

# “My BEST friends, the books”

## Discussing with preschoolers about picture book characters’ social-emotional skills

Preschoolers  
about picture  
book  
characters’

Katerina Dermata

*Department of Communication, Media and Culture,  
Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece*

151

Received 24 January 2019  
Revised 27 April 2019  
Accepted 9 May 2019

### Abstract

**Purpose** – The contribution of children’s literature to the social-emotional development of children has been recognized across disciplines. Especially picture books, as multimodal texts which communicate with young readers with two codes simultaneously, can be a potential means of fostering empathy in young children (Nikolajeva, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to introduce the program “My BEST friends, the books,” an empirical project (in progress) based on a Book-Based Emotional Social Thinking approach.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This approach is inspired by the Critical Thinking and Book Time approach (Roche, 2010, 2015). The program, based on the scales and competences of the Bar-On (2006) model of social-emotional intelligence, explores the way young readers interpret social-emotional skills when discussing about literary characters in children’s picture books. This paper examines the philosophy, the main characteristics and structure of the program, and presents the first results of the pilot phase.

**Findings** – The initial findings indicate that the design and implementation of such a program is a complex procedure that requires from the researcher to take into consideration various aspects that concern both the material and the participants, but also to step back and let children express their thoughts freely.

**Originality/value** – Moreover, such discussions allow for understanding how preschoolers interpret the social-emotional skills of literary characters in a critical manner.

**Keywords** Critical Thinking, Picture books, Greek children’s literature, Social-emotional intelligence

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

During the last decades, education focuses in a humanistic approach emphasizing the social-emotional development of children. The necessity of such an approach in early childhood education is worldwide recognized. According to Bagdi and Vacca (2005) “the experiences that children have from zero to five years old set either a strong or a fragile platform for what happens next in childhood and beyond.” When social-emotional skills are not practiced in the early years, the gaps in students’ social-emotional development become evident (Poulou, 2015). In addition, teachers integrate into their teaching practices a great variety of interesting ways to attract children’s attention help them express themselves and stimulate them to think about themselves and the world. According to Sipe (2008) stories maybe one of the most powerful ways we have of imposing order and meaning to our world. This paper introduces the program “My BEST friends, the books,” an empirical project (in progress) based on a Book-Based Emotional Social Thinking (BEST) approach, aiming to place children in the center of educational action and explore their ideas about literary characters’ social-emotional traits and competencies.



## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Social-emotional profile (SEP) programs in preschool education

According to the Collaborative for Academic Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL Guide, 2013) Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as “the process through which children acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” Many SEL educational programs for preschool education are included in “2013 CASEL GUIDE – Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs, (<https://casel.org/preschool-and-elementary-edition-casel-guide/>)” such as AI’s Pals, High-Scope educational approach for preschoolers, I Can Solve Problem, PATHS, etc. All the programs focus in training preschoolers in social-emotional skills and competencies, such as recognition of feelings, problem-solving, positive interpersonal relationships, etc. Special mention should be made to the “4Rs” (reading, writing, respect and resolution) program, as it actively involves literature. The “4Rs ([www.morningsidecenter.org/4rs-program/](http://www.morningsidecenter.org/4rs-program/))” program is based on a read aloud activity of children’s books, carefully selected for their high literary quality and relevance to the subject and continues with writing, discussing and practicing skills, aiming in encouraging care, responsible behavior, understanding emotions.

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning ([http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training\\_preschool.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training_preschool.html)) is a five-year project designed to strengthen the capacity of Head Start and child care programs to improve the social and emotional outcomes of young children (<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>). In the practical strategies a Book List of children’s literature books related to several social-emotional subjects, Scripted Stories for Social Situations and Book Nook – activities related to children’s books – are proposed to help children think about social interactions, situations, expectations and crucial social cues. The Pyramid Model for Promoting Young Children’s Social-Emotional Competence ([www.pyramidmodel.org](http://www.pyramidmodel.org)) is also a framework for organizing research-based practices for use in early childhood classrooms to promote social-emotional competence and prevent and address children’s challenging behavior. All the programs use supplemental materials such as books, puppets and posters to assist children when labeling their own or their classmates’ emotions.

