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**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
EARLY EDUCATION**

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*Abstract*

Emotional and social development is in a relationship of interdependence, mutual conditioning, hence the expression: social-emotional development. Emotional development aims at forming the child's self-concept by being able to perceive himself as a single person, and to recognize emotions, feelings, and experiences. A balanced emotional development of the child helps him or her to quickly identify feelings and emotions, express them and deal with them appropriately in certain situations. Today, a great emphasis is placed on emotional intelligence, which is the link between the person and the environment to which he or belongs to. The curriculum for preschool education promotes the concept of global child development, considered to be central during early childhood. Global development focuses on the areas of child development, in the context in which, in the present society, the child's preparation for school and for life should take into account not only academic competences, but also capacities, skills, attitudes related to social-emotional development (to live and work with others, to manage emotions, to accept diversity, tolerance, etc.), cognitive development, physical development. The dimensions of the social development area, which put high emphasis on preschool education, are as follows: - the development of interaction skills with adults; - the development of interaction skills with preschool children; - the development of social behaviours; - the acceptance and the respect for diversity. The dimensions of emotional development are as follows: - the development of the self-concept; - the development of emotional control; - the development of the emotional expression.

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## 1. Introduction

The early education is accepted world-wide during the last decades as a strategical formative intervention. In the context of the affirmation of a new philosophy and practice for the early education, especially after 2000, the ante-pre-school and the pre-school education attracted consistent investigatory efforts from teachers, psychologists, paediatricians, social assistants, etc., determining an ample change in approach to the level of the international organisations - UNESCO, UNICEF, OMS, and OECD. Thus, new important concepts appeared in the activity of the teachers: “early education”, “education centred on the child”, “discovery learning”, “emotional intelligence”, and “educational partnership”.

Nowadays, in the entire world, the dominant approach of the child is relational and holistic. The child is seen as a whole, with his/her body, mind, emotions and creativity, but also with his/her personal history as social identity. This perspective – of the development, documented by large research worldwide, reflects the regularities that are to be found in the physical and psychological-social development during childhood. The research underlines the correlation between the development of the child and the quality of the nutrition, treatment, education and, implicitly, the vulnerability of the child during this formative period, considered to be critical or sensible.

The development of the child as perspective of the integrated approach is completed by three complementary approaches, highlighted by Martin Woodhead in his work, *Changing perspectives on early childhood: theory, research and policy*:

- the political and economic perspective – works around the development profile and is translated in social and educational interventions, inspired by the economic models of the human capital.
- the cultural and social perspective – draws attention of the diversity of approaches on childhood (as a built status) and especially on the variety of manners in which the education is put in practice (for children, with children and by children). This perspective has effects on the educational actors and on the way in which the goals, the models and the standards are defined.
- the human rights perspective – resizes the conventional approaches on the educational theory, research and practice, with the respect for the children’s dignity, the acknowledgement of their capacity to contribute to their own development and to the development of the services.

The early development and education can be seen from the larger perspective of the preparation for learning/life or from the perspective of the school preparation. The first perspective includes multiple aspects of the development, among which we mention the verbal and intellectual abilities, knowledge, social abilities, and aspects related to health and nutrition. This perspective allows us to make predictions on the children’s preparation for activities specific to the adult stage: the participation to the family life, to the community life and in economic activities. The preparation for school makes predictions on the child’s success during all the school stages. In order to have success in school, the children must present formed physical and motor abilities, social and emotional abilities, an adequate attitude on learning, language and linguistic competencies, and cognitive abilities. . “School together with professionals have the power and tools to help students to develop in personal and social terms, by facilitating the sense of value of their potential, capacity for self-reflection, flexibility, creativity, positive attitudes towards themselves and others, and by inducing a positive perception of past experience and future” (Herman, 2016 , p. 251).

These analysis perspectives show the interdependence between the policies types, structures and services that need to be promoted by society in order to respect the child's unicity and development.

