INTEGRATED LITERACY METHODS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL – EMOTIONAL SKILLS: PRE-SCHOOL GROUP CONTEXT

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Abstract. *Preschool years are a significant period of a child's life, characterized by a unique social, artistic, cognitive, emotional expression of the child. In the preschool age, children go through a rather difficult period of development, which largely determines the success of their subsequent education at school. At this stage of development, children should feel the need to read and write and thus get to know the world (understand people's relationships, feelings, actions, intentions, etc.); should start reading and writing and feel the joy of reading and writing while successfully interacting with the surrounding world. Having mastered literacy skills, a child can express what he/she feels, hears, and sees. The received data were analyzed while using thematic content analysis. During the observation, it has cleared out that it is quite difficult for children to express their emotions. Practical tasks, such as acting situations, drawing emotions, activities with sand, discussions with parents and researchers when children try to express emotions, practically teach different ways to overcome everyday changes and difficulties and thus acquire social-emotional skills. An attractively equipped book reading area, interestingly used print encourages easier recognition of words and application of reading skills. The application of integrated literacy methods in the implementation of a preschool program is a suitable context for strengthening social emotional skills, which are crucial for recognizing and managing one's emotions, being empathetic, creating and maintaining positive relationships, setting and pursuing positive goals, and making responsible decisions. Literacy techniques such as printed environment, reading books, marking emotions, interactive writing and drawing, social stories, acting situations, and discussions are effective tools and ways to achieve these goals.*
Keywords: education, integrated literacy, methods, preschool group, social emotional abilities.

Introduction

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019), assessing the needs of a rapidly changing world and summarizing international research on adolescent literacy, states that it is necessary for students

to develop a wide range of skills, including strong cognitive, social-emotional skills. The European Commission (2018) has identified eight key competences that a person needs throughout life. Two of them are 'literacy' and 'personal, social and emotional learning'. Thus, it can be said that children's literacy development and social-emotional education are among the priority areas of education. This research paper presents the analysis of scientific sources, revealing the possibilities of using integrated literacy methods in the development of social-emotional skills.

The problem of the research. As the development of children's literacy and social emotional abilities is one of the priority areas of education, mastering literacy skills opens vide communication possibilities for a child. He/she can express what he/she feels, hears, and sees. Still, as the majority of scientific literature sources state (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2016; Caudle & Grist, 2016; CASEL, 2015; 2019), it remains a difficulty for a significant number of children to identify their emotions and to express them fluently in the process of verbal communication. The way out of the situation might be the application of integrated literacy methods giving educators more opportunities to strengthen children's social and emotional abilities, which would lead to children's higher self-esteem, more effective realization of their potential, better interpersonal relationships.

The object of the research - the development of social - emotional skills.

The aim of the research - to highlight the assumptions for the formation of social emotional skills by applying integrated literacy methods in a preschool group. Research question - what kind of actions can be applied to integrate literacy methods into the development of social - emotional skills?

Research methods: the research data were collected while conducting the observation of the activities of pre-school children and organizing the focus group discussion with the prie-school teachers.

Literature review

Analyzing the scientific literature, it was noticed that the authors (Weissberg et al. 2016; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; CASEL, 2015, 2019) classify social-emotional skills according to their areas of expression. The CASEL (2015) organization divides social-emotional skills into cognitive (cognitive), emotional (relational) and positive behavioral expression areas and distinguishes five related groups of social-emotional skills (Fig.1).
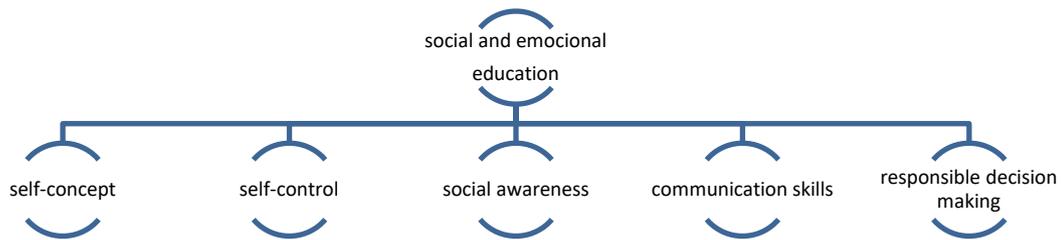
Figure1 ***Five main groups of social-emotional skills***
(Modified according CASEL, 2015)

As indicated by the classification provided by CASEL (2015), the socio-emotional skills of each domain consist of certain skills that are highly related. Similarly, social-emotional skills are named in the works of other authors. Jones & Bouffard (2012) group socio-emotional skills into the expression areas of emotional, cognitive (cognitive) and relational (social) skills. According to the authors, the field of emotional skills includes evaluating, perceiving and analyzing, expressing and regulating emotions. The domain of cognitive skills includes the ability to focus attention and suppress impulses. The domain of interpersonal skills (social skills) includes communication skills, prosocial behavior (cooperation, helping others, being able to give a compliment) and interpersonal skills. So, it could be said that social-emotional education is a process that develops such skills as understanding and managing one's emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, caring for others, creating and maintaining positive relationships with others, appropriate regulation of interpersonal relationships and responsible decision-making.