In Greece, the best known programs are: *The Trying Fish – A Program of Emotional Education for Early Childhood Education* (Thanou, 2009) which was developed as part of a doctoral thesis, aiming to enhancing self-acting and shaping an optimistic interpretation style, and *Steps for Life – A Personal and Social Skill Program for the Kindergarten* (Kourmoussi, 2013), a manual of activities and games for adapting to the school environment, recognizing emotions, assessing situations and solving problems.

### 2.2 Early childhood education, children’s literature and social-emotional intelligence in Greek curriculum

The Greek curriculum for early childhood education (Pedagogical Institute, 2011) recognizes the importance of early childhood education as a period in which the foundations for the development of children and their subsequent attitude toward learning are established. Among its basic principles are personal empowerment and the development of a healthy personality. Enhancing personal and social development allows children to:

- recognize themselves as distinct persons with special abilities and value;
- operate with relative autonomy;
- accept their emotions and control their expression;
- encounter difficulties and resolve conflicts, respect others as well as the group rules;

- understand the feelings and opinions of other people; and
- communicate and collaborate with others.

The content of personal and social development in the curriculum for early childhood education concerns identity, self-regulation, personal empowerment and development of social skills and the social interaction in the school environment. According to the curriculum when children finish early childhood education should be able to:

- identify with their personal characteristics, opinions and choices;
- gain positive self-esteem (sense of value and effectiveness);
- recognize, express and manage their feelings;
- read stories and report events that have caused similar feelings to themselves;
- withstand deprivation/failure;
- manage their relationship with their family;
- be familiar with life events;
- resolve conflicts;
- become empathetic; and
- accept diversity.

The above objectives can be achieved during everyday school life through the appropriate resources and activities. Thus, children are invited to express their feelings with their own words or drawings based on stories, works of art, etc. Through literature, children are encouraged to express pleasant, unpleasant and contradictory feelings, to discuss stories about the particular needs of some people, to suggest ways to resolve conflicts in incomplete stories, to guess how the heroes of a story feel, to interpret emotions from facial expressions in pictures or real persons and express their thoughts on the feelings and thoughts of the hero. Therefore, the Greek curriculum for early childhood education pays a great attention to the importance of children's literature, and especially picture books, as a means of fostering children's social-emotional development.

### 2.3 A "Book-Based Emotional Social Thinking" (BEST)

The philosophy of the program "My BEST friends, the books" is based on the "Critical Thinking and Book Talk" approach (CT & BT) (Roche, 2010, 2015). Roche exploits the choice of picture books as a stimulus for thought and discussion, considering children as active participants in building their own personal learning and development. Critical Thinking involves thinking about one's self, making sense and meaning of one's own life and the world (Roche, 2015, p. 5). Such an approach requires effort, time, active involvement of the participants and discovery. Moreover, it requires from adults to consider children as real people and talk with and to them (p. 19). In an analogy with CT & BT, we named our approach BEST because we use picture books as a stimulus for discussing with children about social-emotional skills and competences of the literary characters. The basis of the approach consists of two crucial elements: high quality picture books which attract children's attention and interest; and an open, dialogic teaching environment empowering students to freely express their thoughts and ideas on social-emotional issues.

The primary aim of the program "My BEST friends, the books" is to explore how preschool children understand and interpret the representation of social-emotional skills presented in picture books. Nikolajeva (2012) examines how emotions can be transferred to young readers through the interaction between words and images in picture books. Among other things, she uses the concept of *emotion ekphrasis* to describe the verbal, visual or

multimodal means used to represent a feeling. She emphasizes on issues of theory of mind and empathy and examines how understanding other people in the real world can be enhanced by multimodal texts. However, she states that her approach is theoretical, has no empirical evidence, and may inspire scholars who work with books and children to test the ideas in practice. Nikolajeva (2013) also notes that picture books, although widely used to support literacy or visual literacy skills, are largely neglected in their contribution to emotional development of children. Nikolajeva concludes that if we read fiction because we want to know more about ourselves and other people, picture books are an excellent first step toward emotional intelligence.

