Formative approaches for socio-emotional development of preschoolers

Lorena Peculea\textsuperscript{a}, Mușata Bocoș\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Specialized Department with Psychopedagogical Profile, No. 15, Constantin Daicoviciu Street, Cluj-Napoca, 400020, Romania

\textsuperscript{b}Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, No. 7, Sindicatelor Street, Cluj-Napoca, 400029, Romania

Abstract

The objective of this paper was revealing how preschool children's sociability varies over time and is influenced by kindergarten activities. We formulated the hypothesis that kindergarten activities contribute to emotional and social skills development depending on the level of preschool age, showing little difference between sexes. The research mainly focused on the dynamics of change on a group level by observing the behaviors manifested in 82 preschoolers in little, middle (compared to other 15 children who don’t attend kindergarten) and high group. The educational implications are highlighted in order to understand the contributions of kindergarten activities in socio-emotional development.

Keywords: social and emotional skills; sociability; developmental domains.

1. Focus of the paper

The entire human development is stimulated by socialization processes through which it is ensured an effective social integration. The formative influences are at first exerted on the child by family and secondly, in a more methodical and systematically way through educational institutions and the society as a whole, which gives him models for action and conduct. In this paper we want to point out the extent to which activities carried out in the kindergarten may influence the children's sociability, which enables them to live together with others and to establish social interactions and relationships.

2. Theoretical framework for the study

Sociability as the feature that facilitates the adjustment, is developed by the integration of numerous specific skills that have the same general adaptive significance for the person, in relation to the external environment conditions. The preschool child shows a strong desire to establish social interactions, but as he is not generally sociable, he learns through specific units of learning, to reach a socially adaptive and expressive behavior. In a generally accepted assertion, socialization means assimilating the social experience (knowledge, roles, rules, ideals); building the actionable capabilities, the personality traits and the social intelligence; developing needs, motives and personal and collective aspirations. In psychology the child's socialization process is viewed as an essential aspect of his personality development, as researches in this direction are relying on theories of outstanding personalities like L.S. Vîgotski, J. Piaget, H. Wallon. In early childhood the primary socialization represents precisely this transformation process of children into real social human beings, through basic values learning, language development and non-cognitive development (along with the cognitive one). This process has a deeply
emotional character, opposed to the other forms of socialization oriented towards emotional neutrality, namely the *secondary and continuous socialization*. From a way of thinking involved in movement and perception, the child will reach, the capacity to make judgments fitting his mental development, but only in the presence of language and with help from the adult (Cosmovici, A., 2006).

Entrance to kindergarten is an important social event for the preschool child and the adjustment process to the new situation is not very easy. Besides the teacher's role in secondary socialization, researches have shown preschool children's increasing tendency to contact other children of his age and the importance of the same-aged group. In this group the need of belonging, self-esteem and safety are satisfied, the emotional and character maturity is achieved and the communication networks crystallize. Studies have shown that emotional immaturity leads later to frustration and emotional conflicts that generate deviance (Preda apud Bonchis, 2007). The adaptation, including the group adaptation, is made as accommodation and assimilation of what is important in the group’s characteristics, of the demands imposed on them and of the acceptance offers (Vincent, R., 2003). There is overwhelming evidence that the growth and development of social and emotional domains in the early years affect health, wellbeing and competence of children throughout life (Denham, S., 2006). Research conducted by Denham stresses the importance of social and emotional skills in school preparation for future academic performances. Moreover, the research of child psychology (Schaffer, R., 2005) demonstrated the correlation between academic success and socio-emotional competence. The emotional competence has a very important role in the adaptation of the preschool child's environment, it supports the cognitive development in preschool period, the pre-academic acquisitions, the school readiness and adaptation, both directly and indirectly through its contributions to social regulation and self-regulation (Carlton, M., & Winsler, A., 1999).

The kindergarten education is a set of demarches, that values a comprehensive approach: socio-emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, psycho-motor. The true education - said J. Dewey (1971) - follows from enhancing the child's ability by demands of the social situations environment.

