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Efectele unui program de dezvoltare a competenţelor socio-emoţionale la elevii de vârstă şcolară timpurie asupra relaţiilor interpersonale

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A PROGRAM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES IN EARLY EDUCATION: EFFECTS ON THE STUDENTS' INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

During the pandemic, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships among students, as well as between students and teachers, underwent a significant transformation due to the imposed restrictions, social distancing measures, and learning through technology. In that context, the development of socio-emotional skills was a priority in the training of students, in addition to ensuring the continuity of the educational process. Based on the collaborative learning paradigm, the proposed program sought to develop the students' social-emotional skills during a crisis situation. In addition, it examined the role of teachers in improving student relationships and preventing negative behavior. This quasi-experimental approach, involving initial and final measurements, was implemented between October 2021 and May 2022 on a group of 30 fourth-grade students. The thorough analysis of the data, conducted after three years of collection,

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is justified by our decision to use it in a broader academic study. We aimed to identify practices related to students' social-emotional education in atypical contexts that could be applied to similar situations in the future, thereby ensuring the resilience of the educational process. Building on the theories of emotional intelligence formulated by Goleman and the social learning theories of Bandura, various techniques were developed and applied to enhance the capacity for self-knowledge, mutual knowledge, and interrelationships, such as role-playing, discussion circles, and collective feedback. The main objective of the program was to support students in adapting to the new educational and social realities, while also fostering a healthy group dynamic based on empathy and peer support. The tools we used to assess group dynamics included sociograms and sociometric tests. The results of this pedagogical quasi-experiment showed an increase in the group cohesion index between the initial phase and the final phase ($C_{gr}i = 0,036$, compared to $C_{gr}f = 0,062$), reflected in better collaboration in group activities and an improved school climate. The involvement of the teaching staff as a facilitator of change proved that teachers play an important role in developing the students' socio-emotional skills and enhancing group dynamics, even under conditions of limited social interaction.

Keywords: group dynamics, interpersonal relationships, social-emotional competence.

Rezumat

În perioada pandemică, dinamica relaţiilor interpersonale între elevi, respectiv între elevi şi profesori a suferit o transformare semnificativă, cauzată de restricţiile impuse, de măsurile de distanţare socială şi de învăţarea prin intermediul tehnologiei. În acel context, dezvoltarea competenţelor socio-emoţionale a reprezentat o prioritate în formarea elevilor, pe lângă asigurarea continuităţii procesului educaţional. Fundamentat pe paradigma învăţării colaborative, programul propus a urmărit dezvoltarea acestor competenţe în context pandemic. În plus, a fost analizat şi rolul pe care îl au profesorii în privinţa îmbunătăţirii relaţiilor interpersonale între elevi şi în prevenirea comportamentelor negative. Acest demers cvasi-experimental, cu măsurători iniţiale şi finale, a fost implementat în perioada octombrie 2021 - mai 2022, pe un grup de 30 de elevi de clasa a IV-a şi a vizat, în principal, sprijinirea elevilor în a se adapta la realităţile educaţionale şi sociale impuse de pandemie. Analiza detaliată a acestor date, realizată la un interval de 3 ani de la colectare, este justificată de decizia de a le valorifica într-un studiu academic mai amplu. De asemenea, s-a dorit identificarea unor practici privind educaţia socio-emoţională a elevilor în contexte atipice care pot fi transferate în situaţii similare viitoare, asigurând reziliența procesului educaţional. Pornind de la teoriile inteligenţei emoţionale formulate de Goleman

şi teoriile învăţării sociale ale lui Bandura, au fost gândite şi aplicate diferite tehnici destinate exersării capacităţii de auto-cunoaştere, intercunoaştere şi interrelaţionare, precum jocuri de rol, cercuri de discuţie şi metode de feedback colectiv. Programul a avut ca obiectiv principal sprijinirea elevilor în adaptarea la noile realităţi educaţionale şi sociale, dar a urmărit şi consolidarea unei dinamici de grup sănătoase, bazate pe empatie şi sprijin colegial. Instrumentele utilizate pentru evaluarea dinamicii de grup au inclus sociograme şi teste sociometrice. Rezultatele acestui cvasi-experiment pedagogic au arătat o creştere a indicelui coeziunii de grup între faza iniţială şi faza finală a acestuia ($C_{gr}i$ = 0,036, faţă de $C_{gr}f$ = 0,062), reflectată într-o mai bună colaborare în activităţile de grup şi o îmbunătăţire a climatului şcolar. Implicarea cadrului didactic ca facilitator al schimbării a demonstrat că profesorii au un rol important în dezvoltarea competenţelor socio-emoţionale ale elevilor şi în îmbunătăţirea dinamicii de grup, chiar şi în condiţii de interacţiune socială limitată.

