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**THE IMPORTANCE OF RAISING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN
SELF-ESTEEM IN ASSURING SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL
ADAPTATION**

Claudia Vlaicu (a)*, Alina Gabriela Anghel (b), Camelia Delia Voicu (c)

*Corresponding author

(a) Valachia University, Lt. Stancu Ion Street, no. 35, cod postal 130105, Targoviste, Romania,
vlaicu.claudia@gmail.com

(b) Valachia University, Lt. Stancu Ion Street, no. 35, cod postal 130105, Targoviste, Romania,
anghelalina2002@yahoo.com

(c) Valachia University, Lt. Stancu Ion Street, no. 35, cod postal 130105, Targoviste, Romania
cameliadeliavoicu@gmail.com,

Abstract

Along the years Romanian school has remained committed to paying considerate attention to the formative role of helping our students to exceed grade level standards. Yet Romanian education system should also have a role that is far more important than the academic one: nurturing our students, helping them to become considerate, responsible, self-respecting future adults. In order to assure this, we need to help them since early years to develop self-esteem. The present paper explores teachers' role in supporting young learners to develop healthy self-esteem. Therefore, our study will envision the introduction of a special optional class within language and communication classes meant to develop self-esteem among other interpersonal communication skills. We state that educators in Romania shouldn't wait for the elementary school years but initiate and develop educational projects and classes focused on developing socio-emotional intelligence since early years. Special attention will be paid to the elements of self-esteem which are meant to support our educational initiative mentioned above. By enriching the national curriculum through the introduction of special classes and taking young learners' self-esteem into account while teaching, they are able to organize special classes whose main objective revolves around raising their pre-schoolers' self-esteem. The findings of the study revealed that in classroom practice, they respect and care for young learner; they utilize various strategies and activities to ensure the raising of self-esteem; they also want to involve the parents to align their type of parenting to the educational methods and tools intended to raise pre-schoolers' self-esteem.

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Keywords: Self-esteem, pre-schoolers, self-concept, emotional education, educator.



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1. Introduction

1.1. According to recent studies (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2016) by the age of 5, children have a sense of self-esteem comparable in strength to that of adults. Washington researchers state this important personality trait is already in place before children begin kindergarten. Cvencek, Greenwald, and Meltzoff, (2016) considers that although some scientists consider preschoolers too young to have developed a positive or negative sense about themselves, their findings suggest that self-esteem, feeling good or bad about yourself, is fundamental. He considers self-esteem a social mindset that children bring to school with them, not something they develop in school. This important finding offers a rather new vision on self-esteem both for educators and parents as well. Because self-esteem tends to remain relatively stable across one's lifespan, the present study starts from two important psychological premises: 1) this important personality trait is already in place before children begin kindergarten and 2) what educators can do is to open new doors through kindergarten self-esteem education by creating optional classes dedicated specially to developing self- concept and self-esteem.

The present paper suggests specific means and tools, including curricular changes that can be done in Romanian kindergartens by educators in order to raise children's self-esteem. The process is complex and it also encompasses other educational objectives from the field of emotional education such as enlarging the curricular frames that neglect the concept of self and self-esteem. Although the educational objectives include school adaptation skills, most Romanian educators place accent on the acquisition of intellectual skills rather than emotional abilities. Therefore, the specific aim of this article is to raise awareness among decisional factors of education that equal importance should be given to social and emotional education of the child, in particular to the concepts of self and self-esteem.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Although the present paper focusses more on the situation of Romanian kindergartens, the perspective it offers could be applied worldwide. It is not new that in the last decades Romanian education system has been submitted to educational reforms that have almost never been led to their ends. With each new government, new curricular changes have been implemented. Although the importance of emotional education has not been put aside, the tools and teacher's skills and training to do so were not so much offered. Each teacher has found his own way of dealing with this fundamental need, present in each human: the need for personal grow. This need is profoundly connected to the concept of self and self-esteem. Therefore, in our opinion, supporting what Santrock states, upbringing and education should put more emphasis on human growth regardless of age. This way children could learn to deal with changes and act in problematical situations encountered in life.

Our theoretical approach follows Michele Borba's (2003) self-esteem theory. According to Borba self-esteem is divided into five components: *security*, *selfhood*, *affiliation*, *mission*, and *competence*. The Borba's components are based on Robert Reasoner's self-theory.

