Social and emotional education through sociopedagogical practices

Iro Mylonakou-Keke*

University of Athens, 13A Navarinou, 10680 Athens, Greece

Abstract

The research which is presented in this paper focuses on the reinforcement and development of the emotional and social skills of the participants, through sociopedagogical practices. The specific sociopedagogical practices focus on a very crucial issue of our times, that of respect of every form of diversity and the healthy highlighting of the uniqueness of every human being. The philosophical and theoretical background of this research is Systems Science. Methodologically it was based on the combined utilisation of Collaborative Action Research and the process of Knowledge Management. A formative and summative evaluation was conducted by different teams of evaluators. In conclusion, it is proven that there can be a dissemination of sociopedagogical practices in social-emotional education with remarkable results.

Keywords: Social Emotional Education; Diversity; Social Pedagogy; Collaborative Action Research; Knowledge Management

1. Introduction

The reinforcement and development of the emotional and social skills of students is a basic aspiration of modern education (Goleman, 1997; Zins et al., 2004). The continuous pursuit of efficient emotional and social educational methods is a dire necessity in our time, given the fact that research data from multiple countries highlight an increase in the social and emotional problems that children and adolescents are facing (Cohen, 2001; Gottman, 2000; Hatzichristou, 2008).

At the same time, one of the primary objectives of Social Pedagogy is modern education as a factor of social cohesion, aiming at the protection of the diversity of individuals or groups, while simultaneously avoiding becoming a cause of social exclusion (Delors, 1996; Mylonakou - Keke, 2003). The search for strategies, techniques and
practices that will indicate the value of diversity and uniqueness through the school environment is a prerequisite for Social Pedagogy (Adams et al., 2007; Buchkremer, 2009), in view of the fact that once we educate our children to appreciate their uniqueness and show respect towards every form of diversity, we may be able to decrease or eliminate various social and emotional problems created by this very lack of respect.

This paper presents concisely a research that is part of a wider research project which is currently underway. The program’s main purpose is to approach and denote the sociopedagogical aspects of various forms of diversity and uniqueness using *symbiosophia* (according to Morin, 1999), meaning the wisdom of living among others in such a way that can safeguard diversity though unity.

The research presented in this paper focuses on the reinforcement and development of the emotional and social skills of the participants through sociopedagogical practices.

2. Background

During the training of teachers in order to conduct the research programme (whose general aim is to approach and highlight the sociopedagogical dimensions of diversity and the uniqueness of each individual), certain educators mentioned that in some primary schools, where they either worked themselves or their colleagues did, school life in and outside the classroom had been adversely influenced due to the behaviour of certain pupils. This behaviour started from lack of communication and good relationships among pupils and went as far as hostility, verbal abuse, exclusion of certain pupils from games, aggression and even bullying. Our discussions brought to the surface the starting point of this research, which consists of the following considerations: How can we help children accept and respect something “different” and examine everything that deviates from their norm (external appearance, character trait, behaviour, idea, concept, stance etc), before they create the tendency to reject it or accuse it or behave towards it in a negative way? How can we help them recognize the value of their own uniqueness as well as the uniqueness of the other and discover that they can enrich their “personal capital” through interaction and cooperation with others? How can we effectively achieve and yield fruit in this direction of the improvement and widening of emotional and social skills within the school environment? What methodological approach will assist us in achieving this?

The philosophical and theoretical background of the research was the one of Soft Systems Methodology (S.S.M.). *Soft Systems Methodology* is considered appropriate for “problematic situations” where there is no clear view as to what the “problem” is or what the kind of action is that must be undertaken to overcome the difficulties that exist. In practice, it helps people overcome pre-existing intellectual schemata that restrict their thought and are related to the conception of thoughts in order to face the problems they are asked to face (Jackson & Flood, 1991).

Given the starting point and the philosophical and theoretical background of the research, a research strategy was developed which aimed at the improvement and change of the situation through the gradual improvement of knowledge as it concerns themselves and others, the realization, understanding and critical approach of thoughts, perceptions, needs, emotions, behaviours and their consequences (see Research Methodology).

3. The aim of the research

The main aim of this research was the reinforcement and development of emotional and social skills of Primary School pupils, through highlighting the value and respect of the many forms of diversity (racial, cultural, religious etc) and uniqueness (anatomic, facial, spiritual, emotional, social, related to skills and experiences etc) of every human being.

Emotional skills (E) focused around the axis: E1) emotional self-awareness (recognition and expression of emotions) and E2) emotional self-management. Social skills (S) focused around the axis: S1) of social awareness and S2) the management of social relationships.
4. The sample of the research

The research took place in school classes with pupils of the same age, who presented the problems we mentioned before. There was also one class of pupils of the same age which did not face this kind of problems.

