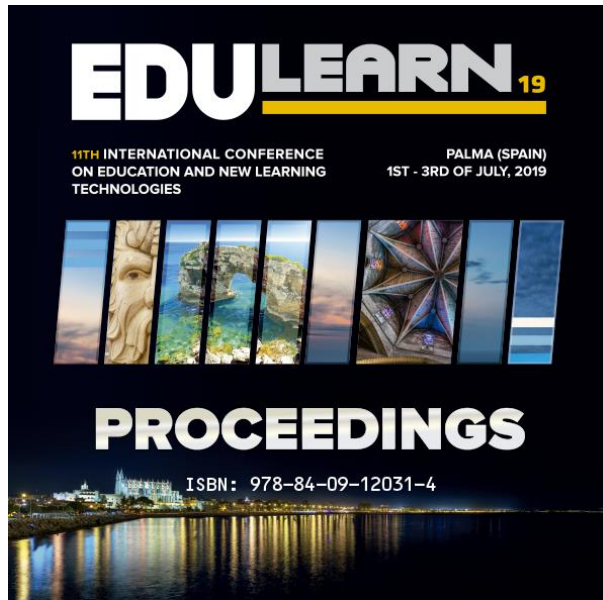


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Constantine the Philosopher University Nitra (SLOVAKIA)

Abstract

High level of teacher training, as well as well-designed career development and long-life learning of teachers are considered to be very important standpoints for education from preschool to university settings. It is no doubt, that without professional competences of teachers, quality education of preschool children cannot be secured. European organizations such as the European Commission and the European Council, explicitly argue for providing and securing high-quality early childhood education. Several studies have provided compelling evidence that an investment in education and training benefiting young children produces the largest gains in terms of human capital, for both children and society.

Recent research has shown the importance of teacher sensitivity for young children's recent and later academic, behavioural and socio-emotional development. Moreover, teacher sensitivity has been found to have compensatory effects for the development of children at-risk. Therefore, the Playing-2-gether program (P2G) aims to improve teacher sensitivity for both pre-service and in-service teachers when playing with pre-schoolers in the classroom. By training both non-verbal and verbal teacher sensitivity skills, teachers are supported in dealing with diversified groups of learners. The program was developed within the Erasmus + project, KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices. The most impacted field is (KA201) Strategic partnerships for school education in cooperation with higher education institutions from Portugal, Belgium, The Netherlands and Slovakia.

The intention of the program is to help the teacher improve the environment with play activities in order to help children to better inclusion and socialization in kindergartens. Within the project, free and directed plays are defined based on the theories of Pianta (2015), Hamre et al. (2014), Vancraeyveldt (2015) and others. Based on the above mentioned theoretical sources of the program, individual principles were applied in Slovak conditions. The program is implemented in a kindergarten with selected children, who have behavioural problems and problems with adaptation in the classroom environment. The paper deals with the description of child behaviour and teacher intervention through P2G. The naturalistic observation and the analysis of realized video recordings show the possibility to implement the program in kindergartens with regard to the socio-cultural context. At the same time, it will serve as a methodological source for pre-service and in-service teachers. The outputs of the project published on the web platform in Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) will provide the possibility for sharing the mutual experience of kindergarten teachers at the European level, which is also the goal of the project and it contributes to the internationalization of pre-school education.

Keywords: Preschool education, playing together program, teacher sensitivity, good practise videos, Massive Open Online Course.

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Keywords: preschool education, playing together program, teacher's sensitivity, good practise videos, Massive Open Online Course.

