Child Development in Primary School through Expressive Therapeutic Approaches

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the absence of psychotherapeutic, psychoeducational and expressive therapeutic approaches in the education system and seeks to highlight their potential in supporting the personal and social development of pupils. In the theoretical part, the professional discussion and the results of international research are presented, which point to the importance of incorporating psychotherapeutic elements into the educational process. These approaches can not only contribute to the development of soft skills (e.g. communication, assertiveness, cooperation) but also act as an effective tool for the prevention of risky behaviour, bullying and mental health deterioration.

The empirical part of the thesis builds on research demonstrating the positive impact of expressive approaches on the saturation of basic psychological needs and presents the results of a project study that monitored the effectiveness of expressive-therapeutic interventions in the development of social behaviour and soft skills in second grade primary school pupils. The research design used a pre-test and post-test to measure changes before and after the intervention. The research population was divided into two groups: group A consisted of intact students and group B consisted of students with mild intellectual disabilities. The study highlights the differences and similarities in the impact of the intervention between the two groups and serves as a starting point for subsequent larger-scale research in the dissertation.

The paper seeks to promote discussion on the systematic inclusion of expressive therapeutic and psychotherapeutic elements in school education, not only in the field of cognitive learning development (e.g. mathematics, science), but especially in the field of mental health education, prevention of mental health problems and development of key social competences.

Keywords: *psychotherapy, expressive therapy, social skills. School psychologist, mental health, education system, inclusive education.*

Research on Psychotherapeutic - Expressive Therapeutic Approaches in Education

One of the key themes of accessible and supportive education is inclusion. Inclusive education is one of the key themes in pedagogy today, aiming to ensure equal opportunities for all pupils regardless of their specific learning needs, which brings with it a greater appeal to promote pupils' wellbeing and health. This philosophy focuses on creating an environment that enables pupils with a range of health and developmental difficulties, including intellectual and behavioural disabilities, to participate fully in the educational process. Another important aspect of inclusive education is the ability of educators and other professionals (e.g. school psychologists or therapists) to work with pupils with a variety of special educational needs, such as pupils with intellectual disabilities, who face not only cognitive problems but often social and emotional difficulties, and pupils with behavioural disorders, who face problems of impulsive behaviour, frustration, aggression or anxiety. These difficulties can affect their ability to communicate, understand social norms, establish relationships and cope with stressful situations, and whether they are SEN pupils or intact pupils, both groups should be supported in solidarity and cooperation with each other and in adapting to the school environment, including in terms of promoting pro-social behaviour, soft skills and assertiveness (Pipeková 2010).

This article focuses on the connection of inclusive education through psychotherapeutic approaches, especially expressive therapies, namely art therapy, music therapy, drama therapy, dance-movement therapy and bibliotherapy. External support methods such as expressive therapies are proving to be a suitable tool for developing not only cognitive abilities but also emotional and social improvement, which has a positive impact on the overall quality of life of these pupils. This article will look in detail at how expressive therapies can contribute to inclusive education and support the development of pupils with special needs, and will evaluate which specific therapeutic approaches are most effective in this context and how they can be integrated into the school environment. In addition, this article will

provide an overview of the benefits and challenges associated with the use of expressive therapies in inclusive education and show how these approaches contribute to improved socialization and personal growth of students, particularly by promoting the saturation of basic psychological needs.

Research Results and Theoretical Background of Researchers on Similar Topics

The Second Step Program is a preventive SEL program focused on empathy, self-regulation, and conflict resolution. It draws on findings from developmental psychology, particularly a study by Moffitt et al. (2011), which found that higher self-control in childhood predicts better health and lower delinquency. In the Czech Republic, the programme was validated by Kateřina Pálová (2017), whose study confirmed an increase in creativity and selected dimensions of self-concept in pupils after a five-month intervention.

Durlak, Weissberg et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 317 studies that showed that SEL programs significantly improve social skills, attitudes, behaviors, and school performance. Positive effects were across age groups and types of settings. SEL programs are also effective in mainstream instruction.