## 2. Problem Statement

A series of documents to the European level discuss the growth of the access to the integrated early education services and the reach of the following target: 95% from the children aged between 4 and the age necessary for the beginning of the primary school must be included in quality integrated services until 2020 and must benefit of these services. In this context, the programs and the activities specific to the pre-school education developed in the last years under the aegis of three important concepts, present in the public policy documents of the majority of the world states:

- The superior interest of the child aims generally the wellbeing of the child and, implicitly, a series of children rights from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), intending to highlight the fact that a child is an individual with needs, interests and rights distinct from those of the parents or of the legal tutors.
- The wellbeing of the child refers to the quality of the life of the child and incorporates the mental/psychological, physical and social dimensions (Pollard & Lee, 2003), and also the material dimension and the dimension of the relations with the others, and the development rights and opportunities ,
- The joy and pleasure of learning takes in consideration the fact that the adults around the child, including the teacher, can offer favourable occasions for the arousal of the pleasure of learning, due to the fact that the positive emotions influence the performance.

Necessarily, the new curriculum requires important rethinking, being structured on areas of development and the purpose of early childhood education being the overall development of the child, which is to provide them a good start in life (Trif, 2015).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which children and adults learn to understand and manage emotions, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This is the first in a series of four related reports about what is known about SEL programs for students ages 3–8. The report series addresses four issues raised by the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Mid-Atlantic's Early Childhood Education Research Alliance: characteristics of effective SEL programs (part 1); implementation strategies and state and district policies that support SEL programming (part 2); teacher and classroom strategies that contribute to social and emotional learning (part 3), and outcomes of social and emotional learning among different student populations and settings (part 4). This report identifies key components of effective SEL programs and offers guidance on selecting programs (O'Conner, De Feyter, Carr Jia, Luo, & Romm, 2017)

Emotional competence comprises three basic components. They are (a) the expression of emotions, (b) the understanding of emotions and (c) the experience of emotions (Denham et al., 2003).

Among social skills, Spence (1983) distinguished the sets of microsocioal and macrosocioal skills. The former includes verbal and non-verbal communication and social perception; the latter comprises empathy, helping behaviour, co-operation, altruism, and conflict-resolution skills. One of the basic characteristics of

social skills is that they are acquired through learning (Argyle, 1999; Dowling, 2001; Gresham & Elliot, 1993; Webster-Stratton, 2002).

Playing represents in kindergarten a force with a propulsion character in the development of the child. The increased possibilities for the contact with adults outside the family circle determine a process of emotional emancipation reflected in the playing activities. The curriculum is put in practice through six integrating themes, where the curriculum content is organised according to the concept of “global development of the child”: “Who am I/ are we?”, “When, how and why is happening?”, “How is, how was and how will be here on Earth?”, “How do we plan/ organise and activity?”, “How do we express what we are feeling?” and “How and what do I want to be?”. The parents are the key partners in the education of the child and the family-day care relation is a decisive relation for the education of the child.

The pre-school age is a long period when important changes take place in the emotional life of the child. The emotions and feelings of the pre-school child accompany all his/her manifestations, in playing, singing, educational activities, and the duties attributed by the adults. They have an important place in the life of the child and influence powerfully the behaviour. We are all challenged to adapt to a world that is no longer as predictable as it was once and the growth and development of the children is more challenged by the dynamic of the contemporary world. Taking these changes in consideration, we have to be more attentive to the social and emotional development of the children. Thus, during the last years, the concept of emotional intelligence entered also in our country, in a time when the educators needed to find pertinent answers for numerous problems during the pre-school and school stages: behavioural disorders, ample conflictual states and violent manifestations among children. The social behaviour and the emotions develop in each age stage and according to the temperament of each child. Some pre-school children are cheerful and adapt easily, while others have the tendency to respond negatively to various situations. The social aptitudes are learned gradually, the child passing from a state of dependence and egoism to a state of creativity, independence and sensitivity.

