

Developing Preschool Children's Socio-Emotional Abilities through Therapeutic Stories

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays constant change marks our children's development, they being increasingly overloaded by tasks. Their resources are not sufficient to meet the challenges, which can lead to emotional imbalances in the form of maladaptive behaviours, thus today's children are lonelier, angrier, more depressed and anxious than previous generations. School relies solely on academic education without taking into consideration their emotional development. In order to offer children the possibility to learn how to manage their dysfunctional feelings, we developed a socio-emotional development programme based on the theoretical principles of Rational Emotive Behavioural Theory/Therapy. This modular programme consisted of sequences of psychological education aiming to develop children's cognitive abilities and behaviours that make them happier and, at the same time, more productive. The present study shows successful results of the programme, conducted over a school semester in a kindergarten group.

KEYWORDS: *socio-emotional development, maladaptive behaviours, REBT*

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that at pre-school age children acquire the most profound, sustainable and productive mental qualities, which constitute the foundations of mental activity and the emerging personality traits. The psychological profile of preschool children displays a specific development of the psycho-intellectual psychomotor and affective-volitional features, the entire experience being centred on the acquisition of experience, highlighting the role of the family and kindergarten in organizing and coordinating the cultivation of positive experiences that influence the becoming of the child's personality. The pre-school period is characterized by a complex of dynamic opposites that determine the child's evolution, among these opposites standing the relationship between empowerment and socialization, between home and kindergarten, parents and teachers as well as the relationship between the components of the psyche in their evolution from an age period to another [4].

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the major dimensions of socio-emotional development of preschool children refers to the gradual increase of the complexity of the generation and deployment of affects. There are involved more and more elements of emotional memory or confrontations with parental moral requirements. Even at the age three, some children may experience guilt when they cross parental requirements. The four-year-old can be proud of what he managed to do and happy for the reward. At six, children live intensely a prestigious crisis when they are scolded in public or can be disappointed if adults do not give them the attention they expect. Pre-schoolers' emotional resonance to stimulation from the environment is progressively increasing. The child that perceives and understands increasingly better and better the things happening around him

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will be able to live many emotions and feelings, be sensitive and respond to others with joy, sensibility, sympathy, etc.

Because of cognitive development and language acquisition, emotions begin to be mediated by analysing situations (cognitive mediation) which leaves its mark on pre-school behaviour. For example, if a three-year-old rises from his chair to show the teacher his drawing, around the age of 6 years he is able to wait until the teacher reaches him (the tolerance to frustration increases). At the same time, children gain a key role in their own socio-cognitive development. Interacting with people of the same age and similar level of development enables children, especially during conflicts, understand that others have feelings, thoughts, different points of view and that their behaviour has effects on the others. In this way, children can overcome the egocentrism which according to Piaget characterizes this stage [3].

The expression of the emotional behaviours is enrichment and refined and their regulation mechanisms are emphasized. The child realizes the effects of his emotional behaviours on others and acts accordingly. At the age of 4-5, the child can successfully simulate some emotional states (e.g., anger, sadness, exuberance) to get what he wants from the adult. Similarly, the five-year-old child can suppress showing weeping and anger even if he suffers; he wilfully shows compassion to be accepted. Pre-schoolers are able to observe emotionally expressive behaviours of others and understand their meaning [7].

Kindergarten is the place where new relationships appear with another significant adult, the educator, and through interaction with peers. R. Vincent [6] noted that once temporary separation from the mother is accepted, kindergarten seems to really give the child a sense of security. The child finds here a world to his measure; surrounded by peers, he always feels free and powerful when facing the adult [6]. These new interactions contain very factors important for the emotional maturity. The teacher is a mixture between parental warmth and stimulation to engage and to succeed on their own.

Another dimension of socio-emotional development is the relationships with peers. In kindergarten, says R. Vincent [6], everyone has the same life, everyone is alike. Dealing with peers and interacting with them diminishes the egocentrism which, willingly or unwillingly, is maintained by the family. Even just the presence of peers, which are all addressed in the same way by the teacher makes the child realize that he is not the centre of the universe and perceive the others as equals [7]. Similarly, in this context, empathy is developed and thus children recognize more easily feelings like sadness or joy in the others and modulate better communication and collaboration with them.

The development of socio-emotional skills aims to improve the knowledge of socio-emotional behaviours needed to achieve desirable and sustainable results. It is a personal capacity to face environmental challenges. Children who show deficiencies on the emotional and social skills are likely to develop problems during childhood, adolescence and even adult life in areas such as cognitive development, mental health, school readiness, etc.

