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6. NEW PERSPECTIVES IN DEVELOPING TEACHERS' SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS TO PREVENT BULLYING: THE ROLE OF FORUM THEATRE

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Abstract: *The present study is in line with the concern for the prevention of bullying behaviors, which have been continuously and unprecedentedly expanding at national and European level. In this case, the socio-emotional competence of teachers is important. A solution for training and developing this competence is offered by continuing vocational training programs regulated at national and European level. In line with the recommendations of the Council of Europe (2018), which refer to complementing academic training with social, emotional and arts learning, our approach is intended as a reflection of the importance of an innovative interdisciplinary perspective in developing social-emotional competences in teachers by considering the theatrical technique Theatre Forum for effective bullying prevention. In this respect, we propose some directions for analysis:*
1). Documentation of the European and national regulatory framework on professional competence training for pre-university teachers;
2). Consider the importance of social-emotional competence in teachers in the effort to prevent bullying;
3). Inclusion of the Forum Theatre technique in in-service training programmes for teachers in the field of bullying prevention as a way of developing socio-emotional skills.
Key words: *bullying, socio-emotional, skills, teachers training, Forum Theatre*

1. Introduction

Currently, the bullying is considered to be a dangerous psychosocial phenomenon with a very high incidence that impacts the students and the communities in which they live; thus, finding the most appropriate prevention method is an objective for various educational institutions. In the scientific literature, the bullying is defined as an aggressive behavior that is repeated over time in a relationship where there is a power imbalance and where the victim is isolated (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). The student involvement in bullying has long-term consequences and it can lead to a wide range of mental health problems (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie & Telch, 2010), with an increased risk of violent behavior in adulthood (Ttofi, Farrington & Lösel, 2012).

The difficulty in establishing relationships with others is a risk factor for bullying (McQuade, Achufusi, Shoulberg & Murray-Close, 2014); the students who have a high degree of development of the socio-emotional skills but are good communicators, they know how to negotiate conflicts constructively and ask for help when deemed necessary and they adopt responsible social behaviors (Wang et al., 2019). Also, people with low self-esteem or who undere stimate their social competence (and who possess a negative bias) are more likely to be involved in bullying (Brendgen et al., 2004).

The results of the study conducted by Yang, Chan and Ma (2020), which

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examined the relationship between bullying and socio-emotional skills in primary school students, show that students lack of confidence in their own social skills predisposes them to victimization, while students who have social skills relating and emotional regulation and who manage their relationships with others, have little chance of becoming victims of bullying.

Although the anti-bullying programs promote a whole-school approach, they usually target the student-student behaviors and they rarely study the nature of other relationships that exist within the school such as the student-teacher, the teacher-student, and the teacher-teacher relationships (James et al., 2008). While until now practitioners have been interested in studying teachers' understanding of bullying incidents (Mishna et al., 2005), their focus is now directed towards in-service training and professional development (Bouchard & Smith, 2016).

These practices are important for the success of prevention and intervention efforts, but they are not enough. Therefore, teachers must benefit from professional training to optimize their attitudes towards the group of students, to refine and diversify their skills of effective communication with the students, as well as to understand, express and regulate the emotional manifestations appropriately (Bouchard & Smith, 2016).

2. Normative status of the training of professional competences for teachers in pre-university education in Romania

A key reference framework for teacher competence training is *the Council of Europe Recommendation of May 22, 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.* For the purposes of this recommendation, the competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, where: *the knowledge* is composed of facts and figures, concepts, ideas and theories that are already established and support the understanding of a particular domain or subject; *the skills* are defined as the ability and capability to perform processes and use the existing knowledge to achieve results; *the attitudes* describe the disposition and state of mind to act or react to ideas, people, or situations.

This document emphasized the fact that some competences such as the critical thinking, the problem solving, the teamwork, the communication and negotiation skills, the analytical skills, the creativity and the intercultural competences are integrated into the key competences. In order to support the development of the key skills it is recommended to encourage the complementation of academic learning with the social and emotional learning, with the arts, with the physical activities that improve the health and that support a health-conscious, future-oriented and physically active lifestyle (Council of Europe, 2018).