*Curriculum for preschool education in Romania*, published in 2008, brings to the attention of teachers working in early education, *developmental domains* of child from 0-7 years among which the socio-emotional development is also found. This involves developing the socio-emotional skills, the training and social life debut of the child early age and developing the self-image. This curriculum promotes the concept of comprehensive development of the child, believed to be central in early childhood and emphasizes the importance of child developmental domains outlined in the *Fundamental benchmarks of early learning and development of child between 0-7 years*, and also illustrating their links with the content of experiential areas of the curriculum structure. In this curriculum, the learning activities represent the set of actions with a planned, systematic, methodical, intensively organized character and managed by the teacher in order to achieve the aims of early education. The three categories of kindergarten learning activities that address in an integrated manner the contents are as follows: activities based on experiential domains, chosen games and educational activities and personal development activities. The latter contributes greatly to achieving the aims of socio-emotional education.

The didactic activities and the games are components with formative valences that structure the development directions of the child's personality, which is given the chance of an optimal integration, translated by the possibility of solving tasks that require effort, will, cooperation, perseverance, respecting the interests and work of those around him, formation of positive attitude towards work and education of moral and aesthetic feelings. The activities have a specific structure that includes a didactic charge - the problem that the child needs to solve within the game, acquiring in this way certain knowledge or skills; rules and game elements, all consistent with the need for creative and personal expression of great depth in this moment (Debess, M., 2009).
In kindergarten the instructional and educational tasks harmoniously blend with the fun side, realizing the desired learning through play. Educational effectiveness also depends on ensuring consistency between topics, the subject of the action, the level of mental development, age and internal structure of personality (Verza, E., 2006); activities in kindergarten with children between 3-5 years are directed towards socializing, while those for children between 5-7 years aim to prepare for school. Both categories of activities have in common the aim of preparing children for future social life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objective

The paper is based on a practical research, by which we tried to illustrate sociability's the degree and forms of manifestation, as personality trait that is initially learned within the family, and then developed through especially designed activities in preschool education.

The objectives that formed the basis of research were:
1. Investigating the way in which the preschool children sociability varies over time (from one year to another) under the influence of kindergarten activities.
2. Investigating the way and the degree in which kindergarten activities, according to their specific, contribute to the development of sociability.
3. Discovering possible differences between girls and boys regarding the degree and forms of sociability manifestation.

3.2. Participants

The total number of subjects included in research is 97, of which 82 are preschoolers enrolled in kindergarten in little, high and middle groups, and 15 subjects are preschoolers that were not enrolled in kindergarten until the survey. Of the 82, 17 are in the small group, 16 in the middle group and 49 in the high group. Referring to the structure of the sample based on gender, it is as follows: 44 male subjects and 53 female subjects.

3.3. Research hypothesis

The basic hypothesis: we assume that activities carried out in kindergarten contribute to emotional and social skills development, depending on the level of preschool age, these competences manifesting easily differentiated between girls and boys.

The secondary hypothesis:
- We suppose that there is a significant increase from one year to another of social and emotional skills at preschooler under the influence of kindergarten activities, less emphasized in little and middle groups and more emphasized in high group.
- We consider that within the kindergarten activities, besides the play opportunities offered to children, kindergarten teachers should also conduct specific activities that allow them to effectively guide children's behavior, thus developing their social and emotional skills.
- We suppose that there are differences between girls and boys, regarding the manifestation forms and degree of emotional and social competences.

3.4. Instruments

The transversal research strategy was used, which involves the research of many individuals at different levels of development, and as the research methods we used experiment, observation and investigation. This investigative approach is predominantly quantitative, as the investigative tools used to be the following: an
observation protocol of sociability forms and an appreciation sheet of sociability being offered to educators for completing.

The observation protocol of sociability main indicators was elaborated after ‘The Child’ Knowledge and Evaluation Sheet’ presented by E. Verza and F.E. Verza (1994) and after the categories system used by Robert F. Bales, system that includes twelve interactional categories, arranged in positive and negative pairs, ordered in two dimensions related to: emotional behavior and intellectual behavior. For the research we considered the dimension regarding the socio-emotional domain. The tool used is built on three sociability dimensions aiming at aspects related to: social adaptation, social capacity and socio-emotional integration. The social adaptation is characterized by the integration level in the group's collective and by the child's expansion degree in collectivity. The social capacities are reflected in autonomy, initiative and the absence of conflict with colleagues, in conflicts resolution and ability to act in accordance with the spontaneous directed purpose. The socio-emotional integration refers to socio-affective relationships, socio-affective factors necessary for further social integration.

