



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2018.2.275-280>

**MCDSARE: 2018**  
**International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the**  
**Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education**

**THE PARTICULARITIES OF TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP**  
**THAT SUPPORTS SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF**  
**PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

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***Abstract***

The development of preschooler's socio-emotional skills depends, on the one hand, on the personal factors of the child (as temperamental, motivational and even cognitive factors) and on the other hand on the quality of the two primary social backgrounds of the child (family and kindergarten). Socio-emotional learning begins in the first year of life, under the influence of parental educational practices. The impact that family emotion socialization has on the emotional and social development of the child can be observed and modeled in the context of formal educational actions in the kindergarten. Here, the most important factor for the socio-emotional development is the relationship between the educator and the child. Recent studies highlight the fact that socio-emotional development is favored by a complex of characteristics of child-teacher interaction, known under the heading "emotional support to students". This study presents ways to investigate the quality of the educator-child relationship, carried out in the context of a broader research aimed at exploring the role of certain intrapersonal factors of the educator on the socio-emotional development of the child. The presented tool was built based on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System developed by Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre in 2008, and aimed at measuring those characteristics of the relationship between educator and children that could especially influence the children's socio-emotional intelligence. These characteristics are organized on several variables: the teacher's responsiveness to the child's needs (if he/she identifies and responds to these needs), an open attitude towards the child's own perspective, the absence of negativity, the assurance of the sense of security and the state of mood. The constructed instrument has a broader implication in assessing early education quality and also, in supporting a reflexive professional development.

**Keywords:** socio-emotional development; preschool education; teacher-child relationship; emotional support;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Early education is nowadays recognized as an essential time for personality development and for ensuring optimal adaptation and integration of the child to the school environment and of the future adult

in the socio-professional environment. In spite of the evidence found in many research conducted in other countries (Gilley T., 2015), there are few national research concerns in Romania to highlight the benefits of early education and especially to optimize the educational system and process in early childhood. The UNICEF study on the state of implementation of the National Early Childhood Education Strategy (2015) highlights the pecuniary nature of early childhood educational investigations as well as the "lack of longitudinal studies reflecting the long-term effects of the interventions under consideration" (Nedelcu, Ulrich, 2015, 26). In this context of the lack of pedagogical practice supported by theoretical perspectives based on evidences in early education, the present study aims to bring more knowledge in this field by presenting a way to investigate the quality of the child-educator relationship, realized in the context of a broader research aimed at exploring the role of certain educator's intra-personal factors on the socio-emotional development of the child. The development of pre-school socio-emotional skills depends, on the one hand, on the personal factors of the child (as temperamental, motivational and even cognitive factors) and on the other hand on the quality of the child's two primary social backgrounds (family and kindergarten). The impact of emotional socialization within the family environment on emotional and social development of the child can be observed and modeled in the context of formal educational actions in the kindergarten. Here, the most important factor for socio-emotional development is the relationship between the educator and the child.

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Kindergarten is, after the family, the second important social environment for the child, where children develop their social and emotional skills. The quality of this social environment is even more important (especially in contemporary society) for the socio-emotional development of the child, as the time spent by the child in the kindergarten is higher the time they spent in the family. By creating much more opportunities to interact with others than the family, the nursery environment provides the child with a multitude of situations where he can learn about emotions and their proper manifestation, relationships with others and social adaptation. The child's entry into the kindergarten involves an expansion of his social field and new demands for adaptation, primarily socially, and consecutively, emotionally. In order to adapt to kindergarten, pre-school children will develop their set of behavioral and emotional abilities specific to socio-emotional intelligence (Ionescu, 2010) Ever since the first years of preschool education, first steps have been taken to develop or strengthen these skills, but their learning process (called socio-emotional education) is continuous throughout life.