Specifically, in this research which was conducted in Greece and lasted for 6 months, the following people participated:

- 51 pupils of E’ class (approximately 11 years old) of a public primary school, who showed intensely negative behaviour among them.
- 44 pupils of E’ class of a private primary school, where there were intense negative behaviours of pupils.
- 57 pupils of E’ class of a public primary school, where there were no negative behaviours among pupils.
- 6 teachers who were the teachers of the above pupils.
- 2 psychologists who acted mainly as external facilitators.
- 1 researcher, responsible for the programme, who acted as coordinator – facilitator.

5. Research Methodology

In order to ensure improvement and change in an issue or situation, there must pre-exist the improvement of knowledge and understanding of those involved as it concerns that issue or situation. The management of this knowledge will come through research. That is why the methodology of this research was based on the combined utilisation of Collaborative Action Research (Atweh et al, 1998; Elliott, 1991; Kekes, 2000) and the process of Knowledge Management (Ackoff, 1989; Kekes, 2007).

Collaborative Action Research (particularly as it concerns education), is a systematic learning process which takes place among groups of participants, who, through their collaboration, utilize the study of their own behaviours and practices and subsequently cultivate their critical thinking on the results of those behaviours and practices. Its basic aim is the improvement or change of a practice, a procedure, a situation and the development of knowledge related to the practices of the participants (Kekes, 2000).

Knowledge Management is today a particular scientific field, closely related to the area of corporations. (Nonaka & Tacheucci, 1995). It has not limited itself to that, however. In the last decade, it is used in the field of education. (Sallis & Jones, 2002). The need to assess and estimate the value of the human factor has been recognised, together with the need to explore the significance of knowledge which is «installed» in each human being and determines his behaviour. This led to the development of interest towards knowledge which is acquired through trust towards others, respect for their experience, dialogue, interaction with them. The development of a dialectic interaction which leads to the creation of new knowledge facilitates the personal operation of people and their relationships with others. (Kekes, 2007).

In this methodology of combined utilisation of Collaborative Action Research and Knowledge Management, we utilize a five-stage model (Ackoff, 1989) for the hierarchical organization of knowledge. The participants in the research correlate the data so as to arrive at information which is incorporated into explanatory models in order to form a body of knowledge. Then, through the undertaking of initiatives and the materialisation of behaviours comes the understanding of basic reasons and the participants are led to the composition of new knowledge and the expression of general principles, which become evident as wisdom. Knowledge comes principally from the group actions and interactions of participants in the research and during this process there is a high level of personal and group reflection, aiming every time at the design of the next improvement processes. The improvement of a practice is a priority, as well as the improvement of the understanding of a practice, aiming at the improvement of the situation within which this practice takes place. We are of the opinion that this combined method widens both epistemologically and methodologically (see the conduct of research) the three-part model (exploration, insight and action) by Hill and O’Brien (1999).

Throughout the research process, emphasis was placed on the development of group experiential activities, which favoured collaborative learning environments. The experiential activities were based on the utilisation of fairy tales, hypothetical scenarios, illustrated stories, videos and films, whose content was such that allowed different levels of reading and interpretation. Through its symbolic content, this material offered in an immediate way access to and
familiarization with ideas, knowledge, concepts, emotions, behaviours, relationships, habits related to different situations in life.

The criteria for selection and utilisation of these materials (mentioned further as the research material), were:
- The highlighting of the different forms of diversity.
- The ways of approaching diversity by the person involved, through his thoughts, emotions, intentions and actions, which highlight the existence or absence of certain emotional and social skills.
- The approach (thoughts, emotions, intentions, behaviours) towards the «different» person from the other members of his environment, with the existence or absence of certain emotional and social skills.
- The ways of highlighting the uniqueness (anatomic, facial, spiritual, behavioural, emotional, social etc.) of every person, through positive and negative examples.
- The processing of different situations which emphasise the presence or absence of different forms of emotional self-awareness, emotional self-management, social realisations and the management of social relationships as well as the relevant behaviours. Finally, the consequences of those behaviours to the person itself and the persons of his environment.
- The emotional and social models which are projected directly or indirectly and influence the relevant thoughts, perceptions, needs, intentions, emotions and behaviours of the persons.
- The language, the plot and the careful narration as well as the careful, attractive and functional illustration (where it existed).

6. The conduct of research

The creative and multiple utilisation of the research material took place throughout the research. The initial teams of participants started with the study of previous knowledge, concepts, experiences, attitudes, stereotypes and emotions as it concerns diversity. Following that, they formed new teams with the Jigsaw technique (Aronson et al., 1978). Every team processed new research material which served different aims every time (see criteria of utilisation of research material above).

