



Circle Of Love: An Instrument to Help Childhood Development - an Experiment With Children From 2 to 4 Years

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Abstract

"Circle of Love" is a practical method based on integration of ancient Eastern wisdom with modern Western science. In a playful and collective way, composed of a series of songs, stories, kid's yoga, relaxation and visualization, it is known to help build character, restore emotional balance of children and strengthen emotional bonds between children and adults. It was formulated by a psychologist, anthropologist and yogic nun - Dr. Susan Andrews - and it has been applied in various nurseries around the world. This present research examined the behavioral changes of children aged 2 to 4 years in four different aspects - affective, cognitive, psychic, and social - after introduction of the techniques of Circle of Love among daily activities of a kindergarten. Thirty six children, in three groups were evaluated at two points: (a) 30 days after start the project, and (b) after 60 days, through questionnaires answered by teachers responsible for each group. Results were very positive and confirmed the effectiveness of Circle of Love in behavioral improvement of children in all four aspects evaluated, and in all ages, with a tendency of effectiveness to increase over time. Changes were more noticeable in the affective and social aspects, possibly because it was more emphasized in the Circle of Love practices.

1 Introduction

A deep and alarming deficiency in emotional intelligence is seen as one of the reasons of current world disorder, which also appears in the infant universe. Signs of this crisis have become evident in the increasing problems of attention deficit, hyperactivity, and depression in children, violence among children and adolescents, and drug use since childhood.

Faced with a range of poor results so explicit, we see the need for major changes in education, since schools and homes have not been able to wisely solve the challenge of developing an "emotional education". In other words, an education to guide humanity towards a goal of life, taking emotional development into account, is lacking.

Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1921 - 1990), Indian philosopher and spiritual master, used to say that the daily nourishment of our Spiritual Being is as important as the nourishment of our physical body. When we focus only on education in the physical and intellectual levels, we therefore limit our understanding of life and the multiplicity of our relationships. Understanding the unlimited, spiritual thirst of children, in particular, we increase the possibility of them having better personal balance and a higher purpose in life.

Thus, for children to have a healthy and appropriate emotional development within school and, consequently, social environment, positive interpersonal relationships should be established, including aspects as acceptance and support, learning to collaborate, to live collectively and in society, to enjoy oneself and others. Based on this, education proceeds on to create in each individual child a feeling of love and unity with all beings [1].



1.1 A new proposal in education

In this context, an important alternative today is the Neohumanistic education. Based on philosophy of Neohumanism developed by Indian philosopher P. R. Sarkar, it is a balanced and harmonious synthesis which aims to help every child to develop his or her highest potential. Its basic principles are: to teach children to respect the other people and themselves; to promote mental expansion; to develop the spirit of unity; to awaken universal love – a potential to love all forms of existence; to be based upon universal ethical concepts, like truth, love, simplicity and solidarity; and to emphasize the importance of relationship with nature [2].

Circle of Love, being mainly oriented to children in kindergarten, is a collective and playful activity that fits nicely in the Neohumanistic educational proposal. Integrating ancient wisdom with modern science, it offers a simple and effective program to build character, restore emotional balance, and strengthen the emotional ties in order to help children to open their hearts. In a world threatened by destruction of all kinds, it is essential to achieve a healthy living, mutual understanding, and universal peace.

The Circle of Love program has been formulated by psychologist, anthropologist, and yogic nun, Dr. Susan Andrews. She was born in the United States, but now she lives in São Paulo, Brazil, where she conducts various social service projects including Educational Center “Espaço CreSer”.

Circle of Love is also part of several kindergarten’s routine in Brazil and around the world [3]. It consists of a series of songs that speak about love, compassion, respect, joy and God, a “God” who has many names: Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Lord, Supreme Being... The Circle has yet creative movements, psychomotor exercises (yoga for kids), visualization and stories, all to encourage in the children a sense of unity and empathy with the world around them. In this wave of affection, alternating exciting moments with reflective ones, the children can feel their loving connection to the Universe, with each other and with the nature – all together incorporating a Large Family [4]. The epidemic that is spreading in our society is not only stress, but also the deep sense of loneliness, emphasizing the power of love and empathy for the health and quality of life.

