

Accompanying the development of emotion regulation: A psychological and pedagogical topic in pre- and primary-school

Luise Hollerer* and Astrid Kohl
Private University College of Teacher Education, Graz, Austria

Abstract: Emotion regulation is described as a milestone in a child's emotional and social development. Various psychological studies have shown that children do differ in their development of expression, perception and regulation of their own emotions (Goleman, 2013; Petermann & Gust, 2016; Siegler et al., 2011) and explicit perceptual, language based and cognitive strategies to achieve regulative competences in early childhood. In accordance with international studies the results indicate the importance of enhancing the emotional development of children in kindergarten and at the beginning of school. Especially the role of social-conscious emotional regulation, anger management and inhibition of aversive external behavior seems to be a key element for learning engagement, school success, wellbeing and mental health. This requires professionals in pre- and primary school settings who are able to accompany children in and are capable to work on prevention and intervention in case children show externalizing behavior. The article focuses on the implementation of emotional learning and emotional regulation on a curricular basis for vocational training and discusses a multilevel and systemic approach for prevention.

Keywords: emotion regulation, child development, professional development, prevention, intervention

Spremljanje razvoja uravnavanja čustev: Psihološka in pedagoška tematika v vrtcu in osnovni šoli

Luise Hollerer* in Astrid Kohl
Private University College of Teacher Education, Graz, Avstrija

Povzetek: Uravnavanje čustev je opredeljeno kot mejnik v otrokovem čustvenem in socialnem razvoju. Številne psihološke študije so pokazale, da se otroci med seboj razlikujejo v razvoju izražanja, zaznavanja in uravnavanja svojih čustev (Goleman, 2013; Petermann in Gust, 2016; Siegler idr., 2011) in eksplicitnih zaznavnih, na jeziku temelječih in kognitivnih strategijah za doseg kompetenc uravnavanja v zgodnjem otroštvu. V skladu z izsledki mednarodnih študij je v vrtcu in prvih razredih osnovne šole pomembno spodbujanje čustvenega razvoja otrok. Pri tem so socialno-občutljivo uravnavanje čustev, uravnavanje jeze in inhibicija averzivnega vedenja pozunanjanja še posebej pomembni za izobraževalno vključenost, šolski uspeh, blagostanje in duševno zdravje. Vse naštetu kliče po strokovnjakih v vrtčevskem in šolskem okolje, ki so otroke zmožni spremljati in z njimi delati – tako preventivno kot z intervencijami, če so za otroka značilna vedenja pozunanjanja. Članek se ukvarja z implementacijo čustvenega učenja in uravnavanja čustev na ravni kurikula za poklicno usposabljanje in razpravlja o večnivojskem in sistematičnem pristopku k preventivnim dejavnostim.

Ključne besede: uravnavanje čustev, razvoj otroka, strokovni razvoj, preventive, intervencija

*Naslov/Address: dr. Luise Hollerer, Private University College of Teacher Education - Graz Austria, Kompetenzzentrum Kindliche Entwicklung - Elementare Bildung, PPH-Augustinum, Langedasse 2, 8010 Graz, e-mail: luise.hollerer@aon.at

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Emotional development – psychological aspects

Social-interactionist models focus on the complexity of emotional development, which is closely linked to reactivity of the child's attachment figure in early childhood (Julius et al., 2014). Social interactions between an adult and the infant allow the infant to perceive his/her emotions that subsequently are to be linked with language. The increasing development of linguistic/symbolic functions leads to disentangling biologically based linkages of various components of an emotion and to conscious control. The child becomes able to explore new emotions due to the increasing cognitive capacity and the accompanying possibility to conduct more differentiated processing (Scherer, 1990). The increasing vocabulary knowledge and language skills of the child enables the child to speak about emotions. Speaking about emotions supports the distinction between experiencing and expressing emotions.

