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**KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS SPEAK THEORY FROM THE
PRAXIS**

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Abstract

This article addresses the analysis of semi-structured in-depth interviews on the topic of social-emotional competence with five kindergarten teachers who work with children aged three to six. The article focuses on the clear and necessary relationship that does not always exist between the personal and practical knowledge of education practitioners and the research and theoretical and methodological knowledge that the researchers bring. The interviews are the qualitative components in a mixed methods research study that examined the attitudes of the kindergarten teachers on the topic of the social-emotional competence. In a semi-structured interview it is possible to research in-depth the term of social-emotional competence but also to broaden and extend the questions to information given by the kindergarten teachers and to obtain the unique viewpoint of each one of them (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Analysis of the interviews included analysis of the topics through the use of passages of text from the interviews (Shkedi, 2003). Two main themes were identified: social competence and emotional competence. Categories were associated with every theme, and four categories were found to characterize social competence and three categories were found to characterize emotional competence. The categories found to define social competence are conflict resolution, cooperation and friendship, ability to see the other, and ability to express desires in words. The categories found to define emotional competence are emotional expression, emotional regulation, and emotional-social understanding. The in-depth observation between these categories and the theory that addresses social-emotional competence shows that there is a relationship between them.

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Keywords: Social – emotional competence, Kindergarten teachers, Attitudes.



1. Introduction

This article presents the findings of a research study that had the objective of examining how an intervention program for the cultivation of social-emotional competence influences the attitudes of kindergarten teachers in kindergartens for children aged three to six regarding the perception of the importance of the cultivation of this competence. A short stay in the kindergarten, a stay of observation and listening, indicates how diverse and different the children are in their social-emotional competence. Some children are a part of a group, while other children are primarily alone. Some children connect effectively with their friends, while other children do not. Some children do not succeed in regulating their emotions in social-emotional situations and find it difficult to calm down, while other children calm down easily. Some children are aggressive, while others are socially withdrawn, and others are what the kindergarten teacher calls 'friendly'. Who are the friendly children, what characterizes them, and how does the kindergarten teacher describe them? How does she preside over this complicated emotional social orchestra? How does she respond in social-emotional situations? What are the positions that influence the way in which she perceives social-emotional situations in the kindergarten and the way in which she responds to them? These are the main themes that accompany the research study, which addresses the attitudes of the kindergarten teachers in the context of social-emotional competence.

2. Problem statement

2.1. Social-Emotional Competence

Emotional competences and social competences are combined with one another. Emotional abilities are central in the development of social contacts and interaction with others and together they create competent behavior (Denham et al., 2003; Denham et al., 2012). However, when we go to understand the concept of social-emotional competence, we must address each concept separately.

There are many definitions of the concept of social competence in the professional literature. Most focus on the individual's ability to create and preserve a system of relations with others, an ability characterized by reciprocity and sense of satisfaction (Katz & McClellan, 1997), with reference both to the individual's outlook and the others' outlook (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Social competence includes a variety of abilities, such as understanding others and communicating effectively (Howes, 1987), producing enjoyment from social interaction, using personal and environmental resources so as to respond suitably to others (Waters & Sroufe, 1983), creating systems of relations and finding a place in the peer group with the realization of goals and personal needs (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

These social abilities are expressed in social interactions and incorporate cognitive-emotional abilities, such as emotional expression, emotional regulation, and emotional understanding (Denham et al., 2003). The emotional expression after the emotion can be expressed verbally or nonverbally, such as facial expressions, vocalizations, body postures, or gestures. The importance of the emotional expression is its communicational role that enables the environment to discern the emotional experience and to respond to it (Campos, Sorce, Emde, & Sevjda, 2013). Emotional expression ability develops over the years as the language develops, and the development of the ability to express desires and conduct

emotional discourse influences the manner of the social contacts (Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987). The acquisition of social norms also influences the ability of emotional expression. The rules of emotional expression regarding the regulation of the emotional expression, the camouflage of emotions, and the pretense that characterize every culture influence the way in which the emotional expressions will be expressed (Bar, 2007).

