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Review paper

PEER RELATIONSHIPS AND POPULARITY IN A GROUP OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Peer relationships are key to the social development of preschool children as they enable them to learn social skills. Popularity in the group, measured as sociometric status, reflects the social acceptance of the child among peers. Popular children are often prosocial, friendly, flexible and show a lower level of withdrawal and aggression. The research on a sample of 20 preschool children, the purpose of which was to determine which children are popular in the group and what are the factors that influence the popularity or social acceptance of these children in the group, showed that in the group of preschool children, they associate popularity with characteristics such as kindness, physical attractiveness, emotional competence and social sensitivity. Such children are important to the dynamics of the group as they facilitate interactions and contribute to a positive social environment.

Keywords: relationships, peers, social acceptance, popular children

INTRODUCTION

Peer relationships are important as they broaden children's horizons. Already at a young age, in kindergarten, children experience peer relationships and learn social behaviour in different contexts, which they would not be able to fully develop at home with their parents.

Kindergarten is not only about the acquisition of learning material in the child's development. Children also learn social behaviour in different contexts at the same time. They learn about themselves, where they belong in the status hierarchy, about relationships with their peers and about the importance of competition, cooperation and friendship (Košir, 2013). Of course, upbringing is not based solely on relationships; however, relationships are a fundamental organizational strategy of our education system. Relationships are not only seen as a warm, protective background or blanket, but as combining elements that work dynamically towards a common purpose (Malaguzzi, 1993). Relationships between peers are important in preschool as the preschool period is a critical period for a child's social development that educators and parents should not ignore (Johnson, Ironsmith, Snow and Poteat, 2000). Even Komensky claimed that it is more beneficial for children to be educated at school rather than at home. Because interaction is created among peers through which they learn more easily and more willingly. They are inspired by each other and shape each other through all of the above. Vygotsky also emphasizes the construction of knowledge through interaction and he bases the concept of child development precisely on social interaction (Pergar-Kuščer, 2005). Piaget points out that when it comes to cognitive activity, the cognitive development of the child can further encourage interactions with peers. Through these interactions, the child gains additional experience. Therefore, in addition to individual work, Piaget's active school should also offer many opportunities for involving the child in group work (Labinowicz, 2010). Montessori describes the child's development and emphasizes that the child must be supported by an environment that nurtures his personality traits, which includes the child's peers. Peers and relationships thus make an important contribution to children's learning (Isaacs, 2015). Relationships with peers mean a lot to children and adolescents, as they think a lot and talk about who they socialize with, who they like and who they don't. They think a lot about what others think of them and avoid situations in which others would tease or ridicule them (Košir, 2013).

The need for belonging is one of the most fundamental and well-researched human needs (Nichols & Webster, 2013). Two key characteristics of the need

for belonging are: (1) the need for frequent contact with others, who are in a good case pleasant and positive and with whom there are no negative emotions and conflicts; (2) the need to perceive stability, mutual bond in the relationship, and interest and care for the continuation of this relationship in the future (Baumeister & Leary, 1959, summary as cited in Košir, 2013). People with a strong need for belonging are also aware of how others perceive them and want consistent and predictable relationships (Nichols & Webster, 2013). Positive emotions such as satisfaction and happiness are associated with a satisfied need for belonging. Unmet need for belonging is associated with anxiety, depression, grief and jealousy (Košir, 2013).

Peer acceptance of an individual is now referred to as sociometric status. This reflects the expressed feelings of the group towards the individual in the group, i.e., it gives information on whether the peer group likes the individual or not. The sociometric position differs from friendship in that it is defined at the level of the peer group and not the individual (Buhs & Ladd, 2001, summary as cited in Košir, 2013, p. 43). The educator can get information about the position of individual children in the group, behaviour and relationships between children in different ways. The most common method is observation. However, there are also methods that are more time-efficient, including sociometric testing. With it, we determine the social acceptance of the individual in the group, the connection between the members of the group and the connection of the entire group (Pečjak & Košir, 2008; Peklaj & Pečjak, 2020).

A person that is popular is the one that a lot of people like. A child in a group is popular when a large number of his peers like him or her, which means that they have a large number of positive sociometric choices (Košir, 2013). Popular children, more likely than rejected children, suggest activities that are focused on others, such as behaviours that seek information and attention, and provide more effective solutions to manage conflict and to initiate and maintain interactions (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006). Compared to other children, they are more sociable, cooperative, friendly, solve social problems more successfully, support their peers and negotiate effectively with them. Such children are more likely to achieve better academic results and more often approach a group that is already playing and ask whether they are allowed to join (Pečjak & Košir, 2008). Children who are rated by their peers as more positive understand better that another child may have different beliefs than they do. Children who are perceived as more negative by their peers are less likely to understand that another child may have different positive emotions towards events than they do (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006). Popular children who are particularly adept at organizing

their emotions may be more popular with their peers because they facilitate social interaction (Smith, 2001). During interaction with peers, children experience emotions and learn conflict resolution skills. Interactions with peers teach children important social and cognitive skills that cannot be learned in relationships with adults. Children who spend more time interacting with their peers consequently have higher social abilities (Song Hee, 1994).

