

At a crossroads: Choosing the way forward to encourage children's empathy towards others¹

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Abstract

Educators often find themselves at a crossroads where decisions need to be made. It has been argued that schools should employ a more humanitarian approach. As such the purpose of the school should not only be the transmission of knowledge but also the emotional development of the student. This can be achieved when the teacher tries to reinforce the self-esteem of the student and make them recognize their identity; hence, their own self. By learning and recognizing oneself through group activities, they also learn about the other, empathizing with them and understanding that they have more similarities with them than differences. The shaping of the student's identity and self-esteem help him/ her to better appreciate himself/ herself, to accept and, consequently, to accept others (empathy). The purpose of this paper is to outline and present the findings of an action research project seeking to look at whether a humanistic approach can positively impact students understanding of self and empathy towards others. To this end, in late fall of 2018, an intervention project was conducted with primary school pupils of 1st, 3d and 4th grade, in an area near Patras. Our tool was group experiential exercises aiming to enhance students' sense of self-awareness and self-esteem through an exchange of views and self-expositions for students to accept themselves as well as the "other". Our intervention was conducted following Action Research principles. The experiential activities were adapted to the age and level of the students. In this presentation, our findings will be presented and discussed with the hope that these can contribute to the academic discussion related to how we can engender a stronger sense of self and awareness of the other in our students as well as to strengthen their self-esteem. Samples of the student's work and dialogues will be presented.

Keywords

Identity, Self-esteem, Empathy, Action Research

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Introduction

According to Ball (2000), our thoughts create the reality of our life. They are the source and the cause for anything that we create and experience in our life. In every human's mind, a perpetual monologue is conducted. Those thoughts are used to be called «internal debate». During an internal debate, we tend to evaluate and critique the decisions we make, and this constantly turns into a source of negative feelings about ourselves. Negative internal debate about ourselves turns into a source of low self-esteem. We must therefore examine each of our thoughts and evaluate it in order to get to know ourselves and slowly begin to appreciate it as it is. Specifically, our thoughts affect directly our feelings and the way we embrace our lives. Only good thoughts help and influence our feelings and actions in a positive way. In addition to positive thinking, an individual can develop a unified understanding where his mind and emotions work together to achieve his goals (Cleghorn, 1998). Researchers argue that self-esteem is not divided into levels. When you are satisfied with yourself regarding one aspect in your life, this can affect other aspects of your life too. Self-esteem is an overall image of ourselves. When you view yourself positively, you dare to do things and therefore you can overcome or minimize your defects and bring forth your assets (Kanellou, 2009). That is why self-esteem and self-respect are vital to student's mental health. Displaying love and affection along with the attitude of parents/teachers towards the child during his upbringing are important for the development of a healthy self-image and self-esteem. The infant's first relationship with the people around him lays the foundations for shaping his personality. The healthy adjustment of the child to his / her environment depends on the satisfaction of his / her need for love (Miller, 2019).

Goleman (1998) claims, that emotional intelligence (EQ) is more important than cognitive intelligence (IQ). He also believes that the cultivation of EQ is vital for the emotional development of an individual and especially of a child. He recommends that schools implement programmes in emotional maturity, since he believes, they improve the mental health of the children. He presents research which shows that programmes in social and emotional maturity improved the emotional perception of the children and particularly their self-esteem. Consequently, we reach the conclusion that the process of searching our identity and self-esteem is directly linked to the emotional and social maturity of the individual.

Tajfel and Turner, (1986) and Van Lare (2018) define identity as the sense of belonging to a group which bears some common characteristics. It refers to the extent to which one is a representative of a given culture behaviourally, communicatively, psychologically and sociologically and how one person is perceived by others based on his cultural and ethnic background. Possible differences that might arise between how one group defines itself and how it is defined by others can create tensions, conflicts, or misunderstandings. According to various sociological and psychological theories, our identities (which are

multiple) are "constructed" through our actions, words, politics, and social life. According to the scientific community, there is no biological basis for any "identity" (e.g., racial or ethnic origin). Sadowski (2008) states that identity is defined by the following questions: Who am I? How do others perceive me? How do I perceive myself? What kind of student would I like to be and what kind of person in general? How would I like to be in the future and what can I do? The identity of the individual is shaped by the self-esteem. Kalliopuska, (1990) & Simos, (2008) claim that self-esteem refers to personal feelings concerning one's own value, importance, and competence and the ability to take responsibility for oneself and the others. It is the result of a long process of appraisal which is influenced by self-evaluation as well as evaluation by others.