Social-emotional education helps children to acquire skills that are necessary for successful adaptation and activity in society. During social-emotional education the teachers, the child's family, and the local community are encouraged to work together in cooperation to help children learn to create, maintain good interpersonal relationships, manage emotions, solve problems, develop self-control, and behave ethically. Social-emotional education is defined as an educational process that helps to develop self-relationship and relationship-to-other abilities, strengthens social, emotional and academic skills. Thus, social-emotional education should remain a priority for teachers even with higher academic standards and rigorous learning expectations (Caudle & Grist, 2016).

Success at school is not only determined by a child's knowledge or early reading and writing skills, but also by emotional and social skills than enable the development of self-confidence, interest in the environment, knowing what behavior is expected and how to control oneself when there is a temptation to misbehave, to be able to follow instructions, to approach teachers for a help, to express needs and get along with other children.

Early life experiences provide the foundation for well-being, health and learning. In early childhood, healthy cognitive development coupled with healthy development of social and emotional skills creates a strong foundation for future academic achievement, success, and social-emotional well-being.

Consistent social-emotional education involves focusing on children's social-emotional development, particularly on self-regulation. Social emotional education also focuses on teaching children vocabulary, labeling and recognizing emotions (Caudle & Gist, 2016). Social and emotional education includes an environment where children can develop social and emotional skills, highlighting self-regulation, which is strongly related to the readiness for school.

Denham, Bassett, Zinsser, & Wyatt (2014) examined the relationship between social-emotional learning, its application in a group, and academic performance. Specifically, these researchers examined self-regulation, emotion cognition, problem solving, and social-emotional behaviors and a possibility to predict children's academic readiness and adjustment in kindergarten. Social-emotional skills were linked to academic readiness and specifically to early literacy skills.

Although integrated literacy methods have been proved to be effective in teaching young children to read and write, the idea about how these methods work in the preschool group needs to be explored in a more detailed way. Educators need to support and practice purposeful literacy development while ensuring that the development of social-emotional skills in group activities remains a central part of practice. Integrated literacy activities in pre-school education groups should be organized taking into account a rich print environment, book reading, dialogical reading, interactive writing and drawing (Vukelich, Christie, & Enz 2012).

While summing up, it could be stated that literacy occupies a very important place in the education of children. It is one of the priority areas of education. The preschool age of a child is a very significant time that has a great impact on the child's literacy development. By constantly interacting with the social world, the child acquires the necessary abilities that become necessary in all areas of his/her life. After mastering the skills of writing and reading, the child can more easily express what he/she feels, hears and sees. In order to make the process of developing literacy of a more better quality, it is important for the teacher to provide an environment that encourages the child's curiosity, activity and desire to act.

Methodology

In order to find out what methods of strengthening social-emotional abilities are used while integrating literacy methods in the preschool group, the logic of qualitative research was chosen. The empirical study was carried out in two

stages. In the first stage, the observation of planned activities was carried out while working with children, in the second stage there was organized a focus group discussion in cooperation with pedagogues.

Observation stages and progress. Observation was carried out in 2021, in October - November while working with children of the pre-school group in one of the pre-school institutions of Kaunas city after obtaining the agreement of their parents. Planned and continuous activities were observed for six weeks. Each week, during group observation, the number of children was different due to attendance at the institution: 14 children participated in the first week, 17 children - in the second week, 17 - in the third week, 16 - in the fourth week, 15 - in the fifth week, and 14 - in the sixth week. The participants of the first observation stage were a group of 17 children, including 12 girls and 7 boys. Children's age was from 5 to 6 years. Most children already know how to pronounce all the sounds of the language, speak clearly and understandably in compound sentences. Pupils are able to briefly narrate a simple everyday event, know the main colors, can count according to their age, know and write letters, some of them can read. Children of this age have more sustained attention, they can concentrate for a certain period of time while doing a task. They also hear and take into account the instructions of an adult. As is typical at this age, children are curious, creative, interested in what works and how it works, and like to try everything. Most of the time, an adult only needs to encourage, help the pupils and participate in activities together with the child. In this way, the child learns to trust himself /herself.