The participants processed the research material in parts, through experiential activities stemming from the persons (heroes) of the relevant research material and gradually involved themselves into the process, each one to the extent that he chose. In essence, according to the research methodology (see above) there was a continuously repeated process which needed exploration, planning, action, observation of the results of action, reflection, critical thinking, realization, understanding, re-planning, more action, more observation etc. It is important to note that these situations were interlinked and they could not obviously be clearly separated. They are situations that we separate for practical reasons in an effort to simplify and study the complex and multi-faceted process of human thought and action.

Pupils traveled inside the scenarios of the research material, not as ordinary “readers” or audience, but as “actively interactive” participants in the events of the “reality” of the scripts. The nature and organization of activities as well as their intensely experiential nature helped preserve the interest and enabled the active participation of pupils in the process, which went as far as the restructuring of activities and the plot of the scripts. This collaborative active participation went as far as the creative reconstruction of the content and the co-creation of alternative scenarios, which highlighted every time certain emotional and social skills of the persons in the scenario.

When this process was completed, the participants (according to the Jigsaw technique) returned to their initial groups. Every member of the team had been involved in a different research material and transferred his experience to the remaining members of his initial group. The participants followed a post-cognitive process. As soon as they transferred their experiences from their participation in the previous teams, they discussed and worked in them, tried to assess their results, re-examine and evaluate the ways they participated, as individuals and as members of a team, in the previous phases of research and discuss what they gained from it. Following that, having new research material which needed to be processed, they were called upon to utilize their previous experience and knowledge and apply the principles which emerged from this new knowledge. They were asked to make decisions and organise their strategies in order to solve specific problems (both on a personal and social level), which were related to the reduced emotional and social adequacy of the heroes (persons) of the new material.
After the completion of this phase, all the teams assembled and approached post-cognitively the complete previous experience from their participation in the research, made suggestions and finally went ahead with the summative evaluation, which was based on specific criteria (see evaluation).

7. Evaluation

A formative and summative evaluation was conducted by different teams of evaluators. We will briefly mention the criteria according to which every team evaluated the research process, during the summative evaluation.

A) The pupils: 1) the creation of new knowledge (what did I learn about myself, others etc.), 2) The improvement and change in emotional and social skills (which skills do I feel I improved or acquired?) 3) the usefulness of this improvement (how do I benefit), 4) the change of perception, attitude and behaviours (if and what changed in my way of thinking and the way I react?), 5) the personal satisfaction from their participation in the research.

B) The group of teachers: 1) the degree of success of the aim of the research, 2) the broadening and reinforcement of their emotional and social skills, 3) the effective operation of the groups, 4) the broadening and reinforcement of their teaching practices, 5) the wider knowledge of the personality of their pupils, 6) the degree of their familiarization with the methodology of qualitative research, 7) their personal satisfaction from their participation in the research.

C) A panel of experts (in Psychology, Social Psychology, Qualitative Research): 1) the degree of success of the research aim, 2) The effectiveness as it concerns the conduct of the research, 3) the innovative nature of the research, 4) the consistency in the methodology of qualitative research, 5) the viable prospects of the whole research programme.

D) The person responsible for the research programme: 1) The functionality of the research process (degree of success of the main aim, mistakes, omissions etc), 2) The effectiveness (of the particular phase) of the research 3) The degree of revealed viability of the whole research programme 4) the potential of multiplication dynamics of the research (dissemination of results, involvement of others in the programme), 5) the effectiveness of the role of the person responsible (self-criticism as it concerns the degree of successful coordination and facilitation of the research).

At the end of research, there was a dialectic discussion in every school among pupils, educators and the person responsible for the research concerning the evaluation of the programme. Following that, there were separate meetings of each group (pupils, educators) with the person responsible for the research aiming at the final evaluation of the research.

8. Results

The results (which are mentioned here in a centralised and general way) showed that there were significant improvements (for every participant, at a different degree):

A) In the familiarisation of pupils and teachers with creative group and collaborative techniques which, within an environment of trust, assisted in their creativity and personal development.

B) In the broadening of the perception of pupils as it concerns diversity and change of attitude and behaviour. More specifically: The knowledge and realization of the many forms of diversity. The realization of the diversity of every human being and the creation of a positive attitude towards it. A critical attitude towards self-exclusion, stereotypes, negative reactions and behaviours expressed towards diversity in the social environment. The realisation and respect towards any difference and the uniqueness of the self and others. This was achieved through the highlighting and reinforcement of emotional and social skills (see C, D1 και D2).

