoning and analysis. When working with children, teachers often made adjustments to teaching methods based upon the children's wishes or opinions. Upon the children's advice, the intensity and duration of group reading classes, for example, was increased, and the reading material was complemented by additional illustrations in order to boost motivation. The application of such an approach clearly intensified the children's self-confidence. Children were fond of speaking and thinking aloud about various issues, and were encouraged to do so by the teachers. These teaching methods helped the teachers motivate the children and created a favourable, open and friendly environment in which the children felt at ease and in which they freely displayed their abilities and expressed their desires, wishes and dreams. Such expressions are important for children to disclose their nature, set their goals and develop skills for independent and critical analysis.

One of the key goals of the entire research was to make public schools recognize special needs as being part of the national curriculum. In other words, whilst the shortfall in learning is caused by a number of factors, teachers should be able to create conditions to enable every child – whether in an ERC or at school – to study. The activity of teachers would also be much more effective if adapted textbooks were available to them. The outcome of this research component reveals that there is a need for developing special, adapted textbooks; this, in turn, will contribute to the preparedness of street children as well as children with other special learning needs to integrate into public schools.

Testing to monitor the overall progress and development of children was conducted twice – during the initial and final stages of the educational course. The children to be monitored were divided into two age groups: 6-11 year-olds and 12-17 year-olds. Questions in tests corresponded to the four levels that were established for learning. Although the tests of both stages used one and the same material, the questions in the second stage test were more specific, enhanced and more complex.

The questions were grouped into four thematic categories: Georgian literature, history, geography and nature. The tests of both age groups comprised 10 questions from each category. Each question was evaluated with one point. The results show that 54% of children in the first age group scored 0-1 points (out of a possible 10) at the initial stage of their educational course

and that this percentage decreased to zero at the final stage of this course. In the second age group, 57% of the tested children scored 0-1 points at the initial stage, this percentage decreasing to 2% at the final stage.
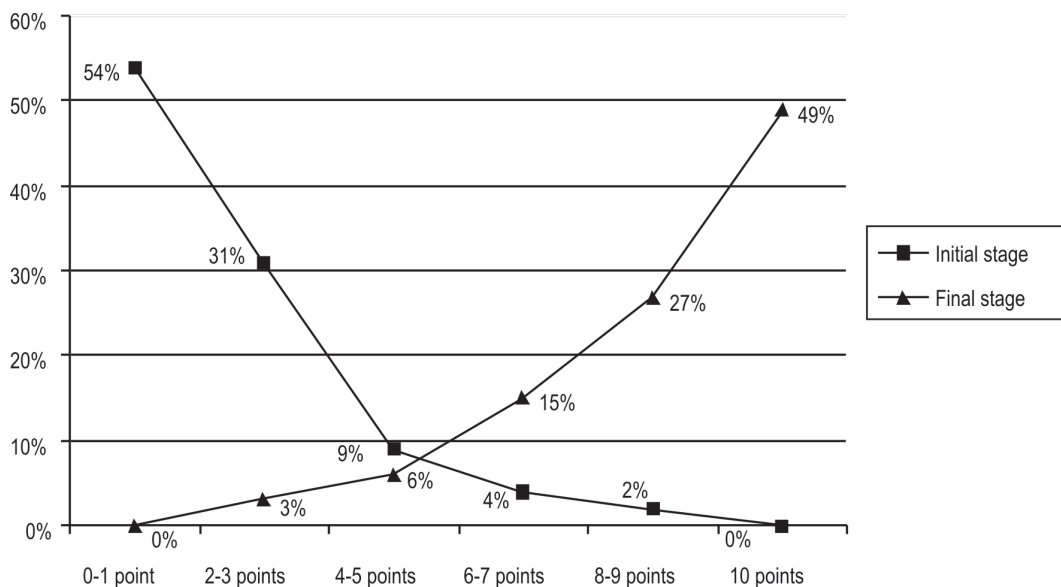

