

## **A DEMARCHE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRE-SCHOOLERS' SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES – DESIGN AND TESTING (PERFORMER)**

Doina USACI<sup>1</sup>, Georgiana CONSTANTIN<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1,2</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania

### **ABSTRACT**

*The socio-emotional skills development is aimed to improve emotional knowledge and social behaviours required for obtaining desirable and sustainable outcomes. Since the approach designed, developed and implemented for the development of preschool children's socio-emotional competence is based on rational-emotive and behavioural education, this paper aims at theoretical and practical aspects of the literature related to rational-emotive and behavioural therapy and education with emphasis on their applicability to kindergarten activities.*

*The practical dimension therefore requires the consideration of the relationship between cognition, emotion and behaviour, of the intervention techniques to restructure irrational beliefs in order to develop social and emotional skills, through identifying and then changing irrational beliefs into rational ones.*

*The issue of socio-emotional skills' development has a high level of applicability in terms of potentialities and trans-disciplinary approach, regarding ways of entering the area of concern, analysis and exploitation of research results.*

*For this demarche of socio-emotional skills' development in pre-schoolers, I used a qualitative research, on a sample of 34 preschool children, with the psycho-pedagogical observation as a tool with high degree of objectivity in measuring the analysed variables and within a high time horizon in terms of data collection, the results being recorded in an observation grid. The observation grid items were adapted from „The psychological observation and characterization of kindergarten children for school entrance” (Clinciu, 2005).*

*In order to identify the dysfunctional emotions felt by the children, I used the scale for dysfunctional negative emotions, an intuitive diagnostic tool containing physiological and behavioural indices of emotion manifestation. This scale is part of the „SELF KIT – Programme of socio-emotional skills' development in children” (Opre, 2010).*

*In addition to the psycho-pedagogical observation grid and social and emotional skills' development in preschool children, we also chose to implement a pedagogical experiment.*

**Keywords:** socio-emotional skills, rational-emotive therapy/theory, rational-emotive and behavioural education, a demarche for the development of pre-schoolers' socio-emotional competences.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the past decades, the complexity of educational environments has considerably increased. Curricular and extracurricular tasks often exceed students' and pre-schoolers' time and, especially, mental resources. This imbalance explains why maladaptive emotions and behaviours prematurely manifest in children have significantly grown.

The nowadays generation of children has got much more emotional problems than in the past. They are more lonely and depressed, more angry and intemperate, more impulsive and aggressive, thus they are clearly likely to become anxious in most competitive conditions.

The solution to all of these problems depends on how parents and teachers think preparing young people for life is appropriate and effective. In particular, the way the early childhood education and primary school education can prevent the onset of these disorders.

Unfortunately, we notice that more and more often educational curricula leave outside children' emotional development, their academic preparation becoming unilateral. Often they are deprived even of a minimal emotional literacy, the educational system leaving them disarmed when confronting reality. Therefore, it is required to have a new vision on what kindergarten and then school can do to ensure a comprehensive training of children, both on academic and socio –emotional level, enabling them to better adapt to the complexity of everyday life.

The preschool age is quite a long period that produces significant changes in the child's emotional life. Emotions and feelings accompany the pre-schooler in all his manifestations, be it games, songs, educational activities, or tasks received from adults. They occupy an important place in the child's life and strongly influence his behaviour. Emotion is a person's experience related to an important event in his life.

Regarding the socio-emotional skills, we will start from the main functions of the educational institutions that can be summarized as: transmission of knowledge, transmission of procedures and techniques, transmission of attitudes; in other words, "to know ", "to do" and "to be" (Oberst& al., 2009). The last dimension, the attitudinal one, includes inter and intrapersonal skills which, in return, include social and emotional skills.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Analysing the diversity and the extent of the problems faced by students enrolled in educational institutions, we must concur that the implementation of socio-emotional development programmes has become today more necessary than ever. Among these, the rational – emotional and behavioural education is a preventive program intended as an intervention for students and pre-schoolers (Knaus, 2004). This program relies on the theoretical principles of the Rational

Emotional Behaviour Therapy Theory (REBT). Expression of Albert Ellis's work, the rational-emotional-behavioural theory (REBT) is a classic presence among papers on psychological intervention with cognitive-behavioural commitment. It is based on the assumption according to which the emotional and behavioural problems of individuals result from a faulty thinking and a miss-understanding of events rather than the events themselves. Developed around the concept of "evaluation", REBT is both, a psychological method and a philosophy of life, its principles representing the basis of one of the most effective methods of psychotherapeutic intervention known so far.