Socially accepted individuals can be defined by different criteria of popularity, which affect their social acceptance (Košir & Pečjak, 2004).

The age of the child has a major impact on social acceptance. Between the ages of seven and nine, there is a developmental shift in children. This means that younger children create an impression of an individual based on more global, concrete perceptions, whereas children, according to this developmental milestone, create impressions about the individual more on the basis of different traits or characteristics of the individual's personality (Bovin & Begin, 1989, as cited in Peklaj & Pečjak, 2020, p. 227).

The sociometric position of the popular children in the group is most often conditioned by their prosocial behaviour. This means that these students are willing to help their peers, respect the rules and authority of the peer group, and engage in positive interactions with their peers to a large extent. (Peklaj & Pečjak, 2020). Children who better understand that others may have different beliefs about reality are those who, according to their peers, most often behave positively and, according to teachers, most often behave prosocially. These are children who better understand that others have different feelings about certain situations than they do (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006).

Popular children in the group show a lower rate of withdrawal from social interactions and aggression than other children. On the contrary, rejected children in the group show a higher degree of withdrawal from social interactions and aggression. This high level of rudeness and impulsiveness contributes to the fact that these children are not accepted by their peers (Košir & Pečjak, 2007). Those who show greater emotional knowledge and are able to regulate their emotions and are less violent in their responses to situations involving interpersonal conflict and distress have higher scores of social preferences and higher average ratings of liking (Smith, 2001). Popular children or children who tend to prosocial behaviours are not only more likely to provide more effective solutions to social interaction and conflict, but may generally be more sensitive to the mental states of others. Children who better recognize the feelings, intentions and thoughts of their peers are also better at responding appropriately

in social interactions, thus gaining the affection of their peers. This is especially true for children in kindergarten (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006).

Emotional competence (e.g. understanding emotions, recognizing emotional signs, expressing appropriate emotions) plays an important role in a child's social competence, especially with peers. This means that the emotional tone of the child's behaviours is important in predicting the sociometric acceptance of the child in the group. Preschool children who are more adept at understanding emotional situations (especially situations of anger and fear) seem to be more liked by their peers (Smith, 2001). In kindergarten, children also prefer to socialize with children who have high cognitive abilities (Song Hee, 1994). In addition to intelligence, the personality characteristics of the child and the social environment, the popularity of children can also be influenced by physical attractiveness, which can also make children more popular and more accepted by peers (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006).

PURPOSE

The purpose of the research was to determine which children are popular in the group and what are the factors that influence the popularity or social acceptance of these children in the group.

METHODOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH

A descriptive and causal nonexperimental research **method** was used in the research.

The research was conducted in one kindergarten in the Štajerska region in Slovenia, in a group of preschool children aged 5-6. The study included a whole group of children, namely 20 children. The sample consisted of 13 boys and 7 girls. The children come from urban and suburban environments.

We chose a sociometric survey for data collection because it is one of the methods that measures peer relationships and social acceptance of an individual in a group. It defines the sociometric position of the child in the group. Thus, using the calculation of sociometric status, we calculate whether a child is popular or rejected in the group (Pečjak & Košir, 2008). The sociometric survey was designed and adapted to this research and it was conducted in December 2023. We asked ourselves a basic research question, namely which children are more and which less popular and why.

We called each child from the playroom and asked them which three children in the group they prefer to socialize/play with and why they chose these three children. For each child, we got information on which three people the child prefers to socialize with and the reasons why they socialize with them. Thus, based on the first data (3 people with whom the child prefers to socialize), we calculated the sociometric status of an individual ($SS < 0.90$ - *low sociometric status*; $0.90 \leq SS \leq 1.19$ - *medium sociometric status*; $1.19 < SS$ - *high sociometric status*). In the end, we checked the arguments of other children (why they socialize with them) for children with high sociometric status (popular children) and based on this, we wrote down the findings of why these children were popular in the group.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The children had no problems answering which three children in the group they prefer to socialize with. They all counted three children. Some wanted to list more, but we told them again that they only had to choose three of them. Only one boy, who has only been in the group for two weeks, had difficulties in listing, as he had not attended kindergarten before. This boy listed two children who he said knew each other from before. Then he fell silent. We asked the boy if he had been hanging out with anyone else in kindergarten. After a long consideration, he said that he had been hanging out with someone else, but did not know their name. The boy and I went to the playroom, where he showed me who the child was. We told the boy his name and wrote it down.