### **3. Research Questions**

Our research aims to identify the answers to the following questions:

- How do the day-care activities contribute to the development of the emotional and social abilities during the pre-school age, abilities that determine the child to be able to live in harmony with the others, to have friendly relations and, especially, to desire to have relations with other people, involving with pleasure in the social relations?

- What can do the educators for the formation of the abilities of empathic involvement in the emotions of the others and of the abilities to show the emotions in various social situations, in order to diminish the unhealthy effects of the negative emotions and to share positive emotions with the others?

- Does the manner in which the teachers react to the emotional expression of the children determine their future expression or the inhibition? Does the emotional expressivity of the teachers become a model of emotional expression for the pre-school children?

- How efficient are some didactic strategies, e.g. the strategies for the education of the language, on the social-emotional development and education of the children using tales? Which is the role of the

therapeutic tales in the education and the development of the social intelligence and which is the role of the didactic games for the emotional development of the pre-school children?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The day-care teachers are confronted with a large range of children's behaviours. Some are excessively shy, closed up, uncommunicative, while others are excessively energetic and open to relation with the people around them (adults or children). School classes are dynamic environments where teachers and students engage in permanent and reciprocal interactions during a school-day. It is mentioned in literature that when effective intervention practices are implemented at the level of actual class (development of social, emotional, study skills), the probability of having positive teacher-student interactions and to promote learning and learner involvement, is increased while problematic behaviours are reduced (Trif, 2016).

The children's categories of activities will aim especially the children's socialising aspects (collaboration, cooperation, negotiation, taking common decisions, etc.) and the gradual acquisition of a personal autonomy; when the child passes in the 5-7 years age category, the accent will move on the school and social life preparation (MECT, Curriculum pentru învățământ preșcolar, 2008, p. 23). The selection and the use of unitary methodological strategies, the organisation of games – exercises for the imitation of other person's speech, of gestures, mimicry and pantomime, and the positive valorisation of the interaction models also contribute to education of the sensitivity, of their attitude toward themselves and toward others, and to the gradual internalisation of the behavioural models. The socialisation of the children's behaviour and the appearance of the character features take place during games and compulsory activities, when the interpersonal and group relations are the main communicational modalities. Still, delays and disorders in sociability can appear, manifesting first through behavioural instability or in specific forms to the late pre-school period, expressed in shyness, isolation, etc.

The objectives of the study

- The investigation of the formative impact of a specific program of educational activities for the development of the social-emotional abilities for the pre-school children;
- The research of the manner in which the games and the tales from the day-care activities influence the pre-school children social-emotional development;
- The identification of the children's behavioural social-emotional difficulties by observing the behaviour during the pre-school program;
- Highlighting the importance of the social-emotional adaptation for the pre-school children's educational evolution.

#### **5. Research Methods**

In choosing the research methods, we considered the following aspects:

- using objective research methods, useful to observe, record and measure the reactions of the subject to the direct and indirect action of various external stimuli;
- using methods that make possible the systemic approach of the investigated phenomenon;

We used the psycho-pedagogical experiment and the method of the structures observation. Based on the requirements of the research, we also used other means of information:

- the children’s observation during the instructional and educational activities in the field of language and communication;
- the analysis of works and materials made by children;
- surveys on the children’s preferences and interests;
- the analysis of the correlations between the obtained grades before and after the experiment.

These methods are used in the pre-experimental (initial or observing) stage as well in the final stage (post-test); thus, it is possible to observe and decide if the hypothesis is confirmed or not and in which degree are achieved the proposed objectives.

The independent variable was represented by the systemic implementation during a school year (9 months) of the formative program for emotional education through games and tales appropriate for the pre-school age.

The dependent variable:

The development level of the emotional ability, quantified with the help of the following indicators:

1. The acknowledgement and the expression of the emotions;
2. The comprehension of the emotions;
3. The emotional adjustment.