In their quasi-experimental study, **Fernand Chacón et al. (2021)** demonstrated improvements in social skills (particularly peer relationships) following a one-year SEL intervention. They observed the largest effect for students with average entry scores, with boys benefiting more than girls.

Durlak et al. (2011) reported positive impacts of the YCDI program on self-confidence, emotional resilience, and school performance among children in Australian schools. There was a significant reduction in problem behaviour and improved reading skills for weaker students.

McCreary et al. (2009) created the IMPPACT community-based program for African American children that uses psychoeducation to improve social skills and school behavior, with an emphasis on resilience and positive role models. **Almasi et al. (2022)** confirmed the effectiveness of psychoeducational interventions for children in foster care - significantly reducing aggression and increasing self-esteem. They recommend incorporating these programs into school-based practice.

Kalogjera et al. (2019) in Croatia verified the positive impact of drama therapy on assertiveness and empathy in children. After 12 sessions, there was a significant improvement in the ability to express opinions and manage conflicts.

Golubović et al. (2015) documented the benefits of art therapy in inclusion - children with specific behavioural disorders better managed emotions, reduced impulsivity and improved social interaction.

Čačinovič-Vogrinčič et al. (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of expressive therapies (music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy) in developing social skills in students. Self-assertion, teamwork and conflict resolution were significantly improved.

Chilton and Wilkinson (2016) confirmed that the visual arts promote emotional openness, teamwork and assertiveness. Children resolved conflicts more effectively.

Lang and Hüther (2021) documented the positive effects of dance movement therapy on students' self-confidence, emotional regulation, and cooperation. Teachers reported fewer conflicts and a better classroom climate.

Kristýna Krahulcová (2016) found that 76% of special educators use expressive therapies to support students with SEN. The most common forms were art therapy, drama therapy and music therapy. Educators appreciate their contribution to inclusion but point to barriers such as lack of time, equipment and methodological support.

Hannigan, Grima-Farrell and Wardman (2019) advocate for the inclusion of art therapy in schools as a means of promoting mental health, wellbeing and inclusion. They call for holistic and creative approaches to teaching.

Flitton and Buckroyd (2002) in their qualitative study of children with intellectual disabilities reported improvements in self-esteem following an intervention programme, although teachers did not always perceive these changes. They recommend longer and more involved programmes.

Petra Bendová points out the limits of using expressive methods by teachers without therapeutic training, but at the same time confirms their benefits for the development of cooperation and self-reflection of students with intellectual disabilities (Bendová & Zikl, 2011).

Valešová, Malecová & Kadrnožková (2024) recommend structured integration of expressive therapies into school practice with an emphasis on motivation, targeted activities and reflection. They note the importance of rituals for a safe environment and inclusive climate.

Comparison of Individual Studies

The above research presents a diverse but complementary picture of the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic, psychoeducational and expressive therapeutic interventions in the context of school and out-of-school settings. A common feature of these studies is their emphasis on the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) and promoting psychosocial functioning in children and students, with methodologies ranging from quasi-experimental designs to longitudinal follow-up to meta-analyses involving thousands of participants.

The Second Step programme shows that targeted SEL interventions can significantly develop children's creativity, self-concept and emotional resilience already in primary school, although some pilot studies (Pálová, 2017) point to methodological limitations due to small sample sizes or short intervention duration. In contrast, a large review of research by Durlak et al. (2011), involving hundreds of studies and hundreds of thousands of children, confirms the general effectiveness of SEL programs in developing social skills, school engagement, and academic achievement, while demonstrating their broad applicability across age, social, and geographic groups. This meta-analysis strongly supports the idea that SEL is not simply an adjunct to schooling, but a key factor in overall child development.

The research by Chacón and colleagues (2021) then adds an important perspective from Portugal, where it appears that while SEL programs do improve peer relationships and social competence, their impact on internalized and externalized problems may be less pronounced. This finding highlights the need for targeted interventions that take into account the different needs of individual children and shows that not all components of psychosocial functioning respond equally to SEL programmes.

Another interesting contribution comes from an Australian study of the You Can Do It! program (Durlak et al., 2011), which shows that even early interventions in preschool and younger school age can lead to a reduction in problem behaviors and promote academic achievement, confirming the importance of early implementation of SEL programs as a prevention strategy.