When asked why they like to play with selected children, some children answered very sovereignly and did not have problems with the answer. For some, however, the answers were a little harder to come by. Most often, they answered that they liked to hang out with someone because they were friends. Therefore, we encouraged them with sub-questions: Why is he your friend? What is it like when you play together? Most often, children answered these sub-questions with the word: "friendly". Some, however, said an additional feature with additional sub-questions. In obtaining answers, however, we had the most problems with one of the girls who is foreign-speaking. We asked the girl the question more slowly and clearly. She did not have a problem with listing, she immediately listed the children. She did not immediately understand why she chose these three children. After the question, she still listed the children. We asked the girl additional sub-questions and after a while she understood what we expected from her. Since the girl did not speak Slovenian well, we had to ask

her a lot of sub-questions and repeat her answers in order to make sure that we understood her correctly.

Calculation of sociometric status

Otrok		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	SSn
Deček 1	1		1										3		2							1,05
Deček 2	2	3								1	2											1,05
Deček 3	3				2				3		1											0,84
Deček 4	4					2			1				3									1,21
Deček 5	5				2				1				3									1,05
Deček 6	6	1	3										2									0,89
Deček 7	7								1				2		3							0,89
Deček 8	8				1	3							2									1,10
Deček 9	9		1		3						2											0,95
Deček 10	10				1	2					3											1,05
Deček 11	11	2	3								1											0,84
Deček 12	12	1			2				3													1,16
Deček 13	13					3	2								1							0,89
Deklica 1	14															2		1		3		1,21
Deklica 2	15														3		1			2		1,00
Deklica 3	16														2	1				3		1,00
Deklica 4	17														1		2			3		0,95
Deklica 5	18				2	3														1		0,89
Deklica 6	19															1		2	3			1,10
Deklica 7	20														3	1		2				0,84
Vsota izbir		4	4	0	7	4	1	1	5	2	4	0	6	1	7	3	3	2	1	5	0	

Based on the calculation of sociometric status, we found that there are seven children with low sociometric status in the ward, eleven children with medium sociometric status and two children with high sociometric status, namely one boy and one girl.

DISCUSSION

The boy with high sociometric status is *Boy 4*. When asked why they like to hang out with him, three of the children replied that he likes to play the same games as them. This confirms the claim that popular children are more likely to suggest activities that are aimed at others. It could be that the boy likes to play games with the three children who like him, or it could be that he adapts and prefers to choose games that others like.

In addition to other characteristics of this boy, one of the children pointed out that this boy invites him to play and responds positively if he invites him to play. This property has been mentioned several times in previous research.

Other authors have argued that popular children are more likely to approach a group playing and ask them if they are allowed to join the game.

Two of the children stated that they like to hang out with him because he is cheerful, one of them added that he is in a good mood. The fact that the children highlighted this as a positive feature means that the boy responds to it with joy and goodwill when appropriate situations arise. This expresses the child's emotional competence, as it adequately expresses its emotions.

One of the children also answered that he likes to hang out with him because he is good looking. This expresses the boy's physical attractiveness, which, among others, is also a trait that contributes to the popularity of the child in the group.

One of the reasons for socializing with him was that this boy was strong.

One of the children, in addition to other reasons for socializing with him, also pointed out his kindness, saying that this quality makes this boy a good friend. The fact that he is very kind was also pointed out by the foreign-speaking girl, who hangs out with him because of this feature. We can also associate with this trait that the boy probably understands better that the child with whom he interacts may have different beliefs than he does. Through this trait, others can consider him friendly.

One of the children pointed out the day of their first meeting as the reason for socializing with him. He said that when he first arrived at the kindergarten, this boy came to him, hugged him and greeted him. This tells us about the boy that he is supportive of the other children. With this act, the boy showed prosocial behaviour, which is characteristic of popular children, as he is ready to help his peers. With this behaviour, the boy also showed great sensitivity to the mental states of others, because he reacted to the friend's distress with a hug. He also showed the empathy that characterizes popular children.

The girl with high sociometric status is *Girl 1*. Two of the children said they hang out with her because she was good looking. One of them added that she was dressed nicely because another child said it next to him. The beauty of the girl and the clothes she wears are included in her physical attractiveness. The popularity of the girl in this area proved to be more common among her peers than was for the boy, as the boy received only one answer which indicated that they were hanging out with him for beauty, and the girl got two, one of which also pointed out that she was well dressed.

Six of the seven children stated that the girl was friendly while one stated that he was in love with her and did not want to add explanations. Since almost all the children who chose the girl pointed this out, we can conclude even more that the girl is socially competent, which is reflected in relations with her peers.

This shows that the girl is able to adapt and choose appropriate social behaviour in different situations and play with different children.