Kullig & Petermann (2012) point out that theoretical approaches concerned with social-emotional development describe several steps children need to go through when developing adequate reactions to emotional situations. They refer to Saarni (2002), who named three steps in the development of emotional key abilities: (1) awareness of one's own emotions, (2) perceiving others' emotions and (3) verbal communication about emotions. Similarly, Halberstadt et al. (2001) formulate two steps, namely (1) awareness about sending, receiving and experiencing of emotions and (2) co-ordinate the feelings with the context. Rose-Krasnor and Denham (2009) extend this model with the internal and external perspective.

Anglo-American (Macklem, 2008) as well as German (Petermann & Wiedebusch, 2016) studies stress the time sequence (some skills are the prerequisite of others) as well as differences in the time of acquisition of the previously mentioned developmental tasks of perceiving, expressing and regulating of one's own emotions as well as the perception and interpretation of others' emotions (so called perspective taking). Several studies have shown that not all children have managed to achieve these developmental tasks when entering school (Blair, 2002; Petermann & Gust, 2016; Petermann & Wiedebusch, 2016). A recent study asked preschoolers how they manage their anger (Hollerer et al. 2021). One third name that they need grown-ups to get out of aversive emotions or name maladaptive strategies (e.g., aversive external behavior, crying, hitting others).

Hence, the acquisition of social-emotional skills is an important task in kindergarten and school, where especially the ability to regulate aversive emotions and the ability of need postponement are of essential importance (Sassu & Roebbers, 2016).

Beside language skills (Weinert, 2014), these social emotional competences are closely linked to learning success (Salisch & Wübker, 2021), children's academic and social development (Blair, 2002; Denham, 1998; Webster-Stratton, 2002). Recent studies show emotional competence to be a prerequisite for high learning outcome (Götz & Nett, 2017; Gut et al., 2012; Voltmer & Salisch, 2018). A systematic

review of studies, that analyze the impact of preschoolers' self-regulation skills on their early academic competences in elementary school, sees in particular cognitive aspects of self-regulation related to academic achievement (Rademacher 2020).

Facing these facts, the following part focuses on pedagogical and systemic aspects of managing situations when children show externalizing behavior and describes strategies to accompany 5–7-year-old children (school-entrance age) on their way to emotion regulation based on self-awareness and social awareness.

Emotional development – pedagogical aspects

At this point it should be emphasized that there is a broad research base which makes clear that social, emotional and cognitive capabilities are deeply intertwined and central for learning. Strengths or weaknesses in one area promote or hinder development in others and each carries aspects of the other (Jones & Kahn, 2017). The importance of promoting social-emotional competencies from early childhood on is also supported by longitudinal studies. Jones et al. (2015) reported that social-emotional skills of preschoolers were significantly predictive of academic and professional success two decades later. Social-emotional skills in preschoolers were also positively correlated with their personal well-being and inversely predictive of involvement in crime and substance use.

There is a growing body of research showing, that fostering social-emotional competencies has a positive effect on school performance and school engagement (Reicher & Matischek-Jauk, 2018).

Cefai et al. (2018) presented a major review of international research which indicates that prompting social-emotional competences has a positive impact on children's and young people's education, learning, wellbeing and mental health. Due to their main findings, strengthening social-emotional abilities leads to more positive attitudes towards self, others and school, it decreases internal and external behaviour difficulties and enhances prosocial behaviour. Social-emotional education also goes along with an increase in academic performance and seems to be a meta-ability for academic learning. Furthermore, the results suggest that fostering social-emotional competences is most effective when started as early as possible in early childhood education. Study results and other research findings lead to the conclusion, that social and emotional education is a necessary part of holistic learning and therefore an important pedagogical task. It should be offered by kindergarten and schools to all children, including those affected by the additional challenges arising from various forms of disadvantage.

It can be assumed that the increasingly complex educational tasks favour the emergence of negative and sometimes also violent emotions such as fear, anger, rage – emotions that may evoke externalizing behaviour. This is actually a challenging situation for pedagogues in both institutions.

And it raises the question, if pedagogues are prepared for accompanying children in dealing with it in the age-group 4–6 (in Kindergarten) and 6–7 (in Primary school).

So, there should be a look at the curricula for the vocational training of professionals dealing with these age groups before discussing pedagogical aspects of accompanying children in developing the emotional competences to regulate emotions.

