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Evaluation of a program for developing socio-emotional competencies in preschool children

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Research in the last decade has shown that social and emotional competencies in preschool children are a key element in predicting school adjustment and success in life. Also, children with deficits in these areas are at risk for developing emotional and behavioral problems and for social exclusion at school. Educators need to have knowledge and skills to implement such programs in kindergarten, to be able to evaluate, monitor and develop socio-emotional competencies in preschool children. The present study evaluates the efficiency of such a program conducted in kindergarten. The program involved offering training for 9 preschool educators and implementing specific activities with 100 children age 3-7 years old during a one month period. An initial and final assessment of socio-emotional competencies of children was made, using PEDa (Developmental Evaluation Platform), an original instrument developed by COGNITROM SRL in Romania. Results have shown a significant improvement of socio-emotional competencies in children aged 5 and 7, involving understanding and regulating emotions, prosocial behavior and rule compliance. At age 3 the progress made by children was not statistically significant, probably due to the short duration of the program and language development of children. The present study proves that such programs are efficient and necessary and preschool educators need to focus not only on cognitive development of children but also on socio-emotional dimensions relevant for adjustment later in school and life

Keywords: socio-emotional competence; prevention; assessment; preschool children

1. Introduction

Acquiring social and emotional competence during preschool years is one of the major development tasks for children that predict mental health and school adjustment later in life. An old line of research considered cognitive abilities only relevant to predict academic achievement. The last decades have proved that cognitive abilities are mediated by social and emotional competence in predicting academic success. For these reasons, in many countries these abilities are included in the curricula during preschool and elementary school years. Research has shown that developing socio-emotional competencies are a key element in prevention programs in order to reduce the incidence of emotional and behavioral problems in children.

Emotional competence refers to expressing emotions in a way that is advantageous to moment to moment interaction and relationships over time (Denham, 2006). It refers to a set of skills like emotional understanding, emotional expression and emotional regulation. Social and emotional competences are related construct. In order to adjust to social contexts, preschool children need adequately to read, interpret and label different emotions in themselves and other and to comply with social norms of expressing these emotions as they grow older. Studies

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have shown that inappropriate expression of emotion, especially negative emotionality like anger or aggression leads to peer rejection in time. Children who express more often positive emotions are more likely to be positive evaluated by educators in social competence and more likeable for peers in kindergarten. In order to maintain satisfying relationships to others during play and social interaction preschool children learn also to regulate their own emotion, retaining and expressing emotions that are helpful and relevant and inhibiting those that are not helpful or relevant (Denham, 2006). Strategies of self regulation goes from simple forms like hugs, thumbs sucking at three years old to more complex ones like attention shifting and cognitive restructuring at six to seven years old (Miclea, 2007).

Social competence on the other hand refers basically social information processing and performance in social contexts (Miclea, 2007), basically involving three distinct dimensions: rule compliance, social interaction and prosocial behavior. (Stefan & colab., 2009). Lack of social skills has been proved to result in problems in initiating and maintaining relationship and rejection from peer and later in externalizing and/or internalizing problems (like aggression and/or depression).

Although many countries are currently developing socio-emotional education programs for children, preschool education system in Romania is still largely based on traditional teaching, in which cognitive abilities are dominant in the curricula, with few efforts of educational staff, especially those with a large experience, to change their perspective and focus on more relevant dimensions like socio-emotional competencies. Also, concept of positive discipline is relatively new in Romania, both to parents and educators. Lack of time, resources, training and assessment instrument are few reasons why implementing new strategies of teaching socio-emotional skills and positive discipline techniques is a difficult process and optional for young and receptive educators.

Socio-emotional education programs are basically multi-dimensional, including educators, parents and community and include in general training in socio-emotional competencies, behavioral management (positive discipline) and self management abilities.

In our study we conducted during one month a prevention program implemented with educators of three to seven years old children, using a multi-evaluator screening instrument before and after the training. The main objective is to evaluate the efficiency of the program directly on socio-emotional skills of children, both in familial and kindergarten settings, as evaluated by both parents and educators.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

The main objective of the study is to evaluate the impact of a socio-emotional competence training program designed for educators of preschool children. We are interested in effect on observed socio-emotional behavior of children before and after the training, both in familial and kindergarten settings, as rated on a screening instrument completed by both parents and educators.

2.2. Participants

Nine educators from one private and one state Romanian kindergarten participated to the training, all females around age mean of 34.5 years old. 100 preschool children in each educator's group were assessed in socio-emotional competence dimensions, before and after the training and implementation of curricula and behavior management techniques learned by educator. Children were assigned to three experimental groups according to their age level: experimental group 1 (3-5years old, N=32), experimental group 2 (4-5years old, N=35), experimental group 3 (5-6/7 years old, N=33). Experimental design is bifactorial, with two independent variables (age level - three modalities), moment of evaluation (pretest and posttest) and two dependent variables (social and emotional competencies assessed).

2.3. Procedure and materials

A pretest assessment was conducted, using two screening instruments for socio-emotional competencies from PEDa platform. PEDa is a multi-method and multi-informant computerized platform for assessment of school readiness in preschool children. It contains screening instruments and scales for 7 areas preschool children development: cognitive and socio-emotional competencies, personal autonomy, school readiness, motor development and temperament. Psychometric properties for socio-emotional screening instruments show an internal consistency (α -Cronbach) with values over 0.80. and a test-retest coefficients (after 3 months) of 0.70. the instruments shows a good content validity, correlation with Social Skills Rating System (SSRS). The screening

scales are relevant for predicting children's mental health problems and school readiness (Stefan & colab., 2009). The screening instruments have different versions for parents and educators and different forms for children aged 3-4, 4-5, 5-6/7 years old. The emotional competence instrument measures three dimensions: emotional understanding, emotional expression and emotional self-regulation. The social competence screening instrument consists of three subscales for rule compliance, social interaction and prosocial behavior.