The development level of the social ability, quantified with the help of the following indicators:

1. The compliance to rules;
2. The social relations;
3. The pro-social behaviour.

The level of social-emotional integration:

1. manifest solidarity;
2. manifest relaxation;
3. passive approval.

The research was developed for a group of children from the rural environment: 10 children aged 3-4 years old, among which 66% attended day care. The experiment was developed in three stages, as presented by the table 01, 02 and 03 below.

**Table 01.** The organisation of the experiment on stages

The subjects sample	Initial stage/ Pre-test	Experimental stage	Final stage/ post-test
Experimental group formed from 10 children, 3-4 years old, in the same group	Behavioural observance chart of the pre-school children on the social and emotional development; Initial test	The frequent use of games and fairy-tales adapted to the pre-school age for the kindergarten activities. All activities take place in the class and are structures as didactic project.	<i>The final test</i> using the same behavioral observance chart of the pre-school children on the social and emotional development at the end of the experiment. The results from the beginning and the end of the research are presented comparatively.

**Table 02.** The schedule of educational activities developed during the school year 2015-2016

Period	Activity title	Competence
<b>October</b>	1. <i>The story of the brown bear</i> - tale 2. <i>The cube of emotions</i> - game 3. <i>Let's practice the rules with Ami</i> -discussions 4. <i>Ami teaches us to be responsible</i> – discussions	- expressing emotions - behavioural abilities - social relations - social relations
<b>November</b>	1. <i>The giant radish</i> - tale 2. <i>The carousel of emotions</i> - game 3. <i>What to expect when we don't follow the rules</i> – game	- the habit of being persistent - acknowledging emotions - behavioural abilities
<b>December</b>	1. <i>Snow-White</i> – fairy tale 2. <i>The story of Țupii the Frog</i> - tale 3. <i>How Ana became friend with the good manners</i>	- social-behavioural abilities - emotional self-regulation - behavioural abilities
<b>January</b>	1. <i>The story of the beehive</i> - tale 2. <i>The story of Pogonici the Hedgehog</i> - tale 3. <i>The umbrella of friendship</i> – game	- favouring discipline inside a community - reducing the interpersonal aggressiveness - social relations
<b>February</b>	1. <i>Coloured little wings</i> – therapeutic tale 2. <i>The four believers</i> - therapeutic tale 3. <i>You decide</i> - game 4. <i>How am I feeling today</i> - game	- social relations - accepting friendship, offering help - assuming responsibilities - acknowledging emotions, expressing them
<b>March</b>	1. <i>Vigilante</i> - therapeutic tale 2. <i>I don't expect a reward</i> - game 3. <i>Sonia, the little princess</i> - therapeutic tale 4. <i>All is mine</i> - tale 5. <i>The cubes tower</i> – game	- expressing relations between siblings - acknowledging emotions - unconditional acceptance - expressing egoism - social relations
<b>April</b>	1. <i>Suzi and the turtle</i> - therapeutic tale 2. <i>The flowers of friendship</i> - game 3. <i>The snowdrop</i> - therapeutic tale	- the fear of unknown - initiating and maintaining a relation - expressing emotions / perseverance
<b>May</b>	1. <i>Fruit salad</i> – domestic activity 2. <i>The story of the treasure hunt</i> - tale 3. <i>Let's play the listening game</i> - game 4. <i>The story of the little boy who couldn't decide what toy does he want</i> - therapeutic tale	- initiating and maintaining a relation - stimulating the curiosity to know - social relations - emotional self-regulation
<b>June</b>	1. <i>The face of my emotions</i> – game 2. <i>My emotions</i> - drawing 3. <i>The magic hat for solutions</i> 4. <i>My friend</i> – art activity (mould activity)	- acknowledging emotions - expressing emotions - social relations - social relations

The behaviour of the pre-school children and their social-emotional capacity are evaluated using the following behaviour indicators:

I1 – Integrates easily in the community, I2 – Proves spontaneity in establishing relations with the other children, I3 – Interacts easily with the surrounding adults, I4 – Responds properly to the solicitations of the adult person, I5 – Presents initiative, comes with ideas and proposals, I6 – Initiates and maintains interaction with another child, I7 – Respects the order to enter a game, I8 – Plays and works respecting the group rules, I9 – Cooperates, accepts to change the play objects, I10 – Does not involve in conflicts with the colleagues, I11 – Is active and interested in activities, I12 – Manages calmly a situation, I13 – Expresses personal emotions through mimicry, gestures or words, I14 – Is able to manage positive and negative emotions, I15 - Manifests solidarity, I16 – Manifests relaxation, I17 – Passive approval.

