

Emotional and Social Competence in School Beginners: An Intervention Programme for Teachers and Therapists

American Journal of Education and Learning

Vol. 3, No. 2, 85-92, 2018

e-ISSN:2518-6647




Elmarí Deacon¹ 
Esmé Van Rensburg²

¹*Optentia, School for Psychosocial Health, North West University, South Africa.*

Email: elmarideacon@nwu.ac.za

²*Compress, School for Psychosocial Health, North West University, South Africa*

 Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This programme was developed to enhance emotional and social competence in a group of South-African school beginners (aged 5 – 6 years). The programme addressed themes such as emotions, friendship, emotional communication, internal and external emotions, self-regulation, problem solving, self-concept, self-confidence, moral development and the successful student. After the intervention, there were practically significant differences in internalization of problems and social competence in general within the experimental group, as well as improvement in practical reasoning.

Keywords: *Emotional competence; Social competence, School beginners, Programme.*

DOI: 10.20448/804.3.2.85.92

Citation | Elmarí Deacon; Esmé van Rensburg (2018). Emotional and Social Competence in School Beginners: An Intervention Programme for Teachers and Therapists. American Journal of Education and Learning, 3(2): 85-92.

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Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

History: Received: 7 August 2018/ Revised: 10 September 2018/ Accepted: 12 October 2018/ Published: 14 November 2018

Publisher: Online Science Publishing

1. INTRODUCTION

A large number of children in South Africa suffer from deprivation (Barnes *et al.*, 2008; Holborn and Eddy, 2011), which influences children not to developing optimally in terms of their cognitive ability; children not creating secure emotional bonds for normal emotional development; and children not experiencing positive social interactions with peers. Emotional and social competencies promote a positive attitude towards school and improve academic performance (Birch and Ladd, 1997). It further promotes successful socializing and peer relationships, self-esteem, motivation and self-confidence (Stewart-Brown and Edmunds, 2003; Bustamante *et al.*, 2017) and may prevent internalization and externalizing symptoms (Izard *et al.*, 2002). Although there are several programmes available for the enhancement of cognitive functioning (e.g. Headstart, HIPPI) no evidence-based programmes could be found for the enhancement of emotional and social competence in the South African context. Most programmes address cognitive aspects of development (Webster-Stratton and Reid, 2003) and do not focus on emotional and social competencies.

2. THEORETICAL GROUNDING AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Rhoades *et al.* (2009) operationalize social and emotional competence as consisting of different emotional aspects (recognition of emotions, managing of emotions and effective decision-making) and social aspects (compassion for others, positive social relationships and acting in accordance with social norms) which are linked, although conceptually distinct (Blair *et al.*, 2015). This definition concurs with the framework of social-emotional competence as proposed by Denham *et al.* (2003) who indicated that emotional competence skills consist of emotional expressiveness, emotional knowledge and emotional regulation. Drawing on the work of Abraham (2004), Denham *et al.* (2003), Denham (1998), Kidwell *et al.* (2010), Rhoades *et al.* (2009), Rose-Krasnor (1997) and Salovey and Sluyter (1997) the current authors conceptualized the following framework for Social-Emotional Competence:

Table-1. A Framework for Social-Emotional competence

Component	Description
Emotional awareness	Awareness and identification of emotions (Salovey and Sluyter, 1997; Abraham, 2004; Rhoades <i>et al.</i> , 2009)
Emotional knowledge	Ability to recognize emotions from others and name basic emotions (Denham, 1998)
Emotional expression	Ability to express emotion to communicate and contextualize emotions (Salovey and Sluyter, 1997; Kidwell <i>et al.</i> , 2010)
Emotional regulation	Dynamic process whereby emotions influences psychological processes and emotional experiences (Campos <i>et al.</i> , 1994)
Self-efficacy	Acceptance of own emotional experiences resulting in a feeling that of living according to own beliefs and convictions (Salovey and Sluyter, 1997)
Attitude	Trust in and respect for self, others and community, which leads to a willingness to be responsible for self, others and community (Ten Dam and Volman, 2007)
Social knowledge	Knowledge about self, others and community (Howes <i>et al.</i> , 2008)
Reflection	Insight in and influence of self, others and social structure in community (Ten Dam and Volman, 2007)
Social skills	Specific behaviour that can be learnt, including self-management, peer-related, academic and assertiveness skills (Gresham, 1998)

