

The Effect of Participating in Recreational Dance Activities on the Social Skills of 10 to 12-Year-Old Children

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Abstract

Developing social skills is important for people's social life, especially for children who are at a sensitive stage of life. The aim of the study is to investigate to which extent participating in recreational dance activities effect children's development of social skills. The participants of the research were 168 children (84 boys and 84 girls) with no previous dance experience. The experimental group, which consisted of 90 children, took up folk dance lessons in a society. The rest 78 children, who formed the control group, did not take up any regular physical activity. The data collection was made with the School Social Behavior Scale (SSBS - Merrell, 1993). The researchers examined the changes of the dimensions 'cooperating skills', 'empathy', 'impulsivity' and 'disruptiveness'. Two measurements conducted (initial and final) within four months. Two-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was conducted to evaluate whether there were significant differences between the two groups and between the measurements for each dimension of the scale. The results showed that the children of the experimental group improved their social skills, contrary to the children of the control group. More specifically, there was an increase in the positive dimensions that were examined (cooperating skills, empathy) and a reduction in the negative dimensions (impulsivity, disruptiveness). Consequently, participating in learning dance activities can develop social skills, in a positive way.

Key Words: *Dance Societies; Cooperating Skills; Empathy; Impulsivity; Disruptiveness*

Introduction

The sense of "belonging" and "being included" is a need that originates from human nature itself. In other words, every human being wants to be a member of individual groups within a social entirety and sustain successful interpersonal relationships with other people around him/her. This pursuit can be achieved, with the correct application of one's social skills (Vasilopoulos, Koutsopoulou & Regli, 2011).

Our times are characterized by intense crises on a social, political, economical and environmental level. The efforts to overcome these crises are, once more, orientated towards education. Thus, education must focus on providing students with functional skills and abilities. These functional skills intend to prepare students for participation and action, so as to become active citizens. The aims of education are a lot more complex than the simple transference of knowledge and development of critical thinking. Modern education has come to realize the importance of the emotional and mental development of young people, in today's society. This realization basically derives from teachers who have highlighted that the social and emotional skills acquired by students contribute definitively to their future development as adults who are able to cope with the particularly demanding needs of the modern world. Success in adult life depends not only on school performances but also on inner-personal or practical intelligence, which concerns skills connected to high emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996).

Theoretical framework

Social Skills

Social skills cannot be defined in a single way. There have been occasional definitions, depending on the elements that were emphasized. Denham, Hatfield, Smethurst, Tan and Tribe, (2006) define social skills as socially accepted behaviours which impel people to interact with the others effectively and avoid socially unacceptable reactions. O'Rourke and Worzbyt (1996) suggest a different approach, defining social skills as a repertoire of verbal and non verbal behaviours, by which children influence other people's reactions (e.g. peers, parents, brothers and sisters or teachers) in an inter-personal framework. This repertoire functions as a mechanism through which children influence their environment, by acquiring, transferring or avoiding desirable or undesirable results, within a social framework. The degree to which they manage to acquire the desirable results and avoid the undesirable ones which inflict pain to the others is the degree to which they are considered people with social skills.

Brooks (1984) has also emphasized the significance of social skills. He supported that they constitute one of the four main categories of skills which are necessary for every child, adolescent and adult and called them "skills of inter-personal communication and relationships", since they are essential for communicating effectively with other people (verbally or non verbally) and they lead to the establishment of relationships and participation in social groups.

Life skills are those which help people cope, in the various environments of their activities (school, neighborhood, job etc). These skills are distinguished in three kinds: Physical skills, which refer to the skillfulness in a kinetic activity (e.g. throwing the javelin), cognitive skills, which refer to the solution of any problem and behavioral skills, which refer to communicating within a group (Danish & Nellen, 1997). Other skills which can be included in the category of life skills are performing under pressure, defining and achieving goals, managing success and failure effectively, being efficient in a group or accepting criticism and using it for improving (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993).

Life skills are essential for succeeding both in the educational environment of a school and in later, adult life (Brooks, 1984). Unfortunately, there are currently many students who have not yet developed these skills adequately (Cantwell & Andrews, 2002). Children's developing social skills is an interesting study field for a plethora of researchers, contrary to parents who are concerned with their attitude in relation to the development of those skills, from their children's pre-school age up to their adolescence (Matson, 2009).

Children with an insufficient social skill development find it hard to establish and maintain relationships and are often rejected by their peers. This leads to the appearance of aggressive behaviors and feelings of introversion and depression (Brotman, Gouley, Chesir – Teran, Dennis, Klein, & Shrout, 2005; Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001).