Maslow pointed out that the most crucial emotional needs for a human is to feel loved and wanted. Only after those needs have been satisfied does one feel good about what he is and gains self-esteem. These needs lead to self-actualization (which includes success, self-fulfilment and creative expression): impartial understanding, the individual's ability to see objectively beyond himself and the other in a wide social environment. Pursuant to this theory, even if the school only ensures that the intellectual needs of the students are met, it cannot overlook the most basic emotional and physical needs of its students or staff. Peer students can provide an ideal feedback regarding self-esteem, value acceptance and mutual support and devotion (Weare & Gray, 2000).

Shaping our identity and self-esteem, help us to appreciate and accept ourselves, and thus to be accepted by others (empathy). Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what people are experiencing from within their frame of reference and to place oneself in another's position. We accept and deeply understand the others when we have a strong sense of our personal value. Empathic people step into other people's shoes to imagine what fears they might be facing and take the time to understand their counterpart's priorities, preferences, and motivations. They treat failure with coolness and are social, confident and ambitious. They are self-conscious, effective and creative and respond in a healthy and positive way to others. They build strong relationships without violence, they receive criticism in a better way, and they are successful in their lives (Bolton, 2009; Campbell, 2014; Kalliopuska, 1990).

Methodology

Action-research

In order to identify changes in our students' behaviour and the way they perceive their identity and their image and in order to answer how certain techniques reinforce that image in their minds, we considered that the main principles of our school-based intervention should be those of action research. The methodology of action research is ideal for the exploration of scientific knowledge, since it

enhances the abilities of the participants, it promotes collaboration, it is carried out on the spot, it develops data feedback, it is interactive and allows for evaluation and review (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008, p. 388).

Furthermore, action research deals, on the one hand, with the changes of the behaviour of individuals, and on the other with the culture of groups, institutions, and societies to which these individuals belong. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008, p. 388). Therefore, it will be particularly helpful to us in a classroom full of students from different backgrounds and with different social stimuli, where we are called to help them enhance their self-esteem, define their identity as much as possible and accept others in their social environment.

Procedure

As a teacher, I found it necessary to apply in my own classroom some of the experiential exercises of self-definition, self-esteem, and acceptance of the other. I chose my own class consisting of 1st, 3rd and 4th graders as I felt that several students needed to enhance their image in order to be able to accept themselves and their classmates, too. The class consists of 11 students foreign and domestic.

Aims of intervention

Aim: Learning to accept the other by accepting at first myself.

Cognitive Objectives:

Members of the group are invited to:

1. enhance their sense of identity
2. acknowledge self-image and others
3. understand and alter their views when necessary

Capacity Objectives:

Members of the group are invited to:

1. project their self-image.
2. express their needs and feelings.
3. develop their communication skills and improve their personal relationships.

Attitude Objectives

The members of the group are called to

1. become sensitive to personal values and issues.
2. adopt an active attitude towards the problems they face.
3. develop their ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of the others.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the group and the overall process is very important since feedback is always needed to identify any shortcomings or the right points that could be repeated in future sessions. Evaluations will be carried out based on the following principles: 1. The formation of the team (i.e., whether the team was formed by the people who comply with the conditions set out in advance), 2. The objectives of the group (i.e., the degree to which they are implemented), 3. Contact by both coordinators and members of the group, 4. The degree of adaption of members to various “areas” (e.g., active participation, understanding differences, interaction among the groups, rational, acceptance, respect, etc.). 5. The methods of organizing the procedure, 6. The effectiveness of activities and the extent to which they fulfill the objectives (Polemy-Todulou, 2005).