Another dimension that characterizes emotional competence is the emotional regulation. Emotional regulation addresses the ability to respond to an environment in a variety of emotions, in a socially accepted manner that is sufficiently flexible to enable a spontaneous response or to inhibit a spontaneous response as requires (Cole, Michel, & Tedi, 1994).

As the children are younger, they have greater need of an adult figure who will help them regulate their emotions in situations of emotional arousal, such as tiredness, pressure, or difficulty (Denham, 1998). Under the influence of language, cognitive, and motor development, the ability of self-regulation develops, expressed in awareness of strategies of personal regulation and strategies of regulation of others and familiarity with diverse ways of regulation, such as distancing from or ignoring of the stimulus, understanding and re-evaluation of the event, tailored choice of personal goals in the event, and reference to possible outcomes (Denham, 1998; Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004; Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992; Katz & MacClellan, 1997). Research studies indicate that a high ability of emotional regulation positively influences the social status in the peer groups (Eisenberg et al., 1993) and is related to low levels of impulsiveness and aggression (Eisenberg et al., 1995; Eisenberg et al., 2004).

The additional dimension that characterizes emotional competence is the social-emotional understanding. Social-emotional understanding addresses the individual's ability to understand the reasons for emotions and discern the emotional expressions or emotional states of the self and of others and the meaning of these states (Denham, 1998). Social emotional understanding includes the ability to identify and decode emotions that awaken in an event, their way of expression (Barth & Bastiana, 1997; Goleman, 1995; Rosental, Gat, & Zur, 2009), and their meaning and the understanding of the circumstances and results of the event (Rosental, Gat, & Zur, 2009). In addition, social emotional understanding includes the ability to understand the other person's perspective, the reciprocal influence of behaviors and responses of the individual regarding others and of others about the individual and social knowledge accepted in the immediate environment (Rosental, Gat, & Zur, 2009). Research studies show that friendships and prosocial behaviors among children are related to good social-emotional understanding (Denham, 1998; Dodge et al., 2003; Lochman & Dodge, 1994), while behaviors of social withdrawal and aggression are related to difficulties in social-emotional understanding (Dodge et al., 2003; Lochman & Dodge, 1994).

Research studies show that the educators' attitudes towards the topic and its deployment are an important and significant variable in the success of the implementation of educational programs (Reinke, Stomont, Herman, Rohini, Nidhi, 2011; Renju et al., 2010). Lim (2010) emphasizes that there is considerable importance that the shapers of policy in education will express their opinion about the outlook of early childhood educators regarding the development of young children, since this outlook influences their educational conduct. Accordingly, the research study upon which this article is based assumes that the kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards social-emotional competence is the basis for

their behavior in social-emotional situations in the kindergarten and will even influence their willingness to express in the field the principles of the 'Learning to Live Together' Intervention Program (Gat, 2004), a program that engages in the social experience of children during early childhood, in which they participated during the research. Hence, the present research study is important.

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to examine how the intervention program dealing with social emotional competencies and social information processing competencies influences the knowledge and educational attitudes of the kindergarten teachers participating in the intervention program

4. Research Question

How does the intervention program dealing with social emotional competencies and social information processing competencies influence the knowledge and educational attitudes of the kindergarten teachers participating in the intervention program?

5. Research Methods

This article is based on a research study of two stages: a qualitative research and a quantitative research. In the article I will present the findings of the qualitative part.

A qualitative research is a research based on a fundamental assumption that the researched reality is a personal and human structure with cultural and social characteristics of the respondents. The respondents are a part of the researched reality. They tell their personal story and give to the same reality interpretations that establish the behavior, emotions, and thoughts. Without the respondents, the reality does not exist (Kaniel, 2014; Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 2016). In addition, qualitative research enables intimate, in-depth, and comprehensive acquaintance with the respondents (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 2016).

