



Art-Based Program for Social and Emotional Development of Children

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1. Introduction

The use of art-based techniques and art therapy in classroom setting is beneficial for shaping intellectual and emotional development and for evoking emotional responses in children who are unable to evoke them in a normal educational setting [6][9]. Art techniques engage competencies, which might affect children's relationships with their peers, teachers, or family [11].

It has been proved that a wide spectrum of clients with a variety of issues can benefit from art-based methods. Art therapy has been successfully used in school settings [2][18] and in researches with children and young adults. The number of participants in those researches varies from one case [14] to whole class studies [16], both single gender [17][21] or mixed [1].

Results from those studies show that art techniques can improve academic performance [14], attitudes toward school and self [18], emotional understanding and anger management [2], or self growth [20]. Researchers often use a combination of methods, yet some studies rely on a single technique as drawing mandalas [19].

1.1 Setting the goals

Our research project was aimed to improve communication, cooperation, emotion management and understanding, and identity enforcement in the 5th grade of a primary school. The forementioned competencies were chosen after evaluation of CES (by Trickett & Moos) and B-3 (by Braun) methods a week before the start of the actual program.

The CES method was used to find out how children evaluate teaching methods, teacher personality and overall classroom environment. Teacher's personality is tied up with the successful or unsuccessful running of the class. The results shown that children saw their class as high in competition and in teacher control and low in teacher support.

The B-3 test evaluates classroom atmosphere, relationships between children and characteristics they attribute to each other. Children were much aware of the absence of trust, safety, friendship, cooperation, and tolerance in the class. The group quality was rated as very low. Out of 25 children, 19 received characteristics as 'lonely', 'rude', 'unreliable', 'unfair', or 'ungrateful' at least once; only 7 children received the opposite, positive characteristics. Those issues influenced children's self-acceptance, communication with each other, will to express their feelings and thoughts and affected their social skills.

Art-based techniques were chosen because of children's positive reactions to such techniques implemented in the past classes. Another reason was the well-documented ability of arts and art therapy to develop and influence the desired competencies. Art therapy brings results in work with children with difficult family background [12][20], which was highly important aspect in our study. Using art therapy promotes acceptance in a group and helps with integration of lonely children into the peer group [15]. This would not be possible without facilitating and improving the communication styles among children, which was also studied in art therapy research [7]. Building social skills as cooperation, emotional understanding and management or asserting the self-esteem has attracted a lot of attention among art therapy researchers [3][7][13]. Self-esteem or self-concept of children can be improved with painting or musical production [13][4]. One of the benefits of art therapy, that we could notice almost from the very beginning of our program, was its power to improve mood and reduce anxiety and negative emotions [1][5][10] or help with their expressing and understanding in a supporting environment.

1.2 Respondents – choosing the class

The 5th grade class was chosen because of its characteristics, which made it very different to other classes. From the 1st to the 5th grade there were 6 different teachers, although in the Czech Republic children have only 1 teacher for the first 5 years of the primary education. All 5 teachers left the class upon their own request as they were unable to handle the behavior of the children.

Out of the 25 children, 16 were brought up by their grandparents, since their parents were prisoners or drug abusers. There were 6 children diagnosed with ADHD/ADD and 4 children diagnosed with dyslexia and/or dysorthographia. All children except for one expressed negative relationship towards their current teacher and 16 children had no friends in the class. Teachers complained about children's inability to cooperate and work in groups of two or more children. A major problem was the relationship between a group of boys and of girls, who were unable to talk to each other or behave in a good manner. Boys were physically aggressive and girls used suing on them as the only way of handling the situation.

1.3 Outline of the program

For 8 weeks we ran an art-based program for social and emotional development for a group of 25 children aged 11-12 years. The social-psychological background of the class is described in section 1.2. We met once a week



for 45 minutes and worked with the children on improving their skills in communication, cooperation, manifestation and recognition of emotions and identity enforcement. Each skill was covered by 2 lessons.

We used traditional methods as group imaginations, drawing a tree, drawing classmates enchanted into animals, or expressing emotions with musical instruments. Other methods were for example drawing images with a finger on each other's back or drawing a group island to support tolerance and acceptance, drawing and performing own fairytales, making an advertisement on one's own personality, painting pictures and making collages on themes like 'safety', 'trust' or 'tolerance', box of miseries, or solving imaginary problems.

Each lesson started with a short ice-breaker activity, followed up by the main program and discussion. We usually combined aspects of art, music and drama. For example we used a short ice breaker activity from music therapy and then painting and dramatization of the painting in the main program.