At the level of the European countries, a competence framework for teachers has been developed and Romania is among the 25 countries whose educational system requires a more detailed description of the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes required (European Commission, 2018). Thus, in our country the continuing professional training of pre-university teachers is regulated by the Ministry of Education based upon national strategies and policies. The institutions responsible for the continuous training of the teaching staff ensure their training through different methods depending on the professional competence and the

specialty/field of activity (art. 74 of the Order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sports (OMECTS) no. 5561/2011).

The activity program of the department/methodical committee, which is drawn up annually and updated every six months, also includes professional development activities (art. 76, paragraph 9 of OMECTS no. 5561/2011). Among the main areas in which the competences corresponding to the teaching profession are defined there is the inter-trans-disciplinary and cross-curricular area intended for communication and partnerships with the social environment alongside alternative and complementary strategies of training, research and innovation (art. 90, letter e). Given the theme of this paper, we will focus only on the skills that are necessary in the prevention of bullying. Therefore, our attention is directed to one of the five fundamental categories of competences, namely, to the complementary competences at the level of which counseling competences are found (art. 92, paragraph 2, letter b).

Through the process of professional development, teachers optimize their acquired skills reflected by the ability to form students moral, civic and aesthetic convictions; they exert positive influences on the affective life of the students (art. 98, paragraph 1, letter e); they interact with students and the school community; they establish partnerships with the members of the extended school community and they motivate the students team activities (art. 98, par. 2, letters a and b).

The National Education Law no. 1 of January 5, 2011, updated on June 5, 2022, to art. 56^1 expressly mentions that the information sessions, homework and training courses regarding the psychological violence-bullying should also be introduced within the continuous training programs. The purpose of this amendment to the education law is to also include the skills to identify bullying as well as to apply effective educational strategies (Parliament of Romania, 2011). Another important legislative benchmark for the professional development is the methodological procedures regarding the psychological violence-bullying that describe in a more specific way the role of the teacher in preventing and fighting bullying in terms of capabilities and attitudes. The purpose of these regulations is to create a safe and positive climate in the educational institution, which provides a working tool for specialists who work with students within a multidisciplinary team and to prevent the bullying.

Thus, it incorporates a series of interventions on the part of the teacher such as: the initiation of prevention programs, the identification of risks, the active involvement of students; debating bullying situations, encouraging the expression of students opinions, identifying solutions, the active participation of students in decisions that concern them; capitalizing on topics relevant to the issue of bullying, such as rights and duties, freedom and norms of behavior, empathy, the decision and the consequences of the decision, social skills; the use of active-participative strategies, case study, role play, critical analysis and so on (art. 5 of the Methodological Norms regarding psychological violence-bullying, Ministry of Education and Research/MEC, 2020).

3. Socio-emotional competencies - the key to successful bullying prevention

According to the authors Salovey and Mayer (1990), the emotional

intelligence (EI) is a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to understand one's own emotions and the others' emotions, to distinguish them and use them to direct thinking and behaviors. Bar-On (2006) believes that the EI is composed of five major fields, each of which involves a number of competencies such as: *intrapersonal* (emotional self-awareness, self-respect, assertiveness, independence and self-actualization); *interpersonal* (empathy, social responsibility and interpersonal relationships); *adaptability* (reality testing, flexibility and problem solving); *stress management* (stress tolerance and urge control); and *general mood* (happiness and optimism).

The socially and emotionally competent teachers are the initiators of supportive relationships with their students as well. These teacher qualities are reflected in designing lessons that build on students strengths and abilities, establish and enforce patterns of behavior that promote intrinsic motivation, and provide models for pro-social behavior (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Goleman (1995) finds that the emotional intelligence is more important for the individual's success in life than the cognitive intelligence because it has an important role in the professional interactions and in different life situations.

According to the author, the emotional intelligence is the ability of the individual to know his own feelings, the feelings of others and to manage his emotions. The EI, and especially the emotional self-awareness, facilitates the teachers' ability to recognize and understand their own emotions in the classroom and to anticipate the effects of their emotional expressions on their interactions with others (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). At the same time, the EI skills allow teachers to identify their own emotional difficulties and to have a reflective attitude in situations with negative emotional impact (Perry & Ball, 2007). The emotion management is considered to be key in the sense that if a teacher is incompetent, it will foster the creation of an unsafe and unpredictable environment for students, and therefore, it would affect the student emotions (Stein & Book, 2000).