### **3. The program “My BEST friends, the books”**

#### *3.1 Structure and characteristics of the program*

The program “My BEST friends, the books” is based on the principles of SEL, it is in line with the developmental level of the age group in which the intervention takes place, as well as with the Greek curriculum for the early childhood education (Pedagogical Institute, 2011). The implementation of the program in preschoolers was approved by the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and the Institute of Educational Policy of Greece (November 2018). The program is structured in six modules, which follow the scales of the Bar-On (2006) SEL model. These modules are:

- (1) intrapersonal skills: self-awareness and self-expression (self-regard, emotional self-awareness, assertiveness and independence);
- (2) interpersonal skills: social awareness and interpersonal relationship (empathy, social responsibility and interpersonal relationship);
- (3) stress management: emotional management and regulation (stress tolerance and impulse control);
- (4) adaptability: change management (reality-testing, flexibility and problem-solving);
- (5) general mood: self-motivation (optimism and happiness); and
- (6) completion of the program.

Each module consists of three activities, that last approx. 30–35 min in total. During each module a different picture book is read. All three activities of each module are completed in one session. These activities are:

- (1) An introductory/exploratory activity: the main goal is to explore what preschoolers think about the concept which will be examined in each section. The introductory/exploratory activity is carried out by the class teacher. The researcher participates as an observer. The estimated duration of this activity is 5–6 min. One open question on the concept of each module is the base of the discussion, such as “What do you think that the phrase I trust myself mean?”
- (2) The main reading activity and discussion: reading and discussing about books is the main activity of each module. Though the duration of the activity can be quite flexible, depending on the team’s attention, usually it lasts up to 15–20 min. This activity is implemented by the researcher in collaboration with the class teacher. During the reading the researcher asks open questions about children’s opinion on the feelings of the characters and especially about the elements of visual and verbal text which reveal to them the SEP of the characters.
- (3) A developmental activity: the final activity of each module is inspired by the plot and the characters of the book and it is carried out by the class teacher.

The researcher participates as an observer. The estimated duration of this activity is 7–10 min. Through this activity children are invited to express their opinion, feelings and thoughts on the story, participate in a role-play activity or express themselves through an “If I were the hero [...]” activity.

The whole program (modules, activities, goals, etc.) is described in detail at the Appendix, at the end of this paper.

### 3.2 *The program’s materials*

The program’s materials consist of picture books, puppets and other accessories. We chose to use five picture books. All of them have been awarded in the major literary competitions in Greece[1] during the last three year. According to Lewis (2001, p. 2), using the award as criterion does not fully guarantee their quality, but “it is a suggestion that these books belong among the best of their kind and are to some extent distinguished for their quality.” Also, the selection of awarded books published in different years and awarded by different committees “is a checklist that ensures that these books are not the personal choice of a closed group of critics.” From the corpus of the awarded children books, our selection for the program was based on a series of criteria, such as books created by different authors, illustrators and publishers, the book’s theme, the characteristics of the program’s target age group, the narrative techniques and the quality of verbal and visual texts. The books have been awarded in different categories, such as Best Picture Book, Non-fiction Book for children, Short Stories for children. The selected books are:

- Angelou, A. and Sini, E. (2014), *How to Make an Elephant Dance*, Illustrated by Sophia Touliatou, Papadopoulos Publishing, Athens[2].
- Iliopoulos, V. (2015), *Does the Real Dinosaur Feel Afraid?* Illustrated by Konstantina Kapanidou, Patakis Publishers, Athens[3].
- Matathia Kovo, K. (2017), *The Yellow Hats*, Illustrated by Kelly Matathia Kovo, Patakis Publishers, Athens[4].
- Papaioannou, T. (2014), *Upside Down*, Illustrated by Iris Samartzi, Ikaros Publishing, Athens[5].
- Pipini, A. (2016), *Melak, all Alone*, Illustrated by Achilles Razis, Kaleidoscope Publications, Athens[6].

