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PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN GIFTED STUDENTS

Abstract: The academic environment is characterized by an education centered on training and cultivating intellectual competencies and less on adaptation of competencies needed in a future professional environment. The study refers to the experience of private counselling and psychotherapy professional practice during the exam sessions or participation in students' competitions. The sample consists of 8 students with an IQ higher than 120, who required psychotherapeutic support in the mentioned situations, provided in private practice during the years 2013 – 2016.

The general objective of the study is represented by a psychological intervention plan in the case of gifted students characterized by performance anxiety.

Due to the fact that universities contain centres of counselling and professional orientation, students are recommended to frequently consult these and to start a psycho-emotional preparation for future exams and competitions.

Keywords: counselling, psychotherapy, performance, student.

1. Introduction

Studies in psychology domain have underlined the fact that a trajectory leading to student's socio-emotional wellbeing may or may not be influenced in a positive manner, through a dynamic interaction between the individual, his family and environmental factors (Gamezy and Rutter, 1983; Luthar et al, 2000; Masten, 2007). The students' ecosystem is one of the most important factors in promoting resilience; without the possibility of accessing a healthy environment, a student is able to use inadequate adaptive strategies in order to maintain a socio-emotional wellbeing (Pfeiffer and Reddy, 2001; Ungar, 2013).

The central concept is a socio-emotional wellbeing (Neihard et. al., 2002).

The socio-emotional wellbeing is a term with a large application domain (Neihard et. al., 2002) and it refers to the person's capacity to show empathy, to easily manage his feelings, to trust himself and to easily develop friendship relations.

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Socio-emotional difficulties refer to the person's incapacity to control feelings and thought and its consequences are: the development of negative emotions (sadness, depression, anxiety, poor auto-regulation abilities, low self-confidence, and problems with scheduling a low level of cooperation). (The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012)

The concept of academic self refers to the individual's attitudes regarding his abilities and attitudes towards learning. Studies have underlined the fact that a low self-concept leads to a low success desire an students with a high academic self-concept may present an increase success desire. (Diaz, 1998, Ford, 1996, Marsh, Chessor, Craven & Roche, 1995; Rimm, 1995; Schunk, 1998; Valentine, Dubois and Cooper, 2004). It is considered that the academic self-concept favours weak exam results.

The giftedness quality is seen as a dynamic attribute which appears in a development trajectory, in the dynamic and complex interaction between the student's and his family's characteristics. In a modern society, when decisions regarding persons from different contexts must be made (education, work place), the results obtained in tests are frequently used. Sometimes, evaluations as determinant facts in the life of individuals represent stimuli that provoke anxiety reactions (Zeidner, 1998).

Performance anxiety "refers to a set of cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions that accompany the concern regarding negative consequences of a contingent performance in a trust of evaluation situation" (Zeidner, 1998, pp. 25-26). This fact involves "excessive fear, negative cognitions of an ability to face an evaluative situation, taught of failure and the suppressing before, during and/or after the testing situations" (Robu, 2011, p.32).

In an educational context, it has been proved that performance anxiety influences results in a negative manner and it is correlated to reduced cognitive performances and psychological stress (cited in Zeidner, 1998), even if the student possesses the necessary abilities to be successful.

2. Research methodology

The sample contains 8 students, who demanded individual psychotherapy sessions before participating in a competition organized by their faculties. The 8 students were selected according to an intelligence coefficient higher than 120 obtained from clients' protocols, from a private practice psychological office.

The reasons for demanding psychotherapeutic treatment were:

- adaptation difficulties to an academic environment;
- performance anxiety when exams or a competition approached;
- preparing for a professional admittance exam (bar exam).

The subjects didn't meet and their verbal and written consent was obtained in order to elaborate this study. A connection was kept with all participant students, because in this psychotherapy session were restarted (4 students), two of them are still in treatment with a session per month and the other two subjects demanded no other meetings after their psychotherapy treatment was ended.

The academic environment is based on building competencies with a low accent on adapting to a competition environment, to the forming and developing of interpersonal competencies and adaptation competencies to a new working place. Higher intelligence students, contrary to expectations, are not characterized by their rapid adapting to an academic environment, even if they are looking for new situations to value their potential by enlisting to student associations and by organizing activities in order to prove their usefulness and their trail to adapt to a students' group. Sooner or later they abandon these activities due to different reasons: they feel disappointed by their colleagues, they are not valued enough, they have to get prepared for exams or for students' competitions etc. It is interesting that little of them are seeking counselling in university centres and even less in private psychotherapy practices (because of financial difficulties, difficulties in recognizing and demanding help from a psychotherapist, a reduced implication of didactic staff in observing students' problems etc.). Thus, too little students demand help in private practices.