The following steps were planned for conducting the observation:

1) goal setting; 2) data recording method; 3) choice of monitoring method; 4) data description; 5) analysis of findings.

The monitoring steps included the following activities:

I step - the printed environment is prepared in the group.

Children need to understand the presentation of printed text before they can read on their own. For example, they understand that printed text is different from illustrations, text is printed from left to right, words are made up of letters of the alphabet. These skills start to develop as children learn to use books, look at pictures, recognize book covers, pay attention to words, and begin to write and read.

II step - optional social stories (6 stories).

Social stories are short descriptive stories that provide information about various social expectations. With the help of social stories, children are helped through situations to understand how to solve problems, cope with difficulties and conflicts that arise in and outside the group. For a group of children, stories are selected that match their age and specific needs. Through social stories, children are shown how to deal with everyday difficulties and react appropriately in various situations.

III step – preparation of practical tasks.

By performing practical tasks, children analyze, retell, act out situations in which they try to say what they have in mind. In this way the children develop the ability to express opinions and show how to express feelings in a difficult situation. Children learn practical ways to cope with everyday changes and difficulties, thus gaining social-emotional skills.

IV step – discussion with the parents and the reflection with the resercher.

Not only children, but also most adults do not find it easy to talk about their feelings. There is quite a number of children who have trouble understanding the "felt" emotions. By carefully listening and observing their children, parents can spot those moments when the children fail to express their feelings, either directly through words or indirectly through body language. Parents and educators, by talking with children about their various experiences, demonstrate the children that their feelings are accepted and understood. This strengthens the child's sense of inner ME and helps him/her to learn to recognize and name personal feelings. In the second stage of the empirical research, the focus group discussion method was chosen. The method is characterized by a small number of group participants (usually 6 -12 people). They are selected for the study while relying on a common characteristic: all participants should be involved in a pedagogical work in a preschool institution with children of preschool age. The participants of the second stage are pre-school education pedagogues. 4 informants have up to 10 years of pedagogical work experience, 2 informants have more than 20 years of experience in the preschool group. The quality of the data in this method is based on the dynamism of the group: such quality data could not be obtained if the group was not dynamic and did not interact. The group was led by the researcher, who asked open-ended questions and encouraged discussion among group members. Themes for discussion were identified by creating 5 open-ended questions based on the results obtained during the observation and the analysis of the theory. Thematic analysis was chosen for the analysis of the conducted research (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). This is a systematic way of working with qualitative data, which helps to identify typical patterns and formulate topics related to the research problem when coding data (Zydziunaite & Sabaliauskas, 2017). During the conducting of the research, informal observation of children's activities and a focus group discussion with pedagogues were organized. A structured monitoring protocol was created during the observation. The study was based on the general principles of research ethics: voluntariness, provision of information, assurance of security, confidentiality and anonymity.

Research results

The preschool educational institution, where the study took place, cooperates with social partners, the Public institution "For the benefit of the child" and participates in the "Friends of Zipy" program. The program helps teachers to

