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THE ROLE PLAYED BY SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PREVENTING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The subject of bullying is approached in this paper, and in this purpose a case study was made in Poiana Codrului School (Satu Mare County, Romania), with 24 subjects (7 boys and 17 girls), all of them attending the preparatory class, secondary level. The study was made between October 2020 and May 2021. The objective of the pedagogical research is: Establishing the appropriate expression of emotions and the level of communication of the students in the interaction with children and adults in the preparatory class, as well as the design of the didactic activity. Accordingly, to the results of this study we concluded that the involvement of the teacher and the activities of personal development play an important role in this aspect, and prevent bullying. The social engagement and the formative experiment raised the level of empathy and increased the interaction between them, also the carried out activities contributed to the development of their social and emotional skills, they became more aware of themselves and also more empathic. Because we want to achieve an increase in the personal and social development of students, as well as in their performances, based on socio-emotional activities aimed at preventing and combating the phenomenon of bullying in school, I believe that an optional on this topic can and also it must find its place in the instructional-educational activities carried out in the preparatory class.

Keywords: Bullying, development, Poiana Codrului, students

1. Introduction

The current article aims at highlighting the type of bullying that exists among children. Bullying represents a form of abuse that is an obstacle in the way of well-being and harmonious development of children. It can manifest itself in different ways, from mere neglect to complex forms of physical and emotional abuse etc. Some mental and emotional symptoms due to bullying are depression, anxiety, ADHD, ASPD disorder and in some cases also suicide attempts can appear (Veronica, 2022).

Let's not forget that also in Romania there are more and more cases that lead to suicides as a result of bullying, this is why school is very important in prevention (ICB, 2019).

The worrying aspect of bullying is that these dysfunctional feelings, as well as the lack of the ability to build positive interpersonal relationships, menace the school performance of a number of children and the development of a group that has a solid cohesion. The study aims at proving that the organization of activities of self-development by the teacher, within the framework of the primary school curriculum, has a significant impact upon the prevention of bullying among primary school children. In the recent years, bullying has crossed the acceptable boundaries, being more and more present in Romanian society, even in the school environment, where children are supervised and where they work in a microsystem (Dumitru & Ciucă, 2019).

.My belief is that as long as the teacher's goal is to create a school environment that fosters respect of each and child, by supporting the primary school student to assert his/her own value and encouraging an environment of trust, safety and support, the phenomenon of bullying will be significantly reduced. If this is not controlled, the aggressive-behavioural character intensifies, accentuates the occurrence of bullying and cyber bullying, and as a result the level of aggression is transmitted (Mureșan, 2020; Mureșan & Stan, 2021).

The prevention and attitude of children towards bullying depends a lot on their parents, on what is transmitted in the family and how is the relationship between parent and child (Cheianu & Sâmboteanu, 2019).

2. Material and Method

The concept of "field of development" was used for the first time between the two world wars. One of the first specialists in analysing child development from birth was the American psychologist Arnold Gesell (AAF, 2016). At the age of 6, children experience an event of a great importance: the shift from the status of preparatory class student to that of primary school student. The constraints in terms of behaviour are significant in their turn, as children have to sit throughout most of the school activity, provide answers solely when asked, and formulate complex and complete answers (Busch, 2018). If until this stage the main activity was play, the enrolment to primary school entails a focus on learning, which is intellectually intense and contributes to the development of useful learning capacity and strategies. Children learn at the same time reading and writing, which will enable them to acquire new knowledge and develop other skills. They become familiar with the need to be competitive and reach achievements. The parent-child bond is affected as well, as parents become more observant of characteristics such as

hyperactivity. Parents should be attentive if they use bullying words or gestures with a sexual meaning (Olweus et al., 2019).

2.1. Traits of social development that characterize the age of 6 to 7

At this age, children assign a great importance to their group of friends, they choose friends of the same age as them, based on common interests, support and personality, they compete with other children in order to become group leaders, have an increased interest in playing with other children, they share toys, collaborate with group members in order to complete a common task, involve themselves in games with rules or symbols, manifest jealousy among siblings, and assume responsibilities in order to complete tasks (Damian et al., 2010).