Children who have developed social skills adequately are cooperative and friendly and are more likely to achieve high goals both in a social framework and the educational framework of a school (Qin & Yong, 2002; Gouley, Brotman, Huang, & Shrout, 2008; Goleman, 2000). Children with a reduced development of social skills usually present problems in their behavior and performance (Langeveld, Gundersen, & Svartdal, 2012).

Researchers from the USA have proved that low performances at school, as a result of an inefficient social skill development, may be due to psychological disturbance and general

psychological health problems (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2007). This implies that the future adult will be inferior, in the field of life skills, since he/she did not develop them sufficiently as a child, contrary to children who did (Benson, 2009).

The main factors that assist the development and conformation of social skills are family, school, social groups and various institutional activities in which people participate (Sharpe, Brown, & Crider, 1995; Brooks, 1984; Magotsiou, 2007). Dance societies are non-profit institutions in which a group of individuals is active in fulfilling a common purpose. They develop a positive framework for developing social skills through the dance process (Darginidou & Goulimaris, 2016).

Educational programs for the development of social skills

Dance is a chosen recreational activity in people's leisure time. At the same time learning dance in dance societies is a form of informal education. There are many dance programs. As a recreational activity, but also as a subject of educational programs, it is appropriate for the development of social skills. Children interact with each other, belong to a group with a different offer of everyone in it (Darginidou, Goulimaris, Mavridis & Genti, 2017).

In order that educational programs remain creative and innovative while evolving within the framework of a changing society, they must modify their cognitive subjects according to the needs of the modern world and the contemporary educational perceptions (Steffe & Gale, 1995). The design and incorporation of innovative practices in today's educational programs are essential pre-conditions, for schools to be able to respond to the demands of a new era. Educational innovations are an international priority for education (European Commission, 2010; Fullan, 2010; US Department of Education, 2012).

The process of learning must equip students with the necessary skills in order that they live effectively and successfully, in their environment. That is why many countries apply programs for the development of life skills, in all educational degrees (Nelson-Jones, 1991).

In recent years, scientific researches show a growing interest in giving prominence to life skills at the youngest age possible, using game/kinetic forms of intervention programs. The structure of these programs is uniform and consists of three units of cognitive targets: a) how to define personal goals, b) how to solve problems and c) how to maintain a positive thinking about oneself. The aim of these programs is to assist the participants use these skills to improve their general performance, as well as use them in other parts of everyday life (Elliot & Lang, 2004; Pickens, 2009; Rosenthal & Gatt, 2010).

There are relative researches in Greece, which include the experimental application of life skill programs, such as the one that was carried out with primary school students of the 5th and 6th degree, in the subject of Olympic Education. The participants scored better in kinetic tests and had better performances in academic fields. They also used their social skill more effectively than before the program and they were more motivated to participate in the lesson (Theofanidis, 2002; Goudas, Dermitzaki, Leondari, & Danish, 2006; Kiorpe, 2002). Life skill programs were also applied to young volleyball athletes and football athletes (Papacharis & Goudas, 2003).

Social skills and dance

Dance is an important means of communicating with other people and it is directly connected to the human existence, despite the fact that, in the course of the centuries, it has been subjected to many changes in order to fit the values of the each society (Wall & Murray, 1994). Folk dance is an important educational tool that can be adjusted to fit the educational programs related to the cognitive, kinetic and emotional development of children (Venetsanou & Leventis, 2010).

Through dance kinetic activities, children discover rhythm, express their improvisational and creative abilities and improve their relationships and their communication and cooperation with their fellow students/dance partners, as well as with persons from their broader environment. In addition, they learn to accept limits and restrictions posed by the group, while they discover their need to create rules and comply with them (Likesas, Tsapakidou, Konstantinidou, & Papadopoulou, 2002).

Dance is a physical activity, often playful, which helps the development of inter-personal relationships, significantly. Developing inter-personal relationships means communicating and interacting mostly with peers but also with adults, while simultaneously creating forms of friendship, within smaller or larger groups. If, for some reason, a child finds it difficult to establish such an interaction, he/she is likely to be rejected by his/her peers and therefore lose his/her opportunity to develop his/her social skills (Mendez, McDermott, & Fantuzzo, 2002).

In Greece, folk dance is an extra-curricular activity which takes place during one's free time. Analyzing the concept of free time, researchers have concluded that 'free time' and 'teaching' should not be juxtaposed, as the first being time for relaxation and enjoyment and the second, time for work and obligations. On the contrary, they must be perceived in a complementary way, so as to help a child cope with his/her daily routine, in the best way. Thus, to fulfill a child's needs, teaching should alternate cognitive subjects and games, skillfully mixing individuality with collectivity, motion with tranquility, tension with relaxation and extroversion with empathy, just the way they take place in a child's free time (Haniotakis & Thoidis, 2002).