The teachers are at the intersection of several critical social contexts that impact the children's development. The adult's ability to decipher the child's social and emotional signals, to react appropriately and to provide emotional support is essential in the adult-child interaction (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman 2003). Some authors believe that these relationships depend on the individual characteristics and the interpersonal skills of the adults. From this viewpoint, the characteristics of teachers that can be optimized or changed for the development of positive relationships with students are important.

The positive relationships contribute to a school climate in which students can develop social and emotional skills that are related to the academic performance and social-emotional development (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). The socio-emotional competences of teachers influence the quality of the teacher- student relationships in the sense that when teachers have emotion regulation skills they also have a "warm" attitude towards students including when the latter are provocative (Jones, Bouffard & Weissbourd, 2013).

The results of other studies show that the middle school students believe that the teacher involvement in acts of bullying is most helpful (Crothers, Kolbert & Barker, 2006). The teachers' emotions impact their job satisfaction, the sense of self-

efficacy (Pianta, 2006) and the social relationships, especially those with students (Perry & Ball, 2007). The development of the EI should be a component of the general professional training of teachers (Palomera et al., 2008).The teachers who have developed EI skills will better understand the students emotions (Salem, 2011) and will improve both the teacher- student relationship and the relationships among students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The findings of the numerous studies conducted to determine which programs are successful in preventing bullying reflect the fact that there is no single "recipe" for all programs. Each school has different needs and its own design of prevention programs. An important finding relates to the fact that the programs have certain similarities in terms of features and techniques (Astor et al., 2005). Thus, it is believed that the most effective prevention interventions are those that are intended for the whole school and which include social-emotional learning (SEL) programs as a key component to address bullying at the individual and peer levels (Smith & Low, 2013; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

The study by Kokko and Pörhölä (2009) is evocative for examining the degree of empathy felt by teachers towards victims. The study looked at whether teachers who were bullied by peers during their schooling could be a resource for the bullying prevention. The results show that the teachers who were themselves victims of their schoolmates have a higher degree of empathy and a higher level of willingness to communicate.

Teachers who were bullied while they were students reported knowing much better how bullied students feel to a greater extent than the teachers who were not subject to bullying involving their schoolmates. Also, the teachers who were bullied as students were more willing to initiate communication than those who were not bullied. Characteristics such as the willingness to initiate communication with students, parents, school staff, experts and authorities are considered to be valuable attributes for teachers who manage bullying situations. Conversely, a teacher who lacks these qualities is less likely to successfully manage violent incidents among students.

4. New perspectives in teacher training: Using Forum Theatre

The scientific literature recognizes that teachers have difficulties in recognizing bullying because it is a complex phenomenon (Roberts & Morotti, 2000). For this reason there are gaps between students and teachers' statements regarding the frequency of bullying incidents, an assumption that leads the authors Holt and Keyes (2004) to state that the students are more aware of the bullying than the teachers. In the light of these assumptions, we analyze the use and introduction of the Forum Theater in the professional training programs of teachers, especially if we take into account the hidden and indirect forms of bullying. Therefore, we refer to the forms of indirect bullying presented by Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz and Kaukianinen (1992): the spreading of false rumors, instigating someone not to be someone else's friend, manipulating relationships and the social exclusion.

In a constantly changing society, it is necessary for the teachers' training to be adapted to today's realities and to use innovative methods and techniques that should transform learning from a frustrating process into an attractive and engaging

process and guide teachers to success. The method that could help in this direction could be the theater with some of the techniques: the forum theater, the "hot seat" technique, the role play and the "alley of consciousness" (Usakli, 2018). Based on the experiential and contextual learning, this educational-theatrical method does not involve the delivery of previously prepared content to be learned by the participants, but a creative process in which the participants present their ideas, knowing that their opinions are valuable and important (Penkova, 2017). The creative drama is a natural medium for the free expression of ideas, feelings and attitudes. Drama is a valuable tool for self-awareness, social awareness, managing emotions, self-acceptance, dealing with emotions, interacting with others, communication and conflict resolution (Heinig,1993).