During the last years of experience in a psychology office, it has been noticed that during exam periods and before competitions the psychotherapist was called by students to schedule an appointment, including those enlisted in this study. The conclusion was that the situation was unchanged from one academic year to another and that more students with high IQs demanded help (fact underlined by the Raven test).

Thus, for students with a high IQ, a high psychological support through psychological counselling and psychotherapy contribute the diminishing of performance anxiety, of the frequency of panic attacks before competitions.

Most persons are characterized by anxiety before a competition or an exam; still not all persons suffer from panic attacks, insomnia and summarization and don't risk losing significant relations in their lives. The behaviours mentioned were observed in most students with a high IQ who demanded psychotherapy treatment.

The objectives of this study are:

1. the identification of anxiety situation in universities, of didactogenies that increase performance anxiety in intellectually gifted students;
2. the elaboration of a psychotherapeutic intervention working model for the intellectually gifted students' psychological preparing before an exam or a competition.

The intervention working model proposed is the consequence of counselling and psychotherapy activities realized in a private psychology practice, during a number of years. The empirical defining and validation of the intervention working model was realized on the sample of 8 students and can still be perfected. In addition, the identification of anxiety situations is the consequence of anamnesis, of individual discussions with students realized during the first counselling and psychotherapeutic sessions, these being particular situation that cannot be generalized. Thus, the presentation of a higher education characterized by didactogenies, by dysfunctional behaviours is not present, only the consequences of promoting a very competitive education on gifted students.

2.1. The identification of anxiety situations in universities

Didactogenies represent dysfunctional behaviours of didactic staff with negative effects on the students' behaviours and emotions.

It has already been stated that didactogenies are not frequently met in an academic environment, still these exist. Didactogenies may be observed by the didactic staff or not, still most of the times these can be the consequences of role identification; the professor identifies with the power generated by his statute of didactic staff. Each university contains a didactic person transformed into a "myth", for example "the scatterbrain professor", "the difficult professor" etc. During the first academic year most students are anxious, without landmarks, the first semester being one of adaptation and the exam period being characterized by anxiety.

The first study semester is dangerous because it can lead students towards substance consumption, drugs, sexual freedom, by living illusory freedom after leaving the "family cage".

Intellectually gifted students have difficulties in finding friends or hardly adhere to groups of colleagues, they are perceived as being weird, difficult and maladapted. There are situations in which the desire to belong to a group or their curiosity contributed in trying drug consumption, in loosing nights, in consuming energizers etc. Guiding didactic staff have the special role in identifying gifted students in their groups (regardless of their aptitudes) and to help them when needed and guide them individually towards the university counselling offices.

It is considered that university didactogenies have the possibility to increase performance anxiety in intellectually gifted students through the next actions:

- the inconsistency of some didactic persons regarding the demands for exams and evaluations formulated at the beginning of the semester. The students' frustration is generated during and after the exam periods when demands are not obeyed, have increased or have been diminished. The need to structure demands and responsibilities determines the maintaining of performance anxiety in certain "bearable" limits;
- grading exams and evaluations is a source of increasing the gifted students' anxiety, either by a uniformity of grades – the disobedience of the Gauss curve – either the grades are too low or too high. The frustration comes from the fact that students put an appreciable effort to gain lower grades or when they put no effort and the grades obtained were high, living the "sour candy" taste;
- the professor's criticism, blaming and his nonverbal and verbal expressing of discontent towards the grade obtained or towards the result to the competition registered by the intellectually gifted student. Before the exams period or the day of the competition, students become anxious with some depressive manifestation, they become sensible and sensitive, needing encouragement, sustainment and emotional support. From various reasons, due to tiredness, stress, exhaustion and anxious-depressive seizures the exam or the competition result is not the one expected by the student and his

coordinator. This distress determines the professor to express disappointment in front of the group, with an audience, leading to negative effects on the student's self-esteem;

In these situations, an authentic dialogue between the professor and the student is recommended and the student's encouragement to discuss and mention a part of the possible causes for the result obtained during the exams or the competition.