One of the methods of evaluation could be observation (i.e., careful monitoring and assessment of phenomena as they unfold, without the intention to modify them, carried out with or without the help of appropriate study and research tools (Vamvoukas, 2000, p. 195). Observation is considered to be the simplest method of collecting quality data, and it refers to the "organized and systematic observation of social behaviours" (Iwsifidis, 2003, p. 50). In our group, the observation would be extremely helpful in order to control the constant reactions of its members, both verbal and non-verbal. We also provided students with a self-assessment sheet where they would record their own knowledge, views, preferences, interests, emotions, expectations, attitudes, values and in general all the aspects of their personality.

Intervention

Intervention will take place during the “Flexible Zone”. The kids will experience the entire process in a playful way. The activities, which reinforce self-assessment, are mainly experiential, from *Identity and Self-Esteem: On my own two feet, Educational Material on Health Education*, (1996). Finally, the activity of the personal shield is from Manousos, & Tanainis (2010). The following table presents the organization of our intervention:

Subject	Duration	Activities Titles per Subject
1. Formation of the group	One two-hour session	A. Formation of the Group B. Drafting the Contract
2. Enhancing our identity 3. Positive vibes to those around us	Two two-hour sessions	A. Identity Cards B. The development of self-esteem through the acknowledgement of the others C. Our strength to boost our self-esteem and the others'

3. Positive Thoughts	Two two-hour sessions	A. Boosting our self-esteem through self-support techniques B. Replacement of negative thoughts C. Group's Closure
	Total: Five two-hour sessions	

Experiential activities

Before the experiential activities, there was a two-hour session where we formed small groups and drafted a contract in order to better carry out the process.

Identity cards

Main idea: The sense of identity is developed when a person is encouraged to talk about himself and his preferences

Material: Cards

The students sit in a circle. We give cards to the first student, which include unfinished sentences about themselves. The aim of the game is to enable each student to talk to the group about himself and his views. Each one who opens a card, reads it and finishes the sentence. When he finishes, the other students can ask, comment or give their own answers. When all the cards are read, the students are separated in small groups and talk about the procedure.

Work Sheet (Cards)

My birthday is on.....I amyears old.

I am good at.....

I havehair andeyes

I believe that friends should

I really want to.....

A kind act of mine is.....

I love to.....

I am afraid of.....

The most frightening thing that ever happened to me was when.....

My favorite food is:

My favorite school subject:

Something which made me angry in the past was when.....

I like.....

I don't like.....

The most interesting thing at school is.....

I like people who.....

Evaluation sheet

How I felt after this activity?.....

Did I get better acquainted with myself and my classmates after this activity?.....

Was there anything difficult in this activity?.....

2. The cycle of positive messages.

Main idea: We improve our self-esteem when we accept confirmation and care from the others. We all have the power to boost our self-esteem and the self-esteem of the others.

Materials: Paper, crayons, pillow.

We ask from the students to remember something good they have done for themselves or for others in the past, something they have learnt good, something they have created, a good deed and something they succeeded in. After that, we tell them to paint a picture, which represents the event. After that, the students sit in a circle and each one of them in turn sits in the middle on a pillow. There he has the opportunity to talk to the others about the picture he painted and the reasons he feels proud of it. When the student finishes, he accepts the sincere and positive comments of his classmates. Before each student takes sits on the pillow, he asks one of his classmates to write down the comments of the other classmates. Finally, we ask students to fill out an evaluation sheet and describe their experience from the experiential activity. During this, we observe the students in order to understand if the activity affects their self-esteem and how they feel. In the end of the process, groups discuss how they felt about themselves. Students write down their classmates' positive comments in their diary. The entire week we check to see if there are more positive comments.

The evaluation sheet delivered to the students is the following:

Evaluation sheet

How did you feel when you were sitting on the pillow? Did you feel good?

.....

How did you feel when you have received positive comments?

.....

Did you find it difficult to believe all the positive comments you have received from your classmates?

.....

Please write down two positive comments, you liked the most and why?

.....

Cards of Positive Messages

Main Idea: We improve our self-esteem through the confirmation of the others. We all have the power to boost our self-esteem and the self-esteem of the others.