Figure 3.   Test results at initial and final stages of research. First age group (6-11 years old).
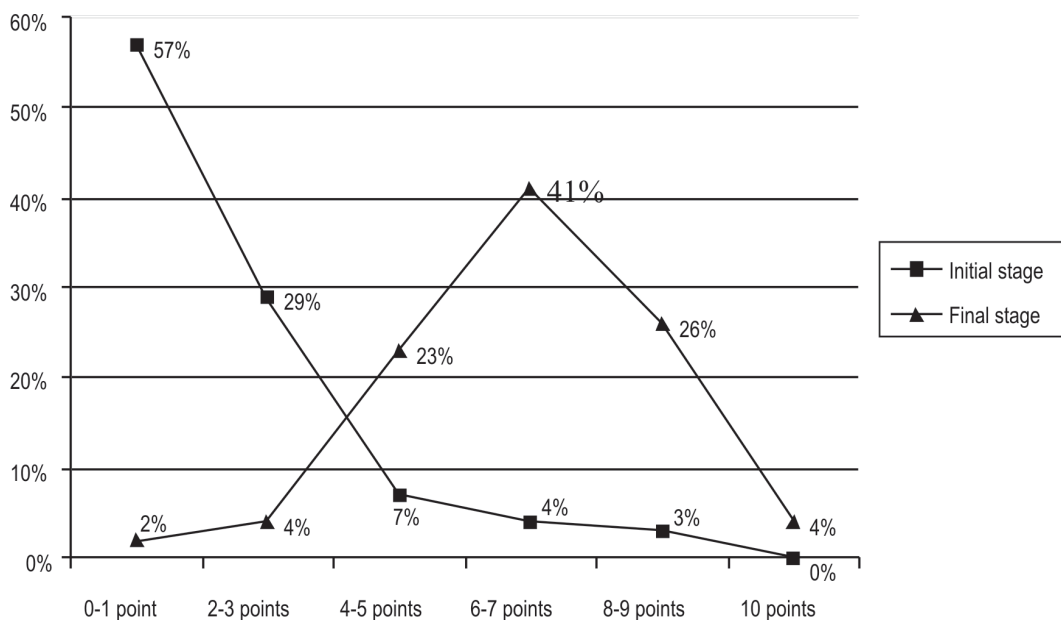

Figure 4.   Test results at initial and final stages of research. Second age group (12-17 years old).

Table 4.   General level of education at initial and final stages of testing.

	Initial Stage		Final Stage	
	Number of Children	Percentage	Number of Children	Percentage
Illiterate	354	88.5	14	7
Can read and write and perform basic mathematical operations	46	11.5	386	93
Knows nothing about Georgia	62	15.5	11	2.75
Has some knowledge of Georgian history	174	43.5	288	72
Knows State symbols of Georgia (national anthem, flag, coat of arms)	108	27	366	91.5
Knows a lot about Georgia	72	18	198	49.5
No knowledge of modern technology	349	87.25	104	26
Can use mobile telephone	14	3.5	136	34
Knows names of continents	22	5.5	228	57
Has heard of computers	46	11.5	310	77.5
Can find places on a map	12	3	292	73
Can use a computer	0	0	162	40.5
Is aware of foreign cars	41	10.25	229	57.25

None of the children from either age group were able to score the highest mark (10 points) at the initial stage of the educational course. However, at the final stage, 49% of the children in the first age group scored 10 points, whilst this mark was only achieved by 4% of the children from the second age group. This difference in learning achievements between the two age groups is explained by the complexity of the curriculum for children in the second age group.

Generally, the results of interviews and tests at the initial stage of the research revealed a low level of education and lack of information in children admitted to the ERC. Most of the children could not read or write or do basic maths. Almost none possessed a deep knowledge of any subject.

The first steps towards the formation of life skills and engagement in education were the development of reading and writing and maths skills. This was one of the most significant achievements of the research. Conducted interviews and tests at initial and final stages of the educational course, showed that the most of the children in the ERCs learned how to read and write. The elementary course in mathematics was taken by 386 children (out of 400, i.e. 96.5 percent), which is 87 percent higher compared to the previous result. The number of children displaying an improved knowledge of history increased by 23.5 percent, whereas the number of those showing a deeper knowledge of geography increased by 72 percent.

The process of integration into schools is difficult for both children and teachers. The research showed that it is almost impossible to achieve a maximal level of children's development within desired timeframes in terms of their preparedness for school as, if anything, children who are deprived of a normal rhythm of development find it difficult to manage intensive learning. Schools, however, should be prepared to meet such a challenge by making sensible and effective use of teaching methods and by ensuring the loyalty of the teaching staff.