The parallel use of music aims at assisting the achievement of certain cognitive goals, which are not necessarily connected to the musical cultivation of children. Music is often used as an educational material or method that leads children to the acquisition of certain cognitive goals (Soulis, 2002) and also as a means to develop their social skills, in the subject of Physical Education. In this way, children interact with one another and form a group in which, they all contribute distinctly and they practice under conditions that favour movement, physical contact and a sense of freedom (Lobo & Winsler, 2006).

Aim

The aim of the research was to examine the degree to which participating in recreational activities with folk dances affects the development of the social skills of children aged 10 to 12, the way it is perceived by the children themselves.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 168 children, boys and girls, who had no previous dance experience. The age of the children ranged between 10 and 12. The children were separated into two groups, the experimental and the control group. The experimental group consisted of 90 children who participated in recreational activities with folk dances, in societies of non-profitable nature. The rest 78 children became the control group. The children of the experimental group took up Greek folk dance lessons, twice a week, 45 minutes per lesson. The children of the control group did not take up any dance or regular physical activity. The gender and the ages of the participants in total and each group separately are seen in table 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1: Gender of participating children

	Participants		Experimental Group		Control Group	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Boys	84	50,0	36	40,0	40	50,5
Girls	84	50,0	54	60,0	38	49,5

Table 2: Age of participating children

	Participants		Experimental Group		Control Group	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
10 Years	55	32,7	29	32,2	26	33,3
11 Years	55	32,7	29	32,2	26	33,3
12 Years	58	34,5	32	35,6	26	33,3

Instruments

The data collection was carried out with the School Social Behavior Scale (SSBS) by Merrell (1993). The validity and reliability of the SSBS was tested and adjusted for the Greek population by Magotsiou, Goudas and Hasandra, (2006). The scale of the research had already been used by other researchers who studied children’s social skills, in Greece (Katsanos, Kouvelas, Samara, & Hasandra, 2008; Goudas & Magotsiou, 2009).

The scale includes four dimensions:

“Cooperating skills” with 5 issues e.g. ‘I work with my fellow students as a group’. Cooperating skills are related to the interactions among the members of a group and are characterized by exchanged, mutual thoughts, feelings and actions. These skills contribute to the construction and maintenance of the group cohesion, according to the wishes its members and are able to work constructively in any following group assignments (Dyson, 2002).

“Empathy” with 6 issues e.g. ‘I am interested in other people’s feelings’. It is the ability to participate in other people’s psychological condition, re-live their experiences and respond to them with sensitivity and subtlety (Carlo, Koler, Eisenberg, Da Silva, & Frohlich, 1996).

"Impulsivity" with 6 issues e.g. 'I often get annoyed or irritated'. It is an intentional or non-intentional anti-social behavior which is expressed with irritation, bursts of anger and inability to resist to negative stimuli (Greek Dictionary, 2005).

"Disruptiveness" with 6 items e.g. 'I am disruptive in class'. It is an anti-social behavior, verbal or kinetic or both, which aims at annoying the others by causing conscious disruptiveness and disturbing the normal climate of the class (Goudas & Magotsiou, 2009).

To answer each question of the dimensions, the scale used a 5-grade Likert type scale, from 1=I completely disagree to 5=I completely agree.

Procedure

In the initial phase of the research, the executives of the dance societies were contacted and were asked for permission to distribute the scale. They were also informed about the aims and the procedures of the research and were insured that their students' answers would be used for strictly educational or scientific reasons. After the necessary permission, the procedure of data collection was programmed. Following the suggestions of the parents whose children were members of the experimental group, the researchers contacted parents whose children were of similar age and they did not participate in any regular physical activity of any kind. These children formed the control group. Before asking the participants to fill in the scale, the researchers ensured their parents' approval and the children were informed that their participation was voluntary and the scale anonymous.

There were two measurements for each group: an initial, during the first week and a final, which took place the last week of the children's participating in the dance activities.

In the beginning, the participants were given general instructions for filling in the scales and were explained that it was essential that they expressed their own opinion and not that of their fellow students, so as to avoid any cooperation. The scales were distributed to the children of the experimental group, after the end of a teaching unit, in the place where the dance programs were carried out. At the same time, the scales were distributed to the children of the control group, after communicating with their parents.