Socio-emotional education for preschool children involves designing, organizing and conducting learning activities aimed at acquiring individual experience, shaping emotional and social skills, or developing intra- and inter-personal skills that lead to success in life, while reducing the risk of undesirable behaviors, both in early childhood and in the future (Durlak et. al., 2015). To facilitate educational approaches, specialists have synthesized, based on the components of socio-emotional intelligence, distinct goals for emotional and social development. Therefore, the instructive-educational approaches aim at developing the emotional expressiveness of the children, the self-concept and the healthy interaction skills with peers, the adults or the elderly. (Stefan, Kallay, 2007). The successful achievement of the socio-emotional education objectives within the kindergarten requires not only the integration of the content of this type of education into all categories of learning activities taking place in the kindergarten but also the development of specific optional activities specific and specific projects complementary to curricular activities, focusing on extracurricular and volunteer activities, in partnership with the school, the community or the children's parents.

The most important aspect for the socio-emotional development of the child in the kindergarten is the relationship between the educator and the child. Once entering the preschool environment, the educator becomes an important adult for the child, even if it is not always easily accepted. The link between the child and the educator must be based on good mood and warmth, calm, sense of humor, in order to offer children the climate necessary to express their thoughts and emotions. The relationship with the educator is the one that influence the child's desire to attend the kindergarten and to take part in the specific proposed activities. To build a positive link between child and educator, trust and mutual

knowledge are absolutely indispensable. If the relationship is based on severity or emotional coldness, then the child will not open to new challenges and will resist the development of curricular competencies.

Educational preschool relationship is influenced by several factors:

- internal (personal) factors like characteristics of the teacher's personality, teacher's knowledge of child's psychology, social representations of the educator about the preschool child and his education, the teaching style etc. on the one hand, and the temperament child and level of its development, on the other hand;

- and external (social) factors like education policy, sanitary policy and practice, social policies reflected in the regulations related to kindergarten activities, didactic and non-teaching staff in the kindergarten, preschool organization management etc..

Obviously, an educator capable of creating a socio-emotional climate has well-developed socio-emotional skills. But learning and applying educational strategies specific to socio-emotional education can facilitate the development of the socio-emotional intelligence of children but also of the educator.

The way the educator reacts to the child's emotional manifestations influences the development of the emotional intelligence of the child. Recognition, acceptance / validation of the child's emotions creates a sense of self-acceptance (of what he feels) and conveys that what he feels is not wrong or incorrect. This validation by the educator is very important for the development of a healthy self, and sets the foundation for the development of emotional recognition and expression skills (Denham et.al., 2011). If the child's emotion is not accepted, he will learn that what he feels is not good, so he is not well, he will deny / refute / mask his own state by replacing it with a behavior that will be dysfunctional in time. In the same time this denial of child's emotion will subsequently undermine the development of the self-knowledge ability, in that it will be very difficult to discover what it really feels.

Therefore, it is very important that socio-emotional education starts with emotional literacy. The use of words that call emotions in different contexts is a way to teach children to recognize and name their own emotions and others. If the educator does not usually allow children to talk about emotions, about the emotional consequences of behaviors, then they will not appropriately learn "labels" that call emotions. The use by educators of a language that "draws children's attention to emotions or emotional reactions in the context of common interactions lowers children's risk of having difficulty understanding emotions as well as the consequences of their behaviors by learning to behave appropriate in situations of conflict". (Stefan, Kallay , 2007, pp. 44-45)

Educators able to facilitate and stimulate the development of socio-emotional intelligence in preschool children have some specific features in relation to the child: positive emotions in interacting with children, a warm, non-violent communication style, respect for (the recognition of and allowance) the child's perspective, unconditional acceptance of the child, awareness of the child's cognitive and non-cognitive development level, emphasis on the interests of children, motivation, concern for the development of socio-emotional skills, balance between excessive authority and total freedom in interaction with children, positive disciplinary strategies.

Recent studies (Carson & Templin, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008 apud. McCormick, 2013) emphasize that socio-emotional development is favored by a complex structure of teacher-child relationship, called "emotional support towards students". Educators who demonstrate emotional support are attentive to the child's needs, are positive, constant, provide stimulating material, play and interact with children, share experiences, support the children interests and learning by planning opportunities throughout the day to learn and practice social skills. This concept has been operationalized in the context of building a quality assessment tool for teaching activity, called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), also available in kindergarten version and the first years of primary school (CLASS K-3). (Sandilos, 2012).