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Meetings between ERC Teachers and Children as a Method of Intervention

ERC teachers and children meet at various intervals and discuss issues related to attendance, cleanliness, discipline, personal hygiene and healthy life styles. The results of the questionnaire confirm the children's positive attitude towards such activities. 84% of respondents assessed working meetings with adults as positive, 12% did not see any sense in such meetings and only 4% thought that teachers were merely pretending to listen to their views.
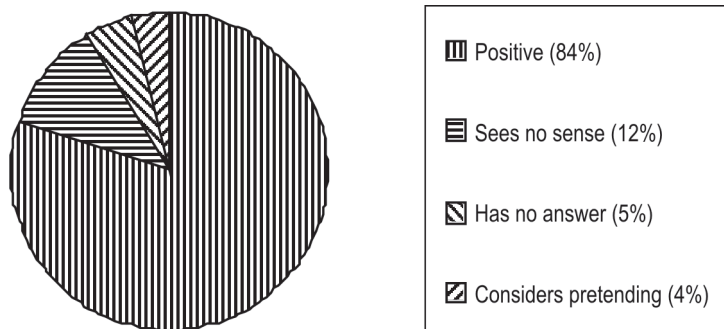

Positive (84%)

Sees no sense (12%)

Has no answer (5%)

Considers pretending (4%)

Figure 5.   Children's attitudes towards parent-teacher meetings.

Working with Parents

Working with parents is a strategy which is difficult to accomplish. Parents often view their children as bread-winners and do not appreciate the role of education, and are often a reason for children dropping out of school. Our research shows that these attitudes have three basic causes:

1) Economic hardship (75 percent), when parents wish for their children's welfare but poverty forces them to send their children into the street to earn money;

2) Dysfunctional families – alcoholic or drug addicted parents (16 percent) who are not interested in the welfare of their children and live on income earned by them. Such parents agree to cooperate only when they expect to obtain some material benefit; and

3) Parents with a low level of development who cannot appreciate the importance of education for the welfare of their children (9 percent).
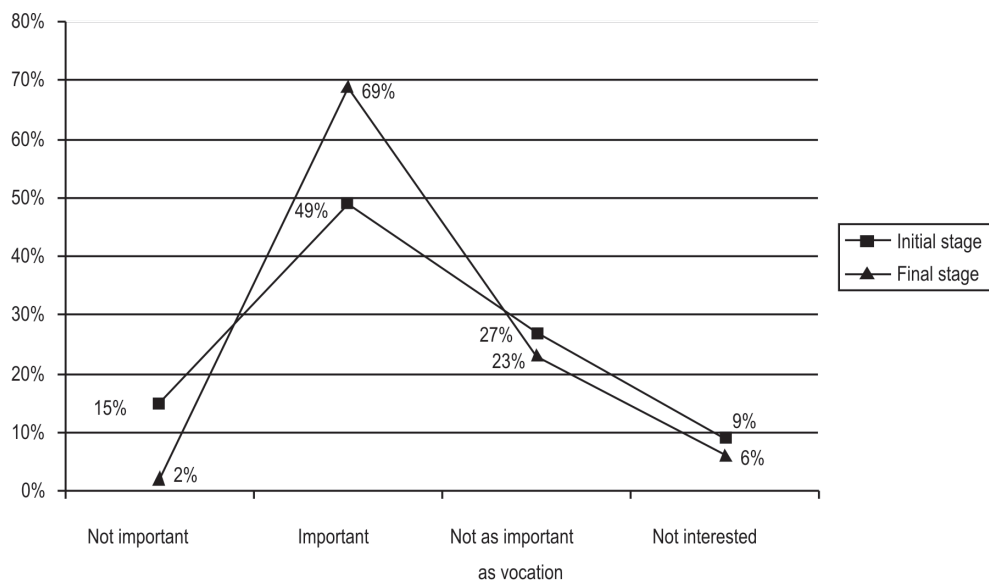
Figure 6. **Parents' attitudes towards the education of their children at the initial and final stages.**

Despite difficulties, informative and educational work with parents is a necessary measure for ensuring children's welfare. Experience has shown the advantages of social pedagogues carrying out such activities. When one compares the results of the initial and final stages, a positive change is apparent in the attitude of parents towards the education of their children.

