Art-Based Program for Social and Emotional Development of Children

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For eight weeks, we ran an art-based program for social and emotional development in Grade 5 of primary school for children aged 11-12. We met once a week for 45 minutes and worked with 25 children on improving their skills in communication, cooperation, manifestation, and recognition of emotions and identity enforcement. Each skill was covered by two lessons, with the first and last lessons including a class climate evaluation using the CES (classrooom environment scale) (Moos & Tricket, 1987) and B-3 (Braun, 2006) methods. Our goal was to improve the class climate by drawing attention to the feelings of children towards their class and classmates, to their ability to cooperate in the class setting and to communicate with each other without fear, shame, or aggression. The use of art-based methods appeared as the most useful way because of the general inability of the children to express their thoughts and feelings in words because of the fear of being laughed at and misunderstood. Particular activities were based on art-therapy in the broader sense and on art education, helping children to express themselves and communicate with others by using drawings, music, or movement. The final evaluation revealed that after the whole program, children were more confident in expressing their identity, more content with the class climate and they thought of their class as more safe, intimate, and cooperative environment.

Keywords: art therapy, education, social skills, emotion management

Introduction

Art education in the Czech Republic is often considered outdated and stereotypical, and teachers call for new methods of teaching with diagnostical and therapeutical potential. Unfortunatelly, they do not have enough opportunities to gain such competencies during their university education. For the last couple of years, a major trend in the country is employing school psychologists to supplement the diagnostical and therapeutical role in educational system. School psychologists educated in art therapy may benefit from therapeutical methods including art-based techniques.

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 (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 2001). Art techniques engage competencies, which might affect children's relationships with their peers, teachers, or family (Horowitz & Webb-Dempsey, 2002).

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 (Bush, 1997; Rosal, McCulloch-Vislisel, & Neese, 1997) and in researches with children and young adults. Even adults (for example teachers), who think

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they lost their creative potential, are able to create under therapeutical circumstances. The number of participants in those researches varies from one case (Pleasant-Metcalf & Rosal, 1997) to whole class studies (Roje, 1995), both single gender (Rosal, 1993; Stiles & Mermer-Welly, 1998) or mixed (Bell & Robbins, 2007).

Issues that can be modified and improved thanks to the art therapy, make it an appropriate method to be used in a classroom setting. Results from those studies show that art techniques can improve academic performance (Pleasant-Metcalf & Rosal, 1997), attitudes towards school and self (Rosal, McCulloch-Vislisel, & Neese, 1997), emotional understanding and anger management (Bush, 1997), or self-growth (Stepney, 2001). Researchers often use a combination of methods, yet some studies rely on a single technique as drawing mandalas (Smitheman-Brown & Church, 1996).

Setting the Goals

This research project was aimed to improve communication, cooperation, emotion management and understanding, and identity enforcement in the Grade 5 of a primary school. The fore-mentioned competencies were chosen after the evaluation of CES (classrooom environment scale) (Trickett & Moos, 1987) and B-3 (Braun, 2006) 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, which is tied up with the successful or unsuccessful running of the class, and overall classroom environment. Individual CES profiles reveal children's perceptions and can enhance student assessment. It is helpful in evaluating programs, interpreting classroom profiles or preparing overall classroom assessments. There are 90 items of the CES, which are grouped into three dimensions, created by nine subscales. First dimension, "relationship"—shows the degree of pupils attentiveness, participation in class activities, friendship children feel for one another, and help, trust and friendship the teacher shows for students. Second dimension, "personal growth/goal orientation"—measures the task orientation in the classroom and the competitive behavior among children. Last dimension, "system maintenance and change"—measures polite behavior, organization of activities, establishment of clear rules, teacher's strictness and the severity of punishment for breaking classroom rules. The results showed that children saw their class as high in competition and in teacher control and low in teacher support.