The accompanying materials (puppets and accessories) were created by the researcher and were mostly used during the developmental activities, to stimulate children to talk about the characters’ emotions and thoughts.

### 3.3 *Discussing with preschoolers about picture books’ characters – the pilot study*

We applied a qualitative method, since our research questions were related to the qualitative characteristics of preschoolers’ thinking about the interpretation and use of social-emotional skills. Thus, the methodology adopted was a combination of “participatory observation” along with “group photo elicitation,” where photos have been replaced by picture books. As data-collecting tools we used the children’s recorded talk during the activities, their drawings created during post-reading activities, as well as the researcher’s notes.

The pilot study was implemented in an Early Childhood Education Centre in Athens, Greece (November 2018). Eight children (four boys and four girls) aged four to eight years participated in the reading activities. The pilot study aimed to help the researcher familiarize herself with the research plan, identify potential difficulties regarding the

formulation of the questions and detect potential procedural deficiencies. The participants were participating to school activities for at least two years and to organized reading activities implemented by the school[7]. For the pilot study, we chose to apply the second module: interpersonal skills (interpersonal relationships, empathy and social responsibility). The session lasted 30 min and included all three designed activities.

*Introductory/exploratory activity: "My own and Your point of view!"*

- Objective: to detect children's perceptions of the concept of "point of view."

During this activity, children reacted either arguing or laughing. A characteristic dialogue was the following:

- (1) Two children stand back to back. They describe in turn what they see:
  - Child 1: I see a window and the yard.
  - Child 2: I see the door of the classroom.
  - Child 1: No, this is the window. I can see outside.
  - Child 2: I can see outside the classroom too. But it is not the yard. It is the corridor.
- (2) They turn 180° around. They describe again:
  - Child 1: Now I see the door of the classroom (laughing).
  - Child 2: I see the yard through the window.
  - Child 1: But I was seeing a window too when I was like that – the child turns around at the previous position, next to the other child to explain. We have many windows (laughing).
  - Child 2: Go back to your place, this is my place! (Rather annoyed).

After the four couples completed the activity, we discussed about their experience, based on four questions posed by the researcher:

- (1) "Why we see different things even when we are at the same room?"
  - Because we are different.
  - Because we have other eyes.
  - Because I know better.
  - Because the room is too big.
  - Because I see what I want, and the others see what they want.
- (2) "Why did you change the way you see things?"
  - We turned around.
  - I got his place and he got mine.
  - We saw the same things then.
- (3) "Who was right, then?"
  - I was right because I saw it.
  - I was right because, you see, this is the window.
  - I was right because the other child was like that (he takes the position his couple previously had).

(4) What do you think “Put myself in your place[8]” mean?

- I take your chair.
- We change places. I take your chair and you take mine.

Even though preschoolers experienced the change of their position in space and they mentioned it in their answers, it was too difficult to accept that the other participants were also right when expressing a point of view different from theirs. This is in agreement with the self-centeredness way of thing of preschoolers, according to Piaget’s theory, the tendency to see the world from one’s own point of view unable to recognize its different perspective or the different thinking of the others. The metaphorical meaning of the expression “I put myself in your place” – which for adults is usually connected with the skill of empathy – was interpreted by preschoolers with its literary meaning related to the change in space. Thus, the researcher had to change the initial formulation.

*Book reading activity.*

- Objective: to engage preschoolers in dialogue expressing their point of view and justify it with arguments, looking at the picture book.
- The picture book: Iliopoulos, V. (2015), *Does the Real Dinosaur feel Afraid?* Illustrated by Konstantina Kapanidou, Patakis Publishers, Athens.