Self-concept is the image that an individual has of himself, whereas self-esteem is the feeling that an individual has of this image. What Borba added to this is that self-esteem is also affected by other people's observations of an individual. We approached Borba's model as we considered it to be clear and yet holistic.

According to Borba (2003), whether an educator can help children to improve their self-esteem is dependable upon the attachment relationship. She underlines that educators need to gain children's respect and trust, and be genuinely interested and willing to support them and help them grow.

2.1.1. Security

Since children are aware of the people they can trust, their feelings of safety and assuredness are assured by the caregiver. It can be family members or an educator.

2.1.2. Selfhood

This element, selfhood, is connected to self-knowledge. A high sense of self-hood is equivalent to a realistic image of their characteristics and roles in the case of children. The accent is placed on the strong sense of individuality.

2.1.3. Affiliation

Affiliation has its basis in human interaction. The sense of belonging and relationship to another person are the key elements. Whether children have positive feeling about their social experiences, they can feel approved of and accepted (Borba 2003, p. 8).

2.1.4. Mission

Mission mainly refers to setting realistic goals and taking responsibility of one's action. When we are little, we don't know what we want to do in life and don't understand what is required to achieve it. Along the path of life, children experience moments of success, and feelings of motivation and the sense of meaning and purpose are gradually increased. According to Borba, feelings of mission also include taking initiative and evaluating one's behaviour and performance (Borba, 2003). Self- Anttila, and Saikkonen (2012) underline that guided children are often curious, determined, and thus finish the tasks they have started.

2.1.5. Competence

Competence is rooted in the feeling of success. In order to regard themselves as competent and respected persons, children need to first understand and recognize their strengths and weaknesses and also approve them. Competence normally leads to a sense of empowerment. Children with strong feelings of competence are not affected by failure, which is often regarded as a learning experience. Instead, children without the feelings of competence are often unable to notice their strengths and may feel unskilful even in tasks and situations where they actually are very competent. Some children may be so afraid of failing that they refuse to initiate or perform an action.

3. Research Questions

3.1. In order to be able to create curriculum and booklets and special classes meant to raise children's self-esteem, it is equally important to be able to investigate elements or things that can damage children's self-esteem. So, every time an educator creates an educational program, he shall investigate all others

variables like family dynamics or invalidating messages coming from the child from other life contexts (extended family, neighbours, brothers). No matter how hard an educator work for raising a child' self-esteem it takes only a moment that all his work is ruined by a negative invalidating message coming from family. Each child in your family is different, with individual strengths and weaknesses. It's better if you can recognise each child's successes and achievements.

3.2. Another research question refers to the process of choosing the subjects and themes of the learning process. Any teaching activity must take into account both the present and day-to-day lives of children, but also their future conditions. This is all the more necessary when working with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or having a short and unsuccessful school biography. This means that subjects must be chosen in such a way as to be modern and relevant to the pupils' lives. The educator must ask the following question: "How relevant is the content or topic in question to the emotional and social development of the children in my class? Or, more precisely, what experiences, skills and abilities must be gained by these tools? How relevant is the content from a pedagogical point of view? "

It is essential for us, as educators, to conceptually understand every skill, so that we put it appropriately translated into words and activities for children. Each booklet or optional class, once started, must be systematically followed. It is essential to use the recommended educational practices to maintain an educational climate that facilitates the acquisition of the skills covered by the program.

3.3. Self-esteem is also connected to the self-concept, so we also included in our study the extent to which children feel they are accepted by their friends or trust their own skills in life. The key question that has led us to undertake this study is whether positive self-concept can be a predictor for the success of school adaptation of the child. This question has given rise to other questions, namely: how do preschool teachers detect and how do they comprehend the formation of the self-concept as non-specialists? Most educators are neither psychologists nor scholars and do not have very precise tools. But we can have the signs, namely the negative feelings children can have about themselves or with others. Also, we can see the tendency to show low school performance, the predisposition to inappropriate, violent behaviour or, on the contrary, withdrawal, isolation, shyness. Are all those observable indices related to the self-confidence of the child and the self-concept? And if so, how?