Emotional development – curricular aspects

Emotional development as an educational task for kindergarten and primary school

Kindergarten

In Austria, there is a national framework considering the education of 1–6-year-old children (Charlotte Bühler Institut, 2009). For the last year of kindergarten (which is compulsory in Austria) following educational tasks concerning the part “emotions and social relationships” are described:

“Children can perceive, verbalize and canalize their emotions and are able to handle their emotions constructively” (p. 10). “Children develop empathy and are therefore able to build relationships. This task is based on the child’s acquired ability for self-perception and non-verbal as well as verbal emotional expression and regulation of emotions” (p. 11).

Primary school

The curriculum for 6–7-year-old school children (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung [BMBWF], 2012) sees the competence of emotional regulation as a pre-condition for school-entrance-age and doesn’t explicitly formulate educational goals to build emotional and social competencies and regulatory strategies. However, general statements concerning social-emotional education can be found in several places, e.g.: “School is a diverse space of experience and action for students, teachers, and parents [...] In addition to factual learning, social learning always takes place at school in various forms and situations. The elementary school must provide space and protection for the child to develop self-esteem and build confidence in his or her own abilities” (p. 10). Concrete guidelines for the promotion of the social-emotional development can only be found in that part of the primary school curriculum which refers to pupils who have reached school entry age but are not yet “ready for school” (pp. 50, 53, 67, 81, 82). This so-called “Lehrplan der Vorschulstufe” focuses on motor, language, cognitive, motivational, and social-emotional developmental areas and aims to enable the children to gradually grow into school life.

The primary school curriculum states that a climate of emotional security, trust, affection, recognition and openness is to be created in order to enhance learning at school as

well as influence social behavior positively. In this context, the importance of the teacher’s personality and behavior is mentioned in several places of the primary school curriculum, e.g., “One of the most important prerequisites for this is the fundamentally appreciative behavior of the teacher toward each individual child” (BMBWF, 2012, p. 10; see also pp. 11, 26). Similarly for the pedagogues in kindergarten it is said, “Educators create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance by respecting and valuing children as active and competent. In this way, children can accept educational impulses and make the best possible use of their learning and development potential” (Charlotte Bühler Institut, 2009, p. 8).

Emotional development as an educational task for training of professionals

Although the relevance of promoting central areas of social-emotional competence in teacher training has already been emphasized internationally, (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010) this recommendation has not yet been reflected in Austria’s curricula. The national Austrian BafEp - training curricula for pedagogues (1–6-year old children) (BMBWF, 2016) and the university curricula for bachelor studies of primary school teachers (Entwicklungsverbund Süd-Ost [EVSO], 2018) don’t show differentiated professionalization-modules to get prepared to accompany social-emotional development and acquire intervention - competencies in case of situations, when children show aversive externalizing behavior. Germany shows a similar lack of specific courses (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

The profession of educating and teaching is characterized by constant social interactions. Emotionally challenging situations that teachers typically face often involve interactions with students who have problems with emotion regulation, including those caught in anger, anxiety, and sadness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Especially at the start of a career, disorders and social conflicts seem to be experienced as the most common stressors. Carstensen et al., (2019) point out that teachers and educators starting off their career report disrupting children and social conflicts as the most frequent stressors. It has to be assumed that the social nature of the teaching profession places high demands on a professional’s social-emotional knowledge and abilities. Pedagogues in different trainings and work contexts starting off their career often do not feel sufficiently prepared for the social challenges of everyday school life (Klusmann et al., 2012; Schmidt et al., 2016) and they are lacking specific courses (Hohenstein et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Looking for effective training contents Carstensen et al. (2019) found emotional self-awareness in connection with emotion knowledge and the application of cognitive reappraisal (emotion regulation) as important professionalization steps. In the area of social abilities, several age-specific training-programs for conflict management skills were proven effective. Taking into account the high level of acceptance among the participating students, the results speak for the benefits of including such programs in teacher education. Ferreira et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of explicitly

promoting social-emotional training in pre-service teacher education as a first step. They plead for systematically combining social-emotional learning with everyday teaching procedures, but they also point out that teachers always have to adapt any technique or program to their local context and their students' individual needs.