C) In the reinforcement of the emotional skills of the participants. More specifically: The recognition and open expression of emotions, the management of emotions, the realization of personal skills, the development of self-respect, the improvement of self-control and the management of negative emotions, the productive self-criticism, the utilisation of the positive «inner dialogue», the realization of influence by his emotional models, the reinforcement
of self-esteem, the improvement of the process of undertaking personal responsibility, the decision making and the solution of a problem, the reinforcement of self-efficacy.

D) In the reinforcement of social skills of the participants. More specifically:

D1) The empathy, the careful listening, the interest in the other, the respect of the other, the understanding of motives, intentions, emotions and behaviours of the other, the management of relationships, the development of dialogue skills, the effective communication, the management of confrontations, the offer of help and support towards the other.

D2) The effective operation of pupils within the groups. More specifically: The active participation in the team and in the development of action towards a common goal, The development of collaboration, the creative mingling of participants through the utilisation of the different knowledge, skills, competences and experiences of each one. The realization of the value of harmonious co-existence with others through the pursuit, highlighting and utilisation of the positive characteristics of others.

F) The teachers (apart from the reinforcement of their own personal development, having had a significantly different role than the one they have in the usual educational activities): Acquired knowledge and techniques on the critical issues of diversity, the highlighting of uniqueness through the reinforcement of emotional and social skills of their pupils. They also obtained exploitable experience for the harmonious and effective operation of the class, had a deeper insight into their pupils’ personalities and they understood more their needs. They enriched their educational strategies and their teaching practices through their participation in the research.

9. Conclusion

The results of this research, which emerged after systematic evaluation from different teams of evaluators and were based on specific categories of criteria, were found to be particularly satisfactory. Finally, it was proven that there can be effective dissemination and utilisation of sociopedagogical practices in social and emotional education.

In our case, the specific sociopedagogical practices focus on a critical issue of our times. That of respect and acceptance of any kind of diversity, the healthy highlighting of the uniqueness of every human being and the realisation of the value of harmonious co-existence with others, through the pursuit, highlighting and utilisation of the positive characteristics of others. It is what Edgar Morin (1999) defined with the word “symbiosophie”, meaning the wisdom of living among others in such a way that can safeguard diversity though unity.

The research showed that the success of these sociopedagogical practices within the school environment was directly related to the efforts for reinforcement and development of the emotional and social skills of the participants. It was proven that the improvement of self-awareness, the ability to express oneself and the management of all emotions and particularly negative ones, the reinforcement of productive self-criticism, self-control, self-esteem, the acceptance of personal responsibility, the improvement of empathy, the social relationship management, the understanding of motives, intentions, emotions and behaviours of the other lead directly and effectively to the acceptance and respect of one’s self and the different other and the interest in effective communication and collaboration with him, focusing on his abilities and his positive characteristics in general.

The research proved that the above improvements (which took place in each one, to a different degree) and their consequences did not concern only the pupils but the teachers who participated in the research, who noted these changes. According to the plan of the general research programme, in a second stage, there is provision for the participation of parents and other members of the pupils’ family and “significant others” for the participants as well as representatives of the local community, policy makers etc. This participation will be accomplished by the utilisation of the Syneducational Model. Syneducation (synergy+education) is defined as the acquisition of a common educational experience, simultaneously and in collaboration, by people of different ages and different knowledge, experiences, interests and/or socio-cultural level. (Kekes & Mylonakou, 2006; Mylonakou & Kekes, 2005). The syneducational model is a new emerging interdisciplinary research field (Mylonakou – Keke, 2009; Mylonakou & Kekes, 2007), in which the participating in the research activities children and adults operate with mutual mentoring, in an interactive learning environment.

The conduct of the present research, due to the combined nature of the specific qualitative research methodologies, also highlighted the dynamics and value of the common and interactive learning experience and the
essential collaborative action of the participants in order to face common problems and improve and change an existing situation.

Throughout this research process which took place inside classrooms, learning was not regarded as a restricted process of linear transmission of knowledge or as individualized learning. It was regarded as a complex perception where theory and practice coexist within a wider frame of social interactions, which create further conditions and opportunities for efficient learning.

It was proven that social and emotional education becomes fruitful and effective when it treats learning not as a process for the linear transfer of knowledge and a restrictive relationship between a learner and an instructor. It became obvious that the operation of teams (of children and adults, within qualitative research methodology) is a necessity. These teams, through their strong interaction and experiential activities, favour effectively the collaborative learning environments. Within this logic, teachers and pupils become collaborators and co-researchers in the process of knowledge and personal development.

10. References


