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SUPPORTING PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-ESTEEM THROUGH SOCIAL SKILL TRAINING

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Abstract. The aim of this research article is to bring theory of child's development through primary school and theory of social skills training into practice. Knowing the background of child's development, can provide us with an answer on their current development milestones and how to support them and their needs. Our focus was on their social skills, more specifically character education. We hypothesize, that children with better knowledge of their personality traits, which can be developed through social skills training, generally perform better in school (academically, emotionally, behaviourally). We selected five activities that promote the targeted topic and carried them out among students from 4th to 7th grade. Class teachers were additionally involved in training with their students, as they were responsible for transferring methods of self-esteem promotion through strengthening individuals' personality traits in everyday school activities. Character education is used as starting point for further self-esteem enhancement.

Key words: development, social skills, personality traits, self-esteem, activities

Introduction

1. Four main areas of child development

Primary school is a time of substantial development changes, ranging from emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development. From entering school at 6 years old and leaving it at 15, changes are significant. Therefore, all educators should be equipped with knowledge about approaching and supporting children with their growing needs.

Emotionally, children at this age start expressing their feelings through words and show empathy towards their peers. Looking at themselves they can be critical and insecure. As they obtain more sense of themselves in the world, their emotions get more complex. Their fears get more real, and they face feelings of anxiety. Overwhelming new feelings can be shown in form of volatility ("Stages of Childhood Development", 2020).

Cognitive development reflects in prolonged attention spans. Additionally, they can conduct more complicated tasks. They require less adult supervision at managing and organising schoolwork. They are naturally curious and ask several questions about their surroundings. In 4th grade, when academical demands increase, children that thrive will continue to do well, while those who struggle have a hard time reaching classroom demands. As mentioned, their emotions start to heighten, affecting their ability to think clearly in particular situations ("Stages of Childhood Development", 2020).

Physically, primary school children face a wide range of development milestones, from development in body shape and size, losing their baby teeth, to coarser teenage skin. Their motor skills get well coordinated, smooth and precise (Positive Parent Guide, 2012).

Muscles get stronger, they can jump, throw, catch, and run more quickly and accurately. Optimal physical development is very important as it affects children's behaviour, how others see them and how they perceive themselves (Susiluwati, A. and Suwarjo, 2020).

Socially, they are moving from spending time alone and are eager to be a part of social group. Opinions of others start to matter, and as peer relationships take on more importance, they can experience increased susceptibility towards them. At the same time, this is a phase where strong boundaries should be established, so they can feel safe (Positive Parenting Guide, 2012). They are able to separate right from wrong, what is moral and what is fair, and usually have no problem accepting that their behaviour demands discipline and correction. Around the age of 10, girls and boys start to present distinctive social development. Girls are more prone to forming groups and being either part of it or isolated. On the other hand, boys have easier time establishing friendships linked to their mutual interests, rather than close personal feelings ("Stages of Childhood Development", 2020).

2. Supporting development through social skills learning activities – introducing character education

UNICEF (2019) categorizes social skills as soft, non-cognitive life skills and therefore crucial for children to acquire. They help and target all abovementioned areas of development, from ability to integrate cognition and regulate emotion to improved academic achievements, mental health and finally resulting in better physical state (Sørli, M., Amlund Hagen, K., and others, 2021). Most distinguished psychologist who has worked on cognitive therapy since 1950s was Albert Bandura. He is the founder of cognitive therapy and social learning theory (SLT), which is based on the idea of our social knowledge coming from observation, imitation, and assimilation of the observed behaviour (Nabavi, 2012). Being part of any social group, especially in a school setting, where children spend most of their time, affects their characters development, among other things (A Framework for Character Education, 2017). The idea of character education being a part of school curriculum has already been proposed and has been a part of many international contexts. More recently, talks have been ongoing about the implementation of the "three Rs" – resilience, respect and responsibility" into the school curriculum. Countries such as the USA and Great Britain have already started increasing government funding for character education (Bates, 2019).

In our empirical study we employed character education as a significant part of social and emotional development, through workshops of social skill training.

3. Methodology

The activities for developing a better sense of students' personality traits were carried out among 3rd, 4th, 6th, and 7th graders at the beginning of school year during social skills classes/workshops. Class teachers were actively involved in activities, which created a safer space for students as well as a common feeling of their class connectiveness. To support these two elements, chairs were positioned in a circular layout, so that students could see each other. For all below listed activities at least 3 lessons (duration of lesson 35 min) are required. Each activity must be evaluated by students. Those who were willing to share their experience were asked what they liked or did not like in a certain activity, what would they change, and how it made them feel. Their answers were used for learning experience and to draw parallels with their use in everyday life. When there was not enough time for discussion, they were asked to raise their thumbs if they liked the activity or lower them if they did not like it. If they could not decide, they set their finger in horizontal position. The list of performed activities is listed below (in order of application).

What are personality traits? (Opening activity)

A good first step in any group activity is to ask the students about their existing knowledge/experience about the discussed topic. That way the level of opening activity can be adjusted accordingly. For this activity we prepared and used laminated cards which had

dyslexics friendly fonts such as Arial, Comic sans, and Helvetica. A personality trait was written on each card. We divided them in two sections: pink cards (easy words) and blue cards (advanced words). When working with younger students (3rd and 4th grade), only pink cards were used, otherwise the cards were mixed. A card was set in the middle of the circle and every student picked one and had to explain it. The class teacher or other children could help the student if he/she needed help.

This is my friend... (communication activity).

After the students got familiar with words used for description of personality traits, a game can be played, called This is my friend. Every child in the group raises their left hand and places it on a classmate on their left side. They take a good look at them and try to find at least one positive personality trait. They have a minute or two to think of a trait. Afterwards they let go of their classmate and start to describe them. They start with: "This is my friend, his name is.... He is very creative and funny". The game is over when everyone describes their classmate.

