

ASSESSMENT OF AUTONOMY AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN PRESCHOOLERS

T.Dughi, O.Ivasiuc

Tiberiu DUGHI,

Assoc. Prof. Ph.D.

„Aurel Vlaicu” University Arad

tibi_dughi@yahoo.com

Ornella IVASIUC

Master Student,

„Aurel Vlaicu” University Arad

ornella.ivasiuc@yahoo.com

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to highlight the extent to which the preschoolers’ degree of autonomy correlates with the development level of their emotional skills. During the research made, I tried to test and to bring arguments in favor of the hypothesis according to which a high level of autonomy links positively to a high level of emotional skills. For this, I used the SCE and SCAP samples for teachers, from the PedA test battery, developed by Cognitrom. I applied the scales on a sample of 25 subjects, consisting of preschool children between the ages of 4 and 5. The results obtained allow a better individualization of the learning and the socialization process in the preschoolers’ class.

Keywords: autonomy, emotional competence, assessment, preschool children

Introduction

Personal autonomy is vital for our development as adults. Children with a high personal autonomy have a sense of self-assurance and self-confidence much more developed, because they know that they can solve the problems they encounter. This aspect makes them realize that they do not have to wait for their parents’ help when they confront with more difficult situations. The pre-

schooler with a high level of autonomy will develop his social and emotional skills more, having a smoother transition towards the school environment.

Emotional skills imply the identification of some emotions, experiencing and then sharing them with the other children or adults. An autonomous pre-schooler will encounter life challenges with greater ease, will seek to have different experiences and to learn something constructive out of them. The autonomy will ensure him a balanced development of the sociability and the affectivity, fundamental aspects for an individual that is part of a structured society, based on certain rules and social positions. The child that acquires these skills will adapt easier in any social environment, will lead a much more fulfilled life as an adult and will have a childhood full of happy memories.

Problem statement

In the contemporary society, the preschool child comes more and more into contact with the kindergarten's environment, in relation to the family one, and observant of the social environment that surrounds him. At this age, he sees, observes and gets to know different rules and factors that are going to develop both his psyche and his personality. Spending maybe more than eight hours at kindergarten, it becomes a pillar in his evolution as a human being. The moment that he gets in touch with other children and adults from kindergarten, his emotional and intellectual skills are being tested. Measuring them becomes important from the perspective of the ability to predict the behaviour of the future student, and then adult. The studies quoted by Matthews, Deary and Whiteman (2012) have revealed that emotions are indicators of the temperamental type being mentioned in many personality assessment scales, used also for assessing children's personality traits. Psychological testing performed in the educational environment have multiple purposes (apud Gronlund, 1988 in McIntire, S., Miller, L., 2010): to stimulate children's motivation, to help children improving their learning results by accomplishing the competence transfer, to facilitate the self-knowledge by means of weak and strong points, to support the teachers in the evaluation of the efficiency of the learning activities.

Aspects of the autonomy at the pre-school age

The role of the kindergarten is to form new behaviors and skills in terms of the pre-schooler's autonomy, or to improve the already existing ones.

Among the most important behaviors involved in the development of the autonomy are the eating, clothing and hygiene behavior.

“Eating behaviors are cultivated intensely. The feeding is pervaded by a series of rituals.” (Şchiopu, U., Verza, E., 1997, p. 124). Those particular rituals refer to meal division into breakfast, lunch, dinner and two snacks. These create an important pattern in the child’s life, because he starts to have a structured diet, a normal one for any human being culturally and socially. As the two authors support, the feeding does not represent just a physiological need, but also the importance that the children attach to the habits before and during the meals.

On the same lines, “in terms of eating behavior, there are cultural eating inadaptability and the minor eating pathology.” (Şchiopu, U., Verza, E., 1997, p. 125). Cultural eating inadaptability is the child’s inability to use the spoon or the fork correctly, the refusal to use napkins at the table and even the ignoring those who are eating next to him. In addition, there is also the minor eating pathology which refers to the not exactly desirable reactions of the child during the meal: he induces nausea, refuses to swallow the food, holds it in his mouth and refuses certain foods, creating real obsessions for others (for example, chocolate).