The observations were centered during the pre-test on the following issues: the adaptation without significant difficulties to the environment and the schedule of the kindergarten; spontaneity in relation with the group colleagues; easy interaction with the adults, responding to their solicitations; participating to

group activities; choosing the activities from one's own initiative; respecting the turn during games; managing positive and negative emotions; trying easily new things; respecting the group rules; the permanent need for positive appreciation; anger when the whims are not satisfied.

After the results from the first stage of the experiment (pre-test), we tried to create as many as possible didactic scenarios using fairy-tales and games, in order to develop the social-emotional abilities through their educational valences. They help the child, by active involvement, to express better feelings and emotions and to developed trust in personal abilities.

We enumerate a few examples of games and activities for the social and emotional development of the pre-school children, with photographs from some activities: "the cube of the emotions", "how am I today", "the umbrella of friendship", "the carousel of emotions", and "you decide".

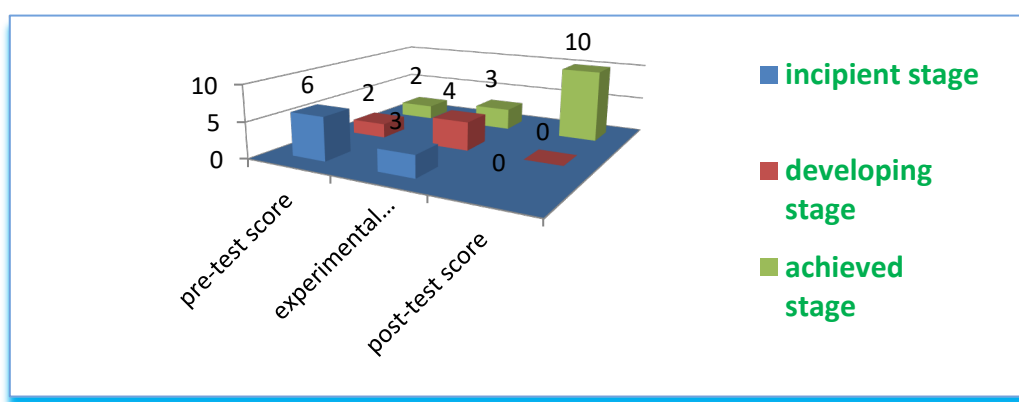
**Table 03.** The quantification of the behavior from the observation chart for the pre-school children in the experimental stage

Children's name and surname	B.D	C. P	C.R	J.R	V.R	L.A	P. A	T.M	K.C	K.E	Total accumulated score
Easily integrates in the collective	4	5	4	3	4	4	3	3	5	4	39
Manifests spontaneity in establishing relations with the other children	4	4	4	2	4	4	3	3	4	3	35
Interacts easily with the surrounding adults	4	5	4	3	4	4	4	3	5	4	40
Responds adequately to the solicitations of the adult person	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	37
Manifests initiative and formulates ideas and proposals	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	5	3	35
Initiates and maintains interaction with another child	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	35
Respects his turn in playing	3	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	36
Plays and works respecting the group rules	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	35
Cooperates and exchanges toys	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	33
Does not involve in conflicts with the other children	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	32
Is active and interested in activities	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	37
Manages calmly a situation	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	4	35
Expresses feelings through mimics, gestures and words	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	5	4	36
Is able to manage positive emotions as well as negative emotions	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	4	35
Manifests solidarity	3	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	37
Manifests relaxation	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	4	35
Passive approval	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	4	4	32
<b>Total score</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>604</b>



A number of only 3 children (30%) obtained in the experimental stage a score between 48 and 56 points, being in the incipient development stage of the social-emotional abilities, recording a small progress. A number of 4 children (40%) are in the development stage (compared to 2 children in the initial stage), while a number of 3 children (30%) are in the achieved stage of the social-emotional abilities.

