AN ADHD STUDENT IN A DIFFICULT CLASSROOM: WHEN THE CONTEXT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

An evidence highlighted by multiple sources that shows a combination of causes [1] is that nowaday’s school faces the presence of children and young people with behavioural problems, self-control and emotional difficulties. This last aspect though is expected in children with ADHD, it is also widely diffused in many pupils and it causes behavioural problems and interpersonal conflicts. Studies about emotional literacy highlight how emotional self-regulation skills can be taught and consequently learned, it emphasizes the role of context and learning factors; allocating great importance to strategies to promote the emotional self-regulation [2]. In light of these assumptions, the study describes the systemic action implemented through the network of actors (school, family and the world of research) that have supported a child with ADHD, dyslexia and dysgraphia, in IV primary. Within a framework of multimodal intervention where behavioural rehabilitation, emotional-relational, educational/didactical and pharmacological intervention were realized with excellent results, the research team carried out also an action in the classroom, defined by teachers and principal as highly problematic. Although the classroom is composed by 16 pupils, in fact, it is a very complex reality which includes strongly disturbing pupils with serious family problems and aggressive behaviours, children with socio-cultural disadvantage and traumatic life events. The instruments used, interviews with teachers, field observations and the Test Of Emotion Comprehension [3] revealed, together with a high emotional competence achieved by the pupil with ADHD, a negative difference for 5 pupils. The test components more problematic for the children were the ninth on the Moral and the component III on Desire. The multimodal nature of the study in the ADHD case, lead to plan an intervention also for the entire classroom group in order to act on the emotional components seen as compromised.

Keywords: ADHD, Classroom, Emotion Comprehension, Assessment, TEC.

1 INTRODUCTION

Day after day many teachers find themselves facing difficult situations in their classes. Children crying, quarreling among themselves or teasing, interrupting the lessons, creating chaos and disorder, children that do not respect classmates and teachers. There are different opinions about the causes of all this: some traces throughout the collapse of traditional values, others believe that socio-economic changes of the last fifty years were significant [1]. In any case, the demands from teachers and consequently also scientific research are oriented towards the development of strategies that can, even in part, contain the problematic situations, trying to work with children on their hypothetical emotional difficulties.

An intervention model of emotional education that is gaining increasing ground in our country is the Rational Emotive Education (ERE), this is a psycho-educational programme that aims to educate the person (adult or child alike) to face their emotional dysfunctions through learning to use and enhance their ability to think constructively and rationally. To summarize, the emotional literacy:

- shows that the emotional self-regulation skills can be taught and therefore learned;
- emphasizes the role of context and learning factors;
- It gives priority to pathways and strategies to promote emotional self-regulation [2].

Goleman’s emotional view of intelligence is “the ability to recognize our feelings and those of others, to motivate ourselves, and to positively manage our emotions, both internally and socially.” [4, p.65]. According to the author, the personal component (self-awareness) and the social component (communicative and relational skills) are two milestones on which to base the emotional competence and represent a primary school goal. Among these complementary skills there are included, for example, the ability to motivate oneself and to continue to pursue a goal despite frustrations; the ability to control impulses and postpone gratification; the ability to modulate their moods by avoiding suffering that prevents us from thinking; the ability to be empathic and hopeful [4]. Bearing in mind that the
social brain is still developing during adolescence [5] and taking into account that social skills are those that enable a community to find positive balance between positive relationship management and communication, exploring these data is very important especially in the presence of particularly disadvantaged classroom where education can play a key role.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 The Sample: A difficult Classroom

The aim of the research was to set up a multimodal approach in a compulsory classroom where an ADHD student with dyslexia and dysgraphia (which we call G) is present, in order to know the relational context of the pupil and to design a systemic intervention for the classroom.

The research began almost as a need for further understanding of the general context of the class attended by G., a child which for about two years, was under a re-educational intervention, a mild pharmacological treatment, and an individualized emotional education pathway. Nevertheless, his classroom disruptive behaviours often and often became unmanageable for teachers.

The survey was conducted in a primary IV, a classroom defined by teachers and the principle as "very difficult" because of its several problematic situations, including a girl with socio-cultural disadvantage and behavioural problems (divorced parents and mother separation), a boy with socio-cultural disadvantage (immigrant living in a convent with his mother and sister) and behavioural problems and a child adopted that is older than the rest of his classmates even with behavioural problems. The classroom is composed by 16 students.