The result expected during a national competition with participation from the faculty representatives lead in a crying crisis of 3 hours for a student, when she found out that she came penultimate. She found support in the accompanying didactic staff. The pain was greater because she "failed the expectation of the faculty dean".

- the cultivating of professor-student relations is inconsistent and emotionally fluctuating, to close or to distance emotionally. The intellectually gifted student needs a constant professional relation, even if his intellectual potential is high; his emotional intelligence is often poorly developed. The gifted student is seeking for a mentor, a facilitator of his development and for the harmonization of his intellectual potential with the world.

Relational competencies are insufficiently developed and practiced. This is why a constant and facilitated professor-student relation may become the cradle of a plenary development for the intellectually gifted. A professor with a highly developed critical and ironic sense, who can transmit double verbal and nonverbal messages at a conscious-unconscious level, even if he is a good professional, isn't necessary the most appropriate person to coach an intellectually gifted student. The professor needs relational flexibility and a certain "relational breathing in his relation with the student, in order to constructively manage this relation by maintaining contact and a functional limit of that contact".

The university, through the faculty management, is to little interested by the competitors' interior feelings and cultivates a competition spirit, pressures by a frequent recollection that these students represent the faculty and the university image and in the case of failure the competitor is a candidate of depression, due to numerous implications (he loses his employer's trust, he loses his recognition in front of the students' group etc.). In fact, education is competitive and not participative. Competition is promoted by any means, only who is able to survive isn't eliminated. The idea of a rich CV is cultivated during faculty years by encouraging the building and the development of competencies to fight for a place on the market in the detriment of the student's preparation to face a competition world. The message is: who doesn't cope is self-eliminated! Great corporations, firms with many employees later express the same message and more and more young people accuse symptoms of burn-out and mobbing is more frequent. Let's not elude the previous statement that students are not taught how to face stress, how to develop their coping mechanisms, how to manage performance anxiety, how to increase their self-esteem and how to eliminate dysfunctional convictions regarding their selves, work, life etc.

The competition term generates the anxiety increase and brings to the conscious surface the anxiety manifested in the love relation frame (if there is any), of parents relations and of interpersonal relations. Thus, problems that were latent are rapidly expressed at a conscious level, fights appear, reproaches, depressive symptoms and fear of failure and auto-sabotage. At the same time with the competition term, pressures are made from the faculty management. Competitors are sometimes stimulated by scholarships, by transport facilities, and the recollection of these privileges is realized when needed. Didactic staff receives the role of the psychologist, without any connection to counselling or psychotherapy education. Because we are all subjected to time pressure, these preparations tangential to psychology are realized in places which are appropriate for the didactic staff (his office) and rarely the problem of inviting student to the university Counselling Centre is put to subject.

Weekly sessions of psychological or psychotherapy counselling with established themes are proposed, centered on the aspects identified from the realization of a psychological profile. Moreover, it is considered appropriate for certain themes treated during these sessions for didactic staff responsible with the students' education to participate.

Performance anxiety is maintained by a frequent use of the idea: he MUST qualify first and bring the faculty the WOODEN SPOON or any other suggestive symbol for the obtaining for the first position. From a pedagogical point of view, even if the subjects discussed are performant students, these symbols develop didactogenies in schools and universities. Small children are terrorized by their parents with the help of the wooden spoon, used as means of intimidation or beating. It seems that the future of the performant student is not free of a symbolic beating in case of an unsatisfying behaviour.

Thus, the question: Can't we find other stimulation modalities for good students than symbolic humiliation? still remains. From a psychological point of view the following are recommended:

- the reframing of the competition significance and of a low self-esteem. Thus, the completion is a privilege to learn in order to reduce the materials volume needed for the obtaining of a job, to practice the learning competence and to learn how to work as part of a team. A low self-esteem but maintained at an acceptable level is reframed as being the motor that keeps the student active in order to learn and to prove to himself that he can do more. Individual psychotherapy sessions are also recommended in these cases.
- the avoidance of stress agents during the time period preceding the competition, because performance anxiety can affect relations with family and friends.
- the analysis of identification and projection mechanisms when a mentor is chosen from the didactic staff.

Each of the students included in this study have underlined a model professor, the expression of professional success, towards who they feel attracted and ambivalence is frequent. Psychologically, mechanisms of defense as

identification and projection, I want him or I don't want him as my mentor, appear. At a behavioural level, features that are detested in the mentor are expressed.