Cuvinte-cheie: *competenţă socio-emoţională, dinamica de grup, relaţii interpersonale.*

1. Introduction

One of the eight key competences for lifelong learning, presented in the *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (European Parliament & Council, 2006) and revised in 2018 (Council of the European Union, 2018), is *personal competence*, to which are added *social competence* and *learning-to-learn competence*. In the 2006 publication, the key competence *learning to learn* referred only to the ability of a person to organize their learning using efficient time management. In the later publication, components of *social and civic competences* were added, including the capacity to work in a team, a cheerful outlook toward one's well-being (Tisdall, 2015), conflict management (Chistolini et al., 2015), and learning to be more empathetic.

Forming and improving this competence can be done only through socio-emotional education, starting in the family and continuing throughout schooling, in kindergarten (Haheu-Munteanu & Bruja, 2020) and school (Trua & Mardar, 2013), which supports the proper development of the social and emotional competencies of children, thus enabling them to maintain social relationships with their peers, adults, and other children.

One of the ways human behavior is formed and shaped is through *imitation*, as theorized and explained by Albert Bandura (1997). The social learning theory explains the emergence of certain behaviors as a result of exposure to and observation of others' behaviors, closely followed by the adoption of those witnessed behaviors. Going beyond the manifestation of social behavior, Goleman (2018) analyzes how emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-control, social awareness, and the ability to lead relationships) influences social competence, the ability to integrate into a group, and to relate to those around them. A lack of these competencies can lead to isolation and difficulties in social interactions.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the educational process and the development of children's social and emotional competencies, especially those at an early age. Restrictions, learning from home, and a decrease in face-to-face interactions led to meaningful changes. Since students' interpersonal relationships decreased, many began to experience feelings of isolation, anxiety, difficulties in emotional management, and a risk of social exclusion (Zhang et al., 2021).

In that context, schools had to adapt their teaching methods and educational strategies to better meet students' emotional and social needs (Mariani et al., 2022). During the pre-pandemic period, the emphasis was on developing cognitive competencies; the pandemic highlighted the importance of supporting children's socio-emotional skills to facilitate adaptation to a new educational reality (Zieher et al., 2021). Studies have shown that children participating in programs designed to promote their socio-emotional development exhibit a better capacity for emotional regulation, an easier adaptation to the school environment, and improved relationships with colleagues and teachers (Durlak et al., 2011).

In this regard, educational interventions aimed at supporting the development of emotional intelligence and social competencies have become essential for preventing socialization difficulties and strengthening interpersonal relationships. Programs that include emotion recognition activities, assertive communication exercises, and collaboration techniques have demonstrated effectiveness in improving students' social abilities (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020).

1.1. The role and importance of social-emotional competence

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020).

The social-emotional competence includes five areas of manifestation: self-awareness (the ability to understand your feelings, thoughts, values, and how this influences your behavior in different environments), social awareness (the capacity to understand and empathize with others, to accept different points of view), self-management (the ability to effectively control one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations to reach certain objectives or ideals), responsible decision making (the ability to take careful and constructive decisions in terms of personal behavior and different social interactions), and relationship skills (establishing and maintaining healthy, supportive relationships and interacting effectively with different individuals or groups) (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). They develop over time, experiencing emotions and learning behaviors in different contexts throughout life (school, family, community), being essential in everyone's education, and should constitute a crucial point in any child's education (Mahoney & Weissberg, 2018).

Many studies have shown a connection between social-emotional competence, mental health, self-contention, and social and academic success (Brändle et al., 2023; Cipriano et al., 2020; Havighurst et al., 2013). Havighurst et al. (2013) conducted a broad study, over 19 years, examining whether teachers' predictions of prosocial competencies are an indicator of noncognitive skills (self-discipline, motivation for learning, social abilities, self-control) at the beginning of schooling, which might indicate significant success in adult life. The results showed significant correlations between social-emotional competencies measured during kindergarten and the results obtained in several areas (education, criminal activities, employment, substance use, mental health) as adults. Therefore, identifying deficits and early intervention can increase the likelihood of one's healthy personal

development. To intervene effectively in children's and students' pro-social behavior, it is necessary for teachers to possess the necessary knowledge and to demonstrate these social-emotional skills (Zenki-Dalipi et al., 2024). The positive effects of effective school management can be observed in decreased conflicts, increased student cohesion, increased training efficiency, and decreased teacher overload (Aldrup et al., 2018; Devaney & Moroney, 2018; Durlak et al., 2011).