In this difficult context the school has to face the presence of children that for a combination of causes [1] show behavioural problems, self-control and emotional difficulties often causing interpersonal conflicts between students and between teachers and students. Studies about emotional literacy highlight how emotional self-regulation skills can be taught and consequently learned, it emphasizes the role of context and learning factors; allocating great importance to strategies to promote the emotional self-regulation [2, p. 70]. On this reality, a four-stage intervention plan has been put in place.

- Systematic observation of G. in his classroom;
- Evaluation of emotional skills of every student of the classroom;
- Interviews with teacher to understand their perception of each student of the classroom;
- Organization of a path of socio-emotional education.

2.2 The Instrument

In the study the Italian standardization of the “TEC-I: Test Of Emotion Comprehension” of Pons and Harris [6] was used [7]. The tool has the purpose of simultaneously studying the overall nature of the development of the understanding of the emotions of the child and the extent of individual variability in such development.

In the test, nine components are investigated that would contribute to the understanding of emotions. These components concern the nature of emotions “(two components: recognition of basic emotions and understanding of mixed nature), the causes of emotions (five components: the role of external causes, of remainders, desires, beliefs and moral values), and the possibility to control the expression of emotions (two components: distinguishing apparent and felt emotion, regulation of current experience)” [8, p.39]:

- Component I: Recognition (Recognition): Recognition implies the ability to recognize basic emotional expressions (sadness, happiness, anger and fright), and to match these expressions to a suitable label provided by the researcher. Facial expressions are never real but iconic and represented through cartoons. The child is also presented with a neutral (normal) expression that is traditionally considered a slightly positive value. Existing literature confirms that skills assessed in component I one are achieved very soon.
- Component II: External Cause (Situational). This component refers to the child’s ability to detect regularity between certain simple situations or events and emotions experienced by a person in such situations or as a result of such events. Approximately around three to four years, children
begin to understand how external causes affect their own and others’ emotions, e.g. I can understand what you might want to know if you lost your favourite game or received a gift.

• Component III: Desire. Around four years, children begin to realize that people’s emotional reactions depend on their desires. For this reason, normally, children can understand that two people in the same situation can experience different emotions because they move from different desires. Component III investigates whether the child is able to provide different emotional responses to the same subject, based on the specific desires/preferences of two protagonists.

• Component IV: Knowledge. Between the age of five and six, children begin to understand that a person’s beliefs, whether true or false, may result in an emotional reaction to a situation. This component identifies the child’s ability to differentiate his knowledge of the world from that of another person.

• Component V: I remember. Between three and six years, children begin to understand the relationship between memory and emotion, e.g. they understand more and more that the intensity of an emotion decreases over time. In the TEC, the child is asked to specify how the memory of a past negative event can affect the current emotion, in short, one can investigate the understanding of the link between memory and emotion.

• Component VI: Adjustment. Children get to knowingly adopt different strategies to control emotions, first behavioural, with age advancing they begin to understand that psychological strategies (negation, distraction, etc.) can be more effective. In order to evaluate the understanding of emotion regulation strategies, the child’s TEC presents prototype strategies for dealing with a sad event (e.g. doing nothing, covering their eyes, leaving home or thinking of something else). Such strategies can reflect a growing sophistication in understanding emotions.

• Component VII: Hide (hide). Not always the emotional expression shown by an individual corresponds to the emotion actually experienced at that moment. Expressive models of children with growth are increasingly articulated: they increase the frequency with which they mask, modulate intensity or replace an emotion with another. With age it also increases understanding: Approximately four to six years, children begin to understand that there may be a discrepancy between the expression of an emotion and the emotion itself. This competence changes with age thanks to the understanding of the rules of emotional performance typical of one’s own culture, useful for maintaining relationships and the overall development of the emotional competence of the child.

• Component VIII: Mixed emotions (ambivalent). In this component the child is asked to attribute to the protagonist of a story two emotions at the same time, in some ways contradictory to each other: e.g. a child may be happy to have received a new bicycle but also scared because it could fall and get hurt. As for mixed emotions, there is still no common agreement on the age at which a child can understand the presence of ambivalent emotions, but latest studies have found that early in preschool, children are able to recognize and describe conflicting emotions.