The Forum Theater, an interactive form of theater and a subgenre of the Theater of the Oppressed, developed by the playwright Augusto Boal, can be successful in preventing and stopping the bullying phenomenon. Boal was inspired by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and his ideas of awareness through dialogue and participation (Lindberg & Jakobsen, 2008). Thus, he developed the Forum Theater as a way for the oppressed groups to raise their collective awareness and develop realistic ways of acting (Houston, Magill, McCollum & Spratt, 2001). In Freire's view, the education presupposes a teacher-student relationship, in which each of the actors constructs knowledge and learning, thus creating mutual education and influence. In this process of participatory democracy, people increasingly assume the role of active actors and agents of change (Duşe & Duse, 2021).

If the Aristotelian theater assumes an invisible wall between the stage and the audience, in the Theater of the Oppressed (TO) the actors and spectators are in contact and they communicate directly. In the TO workshops *Image Theater* or *Forum Theater* techniques are used. The differences between actors and spectators, teachers and learners, narrator and listeners, performers and viewers become unimportant (Kuyumcu, 2018). Initially, this theatrical technique was conceived as a forum for disadvantaged people from the rural environment whose objective was to identify solutions to urgent problems by creating a space open to debate (Boal 1979). In the Forum Theatre, the participants can see and experience the problems first hand and then they can try to solve them. During the play itself, the solutions are presented by those who participate. This aspect is key because the audience will find new solutions by changing the attitude or the way of action of the oppressed people in the play (Lindberg & Jakobsen, 2008).

The Forum Theater is a participatory theater technique that unfolds in three stages: (a) a theater performance described primarily in terms of the oppressor-oppressed dynamic; (b) an interactive stage in which the audience members are invited to replace the actors to resolve the conflicts; and (c) a shared final reflection and exchange of feelings and thoughts about what they experienced. At the level of the scientific literature, the study carried out by Sappa and Barabasch (2020) stands out; the authors used this theatrical technique in continuing professional training workshops attended by 230 professional school teachers from Switzerland. The study was intended to analyze the technique’s emotional, cognitive and social impact among the participants. The results show that theater-based techniques have

a high potential for stimulating, boosting emotional, reflective and social resources both at the individual and at the organizational level.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this work was to expand the area of investigation and analysis of the training of teachers' skills in the prevention of bullying. Also, our approach was a reflection of the importance of an innovative interdisciplinary perspective in the development of socio-emotional skills in teachers by taking into account the Forum Theater theatrical technique for the effective prevention of bullying. Starting from the recommendation of the Council of Europe (2018) on the importance of complementing the academic learning with the socio-emotional learning and the arts and the importance of the socio-emotional competence in the prevention of bullying reflected in the scientific literature, we can state that the new direction of the continuous vocational training programs of the teaching staff is oriented towards their emotional and social development.

Under the influence of increasingly complex school realities and the dynamics of the bullying, the training programs will gradually change and focus on exploring various human experiences in a direct, creative and safe way that can help assimilate, express and regulate emotions, to the assimilation of knowledge and to the consolidation of attitudes. These experiences can be built within the Forum Theatre, a theatrical technique which addresses and brings into discussion difficult issues in a context where the free and authentic expression is supported and encouraged.

We believe that the experiential learning through the Forum Theater could facilitate not only to students, but also to teachers the emotional self-knowledge, the possibility to recognize and understand their own emotions in the classroom, to identify their own emotional difficulties for the creation of a safe school climate. The socio-emotional disability of the teaching staff will become the disability of the students because the quality of the teacher-student relationships and, implicitly, the school climate is thus negatively impacted.

For these reasons, our perspective on the introduction and use of the Forum Theater in the training programs has the credit of determining the direct "exposure" of the teacher in a scenario where he or she can no longer postpone, underestimate or ignore it and he or she must take action. Thus, through the experiential learning, the teacher will reconfigure his or her perception of the severity of the bullying; he or she will understand the importance of the emotional support needed by the victim and develop his or her social and emotional skills that are directly related to the academic performance and the well-being of students.

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