Materials: paper to create a card, pens, crayons, glitter, decorative materials etc.

Process: Students sit in smaller groups. Initially, we urge students to look around and to point out some of their classmates' characteristics they really appreciate. We write them down. Then students make cards for themselves. On each card, the students write their name in capital letters and decorate it the way they want in order to express their own personality. Then they exchange them with their classmates so that everyone can write something positive about each other's character.

A discussion follows about how each student felt about these comments and then they fill out an evaluation sheet in order to check what the students gained from the process.

Evaluation sheet

How did you feel when the other students wrote on your card?

.....

Do you accept the comments of your students?

.....

How did you feel when the other students wrote on your card?

.....

Do you accept the comments of your students?

.....

Positive thinking

Main Idea: Esteem is enhanced through techniques of self-support.

Materials: paper, crayons.

As an introduction, we say to the groups that it is very important for everyone to love themselves and be friends with each other. We also advise them that if they feel unhappy, they have to do something pleasant that fills them with joy.

We ask students to make a list of 5 favorite activities and 5 things they do well. When they finish, we ask them to discuss with their team if what they write makes them feel good about themselves and why. We also discuss their activities and the way they are performed (e.g., in a team or individually).

Each group is given a worksheet, which has hypothetical cases that would make anyone feel bad. Students per group are invited to replace the negative thinking of what they would experience with a positive one. Some cases are the following:

Cases where the students have to think what they would do in order to feel better

- A. Someone you know, calls you big-eared, monkey, Shorty
 Negative thought: «I must look terrible»
 Positive thought:.....

- B. You got a bad grade on an exam;
 Negative thought: «I am stupid»
 Positive thought:

- C. Your friends don't like your new clothes
 Negative thought: "I must look terrible. I shouldn't have bought them."
 Positive thought:

In the end, a circle is created and each group discusses their own sentences with the others. In addition, we discuss why it is always good to think positively and whether or not this enhances our self-image. Finally, they expressed their opinion on the process and how it made them feel. The last hour was dedicated to the overall evaluation of all sessions. Student create their own shield. An exchange of emotions and opinions followed.

Results

This presentation includes all the findings from the five (5) two-hour sessions that we had with the students. All eleven (11) students in the class participated and were divided into groups of three and four. The team design didn't make it too difficult for students to get along, but it made them happy. They were told it was a program that would help them love themselves and accept their classmates.

Session 1

The first meeting was attended by all 11 students who participated in every session and exhibited a great amount of enthusiasm. I explained how the groups would be divided and how this program would be carried out. Although the students knew each other, I felt it was necessary to say some basic things about themselves. The process ran smoothly, and in the end, the students were told that they learned things about their classmates that they didn't know. It was then explained to them that, just as we have rules in the classroom, there should be a contract in this process that should be kept by the entire group. As each team came up with some rules, they wrote them on a piece of paper so they could communicate them to the rest of the team members. The process was completed because after announcing the rules the groups came up with, they wrote them on a cardboard that they decorated and hung up in class and was visible to everyone. The students were quite cooperative and interacted properly, although at times some students exhibited some selfish attitudes that were quickly overcome by my intervention. The students gave the session the following title: "I learn to love myself and others."

Session 2

The second session was attended by all pupils. In order to achieve this, we used cards that contain unfinished proposals concerning themselves and their preferences. Their aim was to complete the proposals and to have an exchange of views. The students sat in a circle, and everyone in turn chose a card. Each card contained a sentence that they had to complete. All the students decided to speak and complete the sentence. When one student was finished, the others could ask to comment and give their own answer. Throughout the process, the students paid attention to their classmates and were respectful (with a few exceptions who were reminded of the contract they had signed during the first session). The students exchanged very nice ideas and talked about themselves and their identity. The easiest cards to answer were the ones about their age and characteristics, their favorite food and their favorite lesson. In fact, many of them commented that they have the same eye color, the same hair color and that they like the same food (e.g., pastitsio and fricassee (Greek foods)). The majority of the students said they like math because they solve problems and do the calculations

in their head. Interestingly enough, students reported that the most interesting thing at school is meeting new friends and playing with them during the break. They also talked about things they like, like football, TV and video games. One student mentioned that he liked honest people. Some of his classmates agreed that everyone should not lie but embrace the truth.