Teachers, on the one hand, need to know preventive and interventional strategies to facilitate social-emotional learning in their students, and on the other hand need knowledge, dispositions and skills for creating a supportive classroom environment. In addition to enhancing pedagogues' knowledge about social-emotional learning, the pedagogues' own social and emotional competencies must be taken into consideration. Teachers influence their students not only by how and what they teach, but also by how they relate, teach and model social and emotional constructs, and manage the classroom (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Accompanying emotional development

Accompanying emotional development – primary prevention level

“Research has clearly shown that social-emotional competencies can be taught, that schools are appropriate places to teach them, and that SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) can make a positive difference in young people's lives” (Weissberg, 2019, p. 65). Over the last years a number of educational programs for social-emotional learning and fostering emotional intelligence have been created and have shown evidence-based efficacy (e.g., programs with declarative and procedural knowledge about emotions; see Hodzic et al., 2018). Particularly noteworthy in this context are two major meta-analyses that examined the short- and long-term effects of universal, school-based SEL programs across 265 reports on student outcomes in six domains: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

In order to acquire social-emotional learning processes sustainably, systematic structuring and thus the creation of explicit learning opportunities throughout the school years is essential (Reicher & Maticsek-Jauk, 2018). Hwang et al. (2017) conducted a systematic meta-analysis of research dealing with mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., evaluation-free perception, non-reactivity to events of inner experience, grounding awareness etc.) for in-service teachers. The survey results suggest that these programs can enhance teacher wellbeing, performance and resilience and that these interventions are an important prerequisite for successful regulation of emotions. Another strength in the evidence base are the indirect effects on students taught by teachers trained in mindfulness. These effects were reductions in pre-school students' maladaptive behaviours and increases in their compliance with teacher requests.

Jones et al. (2017), who investigated the impacts of 11 social-emotional learning (SEL) programs designed for elementary years (5–11), state three recommendations for

policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. The first is that we should pay more attention to outcomes at the teacher and classroom level instead of focusing on the students' skills in isolation, because teachers' own social-emotional competence and the quality of the classroom environment can have strong effects on students' SEL. Second, SEL programs should specially focus on the skills appropriate to each grade and age, rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. Third, measurement of SEL skills among elementary school children should grow narrower in focus but broader in context and depth.

Accompanying emotional development – secondary prevention level – anger-management

For children around the age 5–6 the self-regulation of somatic processes that go along with anger, fury or rage is still a challenge (Hollerer et al., 2021; Petermann & Gust, 2016). In case a child is caught in heavy negative emotions and shows externalizing aversive behavior, the child needs support to regulate these emotions and calm down in order to be part of the social group. In case the child endangers itself or others, the educational professionals should know about steps of de-escalation (secondary prevention).

These steps should be prepared on a systemic level including steps for the child, the social group, the professionals in the group as well as the professionals in the educational system. It should be accompanied by and embedded in a professional team development, on an intrapersonal level as well as on an interpersonal level. As children, pedagogues, kindergarten-/school teams and parents are involved, a systemic multi-level-approach is necessary (Hollerer & Strassegger-Einfalt, 2009).

Challenge and benefit – positive outlook

The opportunity to learn the skills essential to succeed as an individual and as a contributing, engaged member of society must be granted to all children. In order to facilitate social, emotional and cognitive development of children, all stakeholders connected with that task – parents, educators, teachers and administrators – need training and support to understand and develop these skills, behaviours, knowledge and beliefs. In addition to training and support dedicated to developing students' social and emotional skills, support in building their own competences in these areas should be provided for pre-service and in-service educators and teachers. If social-emotional development and learning is successfully made a priority this will lead to significant benefits for the well-being of our society, including implications for public health and economic growth (see also Cefai et al., 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017).

This paper aims to encourage educators and teachers to face the challenge of accompanying children in their developmental and learning processes with an optimistic view to the expected positive effects, because we know that enhancing social-emotional skills from early childhood on can have multiple beneficial short- and long-term effects and

therefore has considerable potential for positively affecting individuals as well as society as a whole.

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