The emotional competence can be defined as “the ability to recognize and interpret your own and the others’ emotions as well as the ability to adequately manage emotionally loaded situations” [5]. Developing children's emotional skills helps to build and maintain relationships with others, helps children to adapt to kindergarten and school, and prevents emotional and behavioural problems in early and middle childhood.

The social competences refer to “children's ability to form functional social relationships with other children and adults in their lives” [5]. Social competences are defined as the ability to

successfully engage in social interactions and interpersonal relationships and ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal messages [5].

Studies [2, 5, 6, 7] indicate that children with social skills will adapt better to the school environment and will have better academic results. Children with poorly developed social skills are more likely to be rejected by others and develop behavioural problems; as a result, children who are isolated from the group are at increased risk of school dropout, juvenile delinquency and emotional problems - anxiety, depression.

The theory of rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT) is the expression of the Albert Ellis' labour and work [1]. The theory is based on the assumption that people's behavioural problems often stem from a flawed thinking and understanding of events, not the events themselves. Applying the concepts promoted by REBT in education is conducted under the Rational Emotive Behaviour Education - REBE. Ellis outlines the applicability of his theory using the ABC (DE) model (activator event, beliefs, consequences, disputing, effect) [2]. This model provides a simple but structured framework to address emotional and behavioural issues faced nowadays.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Hypotheses

The general hypothesis of our study was that implementing a demarche for developing children's socio-emotional skills, based on the scientifically validated principles of rational-emotive and behavioural education will have a positive influence on the integration and adaptation in the pre-school community. Namely, if pre-schoolers actively participate in specific activities of rational-emotive and behavioural education, they will significantly progress in terms of socio-emotional development.

3.2. Sample

The sample on which the research was conducted consists of 28 kindergarten children, aged 5 to 6, including 16 male and 12 female, all part of a single kindergarten group.

3.3. Intervention

We implemented the intervention programme for a group of children from Kindergarten No.13, Brasov and the psycho-pedagogical experiment was conducted over ten weeks, consisting of 5 modules, each module focusing on one disruptive emotion. The programme was designed using *Self Kit*, a psychological and educational counselling programme, developed by a group of Romanian psychologists, based on REBT. Both authors of this paper are licenced to use this programme. Each module consisted of a main story, followed by a sequence of highlighting the dysfunctional negative emotional experiences of the character and their association with maladaptive behaviours as well as the presentation of possible adaptive thoughts and their counterpart behaviours. The latter part was aimed directly at children, with a message encouraging rational thinking. The following meeting, the story was reminded to the children and the teacher – counsellor suggested other exercises to enhance the message of the story and the rational way of thinking about certain situations, including role-playing, drawing, making collages, telling similar stories.

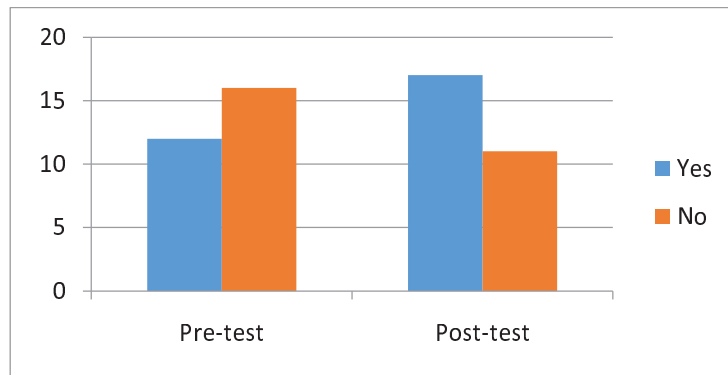
3.4. Instruments used

Besides the implementation of the group counselling modules based on *Self Kit, a programme of developing children’s socio-emotional competences*, there were also used two assessment instruments in order to measure the impact of these activities on the children’s socio-emotional abilities. We used an instrument specially realized for this research: a test presented to the children as a game, aiming at identifying their own and the others’ emotions in different situations (called ‘Emotions’) and an observation grid for the children’s behaviour. The children were tested before and after the implementation of the group counselling programme.

3.5. Results

In the initial evaluation, 12 of the 28 children recognized and correctly name the emotions, while 16 children had difficulties in achieving the task. In the final assessment, we found progress, 17 of the 28 children recognizing the emotions suggested by teachers, while 11 children did not fulfill the task.