What was observed during the process was that students took time to complete the sentence “I'm afraid of...” There were answers like darkness, spiders, snakes etc. One student said she was afraid of her home after the loss of her father. Her classmates immediately commented on it, saying she should be strong. Many students also had difficulty completing the sentence with the verb getting angry. They said that sometimes they get angry when they don't get football passes or when people mock them. Many of the very proud students delineated the kind deeds they did in the past (e.g., giving clothes, toys, food to poor children), that they had hosted their friends at home and that they had donated a notebook to a classmate who didn't have one. They also talked about scary things that had happened to them (e.g., seeing a black figure on a wall, staying alone in a dark place or watching a scary movie). Finally, they said they really want to be good students, footballers and good friends. After they completed the cards, they were divided into groups of three or four and discussed how they felt during the process, what was difficult for them, how careful they were etc. During their conversations, students mostly commented on things they didn't know about themselves and their classmates. They said it was more interesting to talk about their feelings (e.g., I'm afraid of, angry with, scared of, I love). In the end, I told the students that all these answers revealed different aspects of their identity. After this, each student completed an evaluation sheet. The majority of students wrote that they felt happy with the process, they felt good about themselves and learned so much about their classmates.

Session 3

The third (3) meeting brought all the students together, and there was active participation throughout. During this meeting, there was the experience activity: The positive messages cycle (see Appendix I experience activities). Most people with ease, spontaneity and determination drew an act that once made them feel proud, a success for them and so on. In fact, most people have done their best to make the drawing very good and make it easy for all their classmates to understand it. Only two students had difficulty concentrating on themselves and finding an event that made them feel proud and took longer than others. During the students' positive feedback session, there was absolute silence and (I would say) anticipation of what would be said. Sometimes some students were embarrassed to receive positive feedback from their classmates. After the end of the process, students stated how they felt about themselves after this process and more generally how they felt during this experience. All the students felt proud of themselves. The comments varied: good girl, student and friend. From

the above, we understand that through this process students have very much developed their self-esteem as they accepted the confirmation and care of others.

Samples of pupils' drawings



The student represents his good deed, which was to teach a friend how to play football.



The student's drawing depicts the student helping his father repair things at home. His classmates made very positive comments about this good deed and he commented that he was really "proud of himself."



This student depicts her good act, which is helping her friend with her homework. Her classmates commented on her drawing and they remarked that “she is a very good friend and a very good person, too.”

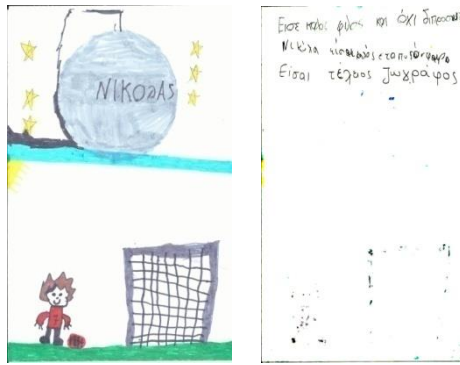
Session 4

All students participated in this session. They were particularly happy because they would work as teams just like in the first two sessions. As a follow-up to the previous activity in session 3, in this session students started to express positive opinions about some of the students they appreciate. Positive opinions were written on the table such as: good, beautiful, responsible, real, fun, make nice jokes, make me laugh, etc. I tried discreetly to make positive comments for all students so that nobody felt bad. The students felt happy because once again their classmates said such good things about them.

The process after that was very popular because they created a positive message card. All the students were involved and engaged, giving space to each other and cooperated harmoniously. Everyone painted their card and tried to weave elements of their personality in it (e.g., favorite colors, favorite games, etc.). They seemed to be happy with what they were doing. I didn't want to pressure them because I wanted them to make something that they would really enjoy and make their own. Upon completion of sessions three (3) and four (4), I noticed some students began praising and commenting positively on the efforts of some of their classmates.