2.2. Traits of emotional development that characterize the age of 6 to 7

The affectivity of children is relatively unstable at this stage, children recognize and name the majority of the feelings, they are empathetic, identify feelings based on facial expression and context, respect the rules of expressing feelings in certain social contexts, convey affective message verbally and non-verbally, establish their own rules of emotional management in different situations of game or social interaction, can experience emotional disorder, such as lying, stealing, defying rules, they express their sadness, anxiety and are sensitive to praise and criticism, they begin to keep feelings, hopes and thoughts to themselves (Damian et al., 2010).

2.3. The phenomenon of "bullying"

The term "bullying" has been used beginning with the 16th century. At that time, "my bully" meant, as revealed by an etymological connection with the Danish word "boele", "my dear". Although it was used a century later with its current meaning, it was only in the 20th century that it acquired all the definitions that it has nowadays. When used a verb, "to bully" means to intimidate, scare, dominate, as a "bully" is defined as someone who uses his/her power to scare or hurt the weaker persons.

In Romania, bullying is regulated by the Law of National Education No. 1/2011, at article 7, after paragraph (1), a new paragraph was introduced (1^1), by the new Law 221/2019 (which completes and modifies the previous one), and it should be underlined that Romania occupies the 3rd place in Europe as far as bullying is concerned, based on a report of World Health Organization. It is important to make a difference between impoliteness, meanness, and bullying, so that the teachers and school administrators, the counsellors, the police, those who work with the young, parents and children know when to intervene. This is particularly significant, as the rate of bullying in school decreases significantly when adults have a similar understanding of what bullying means (and of what it does not), and agree to intervene in consistent ways every time they become aware that bullying occurs (Whitson, 2017). Thus, although a widely spread problem among children, bullying can be controlled when we do not let the false alarms to overwhelm us.

Bullying can be of four types: physical bullying (which includes the hit, the hit with the fist/the leg, the seizure or destruction of somebody else's goods, and other types of behaviour that involve

physical violence), relational bullying (which includes the mock, the teasing, the insult, the comments with sexual connotation, the threats, which are types of bullying that the parents advised their children to simply ignore), cybernetic bullying (which is a form of aggression that involves technology).

Bullying is always a process that, in time, contributes to the imbalance of power, with a frequency and intensity that vary. Children who act as aggressors are exposed to a greater risk of antisocial and delinquent behaviour. Depression is considered to be the major mental health problem caused by bullying (Rigby, 1996). The aggressed children are marginalized, unhappy and have low self-esteem. They often experience anxiety, and feel ashamed, or even guilty for what has happened to them. At school they are often lonely, have no friends, and feel abandoned (Salavastru, 2003). Bullying can have a negative impact not only on their mental health, but also on their academic results, and it can weaken their motivation to attend school and learn.

2.4. Indicators of bullying

Children have a relatively linear conduct, their family, teachers and mates being familiar with it. Any divergence from this linearity, at cognitive, emotional, or behavioural level, can be considered a symptom that the school student suffered from the consequences of bullying. The student can experience one of the following symptoms:

i.   does not attend school or is often late to classes;

ii.   cannot cope with homework, and has a visible low performance, mirrored in poorer grades;

iii. is often lonely and excluded from the group activities during the breaks by the other students, seems to be upset, tense, has tears in his/her eyes, is dejected or helpless;

iv.   the other students snitch on him, he/she is treated seriously but others, for instance he/she is not appreciated by others because of their appearance, he/she become very nervous when speaking in front of the peers (Netzelmann & Angelova, 2016).

The characters of bullying: The aggressor, The victim, The adepts (active and passive), The Onlookers, The helpers, The teacher, The family.

The aim of the current study is to analyse the ways in the activities of social and emotional development can contribute to the prevention of bullying.

The objective of the current pedagogical research is to establish the proper way of expressing feelings and the level of communication in the case of the interaction with children and adults at preparatory class level, so that the teaching activity can be designed.

The hypothesis of the study: If the teacher organizes and completes activities of personal development, within the framework of the primary school curriculum, there can be noticed a significant contribution to the prevention of bullying among preparatory class students.