The intellectually gifted student is interested in participating in competitions due to various reasons:

- in order to increase self-esteem in the case he wins the competition;
- the development of his team work abilities;
- the attraction of the faculty and the university management in to him;
- the notice in front of possible employers by enriching their CV etc.

2.2. Psychotherapeutic intervention model for the intellectually gifted students' preparation before and exam or a competition

Clinical practice and activities with students in the classroom represent possibilities for a permanent development for a didactic staff. If the didactic staff also contains a psychologist than his interaction with the students becomes a challenge.

The landmarks of the psychotherapeutic intervention model are presented (psychological counselling, psychotherapy), which can be used by counsellors that activate in universities Counselling Centres for intellectually gifted students, if these students will ask for specialized help near a competition or during exams.

The model proposed contains three stages:

Stage I - the realization of the student's psychological profile, who is participating in a competition;

Stage II – the realization of an individual psychological counselling or a group psychotherapy for the entire team with the following under-stages:

II. a. The analysis of the socio-emotional wellbeing concept;

II. b. The identification and the analysis of dysfunctional behaviours of socio-emotional wellbeing if these exist.

The manner in which the student perceives himself is also analysed, together with how self-regulation functions, what the academic self concept represents, which are the parameters of self-esteem etc.

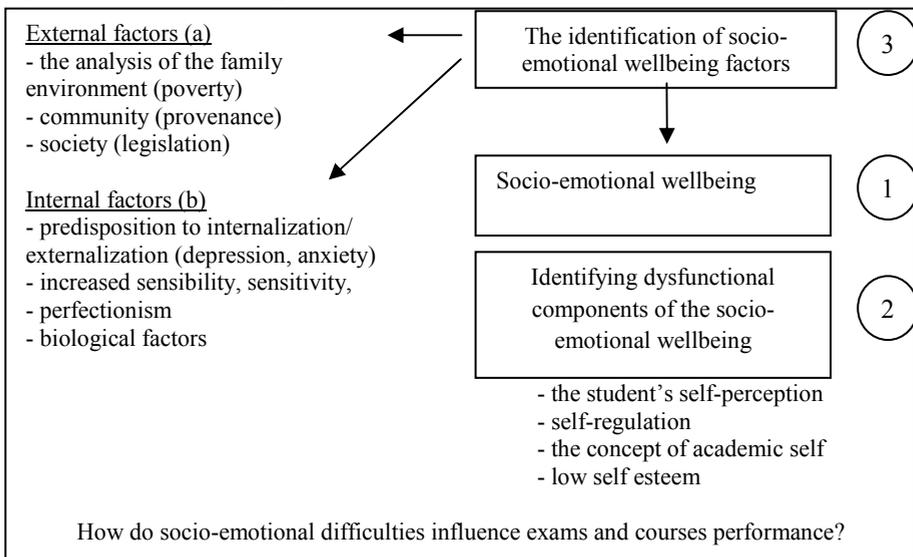


Fig. 1. Framework for the elaboration of the psychotherapeutic intervention model for the preparation of intellectually gifted students before an exam or a competition (adaptation after Blass, S., 2014, pp. 243 – 255)

At the same time, the consequences of these behaviours are identified, in reaching or not a performance in competitions or exam sessions.

Stage III – the identification of external and internal socio-emotional wellbeing factors.

The schema proposed is considered to be useful for the start of the psychological demarche for gifted students with socio-emotional difficulties before exam periods or before participating in a competition. (Fig. 1)

Stage I. The realization of the student's psychological profile, who is participating in a competition

The psychological counsellor, the psychotherapist is considered to have at his disposal the necessary instrument for the students' psychological examination.

The psychological examination is useful for the identification of strong aspects or of those less strong, but which can be transformed into resources. Thus, there are general intelligence, space, numeric and verbal intelligence tests; attention tests and memory tests; clinical evaluation scales etc.

A screening is recommended to identify autonomous thought, convictions and maladaptive schemas etc.

These tests exist together with psychological tests for the identification of self-esteem, of irrational convictions etc.

After the application of psychological tests battery and their interpretation, the presentation and the discussion of results with the student is recommended, in order to initiate a therapeutic alliance, to sensitize him in self-knowledge and to involve him in the improvement and in the solving processes of his problems.