We read the story “*Does the Real Dinosaur feel afraid?*” and discussed about the hero’s relations to his peers. The discussion aimed to explore questions such as:

(1) “Does the hero have friends at the beginning/end of the story?”

- No, he has no friends. They tease him (beginning).
- He is alone. Nobody plays with him (beginning).
- They don’t want to play football with him. They are not his friends (beginning).
- Now they are all friends. They dance all together (end).
- Yes, they play together now (end).
- He has a friend, the Real Dinosaur. Not the other kids (end).

(2) “How does the hero feel at the beginning/end of the story?”

The answers of the participants were clearly divided between the two basic emotions fear and anger:

- He is feeling sad because he does not have friends (beginning).
- He does not feel welcomed because they tease him (beginning).
- They laugh at him. He wants to cry (beginning).
- Now he can be happy, that he has a friend (end).
- He does not cry anymore because they play with him now. And he has the Real Dinosaur (end).

(3) “What can we understand about Paris’ relationship to his friends through words and images?”

- They are not his friends. They are pointing at him. They tease him (The child shows the giant fingers pointing at the protagonist).
- He is not happy. He holds his head and his mouth is like that (The child shows the sad mouth in the picture).

- Look at his eyes. He is like the Dinosaur. When they see him they will go away (The child shows a double spread that depicts Paris full face, in a very close shot, front and direct angle to the reader, staring at the bullies) (Dermata *et al.*, XXX).
- They are holding hands. Now they are all friends.

Children's reactions reveal that non-verbal communication as depicted in picture books is the first thing they notice when they discuss about the emotional state of the characters. As Dermata and Skarpelos (2017) note, the recognition of facial expressions and body language of the depicted heroes was the predominant element for the interpretation of visual modality.

*Developmental activity/expansion activity: Does the Real Dinosaur Feel Afraid?* Taking as a starting point the final sentence of the book "Did you, the Real Dinosaur, feel afraid?" each child animated the dinosaur doll and expressed his/her own thoughts and feelings about the story. The main answers were:

- I was not afraid. I was angry that nobody played with Paris.
- I was sad. Nobody would play with Paris and me. I was thinking to leave school.
- If they didn't play with me, I would have eaten them. I would be too angry.
- I was afraid. I had no friends to play with.

#### 4. Discussion and limitations of the study

The aim of the paper was to introduce "My BEST friends, the books" program, a BEST approach, aiming to explore how preschoolers perceive and interpret social-emotional skills. When designing the program the researcher had to solve two issues. The first had to do with the choice of the books. In the Greek market too many picture books are available. The criterion of the awarded books assisted in reducing the corpus studied. Then, the choice was made based upon the criterion of which book could better present the skills studied in every module. This choice does not imply that each book is related only to the specific social-emotional skill that it is chosen for, but rather that this skill is central to the story and can be used as a stimulus when discussing with preschoolers. Moreover, we claim that "in picture books, with the limited verbal text, the development of the characters may not be complete [...] but there are always some traits revealed to the reader through both words and images, and their synergy. Because of the picture book's multimodal character, the level of interpretation plays a central role in this approach" (Dermata *et al.*, XXX).

The second issue was related to the restrictions and limitations of the context where the program is going to be implemented. The initial educational program included a wider range of activities, structured in 14 modules. This extended program offered the opportunity to devote more time to each one of the concepts and to widely develop the activities of each reading in two meetings. The limited time given to the researcher – not for the pilot phase but for the main research – forced the researcher to design a shorter educational program and focus in a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach.

As this was a pilot study, the researcher had the opportunity to experience the first contact with the preschoolers on the basis of the BEST. The pilot implementation revealed that when designing a set of activities based on discussion, the formulation of questions addressed to children-as-participants is crucial. A challenge is to step back and let the readers express themselves in a free and open manner.