An EREC program consists of modular sequences of psychological education aimed at developing the students' cognitive abilities and behaviours that make them happier and, at the same time, more productive. Originally, it was designed as a program that would optimize the mental health in sessions of group counselling; however, it may be just as effective if, after a prior adaptation, it is used in the individual treatment of the child, adolescent or adult. The main assumption of the REBT theory and, hence, of any EREC program, is best demonstrated by the ABC model of emotional disorders, which we schematically render here (Dryden & Di Giuseppe, 2003).

**The ABC (DE)** model uses the first letters of the alphabet, which ensures simplicity by abbreviating the basic concepts:

- A (activating events) = activating events
- B (beliefs) = cognitions of the person and the result of the evaluation and interpretation of the activating event
- C (consequences) = consequences of the cognitive processing of the activating event. These consequences can be observed through the emotions and behaviours of the individual and they can be either adaptive or maladaptive. A. Ellis (1967 cited in Ellis and Dryden, 2007) believes that emotional and dysfunctional behaviours are not a consequence of the events themselves, but of the way they are assessed (i.e., B of the proposed model). In other words, D. David (2006) points out that the psychological consequences - C - (emotional, cognitive, behavioural, psychophysiological) are determined not by life events - A – but by the way we interpret life events.

If the interpretation is irrational, then the consequences will be emotional distress and maladaptive behaviours. If the interpretation is rational then we have adaptive emotions and behaviours.

- D (disputing) = disputing in order to restructure the irrational and dysfunctional cognitions.
- E (effects) = represent the effects resulted in the process of cognitive restructuration and they are reflected in a more rational philosophy of life.

**Common problems** that can interfere in a child's relationships with others, according to the ABC (DE) model, in terms of irrational beliefs, are (Ellis and Bernard, 2007):

**Activating events:** social rejection, teasing, having no playmates, not getting invited to a party, loss of a friend.

**Cognitions** in the form of:

- Inferences (conclusions, predictions): "Everyone is against me ", "Everybody teases me, nobody likes me", "I will never have friends", "I cannot be happy without her/his love."

- Absolutes (should be, it is imperative, it absolute necessary): "I need people to like me and to approve of me"

- Ratings: "It is awful to be criticized, to be laughed at or to be alone", "I cannot take this ", " This shows that I am a person without hope".

**Consequences** (emotional, behavioural): depression, crying, periods of inactivity, avoiding people and tasks, fatigue, irritability.

Another distinction that we want to point out is related to irrational beliefs by comparison with the rational ones.

**Irrational beliefs** are logically incorrect, incongruent with the objective reality and blocks individual goals (Maultsby, 1991 cited in Macavei, 2002). They appear as absolutes (should be, it is imperative, it is absolutely necessary). Derived from the absolute cognitions (Ellis and Bernard, 2007), they are: catastrophizing (e.g., „It’s awful when you're wrong"), low frustration tolerance (e.g., "People who treat me bad are mean and deserve severe punishment") and global assessment (e.g., "I am stupid").

Instead, **rational cognitions** are based on empirical reality, they can help achieve personal goals and comply with the principles of logic (Maultsby, 1991 cited in Macavei, 2002). Rational cognitions (Ellis and Bernard, 2007) are expressed in terms of preferences, not orders, and lead to higher levels of adaptive emotions and appropriate behaviours. Furthermore, we bring details about the way some rational-emotional educational and behavioural application can be used in schools.

The reason why we investigated this aspect is the fact that our emotions and behaviours are determined by our thoughts (Ellis, 1962). Our beliefs play a crucial role in determining how we feel or behave. If we have reasonable beliefs, the consequences will occur in the form of moderate emotions, which helps to achieve goals. On the other hand, if we have irrational beliefs, the consequences will be in the form of dysfunctional emotions such as anger, anxiety or depression, emotions that will prevent the achievement of goals. Thus, a reduction in the level of irrational beliefs on participants in the experimental group means actually replacing these beliefs with more rational ones, fact which entails a series of more adaptive emotions and represents a first step towards the development of socio -emotional skills.

Successfully combating irrationality requires both hard work and the use of the most effective strategies, among which are essentially included the story and the games.

The rational- emotional education was initially promoted in the Living School, where, in 1974, WJ Knaus first developed educational materials and a guide for teachers (Vernon, 1990). Knaus (1974 cited in Ellis and Bernard, 2007) has developed a curriculum to educate children in the spirit of the ABC model of REBT, based on the effective strategies of thinking, emotions and behaviours that were taught in that school,

Besides the common features included in any rational-emotional and behavioural educational program (e.g., they start from the same theoretical framework and pursue the same goal: the mental health of the subjects), each contains distinct elements that customize the intervention. Already established programs found in the specific literature are:

- **The program proposed by Knaus, W.J.**, Rational Emotional Education: A Manual for Elementary School Teachers (1974)
- **Programs offered by Vernon:** Thinking, Feeling, Behaving, 1989 and The Passport Program. A Journey through Emotional, Social, Cognitive and Self - Development. Grades 1-5/6-8/9-12, 1998. These were translated into Romanian and they provide a comprehensive curriculum to teachers, counsellors, school psychologists, social workers to be used to help children and adolescents learn the concepts of mental health.
- **The program proposed by Michael Bernard** (1995, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004c, 2005a ): *You Can Do It!* Education(YCDI), which is a system that aims to help all students develop educational, social, emotional and behavioural wellness.