The dance activity teachers were two and with as many common characteristics as possible, concerning their dance profile and dance experience. The places where the lessons took place had similar specifications i.e. they maintained the same spatial and acoustic standards.

The dance program

The children of the experimental group participated in the dance activity program for four months, during which they learned Greek folk dances, in dance societies. The lessons were carried out twice a week, 45 minutes per lesson. During this four-month period, the children were taught dances which are commonly met in more than one areas of the Greek population. More specifically, the program was constituted of 16 dances. These dances are seen in table 3.

Table 3: Content of the dance program

1. Chasapia	7. Syrto Makedonias	12. Menousis
2. Syrto sta tria	8. Syrto Nisiotiko	13. Tsamikos
3. Omal kars	9. Zonaradikos	14. Palamakia
4. Podaraki	10. Karagouna	15. Tik mono
5. Tsourapia	11. Pogonisio	16. Tik diplo
6. Kalamatiano		

Statistical Analyses

To analyze the data, the research used elements of descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations). The reliability of the scale was tested with reliability analysis for each measurement, calculating Cronbach’s α . To evaluate the lack of significant differences between the two groups (experimental and control) during the initial measurement, a One-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, for each dimension of the scale. Two-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was conducted to evaluate any significant differences between the two groups and between the two measurements (initial and final) for each dimension of the scale. Significant differences between the means were tested at the 0.05 alpha level.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

As seen in table 4, in the initial measurement, the entirety of the children who participated in the research presented low levels in the dimensions ‘cooperating skills’ and ‘empathy’, while they had higher scores in the factors ‘impulsivity’ and ‘disruptiveness’. This is inverted in the final measurement, where the dimensions ‘cooperating skills’ and ‘empathy’ present high scores and the dimensions ‘impulsivity’ and ‘disruptiveness’ are reduced.

Table 4: Mean and standard deviation of SSBS dimensions

	Participants				Experimental Group				Control Group			
	Initial Measurement		Final Measurement		Initial Measurement		Final Measurement		Initial Measurement		Final Measurement	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
Cooperating Skills	2.8	0.69	4.1	0.63	2.7	.63	4.2	.56	2.9	.76	3.0	.55
Empathy	2.7	0.66	4.1	0.59	2.7	.56	4.2	.51	2.7	.76	2.9	.56
Impulsivity	3.1	0.61	2.1	0.68	3.1	.52	2.0	.70	3.2	.70	3.2	1,02
Disruptivene	3.2	0.73	2.0	0.81	3.1	.62	1.9	.84	3.3	.84	3.3	1,23

Reliability Analysis

In order to evaluate the cohesion and reliability of the questions composing the four dimensions of the social skills examined, there was a reliability analysis for each measurement. The reliability analysis was based on calculating Cronbach’s α (table 5). The analyses showed that the dimensions present adequate cohesion, since all Cronbach’s α values are $>.70$.

Table 5: Reliability analysis of SSBS dimensions

	Cronbach’s α	
	Initial Measurement	Final Measurement
Cooperating Skills	.81	.87
Empathy	.82	.84
Impulsivity	.82	.87
Disruptiveness	.88	.94

One-Way ANOVA - Initial Measurement

In order to evaluate any significant differences between the two groups during the initial measurement, a One-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, for each dimension of the scale. The analyses showed that there were not significant differences for any of the dimensions of the scale. The resulted values are seen in table 6.

Table 6: Analysis of variance of SSBS dimensions - Initial measurement

	F	p
Cooperating Skills	$F_{(1,167)} = 1.52$	>0.05
Empathy	$F_{(1,167)} = .76$	>0.05
Impulsivity	$F_{(1,167)} = .16$	>0.05
Disruptiveness	$F_{(1,167)} = 3.1$	>0.05

Two-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with Repeated Measures

In order to evaluate any significant differences between the two parts of the participants as divided by an independent (group) and a repeated factor (measurement), two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was conducted for each dimension of the scale.

For the positive dimensions of the scale, i.e. cooperating skills and empathy, there was a significant interaction between the two dimensions with $[F_{(1,166)}=93.945; p<0.05]$ and $[F_{(1,166)}=84.473; p<0.05]$ correspondingly. The interaction analysis of each degree of the independent factor showed a significant effect of the repeated factor ‘measurement’ in both the experimental group, concerning cooperating skills $[F_{(1,166)}=299.401; p<0.05]$ and empathy $[F_{(1,166)}=322.407; p<0.05]$ and the control group, concerning cooperating skills $(F_{1,166}=8.213; p<0.05)$ and empathy $(F_{(1,166)}=17.294; p<0.05)$. The Bonferroni test showed that there were significant differences between the two measurements in both the control and the experimental group. Also, the statistical analyses showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups, during the final measurement, concerning cooperating skills $[F_{(1,166)}=40.602;$

$p < 0.05$] and empathy [$F_{(1,166)} = 53.269$; $p < 0.05$]. The means showed that the performances of the children of the experimental group were improved in comparison with those of the children of the control group at the final measurement relative to the initial one. Also, there were significant differences between the two groups during the final measurement, with the experimental group presenting higher means.