We also understood that, when talking about picture books, children are willing to offer explanations based on verbal and visual elements but they also rely on personal experiences. Thus, a systematic content analysis of the picture books texts in combination



with interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2009) of the words used by children would provide a deeper understanding of how preschoolers perceive and interpret social-emotional skills. If reading offers the readers a way to think about themselves, such an empirical research places young readers to the center of scientific interest as active participants, whose opinions, thoughts and ideas are valuable. As the program is – at this time – under full implementation, we believe that in the near future we will be able to share more from our empirical research with children and picture books in the field of this social-emotional literacy perspective.

## Notes

1. The main organizations that have established awards for children's literature in Greece are: the Greek Department of IBBY – The Circle of the Greek Children's Book, the Ministry of Culture and Sports and "Anagnostis," an e-journal magazine for the book and the arts.
2. Ministry of Culture Award for Children's Illustrated Book 2015.
3. "Vito Aggelopoulou" Award for children's information texts, by the Greek Section IBBY 2016.
4. Best Picture Book awarded by the Greek Section of IBBY 2018.
5. "Penelope Maximou" Award for SFS for children, awarded by the Greek Section of IBBY 2015.
6. Best Picture Book Award, awarded by the e-magazine "O Anagnostis" 2017 and the Ministry of Culture Award for Children's Picture Book 2017.
7. The children have been participating in the "Feed me books', Mr. Bookmouse said!" a reading promotion project implemented by the researcher in Early Childhood Education Centre of Athens.
8. "I put myself in your place" in Greek is the equivalent of "I put myself in your shoes."

## References

- Bagdi, A. and Vacca, J. (2005), "Supporting early childhood social-emotional well being: the building blocks for early learning and school success", *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 145-150.
- Bar-On (2006), "The Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence (ESI)", *Psicothema*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 13-25.
- CASEL Guide (2013), *Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs-Preschool and Elementary School Edition*, available at: [casel.org/preschool-and-elementary-edition-casel-guide](http://casel.org/preschool-and-elementary-edition-casel-guide)
- Dermata, K. and Skarpelos, Y. (2017), "What the words do not say: SFS for children under the light of social semiotic theory – case study: 'Horis sosivio'", *Journal of Visual Literacy*, Vol. 36 Nos 3-4, pp. 202-221, available at: [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1051144X.2017.1399761](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1051144X.2017.1399761)
- Dermata, K., Iordanoglou, D., Yannicopoulou, A. and Skarpelos, Y. (XXX), "Emotional intelligence and picture books: portraying the social-emotional profile (SEP) of the literary characters in Greek contemporary children's literature" (unpublished article).
- Kourmoussi, N. (2013), *Steps for Life: A Personal and Social Skill Program for the Kindergarten*, Sokolis Publishers, Athens (in Greek).
- Lewis, D. (2001), *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*, Routledge, London and New York, NY.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2012), "Reading other people's minds through word and image", *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 43 No. 3, pp. 273-291.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2013), "Picturebooks and emotional literacy", *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 67 No. 4, pp. 249-254.
- Pedagogical Institute (2011), *Curriculum for Early Childhood Education – Part 1 & 2*, Pedagogical Institute, Athens, available at: <http://ebooks.edu.gr>
- Poulou, M.S. (2015), "Emotional and behavioral difficulties in preschool", *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 225-236.

- Roche, M. (2010), “Critical Thinking and Book Talk’: using picture books to promote discussion and critical thinking in the classroom”, Reading News (Conference edition), Reading Association of Ireland, Dublin.
- Roche, M. (2015), *Developing Children’s Critical Thinking through Picturebooks*, Routledge, London and New York, NY.
- Sipe, L. (2008), *Storytime: Young Reader’s Literary Understanding in the Classroom*, Springer, New York, NY and London.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009), *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*, Sage, London.
- Thanou, A. (2009), *The Trying Fish: A Program of Emotional Education for Early Childhood Education*, Patakis Publishers, Athens (in Greek).