The Circle of Love is an activity guided by the principles of yoga as it deals with the whole child: mind, body, heart and spirit. It is a form of holistic education, which helps the child in the harmonious development of your body and its emotional and mental skills towards a healthy, solidarity and happy human [5].

The yoga postures, also known as psychomotor exercises, held in the Circle of Love are practiced in a simple and smooth way, and even little kids can do it, preparing the body for an integrated development of intellect and of the feelings, harmonizing the secretions of the endocrine glands to balance the emotions. Besides that, these exercises make flexible joints, massage the internal organs, stimulate circulation, and canalize the nervous energy of children, making them calmer, focused, even those considered hyperactive [4].

Another important aspect in the Circle of Love is meditation. When practiced regularly, it is able to activate new areas of the brain, helping to build the basis of mental focus and spiritual sensitivity. The meditation may offer new opportunities for development of hyperactive children or with learning disabilities, as in children with average mental level or mentally gifted [6].

Among many benefits, meditation makes children more kind and loving, increase self-confidence, inner peace and happiness. It is a science of mind that helps not only the development of spirituality but also intellectuals and social situations.

A practice that leads children to control the restlessness of the mind and focusing the attention should be encouraged since the earliest school years, creating a human being with the least possible stress. Thus, the child can develop the wisdom of selfless love and compassion to bring harmony in all aspects of the life, removing every barriers that separate people from each other and uniting the human society as a world family.

Given the current situation of children and adolescents (hyperactivity, drugs, depression, violence ...) and the probable effectiveness of the Circle of Love in restoring emotional balance and strengthen the affective ties, this study aimed to add the practice of “Circle of Love” in the daily activities of the Municipal



Center for Early Childhood Education “Agua Viva” – Pontal do Parana, Brazil, in order to evaluate its influence on emotional, cognitive, psychic and social development of children 2 to 4 years.

The ultimate goal is to prove that a more loving and humanist education, with activities that focus on love, compassion, respect and spirituality, and with exercises that stimulate the control of emotions (yoga), would be an excellent alternative to the challenges of the current society.

2 Methodology

The Circle of Love was performed in the early childhood education center every morning during about 60 school days (sep 26th, 2010 to dec 20th, 2010). It used to be the first activity of the day, after breakfast, and it used to last around 30 minutes. In this case, the Circle of Love was directed at children from 2 to 4 years, 36 students in total, accompanied by the teachers.

The dynamic of the Circle usually followed a logical order of the songs. After starting with the most active and exciting music, the intensity was gradually lowered, until the moment of silence with the guided visualization. The children sang and followed the choreography while sitting in a circle on the floor, where everyone could see each other. Some songs were done on foot with stretching.

The children periodically practiced yoga postures along with stories that they helped to create. There was also puppet show, theaters and circle dances. Everything always dealing educational topics, loving and encouraging respect and compassion for oneself, with others and for animals and plants. Besides that, the practice had collective massages and relaxation.

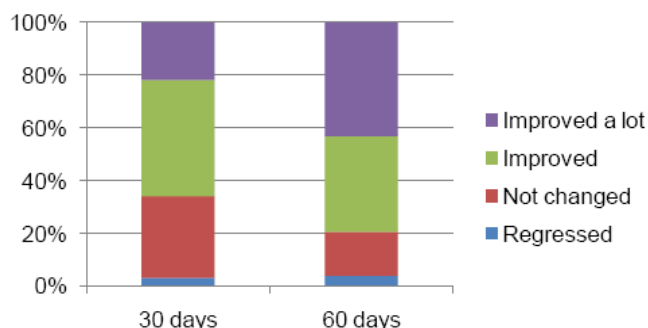
After 30 school days of application of the Circle of Love, questionnaires were distributed to the teachers in order to evaluate any possible behavioral changes of the students with the practices. And the same questionnaires were redone at the end of the project (60 school days after the beginning). Each teacher answered an individual questionnaire for each student of her group.

The questionnaires were composed of closed questions grouped into four aspects: Affective, Cognitive, Psycho and Social. For each question, the teachers answered if the child has regressed, not changed, improved or improved a lot in that regard.

3. Results

The questionnaires done 30 days after the beginning of the Circle of Love were compared with those ones answered at the end of the project (60 days after), observing the progress of children during ongoing activities.