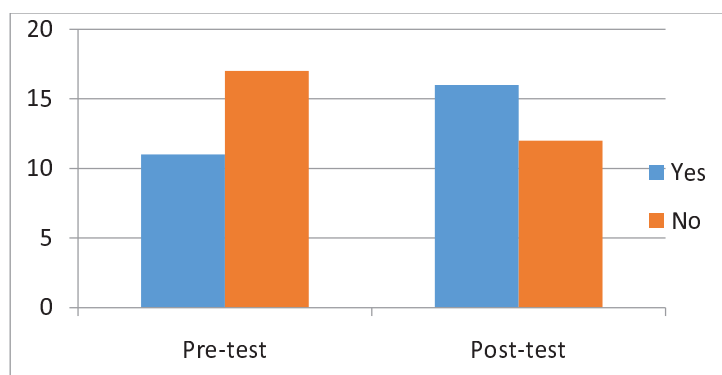
Tabel 1. Recognition of emotions



As regarding the ability to define facial expressions of emotion, in the initial assessment phase, pre-schoolers experienced difficulties / problems in listing facial characteristics for the emotions presented, only 11 of the 28 children being able to enumerate at least two characteristics of expressions of emotions, while in the final evaluation stage, we noted a progress, 14 of them being able to list at least two facial expressions of emotion.

Of the 28 children undergoing assessment test in the initial evaluation, 11 succeeded in imitating the emotions suggested by the teacher, manifesting freely and creatively, and 17 children had difficulties in imitating the emotions suggested by teachers, three of them categorically refusing involvement in the game imitating emotions. In the final assessment, 16 children could and wanted to imitate emotions and 12 had problems in imitating them. There was only one case in which the subject refused participation in the game of imitating emotions.

Tabel 2. Imitating emotions



In the pre-test phase, most pre-schoolers (20) had difficulties in identifying classmates' emotions, which entitles us to say that there was deficit in recognizing emotions (anger, joy, sadness, surprise) in people around them. After the implementation of the counselling programme, we registered that 4 out of the 20 children who could not name their colleagues' emotions are now found in the first category, those who are able to verbalise another person's emotions. We consider it a significant step forward.

As concerning the analysis of the observation grids filled in before and after the implementation of the REBT programme, we noticed an improvement in all children's behaviour in the classroom and better relations among them.

Tabel 3. Analysis of the observation grids

How does the child behave? The child....	Rarely (number of children)		Sometimes (number of children)		Often (number of children)	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
separates from parents easily.	5	3	2	2	21	23
is dependent on the adult/can't let go.	10	8	1	2	17	18
defends his rights.	10	9	2	3	16	16
shows enthusiasm when doing things he likes.	3	2	3	2	22	24
accepts and offers help (physical, moral, etc.)	9	7	2	3	17	18
has self-service skills, is independent / autonomous (eating, sleeping, going to the toilet without problems when far from home)	12	7	3	6	12	15
adapts easily to sudden changes in the environment.	5	3	2	4	21	21
express their anger into action	10	10	5	9	13	9
accepts being redirected by an adult when manifesting aggressive behaviours	18	10	2	8	8	10
withdraws excessively from the group	16	10	5	8	7	10
shows interest and active participation in kindergarten activities	5	–	1	1	22	27
smiles and seems happy most of the time	2	1	1	1	25	26

Analysing each item of the observation grid, we noticed that 80% of the pre-schoolers actively participated and showed interest, enthusiasm, joy, being independent in relation to adults. An indicator that caught our attention was the one regarding acceptance of an adult's redirection when manifesting aggressive behaviours: only 8 of the 28 children accepted to stand corrected, while 18 children flatly refused to change their aggressive behaviour when told so, probably they are still ego-centric and expressed their desires and wishes and even acted without taking into account the others' existence and needs.

After implementation of the *Self Kit* programme, we found progress in each member of the group regarding:

- expressing anger during an action: before the programme implementation, 13 of the 28 children expressed their anger through violent actions, whereas after its implementation, only 9 children expressed anger through violent actions;
- active involvement and showing interest in learning activities and games: before the programme implementation, 5 children were uninvolved and showed no interest in the activity whereas after the experiment, only 1 child rarely manifested lack of interest.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The development of socio-emotional skills in the pre-school period plays an important role in children's social adaptation. Designing and implementing a REBT type programme for developing socio-emotional skills is one of the most secure solutions for prevention and therapy of emotional and behavioural disorders.

Although the group was not enough large to perform more elaborated statistical analysis, we may conclude that research hypotheses were confirmed as improvement in behaviour was noted for most participants. Over all, the children in the programme displayed a larger range of adaptive socio-emotional abilities, thus proving its efficiency.

This study highlights the importance of receiving Rational Emotive Behaviour Education, which can help children manage their own feelings, integrate and adapt to the community. Such a demarche will be continued on a larger sample and included in an experimental design that will be presented in a future paper. Starting from these results, our intention is to implement such an approach as an optional programme of personal development that can be offered to other groups of children, too.

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