1.2. Interpersonal relationships of young students

The proper development of one's personality implies, in addition to the development of cognitive skills, the development of social-emotional skills through involvement in healthy interpersonal relationships. Among the first groups with which a child comes into contact and begins to develop their first significant social relationships are family members, school peers, and play peers. In the playgroup, social relationships are established naturally and spontaneously, based on personal attractions and affinities. Interpersonal relationships in classes of students acquire their characteristics depending on the size of the class, the interaction between its members, and the group's structure, composition, and organization (Zlate, 1972).

There are several criteria for classifying interpersonal relationships in the classroom. Taking into account "the needs and necessities felt by students when they relate to each other" (Iucu, 2006, p. 106), interpersonal relationships can be classified into: knowledge relationships (they arise as a need to find out more information about the others about the object soon to be known, or about the terms of the relationship and the subject that will be presented); intercommunication relationships (verbal, nonverbal, paraverbal, didactic communication) (Cucoş, 2008; Truţa & Mardar, 2007); social-affective relationships (affective-sympathetic, which can be quantified by sociometric tests and allow the identification of the students' statuses in the hierarchy of the school group) and relations of influence (which can manifest themselves in the form of cooperative, competitive, or conflict relationships) (Ullich, 1995).

Several international studies and meta-analyses in which the social-emotional competence was analyzed concerning intervention programs for social and

emotional learning (SEL) indicated positive effects on emotional control, resilience, optimism, and well-being, but also a decrease in bullying situations (Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2021; Taylor et al., 2017; Williford et al., 2013). Teachers' social-emotional competence is another variable that influences the students' group dynamics, and many studies indicate a positive correlation between students' social-emotional competence level and that of their teachers (Aldrup et al., 2018; Bradley, 2015; Hou, 2022; Mariani et al., 2022; Ornaghi et al., 2023; Serafim et al., 2024; Zenki-Dalipi et al., 2024).

This study aims to explore the effects of a program designed to develop the social-emotional skills of early school-age students in the context of the pandemic. Given the need to enhance the social-emotional competencies of young students and considering the characteristics of the types of social relationships between them, we will analyze how such interventions contribute to improving empathy, communication, and collaboration among students. Empirical research shows the importance of social-emotional education in a pandemic context as well as the necessity of integrating it into the post-pandemic school curriculum.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research objectives and hypotheses

This research aims to identify a set of pedagogical instruments and methods that can improve peer interaction among small schoolchildren and analyze their effects on group relationship dynamics in the context of limited physical interaction during the pandemic period. Specifically, two main objectives were followed:

O1 - Identifying how mutual knowledge among students may be enhanced through the teacher's various educational approaches and strategies, in a context of limited physical interaction.

O2 - Measuring the effectiveness of the teachers' interventions in improving class group dynamics.

Two research hypotheses were analyzed:

H1 - It is assumed that a structured educational intervention aiming to develop social-emotional competence, based on collaborative learning strategies, will have a positive impact on group cohesion among early school-age students and their status in the school group.
H2 - It is assumed that social isolation is decreased and positive social interactions between students are increased due to didactic interventions designed to facilitate interaction and group collaboration, evidenced by sociometric tests.

The suitability of sociometric tests for this age group will be discussed, with an emphasis on the relevance and limitations of these tools and their results.

2.2. Research tools

The tools used to verify the hypothesis in this research included the sociometric method (Moreno, 1941; Nicola, 1974), a pedagogical quasi-experiment (Noveanu & Pană, 1981), and pedagogical observation (Zlate, 1972). The data were analyzed with the GroupDynamics software.

The sociometric test consisted of two questions, following Moreno's method. The students made three positive and three negative nominations among their classmates as they answered the questions: "Who would you prefer to have as a desk colleague and collaborate on different tasks?" and "Who wouldn't you prefer to have as a desk colleague and find it harder to collaborate on different tasks?". Four children requested to make fewer or no nominations for the negative side at each measurement.