3. THE PROGRAMME

The programme was presented in ten themes, over four months during normal school hours. The programme was presented weekly, with a break for the school holiday. Each theme was structured in the same manner: firstly

the previous session was revised and learners were asked how they had implemented the skill learned in the previous session. The new theme was introduced in the form of a story with the use of visual stimuli. The suggested stories were chosen for their simple story-line and focused theme. Fairy tales and folk tales worked well, as the stories were known to the children, and attention could be given to the specific outcome of the session. The story was followed by a discussion of the themes or an interactive activity, aiming to emphasize the specific outcomes to be reached in the theme. Discussions were kept very brief and focused, as learners easily became distracted, but it was still effective in teaching basic interaction rules and building self-confidence. During the last part of the session learners had individual activities aimed at the confirmation of the major outcomes to be reached during the session, as well as giving the parents an idea of what the learner had learnt in the session. The activity was usually structured in such a way that it included a worksheet, combined with a parent letter. The involvement of the parents was very important, and they were given a brief overview of the theme of the session, as well as some guidelines to help them implement the theme.

Session 1: Emotions

The aim of this session was to (a) help the children to become aware of different emotions; (b) to identify emotions in others; and (c) to link certain vocabulary with the specific emotion. In order to sensitize children for different emotions the story of little Red Riding Hood was presented by means of a storybook and puppets. The different emotions as prevalent in the story were discussed (excitement, fear, happiness etc). The children then had to draw a picture of any activity that makes them excited. The second activity focused on the awareness of emotions in others. The participants had to cut and paste pictures from magazines depicting different emotions. In order to link vocabulary to the emotion an emotion wheel was constructed. The children had to paste similar emotions together on a paper plate and mimic the expressions. Emotional words were linked to the pictures, e.g. happy, sad, scared etc. Discussion followed on how and when the children experienced these emotions and whether they could identify the emotion in themselves and in others. The use of the body, the voice and facial expressions in the identification of emotions were demonstrated and mimicked. A letter was sent to the parents in which the content of the session was explained and they were encouraged to discuss the emotion wheel with the child.

Session 2: Friendship

This session aimed at (a) defining friendship; (b) enhancing/practising empathy; (c) promoting teamwork; and (d) modelling pro-social behaviour. After revision of the first session (emotions) the theme friendship was introduced. In order to reach the goals of session 1, a story about a friendly little girl named Fransie (as written by the first author) was presented. Friendly Fransie had a friend, Scared Sandy. Friendly Fransie has many friends, while Scared Sandy had no friends. Dialogue between puppets depicting Friendly Fransie and Scared Sandy explained that friendliness and helpfulness play an important role in friendship. After this the children discussed the need of friendship and the sharing of emotions during friendship. The role of empathy and caring were also discussed. Teamwork was promoted by a physical activity whereby the children had to stand in a circle, hold hands and then form a knot with their bodies. The group leader assisted the children in forming a knot. The children were not allowed to loosen their hands. One or two members of the group then had to direct the group with how to untie the knot. Discussion followed on why it was necessary to use teamwork to untie the knot. Modelling pro-social behaviour (the fourth aim) was reached whereby the children had to draw a picture of Friendly Fransie to remind them of pro-social behaviour. A letter was sent to the parents to explain the role of Friendly Fransie and they were requested to incorporate this theme in their daily activities.

Session 3: Emotional Communication

Revision of session 2 took place by briefly discussing Friendly Fransie. The children had to indicate what they had done with the picture, and discuss how and whether Friendly Fransie played a role in their interaction with children during that week. With session 3 the presenters aimed at promoting effective emotional communication. Activities included presenting a story “The dog with fleas” (Adapted from Therapeutic Stories that teach and heal, Davis 1996). The story entails a dog with fleas that bothered him. The dog didn’t know how to convey to his friend that he had fleas, and moreover, he was also infecting his friend with fleas – which nearly ruined the friendship between the dogs. A drawing of a dog was presented to each child, and he/she had to put stickers of fleas on the dog. Fleas were symbols of things that bother the child. Discussion followed on aspects in their lives that bother them and strategies were discussed on how one can share things with significant others. Another technique used in this session aimed specifically at promoting effective communication, was the use of “the telephone game”. Learners had to sit in a circle, and the group leader would whisper a message which had to be passed on. This game demonstrated how easily miscommunication can take place and emphasized the importance of direct, face-to-face communication. The last activity of this session also focused on effective communication, and role plays and discussions were used during which the children had to depict communication with a bossy friend, or friends that had to make a joint decision about what they were going to play.