2.5. Sample of subjects

The sample of subjects is made of 24 students, 7 boys and 17 girls, of the preparatory class D of the Secondary School in Poiana Codrului, Satu Mare County.

The children belong to well-organized families, with a family environment and parent engagement that favours their cognitive development, all of them being of Romanian ethnicity.

As far as the occupation status is concerned, 5% of the mothers are housewives or retirees, the other parents being employed or having businesses of their own. The financial situation of the families is a good and very good one, which makes it possible for them to ensure the resources necessary for high-quality education.

The didactic methods used were the observation and psycho-pedagogical experiment.

The psycho-pedagogical experiment was completed between October 2020 and May 2021, October being the ascertaining stage, and May, the one which focused on the pedagogical experiment proper.

The observation scale focused on the following components:

1.How children express their feelings through games and artistic activities.

2.How children speak about their feelings, and a adopt a facial expression that is in accordance with the verbal message.

3.How children ask for details or help when experiencing a tense situation.

4.How children establish out of their own initiative positive and respectful relationships with children of their own age/peers.

5.How children offer help to the peers who feel that they are marginalized/excluded by the other classmates.

6.How children respect simple rules of participation in games, when in smaller or larger groups, as players or leaders, and how they manifest their fair-play (lose/gain).

7.How children express their disapproval of incorrect behaviour.

8.How children solve conflicts within the group by using different strategies (speaking first, and then asking for adult help).

Integrated disciplines: Communication in Romanian, Personal Development, Visual Arts and Practical Skills, Music and Movement.

3.   The Results of the Study

By analysing the behaviour of children throughout the pre-test, I completed the scale for each child, and I graded the behaviour on a scale from 1 to 5. Thus, the expression of their feelings through games was rendered as follows: always—12%, seldom--24%, sometimes—35%, often—29%, never—12%.

As far as the second behaviour is concerned, 18% of the children observed speak seldom about their feelings, 29% speak sometimes about them, 41% speak frequently, and 12% always speak about their own feelings. For the indicator of frequency „never", there are no representatives (0%).

Regarding the third behaviour, 12% seldom ask for information or adult help when they go through a tense situation, 41% do so sometimes, 29% ask frequently for information or adult help, and 18% never do so. For the indicator of frequency "never", there are no representatives (0%).

As far as the fourth behaviour is concerned, 18% establish positive and respectful relationship with children of their own age sometimes, while 53% do so frequently. For the indicator of frequency "never", there are no representatives (0%).

In terms of the fifth behaviour, 47% of the children who belong to the sample never offer voluntary help, 29% offer seldom help, 12% do so sometimes, and 12% offer frequently help to their peers. For the indicator of frequency "never", there are no representatives (0%).

Regarding the sixth behaviour, 35% seldom respect the participation rules, 35% respect the participation rules sometimes, and 30% do so frequently. For the indicator of frequency "never", there are no representatives (0%).

In terms of behaviour, number seven, 18% of the children observed never express their disapproval of incorrect behaviour, 12% seldom do so, 29% express their disapproval sometimes, and 41% do so frequently. For the indicator of frequency "never", there are no representatives (0%).

Regarding the last behaviour, 23% never solve the conflicts that occur, 23% seldom do so, 18% solve conflicts sometimes, and 18% solve conflicts frequently. For the indicator of frequency "never", there are no representatives (0%).

3.1. The experimental stage

The experiment in itself was completed between March 2021 and May 2021, and consisted of the use of educational activities with social and emotional content twice a week. The types of activities completed that aimed at the social and emotional development of students in order to prevent bullying were the story, the drama, and the dialog. They were integrated and part of the following subjects: Communication in Romanian, Personal Development, Visual Arts and Practical Skills (the main feelings: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, How I feel—the association of feelings with symbols; recognizing feelings based on situations: The Planet of Feelings, a collage based on the main feelings, the creation of the universe, the feelings of the class Let us Be Friendly, presenting images/photography's with dear beings and objects, Drawing: dear beings/objects).

The stage subsequent to the experiment itself took place for two weeks, at the end of May. During this stage, there was applied the same scale of observation of preparatory class student behaviour that was applied during the pre-experimental stage.