The pedagogical quasi-experiment consisted of three steps: pre-experimental evaluation of the group's dynamics, a formative stage, and a post-experimental evaluation of the intervention. During the formative stage, pedagogical observation was used to observe students' interactions and behaviors in different situations.

2.3. Research group

The experimental sample consisted of a convenience group, and we obtained approval from the school principal, as well as consent from parents and the teacher to conduct the study.

The experimental group was composed of 30 students aged 9-11, of whom 11 were girls and 19 were boys.

2.4. Method

The research employed a quasi-experimental design applied to a single group, with measurements taken before and after the implementation of the educational intervention. In this study, the independent variable consisted of a set of educational approaches and techniques, while the dependent variable was group cohesion, which reflects students' status in the group.

The effect of the intervention was measured using a sociometric technique. This method can be utilized by teachers for students of different age groups, aiming at several objectives, such as grouping students for study teams, assessing social-emotional climate in the classroom, observing preferences and rejections among students, measuring students' status in the classroom, and identifying patterns in students' interactions (Vasa et al., 1994).

A pre-experimental evaluation of group cohesion and the status of students in the class revealed the initial status of group communication networks, groups, and subgroups in the class (Nicola, 1974).

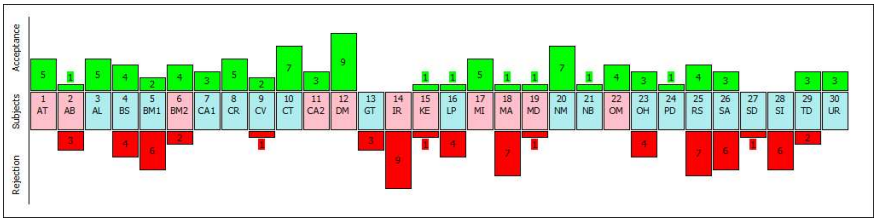
In the formative stage of the experiment, a set of twelve techniques was chosen and applied. These techniques were aimed to help children exercise nonviolent communication, differentiate between labels and personal observation regarding others' behaviors, experience more positive emotions and manage the negative ones (anger, fear, sadness), observe the differences between people's behavioral reactions depending on each person's experienced emotions in given situations, identifying and understanding the differences between a misunderstanding and conflict situations.

In the final stage, after applying the educational intervention, an identical sociometric test was given, and the results were compared to measure the effect of the teacher's intervention through the set of techniques meant to increase group cohesion.

3. Outcomes and discussions

3.1. Outcomes

In the initial stage, we identified each student's status in class by measuring their preferential index. The number of preferences and rejections was used to calculate the group cohesion index.



Source: GroupDynamics software

Graph no. 1. *Number of preferences and number of rejections for each student- initial stage (blue squares - boys, pink squares – girls; green bars – no. of elections; red bars – no. of rejections)*

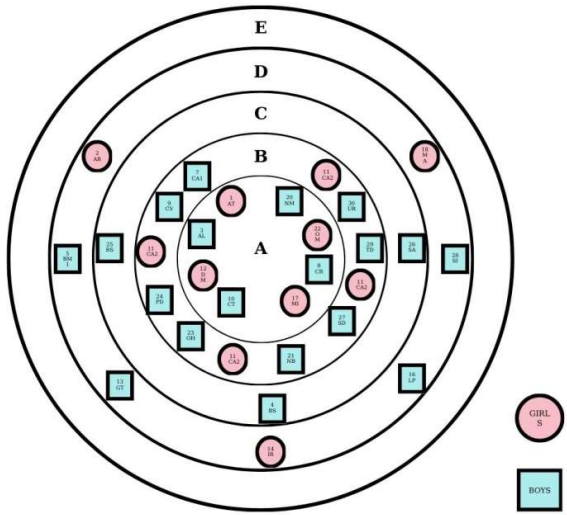
To determine the preferential status index for each student, the following formula has been applied:

$$I_{pr} = (P-R)/(N-1)$$

(where I_{pr} = Preferential index, P = number of preferences, R = number of rejections, N = number of responding students).