The qualitative research includes semi-structured in-depth interviews with five kindergarten teachers from the experimental group. The interviews were held at the beginning of the research. Every interview lasted about half an hour. The goal of the interviews was to reveal how the term social-emotional competence is interpreted. A semi-structured interview enabled the in-depth research of the term social-emotional competence, the broadening and adjustment of the questions to the information given by the kindergarten teacher, and the attainment of the unique viewpoint of each one of them (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). The interviews were transcribed and topic content analysis was performed, with the use of passages of text from the interviews (Shkedi, 2003). The content analysis was performed according to the following stages: (1) holistic reading of the data, (2) organization and reduction of the data, (3) breaking the data into small units, (4) reconstruction of the data and/or theoretical conceptualization, (5) holistic re-reading, (6) verification of the findings, and (7) writing (Kacen & Krumer-Nevo, 2010).

6. Research Findings

From the semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with the kindergarten teachers, two themes were identified, social competence and emotional competence, and the categories were affiliated with them. Table number 1 presents the themes and attribution categories that arose from the content analysis.

Table 01. Themes and Categories

Themes	Categories	Evidence
Social Competence	Conflict resolution	“Sometimes to know to take a step back and sometimes to know to stand up for myself and to fight.”
	Friendship and cooperation	“The child’s ability to get along, in my opinion, more with the peer group. In other words, how he finds his place ... with friends and with the rest of the children in the kindergarten.”
	Ability to see the other	“Also to give a place to another. Also to be respectful in conversation. A friendly child is a child who knows to respect another.”
	Ability to express desires in words	“Then will develop the skill of conversation, the skill of speech, for people to understand what you want. Explain what you want.”
Emotional Competence	Emotional expression	“To express more what they feel, and what they think and what bothers them.”
	Emotional regulation	“If he (the child) throws or hits ...”
	Emotional social understanding	“To caress a friend who is sad. Here there are children who come to me, we are here for a month, and they tell me he cries.”

The first category that characterizes social competence addresses the ability of conflict resolution. This category addresses the ability to clarify and understand what happens when needs and desires clash. It is described in the words of the kindergarten teacher in the following way: “Sometimes to know to take a step back and sometimes to know to stand up for myself and to fight.”

The second category that arose from the interviews addresses the ability of friendship and cooperation, or in other words, the ability to connect with the peer group and to manage play with other children according to the rules and laws, as arising from the statements of one of the interviewees. “The child’s ability to get along, in my opinion, more with the peer group. In other words, how he finds his place ... with friends and with the rest of the children in the kindergarten.”

The third category identified addresses the ability to see the other person. In other words, this is what the other person feels, needs, and/or wants and it is expressed in the following statement. “Also to give a place to another. Also to be respectful in conversation. A friendly child is a child who knows to respect another.”

The fourth category is the ability to express desires in words. It addresses the verbal expression of desires, as one of the kindergarten teachers emphasizes. “Then will develop the skill of conversation, the skill of speech, for people to understand what you want. Explain what you want.”

Conflict resolution, cooperation and friendship, the ability to see the other, and the ability to express desires in words are the four categories that characterize social competence on the basis of the interviews with the kindergarten teachers and the theory that addresses social-emotional competence. Three of the categories identified on the basis of the interviews and the theory as characterizing emotional competence are emotional expression, emotional regulation, and social-emotional understanding.

The first category that characterizes emotional competence is emotional expression. Emotional expression addresses verbal and nonverbal expression of feelings and emotions. It is described by one of the interviewees. “In contrast, the ages of three plus succeed more in talking, expressing more what they feel.” “She doesn’t talk much and this is more in violent ways or to grab games or to scratch children, this is less talk.”

The second category is a component that addresses the ability of emotional regulation, which is the emotional response to the environment in different situations of arousal. A verbal description of this component is, “If he (the child) throws or hits ...”