We used the same behavioral observance chart during the post-test and we registered the progress of each pre-school child from the group, in the initial stage and in the experimental stage. We noticed, by comparing the scores obtained by the children and by comparison, that each child participating to the educational program added at least a point/behavior, compared to the initial test/behavior; the total score obtained to the final test by each child was compared to the initial total score, being remarked a considerable upgrade of the tested behavior. This aspect is highlighted in the following diagram (Figure 01).



**Figure 01.** Diagram presenting the results obtained by children in all the three stages of the experiment

In the stage of the formative experiment, the observations aimed to identify the needs, the goals, the attitudes and the motivation of the children; to depict their reactions in various situations and changes appeared in the children's cognitive style; to depict the efficiency of the didactic strategies and of the educational methods; to identify the typical mistakes and the children's difficulties in the process of developing emotional abilities in order to find practical solutions to overcome them.

## 6. Findings

The elementary social behaviours are acquisitions of the child by simple observation and imitation of the external behavioural models; imitation is to a child one of the most important ways to accumulate social experience, to learn behavioural patterns and to adapt to different actions and situations in life. Acquiring complex social behaviours – attitudes, convictions, mentalities, aims and motives, is ensured by other forms of social learning, which come as a continuation of the imitation. The emotional abilities represent important resources to be developed to children in order to ensure their adaptation to life. For school and social success, the children need to develop their capacity to perceive and express emotions, to understand and respond to the emotions of the others, and also to trust their own forces.

The environment where the children learn and are formed facilitates the emotional equilibrium. The manner in which the adults think and express their feelings and the manner in which they react influences the children's behaviour and forms their attitudes. Most children in the experimental group researched by

us show calm and equilibrium in the relations with the others, respect their turn in games, play respecting the group rules, express positive and negative emotions, have social relations with their colleagues, enter in games one after another and interact easily.

Due to the experimental study, the children gained abilities for the recognition and expression of the emotions, for the identification of their causes and consequences, for the pro-social behaviour, and for the efficient communication, all with important benefices for the personal and relational sphere, with effects on the development and optimisation of the children's behaviour, in the sense of the growth of the sociability and interpersonal receptivity.

Comparing the results from the research study to the results in the consulted dedicated literature, we consider that the proposed work hypothesis was entirely justified – the use of the tales and games in the day-care activities contribute to:

- A more rapid adaptation to the day-care schedule;
- The development of the children's abilities to relate to the people around them;
- The growth of the trust in their own forces;
- Understanding the necessity of respecting the rules;
- Managing personal emotions (emotional self-regulation).

## 7. Conclusion

The kindergarten pre-school children gain knowledge on emotions, desirable/undesirable behaviours, rules for living in a group, and rules for socialising, through their involvement by the teacher in various didactical games, and also through tales and stories, because the pre-school children tend to imitate the behaviour of the tale characters. These activities allow a global approach of the knowledge on the self and on the personal thoughts and emotions, leading to the development of a stable emotional state and to the formation of a moral behaviour, appropriate to living in society. The teacher has the role to observe the actions and the behaviour of the children, but also her own behaviour and the behaviour of the adults in the community, and to inventory the unformed abilities of the children and of the adults surrounding them, possible to generate undesirable behaviour in the children's community or to each child. The tact of the teacher is important for the transformation of any situation appeared in kindergarten in a learning context for the children's social-emotional abilities. The family environment and climate, and the social and culture statute of the parents are also very important, because they leave a deep mark on the social-emotional development of the children.

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