1 INTRODUCTION

Playing-2-gether: Teacher Sensitivity as a Basis for Inclusion in Preschool is the title of the project, that Department of Pedagogy at Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University applied successfully for the grant in cooperation with higher education institutions from Leuven, Belgium; Amsterdam and Leeuwarden, the Netherlands; and Porto, Portugal. European organizations explicitly argue for providing and securing high-quality early childhood education for all children (e.g., European Commission, 2013; European Council, 2011). This demand is aligned with international steering documents, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006) that has been advocating for the right for education for all children. This means educating all children together in mainstream classrooms, regardless their abilities and disabilities, with teaching methods, materials and classroom environments that address the diversity of needs of all. Furthermore, creating a school for all prompts societies to value diversity, to promote the respect for differences and to combat discrimination. Currently, societies are facing new challenges of increasing diversity in Europe (e.g. the refugee crisis, exclusion of minorities). Within this context the need for adapted early childhood education is stringent. Several studies have provided compelling evidence that an investment in education and training benefiting young children produces the largest gains in terms of human capital, for both children (e.g., better job, higher income, better quality of life) and society (e.g., less crime, less unemployment). Following the refugee crisis and an increasing super diverse society, the project explicitly focuses on enhancing the quality of early childhood education for all children in general and for at risk children in particular, as was highlighted in the Paris declaration on education (2015). In this way, the project focuses on two Erasmus KA2+ Horizontal priorities: Enhancing the quality of early childhood education and inclusive education, training, and youth. Recent research has shown the importance of teacher sensitivity for young children's recent and later academic, behavioural and socio-emotional development [12]. Moreover, teacher sensitivity has been found to have compensatory effects for the development of at-risk children [11]. Therefore, the Playing-2-gether project aims to improve teacher sensitivity for both pre-service and in-service teachers when playing with pre-schoolers in the classroom. By training both non-verbal and verbal teacher sensitivity skills, teachers are supported in dealing with diversified groups of learners (such as refugee children, migrants, socially disadvantaged...) and to adopt innovative practices from the start of their careers and during their careers. Doing so, the project is consistent with both the Erasmus KA2+ School education priority for high quality early childhood education and the Erasmus KA2+ Horizontal priority for social inclusion. More specific, the present project focuses on the youngest group (i.e. pre schoolers of 2.5 to 6 years old) and on their teachers.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

An online Playing-2-gether course has already shown its positive effect on teacher sensitivity of Belgian preservice teachers [14], [15]. The P-2-G intervention was developed by colleagues from UC Leuven-Limburg and KU Leuven, Belgium, based on an attachment and learning theory that aims at improving the quality of teacher-child interactions and to decrease child externalizing problem behavior. This type of problem behavior refers to disruptive and harmful behaviors for others (hurting other children, being disobedient, talking back..) and

has been shown to be linked to future child maladjustment in several areas, such as peer rejection, social isolation, school failure, and mental disorders [7], [1]. Finally, this behavior becomes not only a risk factor for the child's development, but also for class climate and for the teacher as well. Therefore it is inevitable to redirect this behavioral maladjustment in an early stage [12]. The P-2-G intervention was developed for preschoolers showing relatively high levels of externalizing problem behavior and their teachers [15]. Teacher-child interactions are considered as environmental factors that influence preschooler behavioral adjustment. The growing number of observational studies has aimed at the link between the affective quality of the teacher-child relationship, teacher behavior management and preschooler behavioral adjustment [9].

The interventions grounded in attachment and learning theory, aimed at improving preschooler behavioral adjustment by focusing on both enhancing the teacher-child relationship and teacher behavior management are on the rise [14], [15]. According to attachment theory developing a secure attachment bond with primary caregivers is important to promote children's development and to prevent adjustment problems in general and externalizing problem behavior in particular. (see meta-analysis by Fearon et al. 2010) [3]. Parents are the primary attachment figures for most children and relationships with teachers are time-limited and not exclusive. Children spend a lot of time with their teachers for at least one school year. Teachers can be temporarily considered as attachment figures playing the role of secure base and they may influence children's adjustment in preschool. High-quality teacher-child relationships are considered important resources which may help children to maintain adequate behavior or redirect externalizing problem behavior in times of stress at school. Learning theory focuses on importance of teacher-child interactions for children's behavioral development as well. More specifically, the operant conditioning model focuses on the importance of the antecedents and the consequences of behavior as targets for behavioral change. Teacher should set up the conditions under which desired behavior is likely to occur (stating clear rules), and if it occurs, the teacher should reinforce this behavior (praising desired behavior) [14].

Attachment and learning theories point at different aspects of teacher-child interactions which are considered to be complementary in improving child behavioral adjustment, and may be combined in two component interventions. The first component may be attachment-based and focused on improving the relationship quality. The improved relationship is, in turn, expected to act as an affective base, which facilitates the effectiveness of behavior management techniques focused on in a second, learning theory based, intervention component [14].