Samples of cards

The student accepts positive comments from his classmates such as “You are a good friend and not sneaky”, “You are a good footballer and perfect painter.”



One student felt accepted by her classmates when she heard the following: “You are good and sweet girl and very good in history.”



Session 5

Session 5 was attended by all pupils. Before we started, I had a conversation with them and pointed out that it is important that everyone loves himself or herself. Based on this, all the team members wrote on one sheet of paper five (5) favorite activities and five (5) things they do well. I noticed that the students were actively involved and that each student was commenting on their experiences with others. The session was also devoted to the *Replace Negative Thought* activity. All students participated. As a preliminary point, it should be noted that the cause of sadness does not stem from the cause itself, but from the thoughts the individual has about it. Students were given some cases of bad behaviors and were asked to replace negative thoughts with positive responses.

Many of the students had similar experiences. The students' responses actually surprised me:

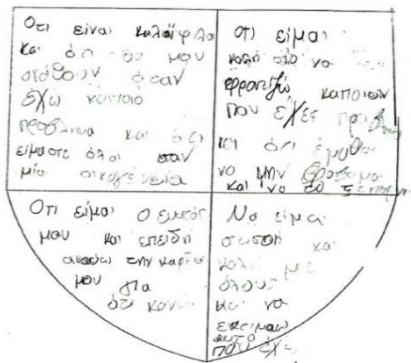
In cases where someone makes fun of another person, the students gave the following possible responses: 1. *Since I'm not what this person says I am, I don't*

have to worry. 2. Whoever says such things must be jealous. 3. I'm myself, and I don't care what people say. 4. I like who I am.

In cases where someone mocks someone's lousy performance on a test, the students gave the following possible responses: 1. Next time I'll try to get a better grade. 2. I'll try harder on the next test. 3. I'm not stupid because I got a bad grade. I know I'm smart.

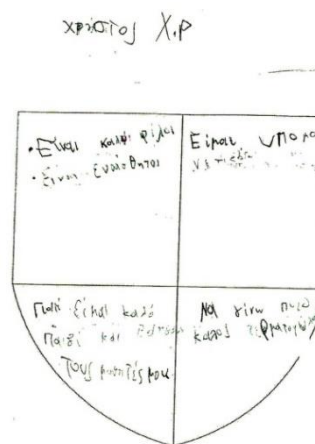
In cases where someone does not like what another person is wearing, the students gave the following possible responses: 1. It's all right, I'll wear it even if they don't like it. 2. I am not going to listen to them because they might be jealous of me. 3. I like what I'm wearing and that's enough for me. 4. As long as I like it, I don't care.

The message from this activity was that we should not allow anyone or anything to hurt us and that we should see things in a more positive manner and appreciate things for what they are. The closure gives each member an opportunity to freely express "what he got," "what he gave," "what to keep," "how he felt." Through the process, students became better acquainted with themselves and their classmates, and thus accepted them for who they are. Every student eventually created his own personal shield. The shield was divided into four parts. Each part contained the following: (a) Two things I learned about my classmates that struck me (b) what I learned about myself after the process, (c) I appreciate and love myself because... (d) In the future, I would like...



In the first shield, the student states that what she learned about her classmates is that they are good friends and that she feels they have become a family. What she learned from the process is that when and if it is possible, she would like to help any friend in need. She loves herself and listens to her heart. In the future, she wishes to help anyone who needs her help.

In the second shield, the student says that after the activity, he realized how good and sensitive his friends are. From the process, he realized he is patient, proud and loves himself because he is a good kid. He would like to become a good goalkeeper in the future.



Conclusions

The results of the five (5) two-hour sessions were encouraging. The students believed in themselves and gave positive feedback to others, gained confidence, strengthened their self-esteem and their identity, and accepted their classmates for who they are. Through the experiences they gained, they understood that they were not as different as they thought they were and that they all had characteristics that deserve to be appreciated by others. We were quite excited when the students stated they did not think they would ever hear such good words about themselves or that they enjoyed the sessions.

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