We will not get into any more details regarding these programs, we only add that A. Ellis, ME Bernard (2007) consider that integrating key concepts of rational-emotional and behavioural education can be achieved while performing ordinary activities, carried out in the classroom. This method is less direct than a structured lesson, but it is a viable way to reinforce the rational concepts integrated into the curriculum. For example, while teaching literature, the teacher can select and discuss stories and poems that show characters that solve problems rationally or express emotions in a healthy manner. It is important to use the content questions and to customize the model proposed by A. Vernon (2004a, b). In addition, the vocabulary of the students can be enriched with words and phrases that properly capture emotion and expression in their behaviours.

- **The program proposed by a group of psychologists and pedagogues, academics and practitioners with cognitive behavioural commitment (Opre et al., 2010): "SELF KIT" (SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING FACILITATOR)** from Cluj. It is a psychological and educational counselling

programme that aims to target major socio-emotional skills of children of preschool age and elementary school in the Romanian educational institutions. SELF KIT has been designed and structured in relation to a number of dysfunctional emotions with increased incidence in the Romanian educational environment: anxiety (fear), depression (deep sadness), anger, shame, guilt, jealousy, feelings of injury. For each of these unhealthy emotions and their associated behaviours, one or more modules of intervention have been developed. Such a module is composed of several elements: a story (the core of the module), one or more thematic activities, poems, songs, riddles, crosswords and games. A number of scientific sequences were added and have been developed in relation to the central theme of the story, sequences which were included in a small encyclopaedia (Selfpedia).

### **3. STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Study design**

Studying the above mentioned programs, we have proposed the design, elaboration and testing phases of a process of socio- emotional development in preschool children, based on the theoretical principles and rational-emotional behaviours theory (Ellis, 1979).

#### **3.2. Sample**

We implemented this approach with a group of children from a kindergarten in Braşov with extended service hours, the pedagogical experiment having been conducted during a period of over ten weeks.

#### **3.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

We named this project “My-SELF”, acronyms for My Social Emotional Learning Facilitator and supervised the implementation of the rational-emotional and behavioural theory in all classroom activities: free-chosen activities, experiential activities and personal development activities. Following the SELF KIT model, we have developed, in some cases adapted, four intervention modules for unhealthy emotions and their specific behaviours, as follows: anger, anxiety, jealousy, and guilt.

As a result, the stories of each module comprise in their content all the elements of a REBT type counselling sequence. To be more precise, the main characters (usually the favourite animal of the children or children of the same age as those whom we addressed the story to) accurately interpret the role of the client, respectively the counsellor. First, in the preamble of each story, the general context in which actions take place is presented and stakeholders are introduced.

In the beginning, they are described only in terms of physical and general social status, without any reference to their way of thinking and acting. During the second sequence, the negative dysfunctional emotional experiences and the associated maladaptive behaviours of the “client” are presented.

Various problems (practical and emotional) that the client is facing are then exposed. The emphasis is mainly on irrational ideation that caused these problems.

As of now, the "advisor" enters the scene and helps the clients establish the connection between the emotional and behavioural dysfunctions they are experiencing and their own thoughts behind those dysfunctions. The same counsellor educates and helps the client dispute (make vulnerable) his irrational beliefs, suggesting different strategies and techniques of disputing. The strategies are then assessed along with the client from the point of view of their effectiveness in the process of replacing the irrational (unhealthy) thoughts with rational (healthy) ones. The best way to motivate the client for using these strategies is to highlight the benefits resulting from the disputing and, thus, from the cognitive restructuring produced by this strategy. A test-sequence then follows, during which the therapist verifies if the client understood correctly and applied properly the right strategies.

At the end of each story, the SELF elf, our main character which represents the rational thinking, addresses directly to the children through a message that encourages rational thinking. He also urges them or their parents to read various stories from the oral literature, gathered in a distinct book. These stories are also saturated with rational messages and help children test the ecological validity of the strategies they were familiarized with by the reading the central story of the module.

The reading will be followed by an analysis made in collaboration with the children, regarding the problems faced by the characters in the story. The focus will have to fall first on the faulty thinking of the central character, respectively, on the consequences of this faulty way of thinking, expressed emotionally and behaviourally. After that, they evaluate and discuss the strategies which the characters used in order to replace irrational (unhealthy) thoughts with rational (healthy) ones, particularly insisting on the benefits such a change brings.