As concerns the negative dimensions of the scale, i.e. impulsivity and disruptiveness, there was a significant interaction between the two dimensions with [$F_{(1,166)} = 45.213$; $p < 0.05$] and [$F_{(1,166)} = 35.237$; $p < 0.05$] correspondingly. The interaction analysis of each degree of the independent factor showed a significant effect of the repeated factor 'measurement' in the experimental group, concerning impulsivity [$F_{(1,166)} = 94.777$; $p < 0.05$] and disruptiveness [$F_{(1,166)} = 77.199$; $p < 0.05$], while in the control group there was not a significant effect concerning impulsivity [$F_{(1,166)} = 0.015$; $p > 0.05$] and disruptiveness [$F_{(1,166)} = 0.005$; $p > 0.05$]. The Bonferroni test showed that the control group did not present significant differences between the two measurements while in relation to the experimental group, there were significant differences between the two measurements. The experimental group showed improvement differences during the final measurement, while the control group remained steady, without any improvement. Furthermore, there was a significant difference during the final measurement between the two groups, concerning impulsivity [$F_{(1,166)} = 52.247$; $p < 0.05$] and disruptiveness [$F_{(1,166)} = 72.776$; $p < 0.05$], with the means of the experimental group improving and the means of the control group remaining steady.

Discussion

The results confirmed that the performances of the children of the experimental group their cooperating skills and empathy, improved in relation to the children of the control group. Additionally, there were differences between the two groups in the final measurement, with the experimental group scoring higher. These results come to agreement with those of Ang and Hughes (2001) who supported that people can benefit and develop their social and cooperating skills significantly, through individual or group interventions. Folk dance is a group physical activity. Children who exercise in groups encourage one another and express their questions freely, which helps them correct their mistakes. This results at improving skills and becoming more sociable. Learning with peers within groups increases one's individual performance and the general performance of a group, in all sections (Balatzaras, 2004).

The observed improvement of empathy comes to agreement with a study by Chaniotakis and Thoidis (2002) who supported that empathy is improved with activities carried out during one's free time.

Empathy is developed in the field of sports and influences athletes' performance positively (Hofmann, 1990). Furthermore, a study by Thomas and Fletcher (2003) ascertained that empathy is shaped and developed in the early stages of the cooperation between a trainer and an athlete, which is similar to the cooperation between a teacher and a dancer.

As concerns the negative dimensions 'impulsivity' and 'disruptiveness', the results of this research showed that the experimental group presented an improvement of values during the second measurement, which means that there was a general improvement of the dancers' social behavior. On the contrary, the values of the control group for both dimensions remained unaltered between the two measurements, showing no progress at all.

There are also results showing the reduction of aggressive behavior and social isolation for various students, as mentioned by the students themselves or by teachers who have long been participating in organized physical education programs, aiming at improving cooperating skills and enhancing group decisions (Dyson, 2001; Dyson, 2002).

The improvement of life skills through dance learning is in accordance with the results of a study by Margotsiou and Goudas (2007) who confirmed that participating in the subject of Physical Education improves the above-mentioned skills. More generally, interacting with peers in groups, in an athletic environment with its rules and dynamic is believed to have positive results on children's social behavior (Smith & D' Arripe – Longueville, 2014).

The results of this study also highlight the significant role of dance societies, which promote dance activities.

Conclusions

In conclusion, participating in recreational activities with folk dances, in the framework of dance societies of non-profitable nature, which is an extra curricular activity, can effect the development of social skills, positively, as it is shown by the observed increase in the values of the positive dimensions studied and the decrease in the values of the negative ones.

Designing and applying actions with folk dances is a conducive field for developing and cultivating the social skills of 10 to 12-year-old children. The adoption of similar activities is thought to be significant, considering the evolution of educational programs on a global scale.

The confirmed positive effect of such activities on life skills is of particular investigative and practical importance and must be forwarded to the administration of dance societies, so as to proceed to the necessary actions, in order to improve the dance activities offered.

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