At the initial stage only 49% of the 100 parents who were interviewed acknowledged the importance of education for their children, whereas at the final stage the proportion of these parents went up to 69%. Initially, 13% of parents did not deem education necessary, but following a rehabilitation course undertaken by the children, this indicator shrank to 2%. The change in parents' attitudes was expressed not only in words but also in an increase in cooperation. This brought about a positive result where some of the children whose parents had sent them to work (or beg) to earn income were relieved of this burden. However, such a positive result was also due to the efforts of social workers to include extremely impoverished parents into the state social assistance programmes.

During both surveys an almost equal number of parents gave preference to vocational training over school education (initially 27% – later 23%). Similarly, the number of parents uninterested in the education of their children was also almost equal (initially 9% – later 6%).

During the research, we could observe the need for teachers and other personnel to cooperate, particularly with single mothers, with tact, skills and experience, in order to help the latter overcome the wide-spread social stigma attached to their being single or to their having given birth when they were minors.

Vocational Education Programme

The research revealed the lack of compliance of the Georgian Law on General Education with every child's right to have access to education. Half of the children surveyed in rehabilitation centres are between fourteen and eighteen years of age, but only 15 percent of them have received a compulsory general education certificate. Consequently, 35 percent of children lack such certificates and are deprived of the opportunity of receiving vocational-technical training. If a state cannot ensure access to either general compulsory education or to vocational training

for vulnerable members of society – in this particular case, children who live and work in the street – and cannot provide for the development of their skills, it is in violation of several articles (Nos. 28, 29, 30, 31, 32) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

For illustrative purposes it should be said that within the framework of the research we tried to enrol a few juveniles who had displayed special skills in drawing and carpentry programs during the research in a vocational school. However, and despite the repeated efforts of the researchers, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia failed to set a precedent for enrolling the juveniles in vocational schools as the law on general education does not provide for such cases and, consequently, does not allow exceptions.

Within the framework of the research a small group of juveniles were learning crafts in accordance with their interests and abilities. The development of certain skills (sewing, embroidery, computer skills, carpentry) was facilitated in the rehabilitation centres. As regards construction, mechanics and hairdressing skills, these were developed in educational-employment centres. After having practiced them many adolescents successfully pass tests and are thereafter ready for employment.

It should be noted that it was difficult to obtain the consent and cooperation of teachers, as they displayed a certain degree of caution towards the idea of teaching former street children. This can be attributed to the negative influence of a stereotype of street children which has become established in society. Despite such difficulties, however, a group of crafts (vocation) teachers was set up, who not only became engaged in the learning process but also had a positive psychological influence on these children.

An important aspect in this process was the development among the adolescents of such social skills as a feeling of responsibility towards a learning and working regime; mobilizing attention; analyzing provided information; following instructions or advice given by teachers exactly; analyzing outcomes together with teachers and peers; understanding that efforts may not always bring desired results; repeating efforts in case of failure and thus developing perseverance; and developing skills to listen to different opinion, to defend one's own stance and views in a calm and rational manner when in discussion with others.

To avoid any harm to the adolescents' health and development when involving them in learning a vocation, and to ensure compliance with relevant labour and employment legislation, easy forms of vocational activities (for example, in construction: observation, measuring, mastering carpentry elements) were selected in consultation with doctors, teachers and psychologists, and working days for practical training were shortened.

Conclusions

This research offers a mechanism for obtaining non-formal education which represents a transitional stage from a harmful environment for street children towards their education and social involvement. The introduction of social pedagogy and child psychology to existing basic provisions for street children in the republic of Georgia and the reform of current care measures towards a more individual approach based upon an assessment of the children's particular social and educational needs and requirements can ensure their successful integration into the public school system and their acquisition of vital life skills.

Assisting street children in fulfilling their aims and in acquiring and developing their life skills is beneficial not only for them but also for society as a whole. Instead of non-productive, economically passive citizens who may potentially become a burden or a danger to society, the state acquires economically active and socially protected people. Any effort will however be counterproductive if children are brought from the street into centres, provided with rehabilitation programmes and accustomed to a different lifestyle, but then left to leave the centres without receiving any support. It is therefore necessary to create a complex system for the

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continuous education, development and social protection of children by developing a long-term vision and strategies.

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