improve the social, socio-educational competences of motivating and supporting the child, which the teachers needed at work. During the research, 6 stories from the "Friends of Zipy" program were used. They demonstrate how it is easier to overcome everyday difficulties and react appropriately in various situations. Social stories: 1) "Full of feelings". The goal is to develop children's ability to recognize sadness and find ways to respond appropriately to it. 2) "What do I like most?". The goal is to develop children's ability to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful ways to express their feelings. 3) "Are you my friend?". The goal is to develop children's ability to save their friends. 4) "We do not allow ourselves to be abused." The goal is to develop children's ability to recognize the qualities of a good way out. 5) "Goodbye". The goal of the story is to help children understand that change and loss are part of our everyday life experience. 6) "Ourselves". The goal is to develop children's ability to use various methods to overcome difficulties. These stories teach children how to manage everyday emotional difficulties: rejection, loneliness, bullying, difficult changes. They help to understand and encourage talking about one's feelings, looking for ways to deal with those feelings; teach children empathy, to find friends, to ask for and accept support, to help others. Analyzing the obtained data, 4 main themes emerged - expressions of feelings and emotions, experiencing difficult and negative feelings, learning to recognize various feelings and stay with them, efforts to create positive relationships (Fig. 2).
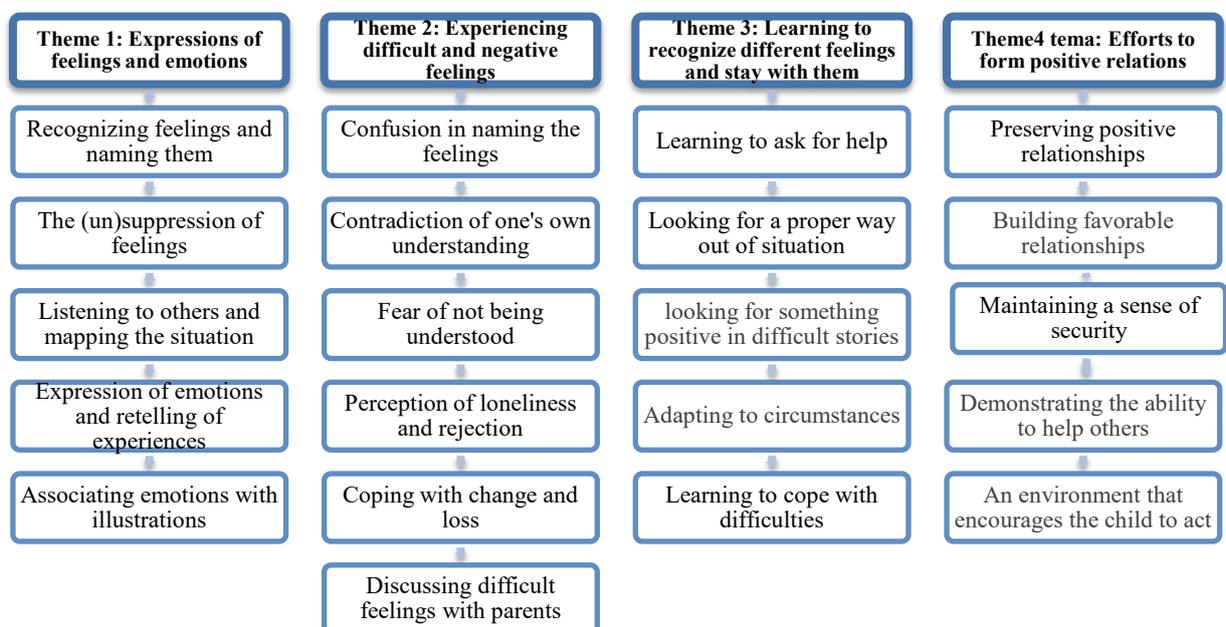
Theme 1: Expressions of feelings and emotions	Theme 2: Experiencing difficult and negative feelings	Theme 3: Learning to recognize different feelings and stay with them	Theme4 tema: Efforts to form positive relations
Recognizing feelings and naming them	Confusion in naming the feelings	Learning to ask for help	Preserving positive relationships
The (un)suppression of feelings	Contradiction of one's own understanding	Looking for a proper way out of situation	Building favorable relationships
Listening to others and mapping the situation	Fear of not being understood	looking for something positive in difficult stories	Maintaining a sense of security
Expression of emotions and retelling of experiences	Perception of loneliness and rejection	Adapting to circumstances	Demonstrating the ability to help others
Associating emotions with illustrations	Coping with change and loss	Learning to cope with difficulties	An environment that encourages the child to act
	Discussing difficult feelings with parents		

*Figure 2 **A thematic map of the representation of feelings and emotions from a child's perspective** (made by authors)*

It could be argued that, in order to strengthen social-emotional abilities, the activities are systematically organized, while integrating literacy methods into them. Topics are chosen purposefully, social stories are chosen according to the

topics, practical tasks - acting situations - are applied, children's discussions with parents and reflection with the teacher are organized. One topic is focused on throughout the week so that children have enough time to absorb the information. Six themes - six stories that are similar to each other, but all of them have different shades. A lot of attention is paid to understanding emotions, expressing them, preserving positive relationships, how to resolve conflicts, overcome difficulties, and survive changes. After listening and discussing the story, practical activities - role-playing situations are applied. During them the children talk about feelings, learn to express emotions and apply their experiences. It has been observed that, when integrated literacy methods are applied, children more easily delve into situations, experience them, try to understand the causes of emotions and name them, find solutions to make things different. Children find it difficult to recognize certain emotions, so they help each other understand, share their experiences and learn from each other. Next, the focus is on working together, cooperation with parents. Tasks for parents are formulated so that parents can discuss the topic with their children at home, and the children can reflect on it with the teacher. This is a very effective method for developing children's social-emotional skills. When children discuss their feelings with their parents, they once again convey them to the teacher. It was noticed that then it is much easier for the child to find words to express his/her feelings and to describe situations more smoothly.