Playing-2-together consists of two six week components during which one-on-one play sessions with the target child take place outside the classroom. These play sessions are held twice a week, for approximately 15 – 20 minutes per session. During these sessions, the teacher is given the opportunity to practice skills to improve the teacher-child relationship quality (1st component) and the teacher's behavior management (2nd component) in a safe learning environment. In the 1st component, Relationship-Game, the play sessions are child-centered. The child can choose the activity or the game and the teacher has to follow the child's lead. The teacher practices skills that improve teacher sensitivity and that focus on making a strong connection with the child. For example, the teacher observes the child during the game, imitates his play, describes his actions and labels his feelings and also pays attention to the

children's relational needs and tries to respond to them in an adequate manner ("developing relational themes" in Banking Time) [8]. In the 2nd component, Rule- Game, the sessions are teacher centered. The teacher chooses the activity or the game, and the child has to follow the teacher's lead. Moreover, the teacher practices skills to improve child behavioral adjustment, such as giving clear commands, introducing rules. If the child disruptive behavior persists, the teacher can make use of time-out, but it is important that the sessions remain a positive time spent together [14].

3 METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

The project management methodology goes from preparatory activities to implementation, evaluation and dissemination. All activities are bundled into clearly defined outputs. The project itself is broken down into 4 outputs. Each output is assigned to a lead partner. By delegating authority to run activities for this output to each partner is ensured the inclusiveness of most of the partners in the project management and therefore ownership for the outputs. In doing so the special consideration of the profile of the institution was taken as well as, the qualifications and experience of people involved. The responsibility on the different intellectual outputs and multiplier events is taken by different partners, based on their specific expertise in this output.

Output 1: Animated videos - the goal is to give an attractive summary of the state-of-the-art on two important elements of the project: teacher sensitivity and inclusive preschools. However, to date, an attractive animated video that explains the exact meaning of teacher sensitivity in inclusive preschools is not yet available. Such informative video will help teachers to understand the importance and the essence of these concepts in layman terms and inspire them to implement more teacher sensitivity in their inclusive classrooms.

Output 2: Good practice videos – are made by the pre-service and in-service teachers in the national professional learning communities. They show the examples of teacher sensitivity and inclusive classrooms. They also show examples where teacher sensitivity and inclusive classrooms are less easy to attain. These videos will be put on the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Playing -2- gether. Videos of strong moments or troublesome areas have been made by the pre-service and in service teachers of the participating schools in every country except Belgium. The teams of teachers are in the position of detecting and anticipating the "hard parts" of teacher sensitivity. The "hard parts" are these areas where improvement is not so easy to access. Singling out the "hard parts" for special attention, practicing them on the side, developing strategies to deal with them better, ultimately, make it easier to recall the information and reintegrate later into daily practice.

Output 3: Developing of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Playing-2-gether that will include the following items: a general introduction, the animated videos which provide the state-of-the-art on teacher sensitivity and inclusive preschools in layman terms, good practice videos on high quality teacher-child relationships with moment-to moment description of the shown interactions. Moreover there will be included discussion forum where pre- and in-service teachers can post their comments on the good practice videos of other countries (as part of an assignment for the professional learning communities). In the discussion forum, new issues on specific topics related teacher sensitivity in inclusive classrooms (innovation problems, good practices) can be raised. Playing-2-gether coaching

manual will be also part of it. The MOOC is based on the principle of Observational Learning in which it is shown that the observation of good examples has positive effect on the self-designing products. The tool will be open access and thus will be able to be consulted and used by all EU pre-service teachers, in-service teachers and teacher trainers.

Output 4: Playing-2-gether coaching manual. In the final phase of the project participating teachers will be trained as coaches for other pre-service and in-service teachers. Therefore the coaching manual will be developed which may be used complementary to the MOOC. Complementing the MOOC by a coaching trajectory has demonstrated more effective teacher-child interactions in comparison to only implementing the MOOC. The coaching manual will be based on the four components of the 4C/ID model for complexing learning: learning tasks, supportive information, procedural information and part task practice (Merriënboer and Kirschner, 2013) [15]. The coaching manual will be available in English, Slovak, Dutch, Portuguese and French, so that many European teachers can consult it. The try-out version of the coaching manual will be presented at the national multiplier events and will be tested in the following months by the participating teachers.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As it was above mentioned the theoretical background was created in Belgium conditions. There was also developed the program of Playing-2gether and firstly it was tested in Belgium preschools. The developed topic is very important and useful to make better quality time for pre-schoolers not only in Belgium but also throughout the European Union with adapting to particular conditions of individual country.

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