During the program children often asked whether they were 'getting better' as a class. It was obvious they realized there were visible problems in the class atmosphere, but they also thought of themselves as of problematic children. That was a label those children were given by their teachers and by their parents. A major part of our work in the class was aimed to deal with this label and to change the way the children perceived themselves. We had to explain to them and to their teacher that the class climate was not a result of children's wrong character, but a result of a wrong communication and problem solving style.

2. Results

After the 8 week-long program we re-evaluated the class atmosphere. We used the B-3 and CES tests again and we asked the children to paint another 'self-advertisement', which we compared with the one they painted at the beginning of the program.

The second administration of the B-3 test revealed that the levels of safety, friendship, cooperation, trust and tolerance improved from the average score of 4 to the average score of 3 for safety and tolerance and of 2 in the other cases (at a 5 point scale). The overall quality of group changed from 5 to 3. There were only 5 children labelled as 'lonesome' and 17 children received positive characteristics in peer rating.

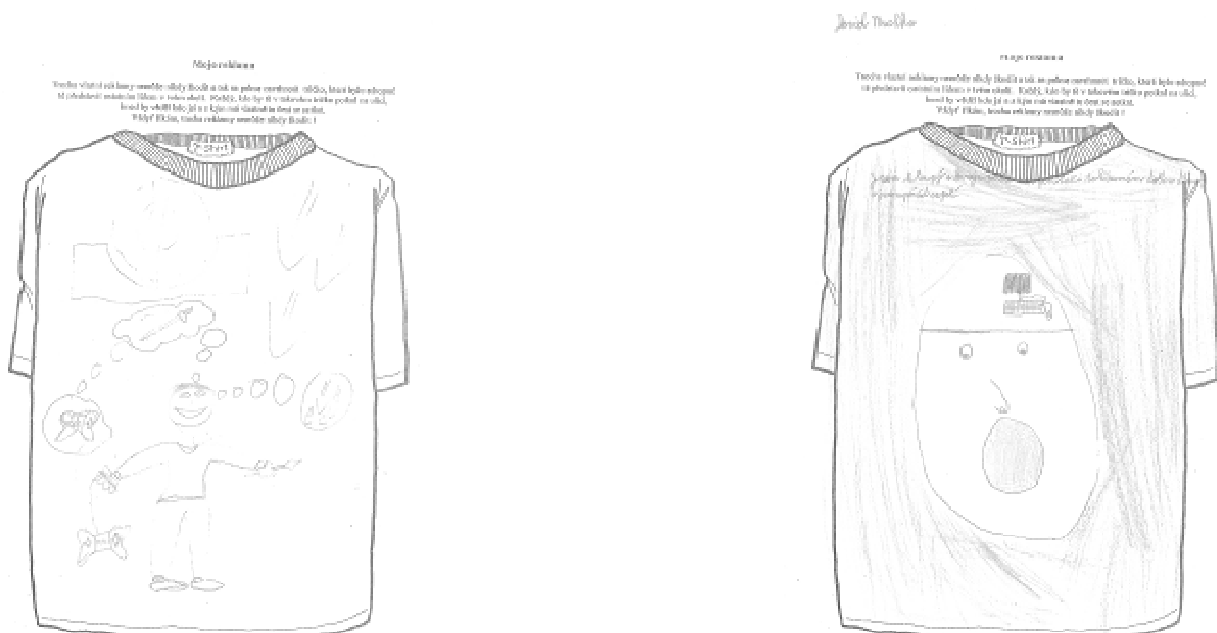
The CES method revealed significantly lower level of teacher control and higher level of teacher support ($p < .05$). The qualitative analysis of paintings indicates children became more aware of their qualities and they rarely promoted their alleged faults. They described themselves as funny, positive, friendly or clever more often than at the beginning and characteristics as silly, boring, lazy, lonely, or useless appeared less frequently.

3. Future possibilities

After the whole program finished, the participating children were offered to attend voluntary classes, a fusion of art therapy and art education with aspects of drama and music therapy. We considered it a major success that 23 out of 25 children expressed an eager wish to participate in the classes, even though they have no advantages for their participation.

The research we described is important thanks to the measurable changes in followed competences and class atmosphere, which we achieved with the program. Similar projects are necessary for promoting the healthy school atmosphere and the discipline of school psychology in the Czech Republic, since its importance is still much underrated in our country.

4. Examples of work





Advertisement on children's personalities on paper T-shirts: First picture represents a boy, whose only interests were computer games. Second picture was drawn by a girl, who enjoyed painting and reading fantasy books. The last example was made by a boy, who loved computers and the description in the picture says: "I am silly and play computer games all day long, so I have a hole in my head and I am always sleepy".

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