Social-emotional understanding is the third category that characterizes emotional competence. This is the ability to differentiate emotional, verbal, and nonverbal expressions, of the self and of others, to understand their meaning and the reasons for emotions, as described by one of the kindergarten teachers. “To caress a friend who is sad. Here there are children who come to me, we are here for a month, and they tell me he cries.”

7. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings show that according to the kindergarten teachers the categories of social competence are conflict resolution, cooperation and friendship, the ability to see the other, and the ability to express desires in words. An in-depth observation between these categories and the theory that address social-emotional competence shows that there is a relationship between them.

The reference to the ability to resolve conflicts can be found in the work of Waters and Sroufe (1983), who defined social competence as the ability to produce benefit from social interactions and the ability to use personal and environmental resources so as to respond in a way suited to others. Support of the category of cooperation and friendship can be found in the theoretical definitions that address social competence as the ability to create and maintain systems of relationships that are characterized by reciprocity and sense of satisfaction (Katz & McClellan, 1997) and to find a place in the peer group through the realization of goals and personal needs (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The ability to see the other was also found in the findings as a category in social competence and reinforcement can be found in the definitions from the professional literature as the ability to understand others (Howes, 1987) and address the viewpoint of another (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The last category in the social competence found in the findings is the ability to express desires in words or, as in Howes (1987), the ability to communicate effectively.

The professional literature that addresses social-emotional competence addresses emotional competence through the components of emotional expression, emotional regulation, and social-emotional understanding. The reference to the emotional expression can be found in the statements of

Campos, Sorce, Emde, and Sevjda (2013), who defined emotional expression as behavior that expresses an emotional experience. In their opinion, emotional experience is expressed in a variety of emotions, such as anger, happiness, sadness, distress, enthusiasm, and so on, and the emotional expression after it can be expressed verbally or nonverbally, such as facial expressions, vocalizations, body positions, or gestures. Support for the category of emotional regulation can be found in the definition of Cole, Michel, and Tedi (1994), according to which emotional regulation addresses the ability to respond to the environment in a variety of emotions, in a socially accepted manner that is sufficiently flexible to enable spontaneous response or to inhibit spontaneous response as necessary. The last category that characterizes emotional competence is the emotional and social understanding. The professional literature defines emotional and social understanding as the individual's ability to understand the reasons for emotions and to differentiate the emotional expressions or emotional situations of the self and of others and the meaning of these situations (Denham, 1998). Therefore, it is possible to say that social-emotional competence according to the kindergarten teachers addresses the characteristics mentioned in the professional literature.

Professional conversations conducted in the academic world, which represents the theory, and among people in the field indicate that sometimes the feeling is that the academia and the educational field do not meet for a shared conversation. Alpert and Kfir (2003, p. 10) maintain that "It has become clear that academic educational research has become alienated from educational activity and the needs of teachers and educators". On the one hand, the researchers conducted research studies on topics that did not trouble educators and the research studies did not contribute to the field work and were not made accessible to the education practitioners. On the other hand, the educational topics that required research attention remained unanswered, and the knowledge that the educators held did not find its way to the world of research (Atkin, 1992). The present research study aspired to provide a solution to a main issue that troubles the kindergarten teachers, who are the women of action in early childhood, and this is the creation of the best educational social-emotional climate in the kindergarten. The research study examines the attitudes of the kindergarten teachers on the topic of social-emotional competence and delineated a picture that there is a relationship between the field and the theory regarding the social-emotional competence. The findings and interpretation indicate that the kindergarten teachers speak theory and the theory speaks praxis and the reference to the components of emotional competence and social competence is similar. This research study strengthens the need to combine between personal knowledge and praxis knowledge of the education practitioners and the research and theoretical and methodological knowledge of the researchers.

To conclude, this research study showed that the kindergarten teachers who participated in the study perceive the social-emotional competence as a main axis around which the educational activity in the kindergarten is held and the cultivation of this competence is made possible. Hence, it is possible to learn that the kindergarten teachers speak theory.

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