I would like to sit with... (group game).

This game can be played after This is my friend. For this activity students must sit in a circle with one empty chair. Student who has an empty chair on their left side starts the game with: "I would like to sit with someone that is athletic". Everyone that thinks of themselves as athletic, stands up and sits on the empty chair. Every child should get a chance to invite someone to sit with them. This activity is great for class teachers to observe students' behaviour, because it shows them what type of friends individual students usually choose. They can also observe, if students recognize their own positive personality traits or if judgment of themselves is true or false. This is a variation of a game found in *Interaktivne igre za spodbujanje in krepitev življenjskih veščin* (2011).

If I would be an animal (individual drawing activity).

For this activity every student needed a piece of paper and something to draw (pencil, colour pencil, crayons...). Before the start, they should be reminded of what they already know and have learned about personality traits. In the first part of the activity, they must consider their own personality traits and think about an animal that is known for or possesses similar traits and draw it. When they were done drawing, we arranged chairs in a circular layout and put all the drawings on the floor inside the circle. It is also possible to sit on the floor.

In the second part, students look at the drawings in front of them. They must pick at least three animal drawings and write one personality trait that comes to their minds on each of them. When they are done, the class teacher shows them each drawing, reads their ideas and comments if necessary. Hopefully, new ideas arise. From this point on, the game can continue with two options. In the first option, the students can guess which of the drawings represents which student. This option is recommended in a class with positive climate and firm friendships. In the second option, the activity ends by giving the student an option to collect their drawings individually from the class teacher. That way they can re-read all the positive personality traits that their classmates indirectly wrote about them.

What I like about myself? (Individual self-reflecting activity)

At the beginning of the lesson, class teachers and students discussed past activities. Each student wrote one personality trait on the blackboard. Afterwards, they received worksheets with the following questions and tasks (Žunko Vogrinc in Mičič, 2021):

- Write some of your personality traits (good and bad).
- List personality traits, that you are especially proud of.
- For which of these traits do your parents compliment you the most?
- For which of these traits do your teachers compliment you the most?
- For what reasons do your friends like to hang out with you?
- When do you like yourself the most?

- Name the activities you are good at.

After they were done, the students were asked to share some of their answers with the group. At the end of the session, they were asked to take the worksheets home and show them to their parents. Finally, they were encouraged to talk about what they learned and ask their parents to answer these questions as well.

4. Results and discussion

These activities were prepared as introduction to self-esteem workshops, which are planned in the second half of the school year. Class teachers are reporting weak knowledge and low level of motivation for schoolwork, which often results as emotional distress/frustration or behavioural problems/outbursts in the classroom. We wanted to give students the tools that will help and empower them in situations where they feel like they are not good or competent enough. Students with this characteristic usually interrupt class work with inappropriate comments, with the intention of being noticed. Furthermore, it can be a student, that tears their paper in anger, because they cannot get anything done the right way, despite their best effort.

The purpose of these activities was to show them the strengths they possess. A struggle of naming positive personality traits was observed during the first activity. The most common answer was "I am good or nice." When we showed them cards with personality traits, they comprehended almost all of them and could easily connect them with their classmates. Afterwards, they were able to come up with new ideas and required less reminders and help with naming them at each subsequent workshop. Interestingly, they never felt the need to name negative personality traits.

At the second (This is my friend) and third activity (I would like to sit with) they all wanted to take part, therefore we took time and played the game as long as everyone had a part in it. The third activity showed us with which personality traits they feel comfortable to ascribe to themselves and which make them uncomfortable. For example, they had no problem with personality traits such as athletic or funny (good humour) but were embarrassed to admit being smart or organised. This could be culturally determined, as Slovenians are known to be modest and humble. We even have a saying that good products/deeds speak for themselves and do not need an additional praise.

In our experience with the fourth activity, students (especially in higher grades) are often burdened with aesthetics of the drawing. The most important thing of this activity are their ideas. We could notice that many girls drew cats and described them as cute and playful. On the other hand, boys usually drew wild animals because of their speed. Some students drew uncommon animals, for example a sloth, an eagle, and a dolphin. If some animals (unknown/unusual ones) don't get picked, a class teacher can take them and write down the ideas about their personality.

Last activity was the only one where the students had to directly think about their strengths and personality traits. Here they had to use the obtained knowledge and praise themselves, something they are not used to do.

Conclusion

Workshops were positively accepted by students and teachers. Both commented that they would enjoy additional contents like this. After observing in practice how hard it was for children to name their positive personality traits, we evaluated our own educational practices. Too often we compliment or coment children's good deeds and forget about their personality traits which are responsible for getting things done.

There are some shortcomings that should be addressed on a national level:

- No additional funding for social skills training. Every class has needs for this kind of preventive activities, but social workers can only do a few hours a year in each class, as these activities take lots of time for planning and evaluating. Schools are left to their own finacal resaurces and resaurcfullnes of their headmaster. In our case activities were carried out by special education teachers as part of their extra curriculom work.

- No extra planned time in curriculum for social skills training. When we were putting this class on children's timetables, there was no free time in which we could perform the activities. Because of all the extracurricular classes that children have it is extremely hard to find an available term for all to join. With 6th and 7th grades we decided to put this as a part of their class meetings, 3rd, and 4th grade's schedules are more flexible as they still have one class teacher, so we incorporated them in their monthly curriculum.

Our wish for the future is, that we could offer these activities in every grade and class at least one a month. This way you can monitor the development of individuals and class climate. Furthermore, these are also prevention activities that support every school's value of mutual respect, responsibility, safety, knowledge and creativity.

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