3.2. The post-experimental stage

This stage was completed throughout two weeks, at the end of May, and there was applied the same scale of observation of the behaviour of children that was applied in the pre-experimental stage.

As far as the first behaviour is concerned, we notice that 12% of the preparatory class students that belong to the sample seldom express their feelings, 12% do so sometimes, 47% express their feelings frequently, and 29% always express their feelings. There was no child never to express his/her feelings through game and artistic activities.

In the case of the second behaviour, no child was found not expressing his/her feelings by adopting a corresponding mimic. 6% of the children observed spoke about their own feelings. Out of them, 65% frequently do so, while 29% were capable of speaking about their own feelings by adopting an appropriate mimic.

In terms of the third behaviour, there was noticed that 23% of the children observed ask for information and adult help sometimes, 53% do so frequently, and 24% always ask for help. For the frequencies of behaviour "never" and "seldom", there were no representatives.

Regarding the fourth behaviour, 23% of the children establish out of their own initiative positive relationships sometimes, 59% do so frequently, and 18% always establish out their own initiative positive and respectful relationships with children of their own age and their peers. For the frequencies of behaviour "never" and "seldom", there were no representatives.

As far as the fifth behaviour is concerned, there was noticed that 12% never offer voluntary help, 6% only seldom do so, 29% offer voluntary help sometimes, 35% do so frequently, and 18% always offer voluntary help to the peers that feel marginalized/excluded by the other students in their class.

In terms of the sixth behaviour, 6% seldom respect simple rules, 17% do so sometimes, 59% frequently respect simple rules, and 18% always do so. For the frequencies of behaviour "never" and "seldom", there were no representatives. Regarding behaviour seven, 6% of the children who belonged to the sample seldom express their disapproval, 17% do so sometimes, 59% express their disapproval frequently, and 18% always express their disapproval of unfair behaviour. For the frequencies of behaviour "never" and "seldom", there were no representatives.

In the case of behaviour eight, 30% of the children observed manifested the attitude in question sometimes, 41% solved frequently conflicts that occurred within their group, by using different strategies (speaking first, then asking for adult help), and 29% always showed an attitude meant to solve the conflicts within their group.

3.3. Comparative analysis of the results obtained in the post-experimental and pre-experimental stages, and the interpretation of data

The first behaviour shows a decrease by 12% of the percentage of children that never express their feelings through games and artistic activities (12% in the pre-experimental stage and 0% in the post-experimental one). A decrease by 12% was also noticed in the case of the frequency with which children seldom express their feelings thorough games and artistic activities (from 24%, to 12%). There was noticed an increase of the percentage of children who frequently express their feelings through artistic activities (from 30% to 47%), and of those who always do so (from 0% to 29%).

Regarding the second behaviour, there was noticed a decrease, from 18% to 0%, for the first value of the scale. There was also noticed a decrease by 23% of the percentage of the children who seldom ask for information or adult help when experiencing a tense situation (from 23% to 0%) and a decrease by 18% in the case of the children who only sometimes ask for information and adult help when experiencing a tense situation. The percentage of children who always manage to manifest the behaviour in question increased from 0% to 24%.

With regard to third aspect included in the observation scale, the percentage of the children who never establish out of their own initiative positive relationships with children is of 0% both in the case of the post-test and that of the pre-test. There was noticed a decrease by 18% (from 18% to 0%) in the case of the children who seldom establish positive relationships with children of their own age and peers. There was also a decrease by 6% in the case the children who manifest this behaviour sometimes. The

percentage of children who frequently establish relationships of this type increases by 6% (from 53% to 59%). There increased as well, from 0% to 18%, the percentage of children who always manifest this behaviour.

In the case of the fourth behaviour, the percentage of children who never offer voluntary help decreases from 47% to 12%. If in the preexperimental stage, the second value of the scale is of 35%, in the post experimental stage, it decreases to the value of 12%. The percentage of students who only sometimes offer voluntary help to the marginalized/excluded classmates increases from 12% to 29%. There was also noticed an increase in the case of children who manifest this behaviour frequently (from 12% to 35%). There is also an increase of the percentage of those who always offer voluntary help to the classmates who feel marginalized by the other classmates, from 0%, to 18%.