While the research cited above mostly focuses on the general school population, studies by McCreary et al. (2009) and Almasim et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of psychoeducational interventions for specific and vulnerable groups of children-for example, African American communities or children in foster care. These interventions not only help to strengthen social skills and resilience, but also have a direct impact on reducing aggressive behaviour and improving self-esteem, which are key factors in their successful integration and adaptation in school and the wider social environment. The breadth of effectiveness of SEL and psychoeducational programmes - from improving social skills, self-concept and creativity to reducing problem behaviours and improving school performance. The need for long-term and systematic implementation - the results of short-term studies are positive but often limited, while large-scale meta-analyses confirm the importance of continuous support and integration of programmes into the school environment. The need to adapt to target groups - not all children respond to interventions, with vulnerable and minority groups needing a special approach based on cultural and psychosocial specificities. The role of school professionals and educators - successful implementation depends on the competence and support of teachers, school psychologists and special educators, which requires adequate

Research studies clearly confirm that psychotherapeutic, psychoeducational and expressive therapeutic interventions are an effective means of supporting children's personal and socio-emotional development in and out of the school environment. Programmes such as Second Step and You Can Do It! show that systematic work on social-emotional competencies not only leads to improved psychosocial functioning, but also has significant benefits for school performance and prevention of risky behaviour. At the same time, however, attention should be paid to the methodological quality of the research, the adaptation of the programmes to the specific needs of different groups of pupils and the long-term support for their implementation in school practice. Integrating these interventions into the regular school curriculum and working with experts are key steps towards creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that respects individual differences while developing the competences necessary for children's lifelong adaptation and success in a changing world.

. The introduction of psychoeducational and intervention methods into the school system has a demonstrably positive impact, as already mentioned, but its inclusion in the school curriculum faces a number of obstacles in the area of legislation, financial and time allocation and the allocation of methodology, materials and specifications for the training of professionals in the field of SEN when working with pupils, see the text below in the context of Czech education.

Meeting Basic Psychological Needs through Expressive-Interventional Approaches

In the context of the above mentioned studies, we would like to draw attention to more than ten years of studies by the authors (cf. Polínek in Popová 2013; Polínek, 2014,; Polínek, Růžička, Lesková, 2016; Polínek, 2017 and Polínek, Vačkov et al. 2022) that demonstrate the positive impact of expressive approaches on the fulfilment of basic psychological needs. We consider this phenomenon to be one of the key and universal principles on the basis of which other effective factors can be defined with regard to inclusive education, prevention of risky behaviour and strengthening of psychosocial competences of pupils.

Longitudinal studies that have focused on different target groups of students differing in age, socio-cultural context, nationality, specific needs, etc., show the universality of the effect of expressive approaches in meeting basic psychological needs, which is essential for further research and application of the methods in practice.

The basic prerequisite for satiation of psychological needs is the ability to realize the degree of their satiation. This ability is currently severely limited in pupils and young people by various phenomena (e.g. alienation from bodily experience due to the negative effects of cyber technologies). We therefore focus primarily on investigations that demonstrate an increase in the ability to perceive the degree of satiation of basic needs through expressive approaches (see Table 1).

Table 1. Differences between perceptions of level of need in real-life and expressive intervention work

Developmental stage/group	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Certainty	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Relationship	-	+	+	-	+	+	-
External awards	-	+	+	+	+	+	0
Self-updating	**+**	+	0	+	0	0	-
Total	-	+	+	+	+	+	-

Note: sign - : the psychological need is saturated during the expressive-intervention work; sign**+** : the awareness of the unsaturation of the need increases during the expressive-intervention work; digit **0**: the awareness of the degree of saturation of the need does not change in the expressive intervention compared to real life.

Based on the data analysis, the following specifics can be deduced (Polínek, 2014):

- Age, gender and occupational profile do not affect introspection in meeting basic psychological needs.

- Expressive approaches, even in the early stages of intervention, can **satisfy the basic psychological need for security.** Subjective perceptions of the degree to which this need is satiated

in real life and in role-play change significantly when this need is perceived as more satiated in role-play. Proportionally with time, this need is more saturated.