In order to maximize the effect of such interventions, the stories accompanied by poems, songs, games, crosswords and images grounded on the same principles (REBT principles) that guided the process of developing the stories. They continue the central theme and message of the story coherently and are explicitly designed to consolidate and generalize a realistic and healthy mind-set during pre-school.

In order to test the efficiency level of this approach, we chose the psycho-pedagogical observation as a tool of a high objectivity in measuring the

analysed variables and having no time constraints in terms of data collection required. The results were recorded in an observation grid. The observation items in the grid were adapted after the “Psychological observation and characterization grid of the kindergarten child preparing for school” (Clinciu, 2005).

In order to identify the dysfunctional emotions felt by children, we used the negative dysfunctional emotions scale, an intuitive diagnostic tool, containing physiological and behavioural indices of manifesting emotions. The scale is part of the "SELF KIT – Programme of socio-emotional skills development in children", programme whose coordinator is prof. Adrian Opre.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The assumption of this research was that by implementing a rational-emotional and behavioural education programme for social and emotional development in preschool children, based on scientifically validated principles specific to a psychological intervention with cognitive-behavioural commitment, the degree of integration and adaptation to the community is positively influenced.

The comparative analysis of the results obtained by the group of children at the initial and the final evaluation, we can say that the hypothesis was confirmed. Pre-schoolers are motivated to actively participate in the learning activities and they progress in terms of socio-emotional development, as highlighted by the results obtained from the observation of their behaviours. After applying the scale of dysfunctional negative emotions, the number of dysfunctional emotions felt by children decreased considerably in favour of the functional emotions.



## REFERENCES

- [1] Băban, A., (2001), *Consiliere educațională*, Cluj-Napoca.
- [2] Botiș, A., Mihalca, L., (2007), *Despre dezvoltarea abilităților emoționale și sociale ale copiilor, fete și băieți, cu vârsta până în 7 ani*, Editura MDN, Buzău.
- [3] Botiș, A., Tărău, A., (2004), *Disciplinarea pozitivă sau cum să disciplinezi fără să rănești*, Editura ASCR, Cluj – Napoca
- [4] Denham, S. & Burton, R. (2003). *Social and Emotional Prevention and Intervention Programming for Preschoolers*. New York: Kluwer Academic, Plenum Publisher
- [5] Denham, S.A., Blair, K.A., DeMulder, E., Levitas, J., Sawyer, K., Auerbach-Major, S. (2003). *Preschool emotional competence: pathway to social competence*. *Child Dev.* 74:238–56. [6] Dryden, W., & DiGiuseppe, R. (2003). *Ghid de terapie rațional-emoțională și comportamentală*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Asociației de Științe Cognitive din România/
- [7] Gurland, S. T., Grolnick, W. S., (2005), „*Perceived Threat, Controlling Parenting and Children’s Achievement Orientations*”, *Motivation and Emotion*, Vol. 29, No. 2, June
- [8] Halberstadt, A., Denham, S., Dunsmore, J., (2001), „*Affective Social Competence*”, în *Social Development*
- [9] Munteanu, C., Munteanu, E.N., 2009, *Ghid pentru învățământul preșcolar. O abordare din perspectiva noului curriculum*, Editura Polirom
- [10] Opre, A., David, D. (2006). *Dezvoltarea inteligenței emoționale prin programe de educație rațional-emoțională și comportamentală (EREC)*. In I. Berar (Ed.), *AlexandruRosca 1906-1996; Omul, savantul, Creatorul de Școală*. Editura Academiei Române: București
- [11] Opre, A., (coord) , Damian, L., Ghimbuluț, O., Gibă, R., Macavei, B., Ormenișan-calbaza, M., Rebegea, O., Vaida, S. (2010). *Lumea lui SELF. Povești pentru dezvoltarea socio-emoțională a copiilor preșcolari*. Editura ASCR.
- [12] Petrică, S., Petrovai, D., Preda, V., Brănișteanu, R., (2012). *Pentru un copil sănătos emoțional și social. Ghid Practic pentru educatorul care construiește încredere!*. Editura V&I Integral
- [13] Petrovai, D. & Petrică, S. (2010). *Ghid de dezvoltare a abilităților de viață ale copiilor*. Fundația „Copiii noștri!”
- [14] Rime, B. (2008). *Comunicarea socială a emoțiilor*. București: Editura Trei
- [15] Sas, C. (2010). *Cunoașterea și dezvoltarea competenței emoționale*. Editura Universității din Oradea.
- [16] Ștefan A. Catrinel & Kallay Eva - “*Dezvoltarea competențelor emoționale și sociale la preșcolari*”, editura ASCR, Cluj Napoca, 2007.
- [17] Vernon, A. - “*Dezvoltarea inteligenței emoționale prin educație rațional - emoțională și comportamentală*”, editura ASCR, Cluj Napoca, 2006.