We understand that self-consciousness begins much earlier than we originally thought. And, more important, no one should ignore the parents, who are the first and most important responsible for the development of the self-concept. Educators 'role always comes second in our opinion. Therefore, an important psychological premise may be the following: The more advanced the elderly child, the more difficult it is to eliminate the effects of a negative self-concept. It is, however, possible to have a very low and negative self-image in some areas, without having any impact on other areas. Also, the power of self-concept may vary over time. Children who feel "different" tend to develop a negative self-concept. It is important, therefore, that the preschool be permanently assisted by new educators, be supported in the development of a balanced self-concept. Recognizing and appreciating them, children will be allowed to see their limits at the same time. Children need to learn to understand that they cannot be perfect, because no one is perfect. Perfection is not a realistic goal. Whoever aspires to become perfect will end unhappily. The objective of the children should be to do everything as well as possible. Supporting and encouraging the raise of self-esteem of children and adolescents is related to certain skills and abilities.

This aspect together leads us to develop possible criteria for observing behaviours related to self-esteem. It is possible to observe and evaluate the students' self-concept for a certain period of time? And if so, what is the time to do? We suggest that teachers should ask the following questions that can be the criteria for establishing the level of self-esteem:

- Are the children willing to take the risk of making mistakes in their work or in their game?
Make a scale from 1 to each and every teacher will notice for each child, appreciating the grade with 1 - very little or not willing and 5- very willing

Are they confident enough to speak in class? How many of them have spoken and expressed their opinion about the theme of the day or subject?

4. Purpose of the Study

Our main interest was to study how children's self-esteem (the children aged four to five) develops before the school age. As our theoretical framework we used Michele Borba's self-esteem theory. Her self-esteem model divides self-esteem into five different elements: security, selfhood, affiliation, mission and competence. We took into consideration each of these components and suggested an educational programme focused on raising children's self-esteem. However, another important purpose of this study is to draw attention to the most significant activities that may influence the development of self-esteem, specifically to those connected to the educational environment. Following the guidelines of preschool curriculum, we suggest the introduction of a special class whose educational objectives shall encompass specific tools and methods of developing and improving pre-schoolers self-esteem. Environment plays one of the most significant part in the development of a child's esteem. A child is surrounded by members of family, peers and school teachers. All these play a significant role in their self-esteem development. All life events and the way the child interprets them influences their esteem. Therefore, it takes a huge responsibility from an adult to healthily educate and form self-esteem of a child.

In our paper we wanted to underline the importance of supporting children's self-esteem already in early childhood education. We suggest the creation of a special class included in the curricular area of *Man and Society*, which may be of real help for educators, for kindergarten teachers working in Romania. Nevertheless, the article does not include a research methodology meant to investigate the degree to which pre-schoolers self-esteem could be raised by using certain specific educational tools and specific educational methods within these specially designed classes. This may be the object of a subsequent research on the issue. We merely suggest that the curriculum should include a theoretical framework and the descriptions for different activities that are targeted to children aged four to five and even a booklet that may suit both the teachers' needs and the kids as well. The idea is that kindergarten teachers could use the booklet as a small group activity. Due to the sensitiveness of the topic, teachers should have a brief account of the family dynamics before the kids start kindergarten. Then, they will have the sufficient educational and family background to use their ability to react to the delicate issues that might come up during the activities. In the previous sessions of the paper we have already sustained our educational proposal with strong arguments from scientific field claiming that the fundamentals of the concept of self and self-esteem are formed during early years of life.

Along with raising self-esteem, the child on the brink of schooling is also helped to form the most elementary rules of verbal, nonverbal and written communication and to apply them in life, to know himself, to think positively towards colleagues, parents, teachers, to - and increase school performance, to integrate much more easily into the college of students.

Another purpose of this study envisioned suggesting parenting programmes. Educators may suggest such type of programmes as helping hand along with the parent education in itself. Developing collaborative partnerships may help families gain the support to respond to child's behaviour and interpretation of life events. However, the parenting programme was not compelling, so it was not a variable to consider for our study.

5. Research Methods

5.1. At the base of the didactic research there was a methodological system consisting of: the introduction of an optional class encompassed within *Man and Society* field of knowledge systematic observation method, self-observation method, the analysis of portfolios / pupils' products (cards, posters, books created by them). In the context of the program called *About me, about you*, we used Borba's theory of self-esteem. Self-esteem is also highly influenced by the culture that surrounds a person and how this culture appreciates the particular characteristics of a person. Cultural influence intensifies when children grow up in modest socio-economic circumstances that force families and even children to fight for their own survival.