One of the children also said that he likes to hang out with this girl because she is cheerful. As in the case of the boy, it shows the emotional competence of the girl, as she adequately expresses emotions in appropriate situations; consequently, her peers assess this as positive.

One of the children said that the girl loved all children, which further confirms the fact that she is popular in the group. With this trait, the girl shows a low level of withdrawal from social interaction, which helps her to be accepted by her peers and thus gain a lot of experience based on social interactions. These experiences contribute to her ability to understand others and thus develop empathy.

This same child who said that the girl loved all children added that the girl liked to play with him and therefore he liked to socialize with her. This emphasizes even more all the listed traits that make a girl in a group popular.

In the research, almost all of the listed characteristics that affect the popularity of the child in the group appeared. All the criteria of popularity have appeared. However, this was different for both popular children. In the case of the girl, children highlighted her physical attractiveness more often. It has been proven that physical attraction, in addition to other child characteristics, also influences the acceptance of children in the group by their parents (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006). In the case of the boy, the children only pointed this out once.

The answer that she was kind appeared several times with the girl, and this answer appeared in almost all the children. This is related to the fact that one of the children also stated that this girl loved all children. This can be linked to the girl showing a lower rate of withdrawal from social interactions and aggression. If she did not have this trait and showed a high level of rudeness and impulsiveness, it is likely that most children would not describe her as kind and consequently would not choose her, which would mean that she would be less popular (Košir & Pečjak, 2007).

While the answers regarding the boy included traits that highlighted empathy and it did not appear in the answers for the girl, this does not mean that it was not present, but probably no one mentioned it. The fact that children emphasized that the boy was empathetic can be linked to his emotional competence, which means that he can properly understand, recognize and express emotions. This plays an important role in the child's social competence, which contributes to

the boy's popularity in the group (Smith, 2001). The answers for the boy also included the answer that the boy was strong, which did not occur in the girl.

Some characteristics show very different traits that help to make an individual in a group popular. In this group, these are activities that are focused on others, emotional competence, empathy, physical attractiveness, and prosocial behaviour. These answers are different for different children. However, we could also conclude that the characteristics of popular children also differ according to gender, which was well evident in this case, as both a boy and a girl were popular in this group.

CONCLUSION

We found that many authors emphasize the importance of social relationships that children encounter in kindergarten or school when interacting with their peers. Thus, children learn social behaviour in different contexts, they learn competition, cooperation and friendship (Košir, 2013). Every child also has a need for belonging, which the authors place among the most fundamental human needs.

In the study, we found that these two key features of the need for belonging can only be met with appropriate social competence and social acceptance in the group. Social competence is the ability of an individual to organize his or her behaviour in a social situation in such a way as to attract positive responses and deter as many negative responses as possible from others in social interaction (Bierman, 2004, as cited in Košir, 2013, p. 40). Social acceptance of a child in a group can also be called the sociometric position of the child in the group. This can be measured by a sociometric test. The authors emphasize that this allows us to determine whether the child is rejected or popular in the group. This depends on the sociometric choices that the child in the group obtains (Pečjak & Košir, 2008).

Popular children in the group show a lower rate of withdrawal from social interactions and aggression than other children (Košir & Pečjak, 2007). Such children are also more sensitive to the mental state of others (Diesendruck & Ben-Eliyahu, 2006) and more emotionally competent which means understanding emotions, recognizing emotional signs, expressing appropriate emotions (Smith, 2001). In kindergarten, children also prefer to socialize with children who have high cognitive abilities (Song Hee, 1994) and with physically attractive children (Diesendruck and Ben-Eliyahu, 2006).

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ODNOSI MEĐU VRŠNJACIMA I POPULARNOST U SKUPINI PREDŠKOLSKE DJECE

Vrste odnosa među vršnjacima ključne su za socijalni razvoj predškolske djece jer im omogućuju učenje socijalnih vještina. Popularnost u skupini, mjerena sociometrijskim statusom, odražava socijalnu prihvaćenost djeteta među vršnjacima. Popularna djeca često su prosocijalna, prijateljski nastrojena, fleksibilna i pokazuju nižu razinu povlačenja i agresije. Istraživanje provedeno na uzorku od 20 predškolske djece, s ciljem utvrđivanja koja su djeca popularna u skupini i koji čimbenici utječu na popularnost ili socijalnu prihvaćenost te djece u skupini, pokazalo je da predškolska djeca popularnost povezuju s karakteristikama poput ljubaznosti, tjelesne privlačnosti, emocionalne kompetencije i socijalne osjetljivosti. Takva djeca su važna za dinamiku skupine jer olakšavaju interakcije i doprinose pozitivnom socijalnom okruženju.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: odnosi, vršnjaci, socijalna prihvaćenost, popularna djeca