A distribution graph has been created based on the measured value index. Boys were represented with blue squares, and girls were represented with pink circles. They have been arranged in concentric circles according to the following rule: in the center circle are the popular students (A), who have the highest value of the index and receive the most positive nominations. The second circle is represented by the average group of students (B), who received an average number of both positive and negative selections. In the third circle are the controversial students (C), who received many negative and positive nominations (such as subject 4). Next is the rejected group (D),

with the lowest value of the preferential index and the highest number of rejections. In the last circle are represented the children from the neglected group of students (E), who are mainly unnoticed by others. In this case, eight students (four girls and four boys) were considered popular, seven students (three girls and four boys) formed the rejected group, three boys represented the controversial group, and 12 students (four girls and eight boys) comprised the average group. No students were in the neglected group.



Graph no. 2. *Students' distribution according to the preferential status index- initial stage (adapted after GroupDynamics software graph)*

The next step in measuring group cohesion is to identify the group's cohesion index and create a collective sociogram that reflects both unilateral and mutual preferences between students. To determine the group cohesion index, we used the following formula:

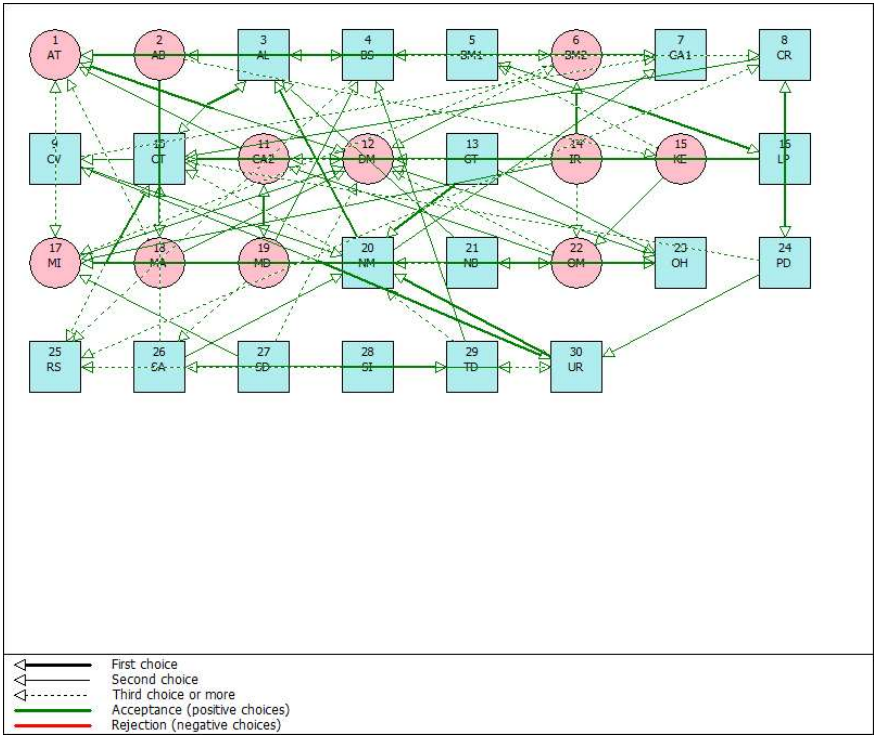
$C_{gr} = M_c X2/Nx(N-1)$

(where $C_{gr=}$ Group cohesion, M_c = mutual choices, N = number of students). A higher value of this index indicates a cohesive group, while a lower value suggests weaker connections between group members.

In this case, the students expressed 16 mutual preferences. Therefore, the group cohesion index is:

C_{gr} = 16x2/30x29=0.036.

This value is relatively low, indicating a need for the teacher's intervention to improve the mutual knowledge mechanism and increase the level of interactions among students.



Source: GroupDynamics software

Graph no. 3. *Preferences sociogram, initial stage. (blue squares – boys; pink circles – girls)*

The psycho-pedagogical intervention program was implemented during the 2021-2022 school year, in both physical and virtual environments, according to the imposed regulations.

The isolation period led to situations that were more difficult to manage emotionally, and the students tended to overreact more than usual to everyday misunderstandings. Therefore, the implemented techniques focused on increasing the level of mutual knowledge by practicing emotional control, exercising non-violent communication, identifying behavioral patterns in different situations, and distinguishing between conflict and misunderstanding. We exemplify the psycho-pedagogical techniques (Hart, 2004; Pânişoară, 2006) applied in the formative period, during physical and online interaction:

- To increase the mutual knowledge and group cohesion, the following were applied:
  - *Bingo with activities* – A technique aimed at identifying those colleagues who prefer the same leisure activities and to increase the level of mutual knowledge at the class level (physical interaction).
  - *Compliments circle* – A technique focused on creating a positive image of oneself and increasing students' self-esteem (physical interaction).
- To differentiate between labeling and neutral observation of a fact/person, the following techniques were applied:
  - *Is this an observation?* – A technique that aimed to help the students observe the differences between a neutral observation of an event/ situation/person and labeling, when a personal belief is expressed (online interaction).
  - *The Detectives* – A technique aimed at consolidating the previous lesson on making neutral observations as opposed to labeling (online interaction).
- To identify behavioral patterns in different contexts, the following techniques were applied:
  - *How do I react when...?* – A technique that encourages students to reflect on the way they react in different situations. Emphasizing the pronoun „I" in formulating the statements, and comparing the given answers allowed for a comparison and analysis of the similarities and differences between their behavioral reactions (physical interaction).
- To differentiate the causes of occurrence and manifestation forms of different negative emotions, the following were:
  - *Moving emotions* – A technique that aimed to increase awareness and acceptance of differences between each person's emotional response (such as fear and anger) in given situations (physical interaction).

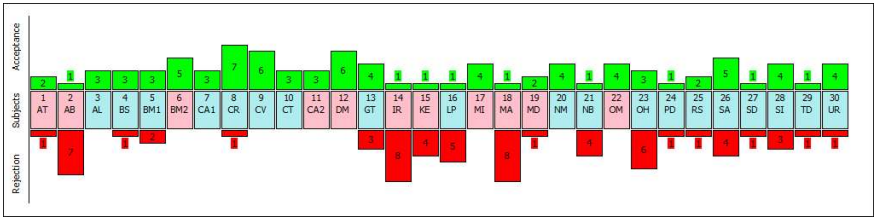
- *Red flags* – A technique that helps students to recognise unmet needs (referred to as red flags) that, if unresolved, can lead to exaggerated emotional states and educate them to express their needs assertively (physical interaction).
- *What needs does the fury hide?* – A technique applied to help children identify and differentiate between unexpressed needs and the true emotions that are often mistaken for fury (online interaction).
- *Where is the fury?* – A technique, which was used to help children become aware of how the bodily response to anger develops, to become more aware of their behavioral response (physical interaction).

• To identify the differences between a momentary misunderstanding and conflict, the following were employed:
  - *What do I know about conflict?* – A technique aimed to clarify the concept of *conflict*, its sources, and ways to resolve conflicts (physical interaction).
  - *Conflict or momentary misunderstanding?* – A technique that assumed the inclusion of given situations in one of the mentioned categories and the argumentation of the choice (physical interaction).
  - *The road of confidence* – A technique in which students were asked to identify the reliable people around them (parents, teachers, colleagues) that they can ask for help in case of a conflict, and ways in which they can regain trust in friends/colleagues after conflictual situations (physical interaction).

At the end of the quasi-experiment, the effects of the educational intervention were assessed using the same sociometric test. The results indicated an improvement in the group dynamics. The number of mutual preferences increased from 16 to 27, representing an increase of 11 preferences from the beginning of the study.

Compared to the initial stage, where some students did not have any acceptance score, in the final stage, all of them received at least one preference from their colleagues. Additionally, the number of rejections decreased.

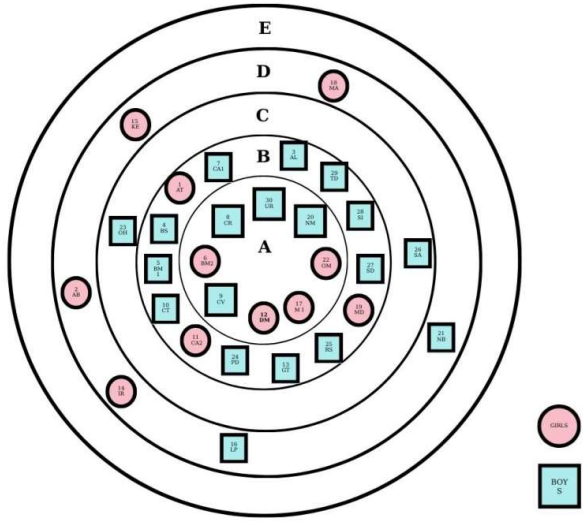
The distribution of students according to their preferential status index has been revised, as it showed some differences compared to the beginning of