5.2. Research hypothesis: *Introducing the optional activity "About me, about you" to the large group as part of an educational program to develop the concept of self and self-esteem paralleled by a parenting program will lead to the development and strengthening of preschoolers' self-esteem.*

Research variables:

- **Independent Variable:** all methods and tools used in the optional class "About Me, About You"; they were not very different from the personal development classes and included: games, booklets, role-play, brainstorming, collaboration and co-operative teaching techniques. All methods followed six central methodologies present in the current curriculum for preschoolers' education:

1. *Talk and discussion* (This was a central learning method. The educator may be a facilitator and mediator of a child processing and learning. The personality the educator displays, the way he/ she behaves stands for a representation of the world for the little ones).

2. *Active learning* (The child should be an active agent in his or her own learning. The activities the child performs should provide opportunities for active engagement in a wide range of learning experiences.)

3. *Collaborative learning* (it is important for children to hear the ideas and opinions of others and react to them. Essentially, we are social human beings and our view of the world is mediated through the lenses of other people also.)

4. *Problem solving* (the child is involved in the process of summarising, analysing and making inferences and deductions; all these lead to problem solving.)

5. *Skills through content* (The children need to learn how to transfer learning; this is a central feature of the curriculum).

6. Using the environment (it includes immediate environment and family environment as well)

- **Dependent Variable:** children's self-esteem. It's elements were previously described at Section *Problem Statement*.

Other research tools of the study were: observation grid; the psycho-pedagogical sheet; fills on different themes; The curriculum design activity has taken into account all of the above mentioned points, so that the training has been differentiated according to the availability, interests and the pupils' learning profile. The optional class was part of an educational programme and was chosen by the teacher in accordance to the curricular and educational demands of respective kindergartens and was applied in 10 different kindergartens from Bucharest at level II (preparatory class), chosen from various districts, and has followed a modern and pragmatic approach to content. The educational programme was applied along the year 2017-2018 after the pre-schooler teachers previously agreed to introduce an optional activity within the Man and Society curricular area. The competencies were structured according to Borba's approach described above and the methodology followed the structured booklets and games, each section with a specific objective related to a specific competence as it follows:

- ✓ fostering a sense of belonging and promoting a sense of security
- ✓ providing adequate space and a balance of didactic and non-didactic activities, that provide for challenge and inspire a sense of wonder
- ✓ implementing a flexible routine, where educators respond and adjust to children's needs
- ✓ minimising transitions and ensuring they are planned and considered to reduce anxiety and stress
- ✓ organising intentional grouping of children in small groups throughout the day based on their rhythms, interests and routines
- ✓ creating a sense of belonging and security by offering a variety of materials, equipment and experiences that engage their interests

The main themes around which the classes, the games and the booklets were structured were: *About me, Me and my family, My friends, My favourite places, My educator, What can I do - my skills, My feelings, How to resolve conflicts.*

6. Findings

The analysis of the worksheets, the psycho-pedagogical observation sheets of the products of the activity and the activity of the children during October 2017-May 2018 revealed the following:

- All activities carried out from optional planning have had a positive effect on self-esteem and preschoolers' motivation to learn but also on the child-teacher relationship. Children felt more at ease and they also felt important and valued. In such a context, education meant not only schooling but also, to some extent, even growth and education.
- In addition to focusing on the emotional-emotional dimension in the lesson planning, children were perceived as active actors and subjects, not as simple objects of the teacher or the school curriculum.
- Running such an option meant planning and structuring the lesson from the pupils' perspective, in collaboration with them and adapting it to their needs.

As a result, all the activities carried out were characterized by a high level of activity and participation of the preschoolers. In contrast to teacher-centered education, this kind of approach here was that of positioning the teacher as a learning mentor or facilitator, and the children had full confidence in self-disclosing and developing their self-concept and self-confidence. At the base of the achievement of the proposed objectives was the educational relationship, but also the relationship of the children with their own parents.