Thus, the student becomes a co-participant in the journey of his becoming, with a self-image of who he is, what he can and what he could become.

Stage II. The realization of an individual psychological counselling or group psychotherapy for the entire team

1. The psychological counsellor, the psychotherapist investigates the external self-perspective, all the behaviours expressed in the therapeutic dialogue, here-and-now (Drobot, Popescu, 2013; Popescu, Vișcu, 2016) of his socio-emotional wellbeing (how emphatic is he, how is he managing his feelings, if he trusts or not the student's self, if he makes friends or not). In addition, the counsellor also investigates the consequences in time of socio-emotional wellbeing: how were relations maintained and broken, if there are any social support relations or not.

Thus, a diagnosis of the past-present is realized for the socio-emotional wellbeing; at the same time with this diagnosis the student has the possibility to identify and become aware, together with the counsellor how his socio-emotional wellbeing was influenced so far.

2. The psychology counsellor identifies and analyses together with the student the dysfunctional behaviours of his socio-emotional wellbeing.

The dysfunctional behaviours of his socio-emotional wellbeing also become the objective of a psychological intervention. The following components are proposed to be investigated and introduced in the intervention:

- the academic self-perception (Valentine, Dubois and Cooper, 2004) – has an impact on scholar results and reflects the manner in which the individual perceives himself in comparison to learning. By observing gifted students it can be stated that they don't always appreciate themselves in a realistic manner to the results obtained; they frequently under-appreciate themselves.
- the concept of academic self refers to the individual's attitudes regarding his abilities and aptitudes towards learning, or in other words – the competency to learn how to learn during college and thus by extension during an entire lifetime. In the office psychologists are interested in the manner in which the student learns, they demand a description or an analytic reflection on the manner used by the student to learn, being interested in the student's description of his leaning competency. The learning competency is an individual's transversal competency (Cădariu, 2005).
- Self-regulation represents the capacity to take over control over his behavior. Students with a self-regulation behaviour trust themselves, have autonomy and are more responsive in the learning process (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998).

Students with reduced self-regulation competencies reach an academic success with difficulty.

From the courses activity it can be observed that students with an increased self-regulation competency also possess a high level of self-efficiency.

- Self-esteem is analysed in discussions with the student and through the tests applied.

The development of awareness and of information on the main dysfunctional behaviours of socio-emotional wellbeing is proposed.

By making the student become aware of the socio-emotional wellbeing components he is motivated to co-participate in psychological counselling.

More often, by becoming aware of the socio-emotional wellbeing components during the dialogue with the therapist, the student can also become aware of other behaviours that have influenced him or can influence his exam or competition performance.

Stage III. The identification of external and internal socio-emotional wellbeing factors represents the prerogative of counselling and at the same time it determines the establishment of the psychotherapeutic intervention objectives.

The category of external factors that influence the student's socio-emotional wellbeing is composed of:

- his family environment – poverty and richness. Students with a poverty characterized origin may experiment poverty, abuse, neglect and parental stress with a direct impact on his socio-emotional wellbeing

(Cauce and collaborators, 2000; Forness & Kavale, 2001). Still there are persons willing to learn socio-emotional abilities and will be able to know academic success;

- the collective of friends influences the gifted student's behaviours. During academic years there is a risk to adhere to environments where alcohol and drugs are consumed. From a desire to belong to a group and not to experience loneliness, some gifted students will choose these environment;
- the society legislation regarding gifted persons (Law no. 17/2007 regarding the education of gifted young people).

In the category of internal factors that influence socio-emotional wellbeing the following can be mentioned:

- perfectionism – as a frequent feature of gifted pupils and students (McRae, 2002, Mendaglio, 1994; Silverman, 1999). Perfectionism is considered to be the factor responsible for more aspects of emotional health as: depression, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and suicide. Because of perfectionism, perfectionist students face decompensation, exhaustion, summarization and stress;
- a predisposition to the gifted students' internalization/externalization leads to family models, to the analysis of roles possessed in the gifted student's origin family and to transgenerational models in the subject's family. There are also situations in which the gifted student "must" excel in a profession, because entire generations have practiced that profession. The experience of depression and anxiety may be constitutional or "learnt".

The gifted student's performance anxiety is most often the catalyst of failure.

- An increases sensibility and sensitiveness are characteristics of the gifted pupil or student with great consequences to the adaptation in a group or in the society.

