

## THE ROLE OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Mihaela VOINEA<sup>1</sup>, Margareta DAMIAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania

<sup>2</sup>”Disney” Kindergarten, Braşov, Romania

### ABSTRACT

*The article is focused on the role of emotional development in early childhood. The key of human development is socio-emotional development. The theoretical premises of this research are to be found in the studies and theories on the relationship between emotional development in early childhood and cognitive development - Bowlby, Ainswoth, Lewis, etc.*

*The factors which are involved in early childhood are families, educators and community. Educators are the most important agents of child emotional development because they can improve the learning environment. Educators usually promote in their daily activities a sense of empathy, concern for others, openness and respect of human nature.*

*Interactions between educators and children which are warm and friendly promote a sense of self and develop children’s well-being. All this arguments underline the important role of educators in early childhood for socio-emotional development.*

**KEYWORDS:** *education, early childhood, socioemotional development*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-emotional development is a key factor for children to succeed in school. The socio- emotional development is important for children’s growth because there is a strong link between emotional, cognitive and social development. A lot of studies [1,2,3,4,5,9,11] show that children with socio-emotional skills are more able to: express their ideas and feelings, display empathy towards others, manage their positive or negative feelings, feel self-confident, etc.

The greatest influence on a child’s social-emotional development is the quality of attachment and the family environment. Parents play an important role in children’s social and emotional development but today they do not have enough time for their children. The kindergarten becomes a second family where children play, learn and grow. In this way, the preschool teacher becomes an important agent in child development.

## 2. SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES – THE "TOOLS" OF SOCIAL SUCCESS

New competences that are necessary today, such as tolerance, critical thinking, communicational skills, empathy, emotional and social intelligence, intercultural skills, can be called tools of social success.

In a document of the Council of Europe it is specified: "In an information society, what matters is the ability to select information, to think critically, to solve problems, to work in a team, to form value judgments, to communicate and constantly to question one's knowledge and abilities in the light of changing needs" [10, p.90].

„Social and emotional development involves the acquisition of a set of skills. Key skills among them are the ability to:

- identify and understand one's own feelings,
- accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others,
- manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner,
- regulate one's own behaviour,
- develop empathy for others, and
- establish and sustain relationships." [11]

Another meaning of social skills can be found in a European Union document on key competences for lifelong learning which states that these social skills refer to personal, interpersonal and intercultural skills and all forms of behaviour that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in the social and professional world. They ensure the personal and social well-being.

Social skills are a prerequisite to effective social adjustment. They materialize in a social behaviour appropriate to the context the child is at a certain time: differentiated greetings, smiling, addressing some pleas or requests, thanks, etc.).

Analysing the concept of social competence we notice the following interlinked characteristics [8]:

- *complexity, as proof of the difficulty to be captured in a valid general definition.*

Some specialists have defined social competence through its structure, others through its results or by reference to other concepts, such as social intelligence.

K. Alberchts proposes a working definition of social intelligence: "the ability to get along well with others and to get them to cooperate with you" [1, p.19] and identifies five components of social intelligence: the sense of the situation, presence, authenticity clarity, empathy.

Another theorist of social intelligence is Daniel Goleman, the famous author of "Emotional Intelligence". As Albrecht, he also describes social

intelligence as consisting of two components, each with certain subcomponents [4, p.102]:

- A. *Social consciousness* - what we notice about others and
- B. *Social disinhibition* - that builds on social consciousness to give rise to effective and smooth interactions.
  - *The dynamics of the concept of social competence, the fact that it depends very much on the age of the individual and on the social context and that it evolves along with the demands of society.*

If in the 1930s social competence came down to having a job, a family and having a good position in the community, today social competence includes, besides the aspects mentioned above, the capacity of active involvement in the community, assertive communication, management of crisis situations, etc.

Age is also an important criterion in the analysis of social competence. For example, we cannot compare a teenager's social competence (recognized as socially competent) to that of an adult's, due to the fact that in the structure of social competence, life experience, interpretation of various events, the way life experiences are valued and internalized depend much on the individual.

- *The difficulty of measuring social competence*

This difficulty results from the fact that most scholars who have studied social competence stated that sociability has an important role in the expression, affirmation and development of social competence. But sociability also resides in innate biological mechanisms. Such a theory is supported by Jerome Kagan who, through the longitudinal studies conducted, demonstrates that not all children are equally sociable.

However there are different ways and techniques for measuring/recording sociability starting with different types of observations to the socio-metric test. The results obtained by these methods offer an insight of someone's social competence.

### **3. HOW CAN WE DEVELOP SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN KINDERGARTEN?**

The preschool years are a sensitive period for the socio-emotional development. H. Siebert [7] argues that these competences must be formed in a real context, through contact with experiences. In early childhood the experiences, as sources of learning, must be organized and selected by professionals. The role of the preschool teacher is to promote the participation, to encourage the exchange of knowledge, feelings and experiences. The preschool teacher serves as a model of communication and behaviour through every day experiences.

Social skills are formed at an early age through interaction with family members and then through interaction with actors from the school environment. Unlike in family, in school, starting from the kindergarten, social skills are formed systematically, consciously and in an organized way, either through activities specifically aimed at training these skills (the "Man and society" domain-specific activities) or through all interactions resulting from the space and climate of the group of children.

Teachers should aim to train these skills explicitly, so that school (kindergarten) education is in fact a preparation for life. The whole range of emotions and feelings that accompany the child in school life as well as all interactions with the (diverse and dynamic) complex world of kindergarten are an excellent workout for the later world of professions, family life, personal life.

But this workout is effective only if it satisfies the following conditions [8]:

- **It is done systematically** (empathy, cooperation, acceptance of differences, affirming own personalities, etc.) are not spontaneously or accidentally achieved in an activity from the "Man and society" domain, for example. All these competences must be trained at each opportunity, at every child - teacher interaction.

- **It is consciously sought.** (At first glance, it seems that people develop their social skills anyway, because man is a social being by definition, forced to interact with others. But smooth interrelationships, assertive communication, acceptance of differences, cooperation and so on are not learned by default, but with difficult and very rarely, with high risks, whereas conscious learning is not only much more efficient, but also rewarding and motivating and it discards the risk of failure which leads to closure and social isolation). Here, the role of the preschool teacher is very important.

- **It is diversified** (various situations for the training of social skills are exploited - not only the actual learning situations, but also the extracurricular, informal situations. Any child-child or teacher-child interaction and even teacher-teacher interaction has a formative potential for the social skills).

- **It is constantly assessed, self-assessed and inter-assessed** (if in extracurricular situations social skills are assessed implicitly through the person's success/failure in relating to peers, in kindergarten these skills are assessed directly and explicitly, much more nuanced. Moreover, peer assessment and especially self-assessment are valuable levers that contribute to the training of social skills).

Suggestions for the socio-emotional development in kindergarten.

A. Suggestions for the learning environment:

- to use interactive methods which lead to socio-emotional skills;
- to encourage children to cooperate and to express their feelings;

- to involve children in arranging their classroom according to social or personal events (a child's birthday, a religious or community fest);
  - to use the nonverbal language or „love language” [2] in several social context;
  - to create a safe climate for every child.
- B. Suggestions for curriculum design
- to promote optional courses for socio-emotional education;
  - to promote child-centred teaching and learning.
- C. Suggestions for assessment:
- to use assessment as a „coach” for life (the assessment is an occasion to live positive or negative feelings, to prepare oneself for other stronger feelings);
  - to use assessment methods which help children feel competent.

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