The CLASS instrument was built by Hamre and collaborators on the basis of the theoretical and empirical knowledge of the group processes manifested in the school organizations. The instrument measures several dimensions of the teacher's classroom activity and it has been developed to identify key aspects of the quality of teaching, which may be related to the socio-emotional and academic development of younger children (Sandilos, 2012). Hamre and his colleagues (McCormick, 2013) argue for multifactorial approach of teaching staff practices, operationalized in a broad range of teacher

behavior divided into three main categories: emotional support of students, class organization and instructive support. The CLASS tool evaluates interactions between children and teachers in these major areas. According to the scale, teachers with higher scores should have a positive influence on the academic and socio-emotional development of their pupils.

Previous studies have shown that scores obtained through CLASS application may be related to changes in class behavior and academic outcomes for pre-school and lower-school children. Higher scores in the field of "emotional support" were related to the increase in emotional and social awareness (Cadima et al., 2010 apud. Sandilos, 2012), while lower scores were considered predictive of poor relations between the teacher and the child (Buyse et al., 2011, apt. Sandilos, 2012). High organizational scores have been linked to increasing learning behaviors (eg initiative, involvement, problem solving) as well as an improvement in early mathematical skills and adaptive behaviors (Cadima et al., 2010; Rimm-Kaufman et al. ., 2009, and Sandilos, 2013). Interestingly, higher levels of support in training were predominant in classes where teachers reported having students with significantly lower levels of self-control (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009 apud. Sandilos, 2012).

The design of the "emotional support" dimension of CLASS is based on the theories of attachment and social cognition, positive feedback and child-care interaction being essential components of this concept. The operational definition of the concept (used in the construction of the CLASS 2008) includes the following variables:

- the teacher's responsiveness to the learner's needs (if he identifies and responds to these needs),
- an open attitude towards the learner's own perspective,
- the absence of negativity,
- the feeling of safety
- the state of good mood.

Thus, this area assesses the extent to which teachers establish and promote a positive climate in their classroom through their daily interactions, as well as the extent to which the teacher demonstrates the awareness (or sensitivity) to the academic and emotional needs of students (recognize children's emotions, helps children solve problems, redirect problematic behaviors, and supports positive relationships between colleagues, constantly provides comfort, reassurance, and encouragement. (Pianta et al., 2008 apud. Sandilos, 2012).

Teachers who provide emotional support demonstrate positive emotions that are shared by students, are aware of and receptive to the needs and interests of children, and take into account their views on teaching-learning activities (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009 apud. McCormick et al., 2013). Classes with good scores in this area have "sensitive" teachers to children, meaning that they are constantly mindful of the children's states and needs and how they are satisfied. In such classes, teachers and children support and respect each other. Emotional support for group is especially important for children from problematic family backgrounds and vulnerable social groups, and especially at younger ages. The authors invoke research that highlighted the positive effects of emotional support in the kindergarten: fewer outsourcing problems, better focus on pregnancy and more effective attitudinal and cognitive involvement in learning activities. (Zaslow M. et al., 2009)

### **3. RESEARCH METHODS**

In this article we will present a tool for evaluating teacher-child interaction of "emotional support". Used in a broader research aimed at exploring the relationship between pre-school social representations of educators and the socio-emotional development of children.

The instrument was design starting from the CLASS, which involved measuring the indicators offered by the operationalization of the "emotional support" concept.

The tool is an assessment scale containing three dimensions of the teacher-child relationship:

**subdomain socio-emotional climate:**

- Educators and children are enthusiastic about their activities
- The educator shows respect for the children
- The affectionate educator with the children (comforts, rejuvenates them, comforts them)

- The educator uses a warm tone in communicating tasks / observations
- The educator has positive emotions during the interactions (pleasure / joy)
- The educator encourages positive / non-aggressive interactions among children (cooperation, collaboration)
- The educator is happy to spend time with the children.
- Children are happy to spend time with the educator.
- Children are looking for interaction with the educator.
- There is a positive climate in the group

**subdomain teacher's sensitivity:**

- The educator is constantly responding to students
- The educator is available for discussion about what concerns the children
- The educator is empathic
- The educator is concerned about the problems / absences of children
- The educator knows the potential and the limits of each child
- The educator offers adequate levels and forms of support for all children