Second test, B-3, is a method created in the Czech Republic and it shows the role and position of each child among their classmates. It evaluates classroom atmosphere, relationships between children and characteristics they atribute to each other. It helps the psychologist to evaluate positive feelings of children, the quality of classroom climate, who and how evaluates each classmate, and also compare improvements or changes in consequent assessments. The results revealed that children were much aware of major absence of trust, safety, friendship, cooperation, and tolerance in the whole group. Also, the overall quality of the whole class atmosphere was very low. Relationships between children were highly influenced by opinions they had about each other. There were 19 children, who received characteristics as "lonesome", "rude", "unreliable", "unfair", or "ungrateful" at least once and only one of these children received also positive characteristics. Only seven children received generally positive characteristics. Those issues influenced children's self-acceptance and 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 the children with difficult family background (Kozlowska & Hanney, 2001; Stepney, 2001), which was highly important aspect in this study. Using art therapy promotes acceptance in a group and helps with integration of lonely children into the peer group (Pond, 1998). This would not be possible without facilitating and improving the communication styles among children, which was also studied in art therapy research (Freilich & Shechtman, 2010). Building social skills as copperation, emotional understanding and managment or asserting the self-esteem has attracted a lot of attention among art therapy researchers (R. J. Chin, M. M. Chin, P. Palumbo, C. Palombo, Bannasch, & Cross, 1980; Freilich & Shechtman, 2010; M. M. Omizo & S. A. Omizo, 1989). Self-esteem or self-concept of children can be improved with painting or musical production (M. M. Omizo & S. A. Omizo, 1989; Colwell, Davis, & Schroeder, 2005). One of the benefits of art therapy, which we could notice almost from the very beginning of our program, was its power to improve mood and reduce anxiety and negative emotions (Bell & Robbins, 2007; Curry & Kasser, 2005; Harvey, 1989) or help with their expressing and understanding in a supporting environment.

Respondents—Choosing the Class

A class in Grade 5 was chosen because of its characteristics, which made it very different from other classes. From Grade 1 to Grade 5, there were six different teachers, although in the Czech Republic, it is usual that children have only one teacher for the first 5-year of the primary education. All five teachers left the class upon their own request as they were unable to handle the behavior of the children. Current teacher was a 26-year-old woman, teaching her first class after graduation.

Out of the 25 children, 16 were brought up by their grandparents, since their parents were imprisoners or drug abusers. There were six children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder both with and without hyperactivity, three of them diagnosed with dyslexia and/or dysorthographia. One child was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia. All children except for one expressed negative relationship towards their current teacher and 16 children had no friends in the class. Teachers complained especially 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 were used to suing on them as the only way of handling the situation.

Outline of the Program

For eight weeks, we ran an art-based program for social and emotional development for a group of 25 children aged 11–12. The social-psychological background of the class is described in section "Respondents—Choosing the Class". 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 two lessons. Each class was led by a school psychologist and after the first two lessons, the teacher became a part of the sessions and participated in activities and co-leaded some of the classes.

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 and solving those problems one after

another (see Table 1, for the summary of activities we used).

Each lesson started with a short ice-breaker activity, followed up by the main program and discussion. We usually combined aspects of art therapy, music therapy, and drama therapy. For example, we used a short ice-breaker activity from music therapy and then painting and dramatization of the painting in the main program. What important were discussions that followed after each class. Children could express their emotions and experiences they had had during the class and they could also suggest which direction we might have taken next.

Table 1

Activities Used During the Program

Group imaginations	Performing own fairytales
Drawing a tree	Performing stories based on personal problems
Drawing a family	Performing short scenes from books with therapeutical potential (i.e., *The Little Prince*)
Drawing classmates enchanted into animals	Performing scenes on the classroom rooms/polite and impolite behavior
Drawing group island	Using musical instruments to express emotions
Drawing personal history	Using musical instruments to express relationships
Drawing images with a finger on each other's back	Box of miseries
Drawing an advertisement on one's own personality	"Draw me a sheep"— based on the book *The Little Prince*
Making collages (themes: safety, trust, tolerance, friendship, emotions in school and in family, my personality, etc.)	How I look—How others see me—How I want to be seen

During the program, children often asked whether they were "getting better" as a class. It was obvious that they realized that there were visible problems in the class atmosphere, but they also thought of themselves as 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 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.

Results

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

The second administration of the B-3 test revealed that at a 5-point scale the levels of safety, friendship, cooperation, trust, and tolerance improved from the average scores of 4.2 to the average score of 3.0 for safety and 3.2 for tolerance. For the other competencies, the levels changed from 4.4 to 2.0 for friendship, from 4.0 to 2.1 for cooperation and from 4.1 to 3.2 for tolerance. The overall quality of group changed from 5.0 to 3.1 (see Table 2, for the summary of B-3 results). There were only five 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 ($p < 0.05$). Those results suggest a significant improvement in the way the teacher handled the class. Children were able to communicate with their teacher with less fear and anger.