The pre-schooler shows progress also in terms of clothing and personal hygiene. The clothes that he chooses to wear show that he is aware of the moments of the day, the season and the weather. Although at the age of 3 he is still dependent on his parents at this stage, by the age of 6 he will vastly acquire the necessary behavior to guide him in choosing the right clothes. Also, the clothing he chooses to wear says a lot about the attention to his image too, if he is tidy or untidy, if he likes to take care of himself or if he feels comfortable with his clothes rumpled and dirty etc. “One interesting problem by means of its psychological side involved is that of the content of the children’s pockets” (Şchiopu, U., Verza, E., 1997, p. 126), in the sense that a 3-year-old child, for the most part, does not have too many objects in his pockets, these being empty most of the time. At 4-5 years old, they start to collect and stock candy, sweets and wrappers left from these in their pockets, and at 6 we can find inside them all sorts of inessential things, like coins, small rocks, buttons, and pieces of stained glass. Personal hygiene skills can be seen in the way the child makes his toilet, if he brushes his teeth, if he brushes his hair, if he washes his hands after

using the toilet or before a meal, if he has a bath regularly, if he blows his nose when he feels it is running and so on. These skills also show the level of interest toward himself and his image.

A fundamental element in the pre-schooler's activity, which can help the formation and the development of the autonomy, is play. From the age of 3-4, play has a symbolic charge, meaning the pre-schooler gives significance to the actions that he makes and the objects that he handles. Play "forms, develops and restructures the entire physical life of the child" (Golu, P., Verza, E., Zlate, M., 1993, p. 92). Through play, both the parents and the teacher can implement and introduce the idea of developing the autonomy, so that the child will want to achieve as much as he can on his own.

Developing emotional skills at pre-schoolers

The experiences that a child has in the kindergarten's environment set their stamp on his balanced development and affect the way in which he looks at life. Positive or negative events at an early age are significant, in the sense that based on their frequency he will establish his emotional life and will set his thoughts toward positive or negative ideas. Ursula Șchiopu și Emil Verza define affectivity as "muscularity of the family life - subjective existential tonality which, expanding the experience, gives them pithiness and polarizes them." (Șchiopu, U., Verza, E., 1997, p. 153) Thus, the two authors highlight the idea that affectivity gives a meaning to every event in the child's life and he attaches importance to it emotionally. Moreover, "emotions have a function to distinguish the individual, and also to integrate him with the others." (Muntean, A., 2006, p.187) The same author highlights the fact that emotions provide the integration both at the level of the child's mental processes and in the interpersonal communication.

The most obvious reason for the presence of some emotions, new affective states, is the discrepancy between the need for autonomy of the pre-schooler and the forbiddance that the adult imposes on him. If the pre-schooler satisfies his wishes and needs, there will be positive emotions, calmness, relaxation and happiness. Instead, if his needs are being denied, then there will appear negative affective states, annoyance, and irritability.

At this age, "through imitation, the child takes from the adult a series of affective states, for example, the fear of certain animals, the joy of seeing some people or of receiving a gift." (Golu, P., Verza, E., Zlate, M., 1993, p. 89). Phobias about certain things can also be acquired from the parents by the child.

If the parent is afraid of heights, then the child might get this fear too. Pre-schoolers are easily sensitive and susceptible to what those around them are doing, so it is advised for the parents not to let their fears and negative emotions for certain things be exposed in the presence of the children. At the same time, in this period children realise that they can feign certain affective states to get what they want. For example, they cry, even if they are not in pain, just to convince the adult that they really need a much desired toy. Later on, this way of negative imitation will manifest itself as a lie feature. Recent studies (Ignat, S., 2012) show that the feeling of loneliness is strongly felt by some children with effects upon personality development both in a short and in a long term.

Regarding the affectivity, Jean Piaget considers that “along with the appearance of the mental image, of the evocative memory, of the symbolic game and of the language, the affective object is, on the contrary, always present and always active, even during his physical absence, and this fundamental fact leads to the creation of new affects, in the form of durable sympathies and antipathies towards others, and regarding the inner man, in the form of a conscience or a solid self-valorisation.” (Piaget, J., Inhelder, B., 1968, p. 61) Through play, the child expresses his emotions and his feelings best. For example, for Piaget’s reasons quoted earlier, we can talk about the symbolic game or the role-play that impersonates a parent, by imitating the actions and the gestures that he does. When children play the mother’s role, then the one whose mother is being represented will feel love and affection, even if she is not there. Reproductive memory and mental image helps him bring back to life his mother’s face and feel what he feels for her. Thus, there is the idea that cognitive, affective and social aspects of the conduct are inseparable. These are all important components of the child’s personality and the relation between them is crucial for his development. It all starts from the formation of the mental image, continues with the memory and gets to the symbolic game and language. Mental images appear immediately after the development of perceptions and representations, which are not “separated autonomous entities, stored up as such in the long-term memory, but are produced when a particular task requests their presence.” (Miclea, M., 1999, p. 159) With this statement, we can understand to some extent the appearance of the mental images and then the emotional charge that these carry and that influence the pre-schooler.