The Preschool Children's Sociability Assessment Sheet is identical in substance to the observation protocol. The difference between the two instruments consists in two aspects: the way of evaluating and the person making the evaluation. Regarding the first point, in the sheet's case, for each of the 13 items of the original observation protocol, the estimations degrees agreed in digits were established by awarding points: 5 points - very large extent until 1 point - very small extent. The person conducting the assessment is either the educator, for children enrolled in kindergarten, either one of the parents, if children were not and are not enrolled in kindergarten.

4. Results

Before proceeding to the hypothesis testing, we propose to realize a content validity check of the instruments used, to analyze the items’ internal consistency. After calculating the alpha Cronbach coefficient for the observation protocol dimensions, we had to eliminate an item from the second dimension (social ability), as the other two dimensions (social adjustment and socio-emotional integration) remained unchanged. As a result of this item elimination and of statistical procedure resuming the alpha Cronbach value of 0.641 was reached. From the Sociability Assessment Sheet, the same item was removed for the same reasons, achieving an alpha Cronbach coefficient of 0.662. It is necessary to try a convergent validity checking of the observation protocol, too. Pearson correlation coefficients indicate the presence of strong positive correlations between the variables of those two categories, which shows the correlation between the appreciations of the observer (researcher) and those of the educators and parents.

Thus, in a first phase, we proposed to compare the results obtained from the preschool children observation of three groups selected (a little group, a middle group and a high one). The independent variable represented by age is non-parametrical, while the dependent variable represented by recorded scores using the observation protocol is a parametrical variable measured on an interval scale. Thus, instead of a repeated application of t-test for independent samples we can apply, as statistical procedure, the unifactorial analysis of variance (the unifactorial ANOVA), as we are interested in the variation of each sociability manifestation forms in relation to age. A preliminary condition of variance analysis is variance homogeneity checking by Levene statistical test. Whereas the significance level is higher than 0.05, we can state that the homogeneity condition is fulfilled. Among post-hoc tests, calculated after applying ANOVA procedure, we selected the Bonferroni test in which data shows that there is a progressive increase of preschool children sociability under the influence of kindergarten activities.
In the second phase, we carried out a natural experiment in which we measured the sociability degree of preschool children enrolled in kindergarten (the middle group) and of those who were not enrolled in kindergarten until this research. Comparing the results obtained from the first observations in the two subjects groups, we found that there are no significant differences regarding the sociability degree on any of the three dimensions (social adaptation, social capacity and socio-emotional integration). After comparing the scores resulting from preschool children observation after a period of six months, although there are significant differences between first and second sociability measurement in both groups, a higher increase of sociability was found at children attending kindergarten compared to the children in the other group.

The second hypothesis shows the influence that different types of kindergarten activities have on the development of preschool children sociability, namely intellectual education activities (cognitive-oriented goals) and moral education and chosen activities (designed to achieve objectives such as emotional, moral and psychosocial nature). From the data analysis for verifying the homogeneity of variance by Levene statistical test, it results that the homogeneity condition is fulfilled (the significance level is higher than 0.05). The unifactorial ANOVA results lead us to the idea that between the three subjects groups (experimental and control) there are no significant differences for any of the three sociability manifestations. (Table 3)

As a result of variance analysis and of Bonferroni test we found that at the second measurement the significant differences have been registered mainly between the experimental groups (the sociability degree being much higher for the group that focused on moral education and chosen activities compared to the other group focused on intellectual education activities) and between each experimental group and the control group. Thus, in the control group there was a significantly higher sociability degree than the experimental group in which intellectual education activities were mainly conducted and a significantly lower one than in the experimental group in which were mostly conducted moral education activities and chosen activities. Thus, we conclude that the hypothesis according to which different types of kindergarten activities influence the evolution of preschool children sociability, is confirmed.
By the third hypothesis we intend to check the differences between girls and boys of preschool age who attend kindergarten regarding the sociability degree.