After 30 days of activities, it was possible to perceive an improvement in children's behavior. As shown in Graphic 1, about 44% improved and 22% improved a lot, averaging between all aspects. After 60 days, one can observe an even greater improvement, with 36% of children improved and 44% improved a lot.



Graph 1: Comparison of the two questionnaires applied after 30 and 60 days of the project.

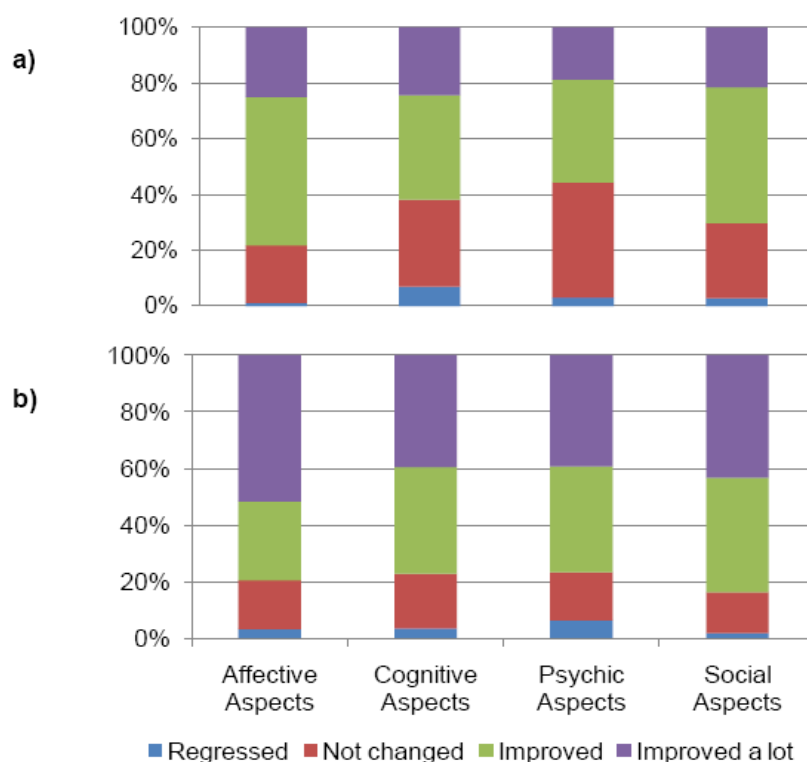


Cases of regression were minimal and can be caused by external factors, since it is difficult for the teacher to evaluate the family situation and the type of education that children receive at home.

It is also evident, the increment of improvement with the continuation of the project. It is likely that the practice of the Circle of Love throughout the whole school year will bring even more positive effects at school, obtaining better results even with the kids more "difficult".

As mentioned earlier, questions were grouped by the following behavioral aspects: affective (kindness, loving, giving and receiving affection), cognitive (concentration, animus, creativity); psycho (aggression, annoyance, joy, expression, fear, shyness) and social (respect, cooperation, participation, interaction).

The graphic 2 illustrates the effectiveness of the Circle of Love in early childhood education in all aspects analyzed in this research, with more than 50% of improvement and / or lot of improvement in all cases. However the affective and social aspects were those that the children most progressed, as in the evaluation of the questionnaires as in the the observations of the researchers and educators.



Graph 2: Comparison between the four aspects of behavior - a) 30 days, b) 60 days.

Given these results, it is worth emphasizing the importance of affection and the encouragement of positive emotions in the school environment, making the ideals of the Circle of Love indispensable in early childhood education.

Negative emotions have a considerable influence over the whole of our intellectual and cognitive functions, and the best way to manage these emotions is causing positive emotions [7].

Thus, in an affective, happy and safe environment, the students become calm and secure, build a positive self-image, participate effectively in the proposed activities and fulfill the educational objectives. Moreover, aggressive attitudes in children are eased and interpersonal relationships are favored, then the children become benevolent with all beings that surround them.



Another form of contribution of the Circle of Love are the practices of meditation, relaxation and yoga. Such activities have a positive impact on the emotional state of students and also about the feeling of belonging to the One.

Briefly, this project was really a proof that the Circle of Love is an important tool to becoming the educational system more humane, happier and healthier children and involved in a feeling of unity and equality with all beings (Neo-humanism), consequently, a better world!

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