Research Questions

The study is based on the hypothesis according to which there is a directly proportional correlation between the personal autonomy and the emotional skills of the pre-schoolers, meaning a high level of autonomy correlates positively with a high level of development of the emotional skills.

Purpose of the Study

In order to support the stated hypothesis, we want to make an observational research regarding the levels of development of the pre-schoolers' personal autonomy and affectivity at the age of 4-5. The purpose of this research is to establish the differences and the resemblances at a psychical and behavioural level between the children of the same age, but which, until now, have developed differently because of hereditary, educational and environmental factors. The objectives set to prove the working hypothesis are the following:

- measuring the level of development of the personal autonomy and the emotional skills of every pre-schooler by applying the specific tests
- comparing the results gathered from all the tests in order to establish the differences and the resemblances between children with regard to the socio-emotional development

Research Methods

Personal autonomy skills screening (PASS) represents a scale that measures the level of development of the pre-schoolers' personal autonomy skills. This scale was made for different age groups; for the present research, I used just the scale for the age of 4-5, the version for teachers. The scale used is made of 6 items. For each item, the option is scored from 1 to 5, 1 for the behavior that never occurs and 5 for the behavior that occurs almost every time.

Using this type of personal autonomy scales is beneficial, because by its means there can be evaluated behaviors that help the cognitive, emotional, social, psychomotor development. As a matter of fact, an autonomous child is always eager to explore the environment and to discover new things. Personal autonomy skills are necessary for school and also social adaptation of the little ones. Thus, those who are more advanced in terms of personal autonomy will be more concerned with the tasks received from the kindergarten teacher or the tutor and will look for solutions to the problems encountered at school and in

day-to-day life. (Miclea, M., Bălaj, A., Porumb, M., Porumb, D., Porumb, S., 2010, pag. 235)

The second scale used is emotional competence screening (ECS). This scale assesses the emotional competence the preschoolers have in terms of several perspectives: the apprehension of the emotions, the manifestation of the emotions and the emotional self-correction. Just as the personal autonomy skills screening, this scale has two versions, one for parents and one for teachers. Moreover, the scale is divided into age groups: 3-4, 4-5 and 5-7. For this research, I applied the scale for the age of 4-5, the version for the teachers, which consists of 13 items. The options are scored on a scale from 1 to 5, 5 representing the behavior that always occurs. Due to the fact that the preschooler is more active emotionally within a new social situation, such as kindergarten, this scale has been attributed more items than the previous scale, the one for personal autonomy skills assessment.

Through this scale, emotional competences assessment offers an overview of the children's preparation from an emotional point of view for the integration into the society and the environment. Moreover, it indicates potential future psychological investigations that are necessary to be made in case the child has a low level of emotional development. We can define this scale as being a predictive one, to a certain degree, regarding the adaptation to the school environment.

Data analysis

After applying the PASS and ECS scales to the 25 preschoolers, we obtained the results from Table 01. The analysis of the data obtained by the children was made using the SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Then, as shown in Table 2, we used the descriptive statistics to determine the standard deviation from the norm for the 4 test samples used.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Measured feature	Average	Standard deviation
Personal autonomy	24,44	3,042
Emotional competence	52,24	5,150

In case of the personal autonomy, the minimum score obtained is 19, maximum 29, average $\bar{x}=24,44$, with a standard deviation $\sigma=3,042$. The minimum score that can be obtained after the scoring is 6 and the maximum score is 30.

In case of the emotional competence, the minimum score obtained is 42 and maximum 63, where the average $\bar{x}=52,24$, with a standard deviation $\sigma=5,150$. The minimum score that can be obtained by a child at this scale is 13, and the maximum 65.