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<th>Social adaptation</th>
<th>Social capacity</th>
<th>Socio-emotional integration</th>
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<td>Little group</td>
<td>Middle group</td>
<td>High group</td>
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<td>T</td>
<td>Sig.(2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social adaptation</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>.641</td>
<td>1.993*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social capacity</td>
<td>.989</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>1.451</td>
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<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>2.354*</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>2.578*</td>
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<td>integration</td>
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As we anticipated when we formulated the hypothesis, there is a tendency for older aged girl groups to obtain higher scores at social adaptation and socio-emotional integration, while older aged boy groups have been appreciated as having higher social capacity. Girls from middle and high groups have a higher social adaptation and socio-emotional integration than boys. We put this fact on the account of a faster affective maturity achieved by girls, rather than boys. On the other hand, boys have higher social ability, which can be attributed to greater involvement in activity through the intellectual component.

5. Discussions

The objective of this paper was to reveal how preschool children's sociability varies over time and how it is influenced by kindergarten activities, using methods and techniques selected according to the psycho-physiological particularities of the little, middle and high preschool child's age. Concluding the experimental research data we can say that methodology, which was based on methods and techniques of collecting and processing additional data, allowed us to obtain information about: the contribution that kindergarten brings in sociability development due to the specific activities designed for this age stage; the different manifestation of sociability at representatives of the two genders; the contribution that each type of activity carried out in kindergarten brings to the development of certain aspects of the child's personality, mainly on its sociability.

1. From the research data a series of specific considerations can be drawn related to the degree and forms of sociability for each age group, so we recommend the structuring of a varied and flexible program of activities, constantly adapted to the preschool group requirements. The idea of activities’ flexibility and variety that focus on children's sociability development is drawn from the pragmatic particularities of working with preschoolers, requiring planning and careful organization of kindergarten activities, to attract preschool children’s involvement in their development. At the same time, we refer to the action of teacher mediation, which has to engage each child in the educational process, to involve him in the task, to redirect negative behaviors, if these occur, towards positive behaviors, in order to develop his personality features necessary for further integration in in a collective system such as collectivities and school communities. The results obtained from testing the hypothesis which considers the variation sociability in relation to age under the influence of kindergarten activities, indicate that there are significant differences regarding the sociability forms for each of the three groups of preschoolers: little, middle and high group. Thus, it can be stated that the especially designed activities lead, from year to year, to progressive increase of the sociability and to accentuated desire to contact with others. In conclusion, this hypothesis particularly aimed the sociability variation depending on age as well as the development of emotional competences based on the age level.

2. The experiment which aimed to highlight the influences of different types of activities on children's sociability results in significant differences between the group
that focused on common activities aiming at predominantly intellectual goals and the group that carried out especially chosen activities guided by affective, moral and psychosocial objectives. We believe that practicing the chosen activities, guided by moral, emotional and psychosocial objectives is appropriate, causing significant benefits in the personal and relational area with effects on children's behavioral development and optimization, increased sociability and interpersonal responsiveness. The chosen preschool activities offer children the opportunity to experience emotions and feelings with others, to discover themselves and to discover others, to discover the joy of being together with others, all as the advantages of a positive and harmonious interrelationships.

3. Concerning the revealing of differences between preschool girls and boys attending kindergarten, we found that the differences at sociability forms are significant for middle and high group and non-existent for little group due to low levels of cohesion, as it is a beginning, newly established group. The difference is significant for middle and high groups: girls obtained higher scores regarding social adaptation and socio-emotional integration. Many of the social phenomena are different in the two genders. In these circumstances, we find slight differences between male and female subjects in the preschool period in terms of the degree and the forms of sociability.

6. Conclusions

The conclusion drawn from the research is that preschool education should provide all ways and means to facilitate the integration of children into peer groups and to develop their sociability, creating favorable conditions to build an inter-children network. Given that it was found how kindergarten has an impact on child development, finally we present some aspects of child education:

- Elaborating the content of activities on preschool children's education has to take into account the child's maturity level so that there is a constant balance between types, as it is recommended to be conceived and organized according to age.
- Educating the preschool child must be made in an educational environment suitable for continually fostering the spontaneous and authentic learning and to form him as an autonomous and self-conscious personality, through organizing and having experiences of learning, taking into account the requirements of the future and the need to produce desired changes in the child's behavior today.

This paper offers just a few pragmatic guidelines with formative and informative value in conducting learning activities that can be adapted or improved, depending on the creativity of each teacher and each child's need. Also, it must not be forgotten that social and emotional skills development are just one facet of the child's development and have to be consistently grown through activities organized specifically for this purpose.

References