Children avoid talking about difficult emotions and do not rush to open up, but the empathy shown by an adult is the key to a child's heart. It is often enough to show attention to the child, hug him/her, be near him/her, talk to him/her, read his/her favorite book together, but it is important not to leave the child with difficult feelings and finish the activity. Children's moods should be taken into account, activities should be diversified to distract negative feelings. Rules created together with children help children to follow agreements. Illustrations with emotions allow children to connect their emotions with visualizations and understand that it is natural to feel the particular way. Tea breaks will always create a cozy atmosphere, as the teacher's goal is to create an environment in the group where all children can express themselves, feel emotionally safe and valued.

Analyzing the research data obtained in the second stage, 3 main themes emerged: 1) features of social and emotional abilities; 2) applied methods for developing social-emotional skills and 3) educational environment favorable to social-emotional abilities. These topics are highly interrelated. When discussing integrated literacy methods, it is important to clarify what needs to be considered in the development of preschool children's social-emotional skills. The experience of educators in creating educational environments that promote the growth of children's social-emotional abilities is also relevant.

The pedagogues who participated in the focus group emphasize that when developing children's social-emotional skills, it is important to take into account

children's individuality. The participants also say that each child is able to receive information differently and interpret it in a personal way. Participants of the discussion think, that it is very important what experience the child brings to kindergarten from the family. As stated in the discussion, it is important how the child communicates with his/her relatives at home, how the family reacts to the child's emotions, what is the general emotional background in the family. Participants emphasize that it is important for the family to cooperate with the institution in order to achieve the best results. The teachers who participated in the discussion say that they often use similar methods when developing children's social-emotional skills, but most of them distinguish between reading fairy tales and activities that encourage discussions, because the educators believe that this is the most appropriate way to answer all the questions in a language that children can understand.

Focus group participants, discussing the creation of an educational environment, emphasize several aspects: provision of tools, usage of spaces, creation of a safe and cozy environment. Participants pay attention to creative role-play spaces, where children learn to communicate with each other, express their feelings, moods, and thoughts and thus get to know the world around them. The teachers who participated in the discussion emphasize and name such an environment as an important aspect, which must ensure the emotional safety of children. During the discussion with the teachers it became clear that most of them, when developing social-emotional skills, usually take into account the needs of children and the general context of the group. It is very important to help children recognize their emotions and express them in appropriate and acceptable ways. Then teachers must think and apply such methods that help children to reveal themselves. When creating the environment, teachers often use their creativity, for example, they prepare an "emotion wall" in the group, where any child can evaluate his/her emotions according to the heroes of the videos; the "emotional train", where everyone in their car shows what emotion they have come with today; cushions brought from home with the child's letter will always give the child a sense of security.

Conclusions and discussion

During the research, it was observed that with the help of social stories, children better understand emotions and perceive social interactions. Social stories show how it is easier to cope with everyday difficulties and to react appropriately in various situations. According to Caudle and Girst (2016), before children can deal with complex, unexpected problems and conflicts, it is important to understand their own emotions as well as those of others. The conducted observation confirms that when communicating, children gain knowledge from each other, share experiences, and are able to find out the essence of the

difficulties encountered and possible solutions. Knowledge and understanding of the surrounding and personal emotions, their management and control, empathy promotes effective interpersonal communication and positively affects individual decisions. During the observation, it became clear that it is quite difficult for children to express their emotions. Practical tasks, such as role-playing situations, recognizing emotions, expressing them in a drawing, discussions with parents and the researcher, where children try to express emotions, practically teach various ways to overcome everyday changes and difficulties and in such a way to acquire social-emotional skills.

During the research it was observed that applying integrated literacy methods is meaningful and useful, if the conditions are created and a full-fledged environment is created. An attractively equipped book reading area, abundantly used print encourages easier recognition of words and application of reading skills. Vukelich et al. (2012) emphasize that it is very important for pre-school educators to use the press purposefully in the group highlighting functional and environmental aspects. Children feel more fun in an aesthetically attractive group room, playful colors and bright names help create a cozy atmosphere. Properly arranged furniture provides knowledge about the use of space and develops safety skills. A properly and attractively equipped group environment encourages more diverse games. The formation of social skills teaches to be independent and overcome difficulties.

The study revealed that reading fairy tales and activities that promote analysis of situations and discussions of experiences are among the methods which are most often used by educators to strengthen children's social-emotional skills. It is emphasized that this is the way to answer all the questions that arise in a language that children can understand. Teachers usually use various images as tools in their activities, in which children can recognize their emotions and understand them. Creative role-play spaces, where children learn to communicate, express their feelings, moods, and thoughts, and thus get to know the world around them are also of great importance.

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