- The insatiable need for external validation was most pronounced in this investigation, and this was exacerbated in the role-play.

- Paradoxically, however, a high level of self-esteem and self-confidence was emphasised in the teaching. This may correspond with the assumption that expressive approaches have the potential to accentuate the authentic creative process, which may have a positive effect on healthy personality development despite the underdevelopment of some lower needs. **That is, expressive therapies achieve self-esteem despite a lack of external appreciation**.

- Compared to the subjective **perception of the degree of saturation of psychological needs** in real life**, intervention with expressive methods increases** this perception for all basic psychological needs.

Methodology - Project Research (IGA)

This study is a part of the project of the Internal Grant Agency of Palacký University in Olomouc (IGA 2025) entitled *The importance of selected specific interventions for individuals with special educational needs and problematic behaviour for strengthening inclusion*. The research focuses on the effectiveness of expressive-therapeutic interventions in the development of social skills of primary school students and also serves as a pilot phase for a larger dissertation research.

The study uses a **quasi-experimental design** with two measurement phases - pre-test and post-test. The aim was to test the effectiveness of expressive therapeutic methods (e.g., drama and art techniques) on the development of prosocial and assertive behavior in Integra Elementary School students. The research was conducted over a period of two months (90 minutes per week) and included two groups:

- **Group A**: pupils with no or mild special educational needs

- **Group B**: pupils with mild intellectual disabilities

The main data collection tool was a non-standardized questionnaire focused on dimensions of social behaviour (empathy, cooperation, assertiveness, willingness to help). The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the school psychologist and served as an orientation tool to identify key variables for further research. Additionally**, systematic observation and reflection after each intervention**, supported by audiovisual documentation, was used. Data were analysed using the **sign test**.

.**Character test for pupils of group A without intellectual disability and pupils of group B with intellectual disability**

Class A without intellectual disability

Child	Default score	Default score	Changes to brands
1	35	38	+
2	37	37	0
3	32	37	+
4	35	40	+
5	30	33	+
6	33	36	+
7	31	36	+
8	27	30	+
9	30	32	+
10	29	31	+

The number of positive changes between pretest and posttest exceeds the number of negative changes. The differences in scores are statistically significant, indicating that the intervention had a positive effect.

Class B pupils with intellectual disabilities

Child	Default score	Default score	Changes to brands
1	26	29	+
2	25	28	+
3	21	23	+
4	22	24	+
5	19	19	0
6	23	24	+
7	20	19	−
8	24	25	+
9	25	27	+
10	26	26	0

The number of positive changes between pretest and posttest exceeds the number of negative changes. The differences in scores are statistically significant, indicating that the intervention had a positive effect.

Conclusion

Within the IGA project, research was carried out on the effectiveness of expressive-therapeutic interventions in primary school pupils, with the aim of verifying their influence on the development of prosocial and assertive behaviour. The research was designed as a quasi-experimental study with pre-test and post-test. It was conducted over a period of two months and included two groups: intact pupils and pupils with mild intellectual disabilities. The intervention took place once a week in the form of expressive therapeutic techniques (e.g., drama and art activities) and was accompanied by systematic observation and reflection.

The evaluation used a non-standardized questionnaire method, focused on key areas of prosocial behaviour (empathy, cooperation, assertiveness). The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the school psychologist and served as an input tool to identify areas suitable for further investigation. It was supplemented by regular observations and reflections of the pupils after each meeting, the records of which form an important basis for analysis.

The results were analysed using a sign test and showed a clear improvement in social-emotional skills for both groups, with more significant progress in the areas of cooperation and communication (ability to express oneself, to give one's opinion)

Although non-standardised instruments were used and the sample size was relatively small, the study provided valuable insights for the preparation of a major research project that will extend the methodology with standardised instruments and a longer time horizon. The results also point to the importance of expressive interventions as a means of promoting mental health and building a positive classroom climate. Thus, the study makes an important contribution to the debate on the use of expressive therapies in pedagogical practice and inclusive education.

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