After the completion of the optional class, the teachers were asked to fill in observation files and structured interviews including their opinion on the development of such an activity and the efficacy of teaching tools and interactions. They were regarded as feedback sheets and their centralized analysis (revealed the following as guidelines for teachers who conduct such classes on specific educational objectives centered on raising preschoolers' self-esteem :

- The need for teachers to create and maintain a sense of belonging and promoting a sense of security (teaching their children about how their behaviour and actions affect themselves and others and developing the skills to regulate these independently).
- Educators need to learn how to be warm, kind, responsive and available (it is important that educators acknowledge that these skills develop gradually and on a continuum. Children are not able to apply these developing skills in a continuum so patience and perseverance is also required.)
- The need for each educator to reflect on the pedagogical decisions for each day and each situation (Is the situation or the environment contributing to or creating a problem?/ Are my expectations appropriate?/ Am I being consistent?/ How is the child likely to be feeling - what does this situation mean for the child?/ To what extent is my mood contributing to my reactions?)
- The need to involve families in the education process (sometimes educators and families have different views regarding behaviour of their children; sitting down and talking over these issues is required as part of creating a common vision on how to teach the child to get over a situation. Children are not born with these regulation strategies, they learn them from us so it is important not to offer the child more contradictory messages on the same situation.)
- Special attention should be paid to intentional strategies (it is not only about being firm when you need to be, but also helping children organise feelings, use more the natural consequences of the child's behavior instead of punishing him or reminding him the classroom rules; sometimes withdraw from the conflict and give the child the opportunity to solve the confrontation with other children
- The importance of empowering the pre-schoolers (giving them some responsibility; it starts with having appropriate expectations. It is important to acknowledge that children are individuals with a range of skills, emotions and experiences).
- Accept that not every situation can be resolved immediately. Although many teachers may be interested more in gaining control of the situation as soon as possible as they they are afraid of not creating noise or agitation in class, it is equally important to offer children opportunities to master and regulate situations themselves.

Appreciate each positive behaviour of the child (they have been given to exercise the appreciation of the child whenever he or she makes positive behavior or whenever he makes progress or learns new behaviour.

7. Conclusion

7.1. The formation of the self-confidence begins very early in the child's life and not just with the emergence of self-consciousness. This experiment tells educators that before working on self-confidence and self-esteem in the child, it is equally as important to develop the self-concept as a basis for a harmonious development. To help children become autonomous, to cope with the difficult situations in everyday life and to be emotionally balanced, the adult must be available to the child's needs, discuss and satisfy them, but, at the same time, to ensure that there are general social limits and norms that the child can understand.

7.2. Self-esteem is the "feeling of self-appreciation". As previously mentioned, it is essential for children, in particular, to learn how to interact with environment and the people (family members, peers etc). It is the environment in which they are raised that contributes profoundly to the development of their self-esteem. Children with low self-esteem are at risk of developing psychological and social problems. Therefore, evaluating children's self-esteem should be an effective method for understanding their past and present circumstances, for teaching them how to cope with frustrations, disappointments, lack of confidence and working with the sense of belonging as well.

7.3. Every child needs balance in education. Both in the education offered to her at home and in the kindergarten. For children where the family is not harmonious, where there have been frequent conflicts and quarrels, the model of emotional and social education offered by kindergarten has contradicted the mind of the child with the home. Or, it must be similar to the one practiced in the family. In fact, in order to achieve this, parents must be willing to accept that they have something to change in parenting. And this seems to be the most difficult to accomplish, as each parent thinks that he / she grows up the baby best and hardly accepts advice or goes to parental education. Those who followed the parenting course understood to avoid comparing the child or its outcomes with other children and their outcomes. Each child is different and must be appreciated for what he is, without being constantly reported to others. The teachers equally understood that it is important to avoid criticism, and the consequences of punishment. Every child's mistake can be addressed in a positive and explanatory manner so that the child can understand where he was wrong, but also do something to correct the mistake.

7.4. The child should be encouraged to explore and experience new activities and situations; placing him in such situations he gains the courage and confidence that he needs to overcome everyday obstacles and difficulties and develop personal autonomy.

The introduction of such optional classes with specific focus on developing the elements of self-esteem in the last year of kindergarten (preparatory class) is appreciated by the preschooler's teachers as it fosters and strengthens not only self-esteem but also child-teacher relationship. The responsibilities given to each child made them feel important and valued; they developed interpersonal communication skills in a playful and enjoying manner, by getting involved in activities which were finalized firstly due to the fact that the teacher knew how to use appraisals for positive behaviors. The value of such educational classes is double: on the one hand, children gain competencies that help them open the school doors easier but on the other hand, increased self-esteem help them gain competencies to deal with life challenges. Therefore, any classes during kindergarten including personal development skills are welcomed by teachers as well as by parents as all of us know how important is for a child to be able to cope with lifetime difficulties without the help of adults

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