Session 4: Internal and External Emotions

The children again discussed “The dog with the fleas” and had to indicate which “fleas” they had experienced that week and what the outcome was of sharing it with a significant other. The aims of session 4 were to (a) explain that inner emotions may occasionally differ from that which is outwardly portrayed; (b) how emotions are expressed; (c) how emotions influence our lives and (d) how to effectively express emotions. The story of the Princess with the Pea by Hans Christian Andersen and hand puppets were used to explore how emotions can be depicted verbally and non-verbally. The ability to express emotions is an important component of emotional competence. In the second activity animated pictures of animals were used. The emotion expressed had to be identified and discussion on the causes and the effects of the emotions followed. The learners had to try to mimic emotions, and use their faces/bodies/eyes/voices to depict certain emotions. This activity enhanced self-awareness but also awareness of other people. In order to demonstrate that emotion can influence our lives, a glass of water with food colouring was used. The colouring was dropped into the water until the water assumed the colour of the food colouring. A story of a little girl was further used whereby the little girl was upset about everything. Her emotions influenced her perception of further daily events. The last activity was that the group was divided into two teams. Each team received cards depicting emotions and they had to mimic the emotions to the other group. For each emotion correctly identified the other team received a token. The team with the most tokens won. The parents received a brief letter explaining that the children had learnt to identify and express emotions and that they had to encourage these activities at home as well.

Session 5: Self-Regulation

The ability of self-regulation is one of the core concepts of emotional competence and plays an important role in interpersonal relationships. The aims of this session were therefore to facilitate awareness of emotions, but more specifically how one can regulate emotions. Self-regulation implies different strategies the individual employs when he/she becomes aware of the emotion so that a positive outcome can be reached. After a brief revision of the previous session, the first technique implemented during this session was the use of a story about a man with

buttons (from Therapeutic Stories that teach and heal, Davis (1996). With the push of these buttons the man turned into a tornado. The man decided that he was tired of turning into a tornado and realized that he had a choice regarding how he wanted to react when somebody pushed his button. The story therefore links with i) one has to be aware of one's emotions and ii) one has a choice regarding how to regulate your emotions. This was followed by the "Stop-Think-Do technique. The learners then had to identify different situations whereby they could practise to stop, think and do. The session was ended with a relaxation technique. The stop-think-do technique was explained to the parents by means of a newsletter, and parents were encouraged to practise this technique with their children.

Session 6: Problem-Solving

A quick revision of the previous session took place by asking the learners about situations that they managed to "stop-think-do". The learners were praised and thereby reinforced for their attempts to self-regulation. The aims of the next session were to facilitate problem-solving abilities. A story about a boy who lost a key was presented (Davis, 1996). He had to use different approaches and methods to find the key. After discussing Brian's dilemma, the learners had to come with solutions as to how Brian could solve his problem. Methods of solving problems and the different steps in problem-solving were discussed. The children were then presented with different types of pasta (noodles, spaghetti etc) and asked what different things one could make with pasta (a house, a string of beads, use it as a ruler). The children's use of creativity was stimulated. The last activity was that they had to build a house from marshmallows and pasta. They had to explain what they were going to do, and how they were going to do it (planning), before building the house. The different houses were then discussed indicating that although everybody has the same material, different options/plans can lead to different outcomes. Parents received a letter explaining the steps in problem-solving and requested to practise it at home.

Session 7: Self-Concept

The aim of session 7 was to make the participants aware of the difference between people, and thereby emphasizing the uniqueness of each person. The story about the "ugly duckling" was read and dramatized. The underlying message was that perceptions can have an influence on relationships, but also that people may and can change. The children were then measured in terms of their own length, different body parts (arms, legs, circumference of the head, shoe size, big toe, fingers etc). Discussion followed on how each child differed from others in the group and on what made each child special. The "wholeness" of the body was emphasized and how a person is made up of different parts. Thereafter the children were supplied with finger paint with which to do a hand print. The uniqueness of each hand print was discussed. Parents received a letter in which they were requested to emphasize each child's uniqueness and to praise strong personality facets (e.g. you are so special because you always help Grandmother by making her tea).