- Personal autonomy assessment

In case of the personal autonomy assessment, I observed that the most frequent scores were 23, 24 and 29, namely 4 children got a score of 23, 4 children got 24 and 4 children had been evaluated with the score of 29. The rest of the scores left, from 19 (the minimum obtained) to 29 (maximum), had a reduced frequency, of a child or two. Thus, I discovered that half of the pre-schoolers have a very good development of the autonomy skills. The minimum score of the autonomy skills assessment is 6, and the lowest score obtained by the pre-schoolers tested was 19, which proves that they have at least mediocre skills regarding the autonomy. Those who have the lowest scores, of 19, 20, 21 and 22 are children that have more protective parents and they are not left to cope on their own. Even so, they had satisfactory results at the present scale and have managed to integrate successfully in the pre-schoolers group, having a quite smooth transition from the family environment to the institutionalized one. Of course, we can see a difference between the pre-schoolers that got 29 and those who got, for example, 20, from the point of view of the autonomy conduct possessed and the integration into kindergarten.

- Emotional skills assessment

After applying the emotional skills rating scale, it was found that the most frequent scores were 48 and 54, each of them being obtained by three children. The other scores were obtained by 1 or 2 children maximum. 52% of the pre-schoolers are placed above the score of 52, meaning they had scores above the average. The minimum score of the social skills assessment is 13 and the lowest score obtained by the pre-schoolers tested was 42, hence noticing that all are normally developed in terms of emotional skills at the age of 4-5. Considering that most of the pre-schoolers had very high scores, over the

average of 52, I can claim that they acquired different emotional behaviours within kindergarten, but they came with a well-built emotional baggage from the family environment too. All the pre-schoolers from this group know how to recognize their personal emotions and those of the people around them. The problem for some of them, and particularly for those who obtained the lowest scores, is that they do not emphasize with the other children at the level they should at this age.

Testing the hypothesis

In order to test the hypothesis according to which a high level of autonomy also represents the existence of a high level of emotional competence at pre-schoolers, I used the Pearson correlation coefficient, this representing a statistic method that determines the degree of linear correlation between two variables.

Table 2. Correlation between autonomy and emotional competence

Evaluated size	Correlation type	personal_ autonomy	emotional_ competence
Personal_ autonomy	Pearson Correlation	1	,743**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	25	25
Emotional_ competence	Pearson Correlation	,743**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	25	25

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to Table 2, we obtained a correlation coefficient $r=0,743$, significant at a degree $d<0, 01$, between personal autonomy and emotional competence. Thus, the hypothesis is proved, between the 2 being a directly proportional correlation.

When the child discovers his own identity, with all its characteristics, especially personal autonomy that gives him a feeling of independence, he is able to move on to a higher level of comprehension and expression of his own emotions. In addition, he becomes more emphatic towards his kindergarten colleagues and towards the people he gets in touch with. During the year in which the preschoolers acquired many personal autonomy behaviors, I noticed a progress regarding the emotional development too. They were much more

satisfied with themselves when they saw that they manage to cope on their own in a situation, emitting in this way positive energy around and managing to express emotions like happiness, enthusiasm verbally and non-verbally. These emotions helped them to befriend other children and to mature emotionally and psychically. Thus, the directly proportional correlation between personal autonomy and emotional competence of a preschooler is evident, the first variable being a necessary condition for the balanced development of the children's emotional life, with all that it comprises.

Conclusions

The preschoolers' emotions and feelings accompany the reactions to certain stimuli and to different actions. Moreover, emotions, especially affects, are a manifestation of the children's temperament. By self-discovery, they manage to acquire a certain level of control of the negative emotions in the situations that are always frustrating for them. In the same time, autonomy behaviors are the first signs that the preschooler took part in a certain educational process and is ready to integrate into different social environments. The fact that he owns elements of autonomy gives him a feeling of confidence and generates positive reactions, as a result and positive feelings, emotions.

After the analysis and the interpretation of the results at the samples applied, we can emphasize the uniqueness of the autonomy and emotional abilities rhythm of development. These two sides of human life, autonomy and affectivity, should be the first that come to our attention when we start working with children, along with the cognitive stimulation. Especially at the preschool age, when they are growing and developing, they imprint deeply their importance on our fulfilment as human beings. The tests applied to the 25 preschoolers prove that they have the personal autonomy skills correctly acquired and the level of emotional competence is still in a process of sedimentation, a specific aspect, as a matter of fact, to the preschool age.

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