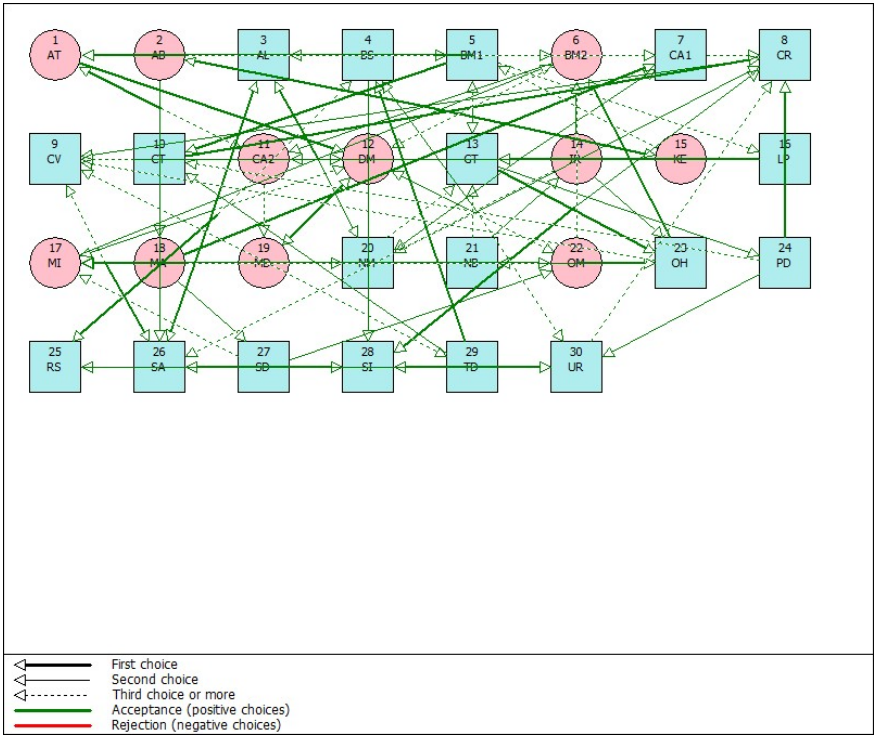
Source: GroupDynamics software

Graph no. 4. *Number of preferences and number of rejections for each student- final stage (blue squares - boys, pink squares – girls; green bars – no. of elections; red bars – no. of rejections)*

the study. The number of popular students remained the same, but the number of accepted students increased from 12 to 14 students. There were fewer rejected students (6 students at the end compared to 7 students at the beginning). The number of controversial students decreased from 3 to 2. Additionally, there were no neglected students.



Graph no. 5. *Students' distribution according to the preferential status index- final stage (adapted after GroupDynamics software graph)*



Source: GroupDynamics software

Graph no. 6. *Preferences sociogram, final stage (blue squares – boys; pink circles – girls)*

To evaluate the group cohesion index after the intervention, we used the same formula as before.

C_{gr} final = (27*2):(30*29)=54:870=0.062.

This result is greater than the initial value (0.062 > 0.036), which confirms the second hypothesis of the study.

3.2. Discussions

Few studies have analyzed the development of young students' social-emotional skills during the pandemic (Efuribe et al., 2020). Most of them focused on

the adolescent period (Green et al., 2021). Those analyzing this particular subject were conducted before the crisis (Caprara et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2017). These are some of the reasons for exploring the dynamics of relationships among primary school children in a crisis. Finding ways to help children develop their social-emotional competencies and improve relationships before they reach the preadolescent stage is also important for a healthy upbringing.

The primary objective of this research was to identify a set of psycho-pedagogical methods that would foster a better relationship between small schoolchildren in a crisis period, given the reduction of physical interaction between them. Also, the study aimed to analyze the effects of the intervention on the dynamics of relationships between students. The second objective was to observe and measure the influence of teachers' interventions on interpersonal relationships between students during a time of restricted physical interaction.

Comparative results of the two sociometric tests applied before ($C_{gr} = 0.036$) and after the intervention ($C_{gr} = 0.062$) show a positive shift in the students' interpersonal dynamics, sustained by higher group cohesion index and increased number of mutual choices, thus validating the first hypothesis. These changes suggest that the intervention had the desired and expected impact on group cohesion.