### Further reading

- Angelou, A. and Sini, E. (2014), *How to Make an Elephant Dance*, Illustrated by Sophia Touliatou, Papadopoulos Publishing, Athens.
- Iliopoulos, V. (2015), *Does the Real Dinosaur Feel Afraid?*, Illustrated by Konstantina Kapanidou, Patakis Publishers, Athens.
- Matathia Kovo, K. (2017), *The Yellow Hats*, Illustrated by Kelly Matathia Kovo, Patakis Publishers, Athens.
- Papaioannou, T. (2014), *Upside Down*, Illustrated by Iris Samartzi, Ikaros Publishing, Athens.
- Pipini, A. (2016), *Melak, all Alone*, Illustrated by Achilles Razis, Kaleidoscope Publications, Athens.

### Appendix

In this appendix the full structure of the program – division into modules – is described.

#### First module: intrapersonal skills (emotional self-awareness, assertiveness and self-regard)

*Exploratory/introductory activity: “I trust myself”*

- Objective: to detect children’s perceptions about the concept of trust, and, in particular, self-confidence.

Through group discussion, the researcher notes what children believe about assertiveness and self-regard, and what they understand as the meaning of the phrase “I trust myself.”

#### *Book reading activity*

- Objective: to engage preschoolers in dialogue expressing their point of view and justify it with arguments.
- The picture book: Angelou, A. and Sini, E. (2014), *How to make an Elephant Dance*, Illustrated by Sophia Touliatou, Papadopoulos Publishing, Athens.

The discussion aims to explore questions such as:

- “Does the hero have confidence in himself and his forces at the beginning, during/at the end of history?”
- “Does the hero claim for himself what he wants at the beginning/during/at the end of the story?”
- “How is the hero’s confidence in himself revealed through words and pictures?”

*Development activity/expansion activity: "My strong points!"*

- Objective: to have the children think and talk about their own strengths their own strengths (what they do, they like to do). Boosting self-esteem and efficiency.

On a piece of paper, each participant draws his/her own strengths and, if he/she desires so, can present it to the group.

### **Second module: interpersonal skills (interpersonal relationships, empathy and social responsibility)**

*Introductory/exploratory activity: "Mine-Your point of view!"*

- Objective: to detect children's perceptions of the "point of view."

The children stand in pairs, back to back. When instructed by the teacher, one child describes what he/she sees. Then the second child of the couple describes what he/she sees. They then rotate 180° so that each participant is in the starting position of his teammate. They describe again what they see from their new position. Then they express their thoughts on what the phrase "My own and your point of view!" may mean.

*Book reading activity*

- Objective: to engage preschoolers in dialogue expressing their point of view and justify it with arguments.
- The picture book: Iliopoulos, V. (2015), *Does the Real Dinosaur feel Afraid?* Illustrated by Konstantina Kapanidou, Patakis Publishers, Athens.

The discussion aims to explore questions such as:

- "Does the hero have friends at the beginning/middle/end of the story?"
- "What does he feel, what does the hero/other characters of the story think?"
- "What can we understand about Paris' relationships with his friends through words and images?"

*Developmental activity/expansion activity: Does the Real Dinosaur Feel Afraid?*

- Objective: to develop participants' empathy skills by taking the place of another through the use of the doll, to recognize and express the feelings of different heroes and to relate them to events of the story and to their own thoughts.

By stimulus the last phrase of the book "Did you, the Real Dinosaur feel afraid?" the group discusses with the dinosaur puppet about his feelings. Each child animates the puppet and expresses his/her own thoughts and feelings about the problem of the hero.

### **Third module: adaptability (problem-solving, checking reality and flexibility)**

*Exploratory/introductory activity: "Problems!"*

- Objective: to explore children's ideas about the meaning of the consent "problem," to recognize their personal characteristics, to exchange information, to realize that one's problem maybe others' problem too, to negotiate solutions and to speculate about the problems and their potential solutions.

The team members share their ideas about the concept of "problem."