The objectives of psychological counselling, of psychotherapy and of group counselling for gifted students

The possible objective of an intervention model can be stated in a few words as being:

O1 – The realization of a psychological profile (individual counselling)

O2 – The co-creation of a therapeutic relation:

- The analysis of the socio-emotional wellbeing concept and its significance;
- The student's participation in the interpretation of psychological tests results (individual counselling)

O3 – The identification of dysfunctional behaviours (individual and group counselling) of socio-emotional wellbeing (self-perception, self-regulation and the academic self concept)

O4 – The analysis of consequences of socio-emotional wellbeing behaviours during and exam or a competition (individual and group counselling)

O5 – The analysis of advantages and disadvantages of a moral support network (individual and group counselling)

O6 – The analysis of family roles, of transgenerational models in the origin family (individual and group counselling)

O7 – The identification of dysfunctional central beliefs (automatic taught, dysfunctional beliefs, cognitions, distorted cognitive schemas etc.) (Individual counselling)

O8 – The testing of new learning behaviours (individual and group counselling)

Methods and techniques used in individual and group counselling

An eclectic approach of intervention techniques in counselling and psychotherapy is promoted.

The main diagnosis instrument is the therapist's personality, together with psychological tests.

The counsellor's or the psychotherapist's professional competency is based in his ability to use reframing argumentative verbal aptitudes, to ask questions, to use words, suggestion and pauses etc. in reaching the objective proposed and negotiated with the student or the psychotherapy group.

Therapeutic metaphors are also useful in counselling and psychotherapy of gifted students.

Reflection journals, the demand addressed to students to become co-researchers in a future scientific paper to be published also represents useful "instruments" in attracting them in journeys of becoming and of facing daily problems.

3. Conclusions and proposals

Counselling and Orientation Centres in universities, through specialized personnel are useful to all students and can bring a value plus to the university, to students and to all didactic staff, if they will conceive and implement programs for intellectually gifted students.

Programs for intellectually gifted students may be conceived in an individual manner or for groups of personal development. This study proposed an individualized intervention model as a result of psychological counselling, of psychotherapy applied to gifted students on a long period of time in practice.

The following are also proposed:

- the intensification of the year dean, mainly during the first academic year in order to facilitate the students' adaption to the academic environment and the identification of gifted students in all fields;
- the attentive monitoring of an evolution of a personal development path for gifted students;
- the organization of personal and professional development courses, camps for academic didactic staff with themes centered on the didactic staff – gifted student relation;

- the organization of seminars for academic didactic staff with didactogenies themes;
- the involvement and the attraction of gifted students in the realization of qualitative co-research studies. Thus, intellectual research and reflexive analysis competencies are developed.

Didactogenies represent behaviours rarely met in academic education and the promotion of a highly competitive education, proved by students' competitions may sometimes generate socio-emotional difficulties in gifted students. The fact that academic education and doesn't present didactogenies as usual behaviours is underlined, still didactic staff, university counsellors and psychotherapists from counselling centres, through prevention activities, group and individual activities with students may diminish negative consequences or may even cancel the effects of a competitive education.

Students represent a permanent resource for the university and the didactic staff – gifted student relation may be the main catalyst for a reciprocal intellectual and personal development, not only for the student, but also for the academic didactic staff.

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ANXIETATEA DE PERFORMANȚĂ LA STUDENȚII SUPRADOTAȚI

Rezumat: Mediul universitar se caracterizează printr-un învățământ centrat pe formarea și cultivarea competențelor intelectuale și mai puțin pe competențele de adaptare ulterioară la mediul profesional. Studiul se referă la experiența din practica profesională privată de consiliere și psihoterapie cu studenții supradotați, care au solicitat psihoterapie individuală sau consiliere psihologică în preajma sesiunii de examene sau când participau la concursurile studențești. Eșantionul a fost format din 8 studenți cu un IQ mai mare de 120, ce au solicitat suport psihoterapeutic în situațiile menționate, la cabinetul privat, în perioada 2013 – 2016.

Obiectivul general al studiului este prezentarea unui plan de intervenție psihologică în cazul studenților supradotați caracterizați prin anxietatea de performanță.

Deoarece universitățile au centre de consiliere și orientare vocațională se recomandă frecventarea acestora și pregătirea psihoemoțională a studenților pentru examinări și concursuri.

Cuvinte cheie: consiliere, psihoterapie, performanță, student.