Session 8: Self-Confidence

The child's evaluation of him/herself formed the focus of this session. Recap of the previous session was done by asking the questions: What can you remember about the previous session? What can you remember about the Ugly Duckling and what did you learn from the story? What did your parents tell you about yourself this week and what makes you special? After this discussion the concept self-confidence was explained to the participants. The importance of self-confidence was discussed and how it may influence our behaviour. Thereafter the story about "The wish that became true" (Davis, 1996) was read to them. This led to a discussion on what learners like about themselves and what they would like to change about themselves. It also included aspects such as how to make

friends and how to be a friend. The participants were made aware of their own development over their short lifespan – and how they first had to crawl, then only they were able to walk and then only to run. This metaphor was used to explain that change is possible, but that it had to come in “small steps”. Learners reacted with pride when realizing what they had achieved during their short lifetimes. The learners then received a work chart with certain developmental outcomes, for example to kick a ball, to write their name, to skip etc. The participants could mark, by pasting a star, which of the milestones they had reached. Each participant then received a small mirror and he/she had to look in it while explaining to the rest of the group why he/she is proud of him/herself.

Session 9: Moral Development

The aim of this session was to explain moral behaviour to the participants. Moral behaviour was defined as the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and to do the right thing. As moral development is linked to social competence, and specifically to self-reflection, it was seen as an important aspect of the session. The story of Cinderella was read and dramatized with hand puppets. All the bad things the stepsisters did, and how they influenced each other were emphasized. The moral of the story was that by doing good, Cinderella became a princess. Hereafter a discussion was held about doing good versus not doing good. The participants were encouraged to share experiences where good behaviour had a positive outcome, whereas bad behaviour had a negative outcome. Ways and measures of enhancing positive behaviour were also discussed. The second aim of the session was to promote the adherence to rules. Different games were used in which rules are incorporated (Snakes and ladders, Snap, Ludo). The group first had to reach consensus about the rules of the game, before starting to play it. Discussion followed on: Were the rules followed? Who broke the rules and why? What was the impact/consequence of breaking the rules? The session was ended by a quiz whereby the facilitator provided each member with a paper divided into blocks. Learners had to colour in blocks based on the answers to questions asked, such as: If you were honest in the games today, colour two blocks; If you liked to play Snakes and ladders, colour one block red; If you cheated today, colour one block yellow etc. The aim was that participants follow the rules, but also to reflect on their own actions. The parents received a letter explaining the last activity and requesting them to do a similar activity during the rest of the week to encourage self-reflection with regard to following rules.

Session 10: The Successful Student

The last session focused on being a successful learner. Recap of the previous session and discussion of the papers with blocks that had to be completed at home formed the first activity. Questions were discussed regarding what they had found difficult and reasons why following the rules was difficult. Thereafter a story (as written by the first author) about Peter’s first day at school was read. The story focused on what Peter needed on social and emotional level to be a successful student. Emotions accompanying entrance to school, the strangeness of the environment, the importance of following rules, making friends and sharing were demonstrated by the character in the story. The participants’ expectations regarding school were explored, and what they would gain and benefit from schooling was also discussed. Their uniqueness and ability to develop, learn and flourish in the school environment were all emphasized.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated a statistical and practical significant difference between the participants in the control and experimental group in terms of social competence ($p = 0.03$; $d = 0.65$, medium effect) and internalizing problems ($p = 0.00$, $d = 0.88$, large effect) and ability to solve problems and think practically ($p = 0.03$,

$d = 0.67$, medium effect) (Deacon and van Rensburg, 2012). Learners that attended the programme were seen to be better adjusted, more adjustable, emotionally mature and to have more pro-social patterns of adjustment than participants of the control group. Furthermore, the learners in the experimental group were more inclined to communicate their emotions after the programme than did the learners in the control group. Lastly, participants also benefitted in terms of their general development, which emphasizes the important links between improvement on the social competence levels and developmental scales.

The implication of this study lies in the importance of the emotional and social competence, not only for the general adjustment of school beginners, but also for the academic adjustment of these learners. Teachers should be made aware of these constructs and the influence thereof, and be trained to enhance this in learners and to identify possible problems in this regard at an early stage. Emotional and social competence as important cornerstones in the development of school preparation programmes should be acknowledged and more should be done to also include these constructs in formal preparation programmes. If it is taken into account that children in South Africa are exposed to high levels of risk, such as poverty, crime and deprivation, it is of paramount importance that programmes to help children cope with difficulties be implemented to prevent adjustment problems and to improve the total development of the child – not only in the school environment, but also in the broader community.

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