At the beginning of the educational intervention, 16 mutual choices were numbered, and the differences between student preferences were significant. The most liked student received nine positive selections, while the most disliked student faced nine rejections. After the intervention, the gap was slightly reduced. The student with the highest number of positive selections received seven votes, while the least liked student received eight negative nominations, down from nine. Before the program, there were seven students in the disliked group, compared to six students after the intervention. Another noticeable observation concerned the difference in the student's preferential index, which was lower after the intervention than before. Sociometric tests analyze individual perceptions, that can be influenced by different factors, such as different emotional states, including not just momentary emotions (spontaneous and intense reactions to specific stimuli), but also transient emotional dispositions (affective states of lower intensity, but longer duration,

that can influence overall perception), and positive or negative feelings developed over the long term, and certain unmet expectations in relationships. The lower index may be a reflection of some of these subjective factors. Also, they provide an image of preferences at a specific point in time; while some individuals may have benefited from these activities, others may have encountered some difficulties in adapting.

Shifts among students were observed, with some of the popular students moving to the accepted group and *vice versa*. Additionally, one student who was previously placed in the controversial group became part of the accepted group of students. These changes indicate a shift in student dynamics. They also provide evidence of the positive influence of teachers' interventions on the interpersonal relationships between students, results that align with other studies showing the efficiency of social-emotional learning programs on school performance, as well as on social interactions in and outside of school (Durlak et al., 2011). The collaborative activities and techniques, including role-playing, discussion circles, and collective feedback, have played an important role in promoting empathy and helping students understand diverse perspectives on the same situation.

During early childhood, peer relationships have a significant influence on psychosocial development and children's social behavior (Taylor et al., 2017). Young people need to learn how to cultivate good relationships with others (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Teachers' support to correct some behaviors and mediate conflicts between classmates was even more necessary during the pandemic (Longobardi et al., 2021).

In that context, the imposed restrictions and the conduct of the educational process mainly through online communication have significantly limited physical interaction, leading to social and emotional isolation (OECD, 2021). That emphasized the need for additional emotional support and exercise for managing natural emotions, such as sadness, fear, and anger. The selected techniques were also aimed at exemplifying the different manifestations of the same emotion and the interoceptive sensations experienced simultaneously (Hou, 2022). The competencies developed through such programs are transferable and applicable in different educational settings, not just during a crisis.

The observations made during the conduct of the interventions revealed positive effects on well-being in school, creating a pleasant, non-conflicting atmosphere within the school group, and increasing the sense of belonging (Castro Genes, 2024), but also improving the student-teacher relationship. Teachers' role expands beyond delivering information and applying different techniques. Their involvement as facilitators, guiding students through these activities, creating a safe environment for learning, and helping students express their emotions was a critical factor in the intervention. These findings also underline the importance of teacher training and professional development focused on effectively enhancing the social-emotional competencies of their students from an early age (OECD, 2021).

3.3. Limitations

The limitations of this study primarily come from the small size of the experimental group, its type, which was selected for convenience, and the absence of a control sample, which could have provided more relevant data. These factors do not allow generalization of results, which can only be compared to other relevant studies in the field. For the future, it is recommended to conduct a quasi-experiment using at least one experimental group and one control group.

Another limitation of the study is the exclusive focus on the mutual knowledge techniques implemented by the teacher and the sociometric method. The results would have been better sustained with additional research methods, such as observation and quantification of positive and negative behaviors in the class, after the teachers' interventions. Additionally, a baseline evaluation is recommended to establish a precise effect size of a similar intervention.

Measuring the social-emotional competence level of both teachers and students before and after this type of intervention, using specific scales alongside sociometric tests, would enhance the study. A comparison between groups from different educational environments (urban and rural) would also be beneficial.

4. Conclusions

Facilitating opportunities for students to get to know each other better is a challenge for both students and teachers. They must choose adequate methods and techniques to enhance mutual knowledge between students and improve relationships, communication, and collaboration. To achieve positive results, teachers need a solid grasp of group dynamics and effective strategies for improving communication between students, as well as the ability to improve the educational environment to help children develop harmoniously.

This study aimed to identify a set of psycho-pedagogical methods suitable for improving relationships between small school children in crises and taking into consideration the lack of physical interaction between them. The second aim was to determine the efficiency of teachers' influence on class group dynamics. The obtained data confirm the hypothesis that a well-structured educational intervention can improve group cohesion and school climate.

The integration of socio-emotional learning into the school curriculum helps create inclusive educational environments and favors a harmonious development for children. By emphasizing the development of social-emotional skills, teachers can equip students with the proper tools to face social challenges and build meaningful relationships in diverse environments.

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