The qualitative analysis of paintings indicates that children became more aware of their qualities and they

rarely promoted their alleged faults. They described themselves as reliable, funny, positive, friendly, or clever more often than at the beginning and characteristics as silly, boring, lazy, lonely, or useless appeared less frequently.

Table 2

The B-3 Test Results

Competence	Before program	After program
Safety	4.2	3.0
Friendship	4.4	2.0
Cooperation	4.0	2.1
Trust	4.1	3.1
Tolerance	4.2	3.2
Group quality	5.0	3.1

Conclusions and 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 as 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.

Major advantage of the program is that it is easily replicable in other schools and even in other countries. We are currently running three similar programs in two other primary schools and one grammar school in the Czech Republic, and we are preparing a manual for the whole program, which could be used in Czech schools which are willing to participate in it. Another advantage is that the program may be led by teachers, so that they have better feedback from the class and bigger control of what happens in the classroom. School psychologist could provide supervision for teachers, educate them in methods that are used during the program, and execute the class climate assessment at the beginning and after the whole program ends. It might be beneficial if teachers experience the similar program on themselves, i.e., try the techniques used in the program and experience their own reactions and feelings evoked by those techniques.

There are still many steps to be done in order to improve the program and prepare the best activities and methodology. Yet the results we have achieved so far are promising. The research we described is important thanks to the measurable changes in followed competencies and class climate and atmosphere, which we achieved in the program. Similar projects are necessary for promoting the healthy school climate and the discipline of school psychology in the Czech Republic, since its importance is still much underrated in our country.

Examples of Work

Advertisement on children's personalities on paper T-shirts (see Figure 1): The first picture represents a boy, whose only interest was 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".
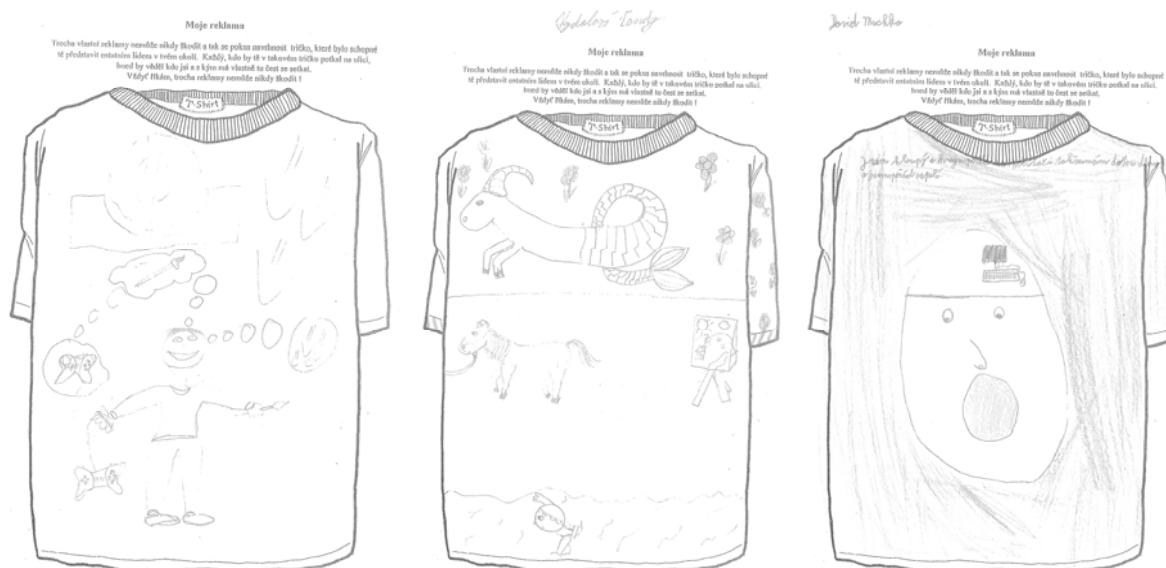
Figure 1. Examples of work.

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