**subdomain accepting and encouraging the perspective of children:**

- The educator offers opportunities for children to make decisions
- The educator allows preschoolers to self-organize
- The educator encourages children to make decisions and argue points of view
- Teaching-learning involves expressing children's questions
- The educator constructively accepts opinions contrary to his own, or apparently does not meet his

expectations. Each descriptor was rated with a value between 1 and 7 in which: 1 = there is no evidence of that behavior / behavior is not manifested; 4 = there is sufficient evidence for that behavior / behavior is moderate; 7 = there is a great deal of evidence for that behavior / behavior is manifested to a great extent. The tool was applied to 12 teachers from six groups (level one and level two) in kindergarten no. 16 Targoviste. In order to ensure the accuracy of the evaluation, the scale was completed three times for each evaluated educator, respectively by the researcher, through self-evaluation and inter-evaluation (by the group partner educator). For each item of each dimension the average of the three assessments was calculated.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The data collected by observing the interactions are synthesized in the diagram below:

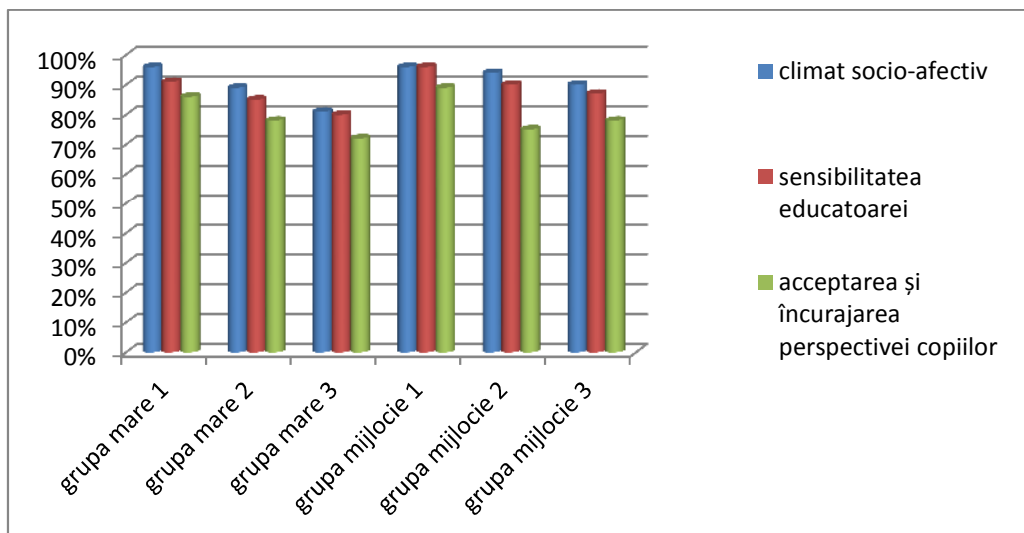


Figure 1. Level of manifestation of emotional support interactions on subdomains

Higher scores (over 75%) in all subdomains in each group of children allow us to appreciate that educator-preschool interactions are of the "emotional support" type.

The socio-emotional climate is the component with the highest scores in all age groups, which may be due to the predominantly positive content of the teacher's social representation of preschool child (TSRPC) and the functional dimension of TSRPC central nucleus, with two emotionally activated elements (love, joy), constituting prescriptive scripts which guides the teacher's attitudes and behavior in relation to the child.

Regarding the use of the scale, the subjects involved in research declared satisfied that is covering every aspect of child-teacher interaction during the daily activities and is quite easy to complete. Yet, the success of the evaluation is depending on the teacher availability and ability to assess herself and the colleagues, their honesty and goodwill.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The article presented a new way, never used in Romania, to investigate the quality of the educator-child relationship, carried out in the context of a broader research aimed at exploring the role of certain teacher intrapersonal factors on the socio-emotional development of the child. The constructed instrument proved to be very good assessing tool for child-teacher relationship. This has big implication in assessing early education quality and also, in supporting a reflexive professional development. Using this tool, teachers became aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their interaction with the children, and doing so, they are able to improve the class climate and education process.

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