Regarding the fifth behaviour, there was no change for the frequency of behaviour "never", the percentage being 0% both in the case of the post-test, and that of the pre-test. There was noticed, in exchange, a decrease of the percentage of children who seldom respect simple rules when participating in games (from 35% to 6%). The percentage of children of who only sometimes manifest this behaviour decreased, from 35% to 18%. At the same time, there was noticed an increase by 29% in the case of the children who frequently respect simple rules of participation in games, in smaller or larger groups (from 30% to 59%). For the last value of the scale, the percentage increased from 0% to 18%.

As far as the sixth behaviour is concerned, the results obtained are as follows: the percentage of children who never express their disapproval of unfair behaviour decreased by 18%. The percentage of children who seldom do so decreased by 6%, and that of the children who do so sometimes decreased by 11%. At the same time, there was an increase of the number of children who often show this kind of attitude (from 41% to 59%), and an increase (from 0% to 17%) of the children who always manifest the attitude in question.

Regarding the last behaviour, it was manifest by 29% as compared to the previous stage, when no value was recorded. The percentage of children who do not solve the conflicts that arise within their group by using different strategies decreased by 41% (from 41% in the preexperimental stage, to 0%, in the postexperimetal one), and the percentage of children who seldom manifest this behaviour decreased by 24% (from 24% to 0%). There was a decrease by 9% of the children who only sometimes solve the conflicts that occur within the group by using different strategies (speaking first, and then asking for adult help). The percentage of children who frequently manifest this behaviour increased by 23%, and that of the children who always do so, by 29%.

4. Conclusions

The current study presented the way in which the completion activities of personal development at preparatory class level contributes significantly to the prevention of bullying among the students enrolled in the preparatory class classes.

It aimed at proving the hypothesis according to which the organization by the teacher of activities of personal development, within the framework of the curriculum for primary school, contributes significantly to the prevention of bullying among preparatory class children.

Throughout the development of the formative experiment, children paid more attention to the needs of the people surrounding them, became more aware of them, and more empathetic. The level of social engagement and interest in interaction increased, which helped children relate with each other. The activities completed at school contributed to the development of their social and emotional skills. We conclude by stating that the results obtained confirm the hypothesis of the study, namely that the organization and completion of social and emotional activities contribute significantly to the prevention of bullying among the children of preparatory class level.

4.1. The limitations of the study

While conducting research, a number of limitations was noticed, such as:

- The relatively small number of participants, a class of preparatory class students;

- The social distancing imposed by the pandemic limited the direct interaction among children (exchange of drawings, games, etc.), and the time assigned to each activity was limited (30 minutes); there was also limited room of development of the activities.

- The lack of a specific curriculum; the completion of classes online for a relatively long period of time;

- Very few teachers have access to programs of development that focus on this specific form of violence. The level of awareness regarding the problems caused by bullying is relatively low, and there are no specific school-based programs that prevent bullying recognized at national level. Here from the reticence faced vis-à-vis this type of activities.

4.2. Educational Recommendations

Considering the complexity of the phenomenon studied, I regard the activities developed as being only the beginning of comprehensive research. It is an initial stage that provided useful information and captured general trends through the analysis of particular aspects. Further research and completion of the current broad approach is needed, given the fact that the study was conducted in a limited geographical area, with a limited number of preparatory class students. Thus, expanding the study at a large scale by including a more diverse population through longitudinal studies in different social and geographical areas are found to be of utmost importance.

In this sense, is recommend School Counselling, which is in a continuous evolution and transformation, and school counsellors can represent an important resource in education (Enea, 2019). Guarini et al. (2019), recommended necessary to create short intervention programs, implemented at classroom level by trained teachers.

Considering the fact that the intervention involved children who are not in situations of high risk, a possible comparative analysis can be conducted with regard to certain categories which are in a situation of risk. As we desire the personal and social development of the students, as well as of their school performance, based on social and emotional activities that have as a goal the prevention and combating of bullying in schools, I find that an elective subject on this topic could and should be included as part of the instructive and educational activities completed at preparatory class level.

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