*Book reading activity*

- Objective: to express the participants' views about the situations and events the story heroes face, to discuss about their (the heroes') problems and needs.
- The book: Matathia Kovo, K. (2017), *The Yellow Hats. Illustrated by Kelly Matathia Kovo*, Patakis Publishers, Athens.

The discussion aims to explore questions such as:

- “What problem does the hero of history face?”
- “How is the problem revealed to the reader through words and images?”
- “What did the hero do to solve his problem? What would you do if you were in his place?”

*Development activity/expansion activity: “How do we solve this problem?”*

- Objective: to develop dialogue and arguments about potential solutions to a problem (brainstorming) and collaboration through role-playing games.

Hats with heroes' figures are placed in the center of the classroom. The teacher shows the picture where the three heroes draw a plan. The children choose the hat they want, and they argue through a brief improvisation what they would do to address the problem the “Be family” was facing.

#### **Fourth module: managing anxiety (tolerance to stress and impulse control)**

*Exploratory/introductory activity*

- Objective: to detect children's perceptions about the emotional content of words, and in particular of the phrase “all alone.”

Through group discussion, the researcher notes what children believe is the meaning of the phrase/title “all alone.”

*Book reading activity*

- Objective: to guess how the heroes of stories feel when they are in a situation and to express their views on the hero's feelings and thoughts.
- The book: Pipini, A. (2016), *Melak, all Alone*, Illustrated by Achilles Razis, Kaleidoscope Publications, Athens.

The discussion aims to explore questions such as:

- “What does the hero feel at the beginning/during/at the end of story?”
- “How are protagonist's feelings revealed through words and images?”

*Development activity/expansion activity: “Show me how you feel!”*

- Objective: to interpret the feelings of heroes in fairy tales and to express them through facial expressions in images or words, to express and communicate their feelings through elements of non-verbal communication.

The teacher shows some pictures of the book. Participants express with their face and body what they feel about what they see (e.g. Melak is in the middle of a crowd, many people on board, etc.). Then the teacher describes mental pictures (e.g. I am in a park, I look at the sea, I hear a loud sound, etc.) and the group expresses its feelings for the mental pictures only by elements of non-verbal communication.

#### **Fifth module: general mood (happiness and optimism)**

*Exploratory/introductory activity: “Happiness and Optimism”*

- Objective: to detect children's perceptions of the concepts of “Happiness and Optimism.”

Through team discussion, children express their thoughts about the concepts “Happiness” and “Optimism.”

*Book reading activity*

- Objective: to talk about stories, to try to guess how the heroes feel when they are in a fantastic situation and to be concerned about the adversities that may happen in life and how to deal with them.
- The book: Papaioannou, T. (2014), *Upside Down*, Illustrated by Iris Samartzi, Ikaros Publishing, Athens.

The discussion aims to explore questions such as:

- “How does the hero feel in every new situation he faces?”
- “What does he think about the new things he sees around him?”
- “What would you think if you were in his position?”

*Development activity/expansion activity: “What would you do if [...]”*

- Objective: to develop strategic thinking skills, to devise imaginative solutions to hypothetical problems and to confront with optimism the potential difficulties.

Children in pairs represent with the use of dolls the discussion of the two protagonists. They take turns in asking, “What would you do if [...]” and complete the phrase with some obstacle that could be encountered in their attempt to meet each other (e.g. what would you do if a big truck landed on your way?)

**Sixth module: completion of the program**

*Closing activity: “My BEST friends, the books”*

- Objective: to develop critical capacity, express personal opinion and choose on the basis of their personal interests.

In the center of the classroom we place all the accessories, dolls and books used in the program. Every child chooses a hero and draws him on paper. Then he/she presents the hero and describes to the group who he is and which is the characteristic that made the hero stand out from the others.

**Corresponding author**

Katerina Dermata can be contacted at: [katerinakuphd@gmail.com](mailto:katerinakuphd@gmail.com)