After the pretest, the training of educators was conducted during three days, summing 24 hours of courses. The main objectives of training courses were: a) to improve educator's abilities to develop socio-emotional competencies in children, through modeling, role play, structured play and other activities (a special curricula was developed for this objective); b) to improve educator's behavioral management abilities (like rule settings, rewarding acceptable behavior, using logical consequences for unacceptable behavior, functional analysis of behavior and so on). The implementation of strategies learned and curricula activities were implemented during one month in daily interaction with preschool children. A posttest assessment of socio-emotional competence in children was made, using the same instruments as in pretest, completed by both parents and educators for each children.

2.4. Results

All collected data were processed using SPSS 19.1 statistical software. The main results (pretest and post test mean, paired sample t test and significance level are shown below in table nr. 1 and table nr. 2 for each experimental group:

Table 1. Paired sample t test results for emotional competence variable

Groups	Subscales	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test Mean		Post-Test Mean		Paired sample t test	
				SCEP	SCEE	SCEP	SCEE	SCEP	SCEE
Experimental Group 1	1. Emotion understanding	32	32	11.81	11.50	12.50	12.56	-1.21	-2.68**
	2. Emotional expression			17.06	13.06	18.03	13.50	-1.36	-0.73**
	3.Emotionself-regulation			14.86	14.83	16.83	15.51	-3.08	-0.80
Experimental Group 2	1. Emotion understanding	35	35	11.90	16.84	13.51	11.84	-2.98*	-8.58**
	2. Emotional expression			22.59	16.84	23.07	17.18	-0.75	-0.63
	3.Emotionself-regulation			11.96	19.72	23.00	21.36	-11.85**	-2.57*
Experimental Group 3	1. Emotion understanding	33	33	18.69	21.52	19.72	23.02	-1.35	-1.22
	2. Emotional expression			17.16	14.61	21.00	15.91	-4.77**	-1.67
	3.Emotionself-regulation			24.86	35.77	26.86	37.05	-1.82	0.77

Table 2. Paired sample t test results for social competence variable.

Groups	Subscales	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Pre-Test Mean		Post-Test Mean		Paired sample t test	
				SCSP	SCSE	SCSP	SCSE	SCSP	SCSE
Experimental Group 1	1.Rule compliance	32	32	10.72	15.16	11.20	16.92	-0.78	-1.54
	2. Social interaction			15.12	16.84	15.16	16.93	-0.04	-0.12
	3.Prosocial behavior			11.13	19.13	11.86	19.53	-1.12	-0.26
Experimental Group 2	1.Rule compliance	35	35	19.48	20.45	22.24	22.96	-1.15	-3.52**
	2. Social interaction			16.44	23.53	17.72	23.03	-2.04*	0.59
	3.Prosocial behavior			11.55	16.67	14.06	17.77	-3.46**	-1.91**
Experimental Group 3	1.Rule compliance	33	33	26.00	26.48	29.18	29.37	-2.48**	-2.63**
	2. Social interaction			28.91	38.94	40.74	40.27	-6.78**	0.82
	3.Prosocial behavior			26.08	26.08	30.80	30.22	-3.81**	3.49**

Regarding emotional competencies, as it can be seen from the table 1, for experimental group 1 (children 3-4 years old) significant results have been obtained only in ratings of educators ($t=-2, 68, p \leq 0.01$ for emotional understanding subscale and $t= -0.78, p \leq 0.01$ for emotional expression subscale) but not in rating of parents. No significant results have been obtained for social competencies in age group. These results are probably due to the

short duration of the implementation program, knowing that consolidation of socio-emotional abilities in 3 years old children require a longer duration. Also, in kindergarten setting it may be that educators have been more biased after the training to notice emotional skills of children and overrate them in the posttest.

As can be seen from Table 1, in experimental group nr. 2 (age 4-5 years old) after the program implementation both parent and educators have noticed a progress in children's emotional understanding and emotional self regulation. It is possible that educators have worked in their activities especially on these aspects, through modeling and activities that were more attractive to them from the curricula. As for social competencies (table nr. 2) in same age group, in the educational setting rule compliance has significantly improved and prosocial behavior of children. As for familial context (parental ratings) significant progress has been made on social interaction of children and prosocial behavior.

In experimental group nr. 3 (children age 5-7 years old) on emotional competence dimension only parents have noticed an improvement in emotional expression subscale. Social competence of children also improved, as noticed by parents in all three subscales. In educational setting only social interaction was not significantly improved, probably educators were not very sensitive to this aspect in their program implementation.

3. Conclusions

The present study has shown that even a short program for developing socio-emotional competencies in preschool children, if correctly applied, is in a large proportion efficient. Children develop socio-emotional skills if offered many opportunities (social context) to learn and practice them. Parents and educators are models of social interaction rules and strategies and of emotional expression and self regulation. Also, educators had the opportunity to treat day to day conflicts between children as ways to learn them socio-emotional skills to adequately deal with these conflicts. Other behavioral strategies like rule setting offered a structured environment to learn and develop their skills. future programs need to extend the duration of implementation during one year and it would be best to include this kind of activities in the main curricula, in order to address not only cognitive development but also to better prepare children for school adjustment and why not life adjustment and to prevent further emotional or behavior problems in children.

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