Figure 1 Component VIII Test of Emotion Comprehension
Component IX: Morale Values. In this last component, the child must grasp the emotional dimension of moral choices. The TEC focuses on the negative feelings that arise when a person avoids to admit the breaking of the rules: the protagonist of the story, after a transgression, omits to tell his mother. Since about eight years old, children begin to realize that negative feelings come from morally reprehensible action and positive feelings from a morally praiseworthy action like resisting a temptation.

The TEC is composed by 23 numbered double-cardboard cards with a male and female version. The first five tables depict four different emotional expressions, for each of them they ask the child to identify a specific emotion. The structure of the remaining boards is unique: for each component, the top of the table represents a small emotional content where the face of the protagonist is left blank; while the bottom, to be discovered after telling the story, represents four different emotional expressions, among which the child is asked to choose the one corresponding to the protagonist of the story. The cardboard were designed so that they are folded in two and present the first part while telling the story and then discovering the second part when asking the child to answer. The answer sheet, in both male and female versions, contains the text of the stories and the child questions, in addition to the boxes where it is possible to record the answer and any comments. The coding sheet allows to calculate the raw score of the child quickly and easily. The sheet of standardized scores, finally, allows to attribute the relative standardized score in relation to age (both in percentiles and z points).

TEC administration in the fourth primary grade, was performed with all the caution of a child assessment: the setting was familiar, non-distracting and not-noisy, in order to allow greater concentration not only to G. but in general to all students and to foster a serene and comfortable atmosphere. The administration was individual. Once started, the tables were presented one at a time with a suitable pace for the child. The administrator, once the child responded to the question, summed up everything on the Child’s Answer Response Sheet, including any salient comments on the questions. These were put in a strictly neutral tone so as not to implicitly suggest the correct answer, this did not mean to present the stories in a monotonous way, but tried to make the reading pleasant while not letting go to superfluous comments.

3 RESULTS

By using the sheet with standardized scores, it was possible to compare the results obtained by the children with normative data. The results show that six out of sixteen children have had a lower score than the average.

The test component that has seen generally more errors by children was the ninth on the moral values. In particular, it was noted that many children would respond well initially, but then, in the control questions to test the actual validity of the answer, they gave the wrong answer. Three children also gave the wrong answer in the third component, showing a difficulty to understand that two persons can express different emotions in the same situation depending on their belief about the context of the situation.

The data in Table 1 show that G. (Sub.7) had a better performance compared to classmates and high when compared to normative data.
According to this data one third of the classroom scores were below the 25th percentile.

4 DISCUSSION

During natural observations in classroom two children showed difficulties to cope with school demand (for example they refused to do a specific task or disturbed during lesson or cried to seek teachers attention) confirming teacher’s perceptions of a difficult classroom. Subjects n°4-6-8-9-13 (student n°4 in particular, which is the best friend of G.) with a scoring below the 25th percentile are at risk of emotional maladjustment.

Semi-structured interviews conducted with two teachers (math and Italian teacher) regarding each student of the classroom revealed that these pupils present difficulties in the emotional area not just at a meta-level (comprehension of emotion) but also at the level of the emotional regulation.

The interviews with teachers disclosed that the subjects n°4-6-8-9-13 present also socio-cultural or socio-economic disadvantage or traumatic life events (separation or divorce of parents). It is important to highlight that G., although shows good meta-emotional skills, according to teachers interviews, has difficulties in the regulation of his emotions at school.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The comprehension of emotions can be considered a meta-level of analysis that a child makes in order to understand his own and other feelings. Through the use of the Test of Emotion comprehension it has been examined the children’s ability of “perspective-taking” and to report on and ruminating on an experience of guilty. As argued by Harris, children’s ability to comprehend and “predict their own emotions likely affects their decision making about what course of action to take, […] this course of action can lead to - or prevent - certain emotional consequences, [in other words this meta-component let students look to the] future and make choices about what their emotional life should be like” [9, p. 329].

The emotion comprehension follows different developmental phases and each component appears at different time [10]. By the age of 3-4 years children can identify not only an emotion expressed by another child but also indicate the external causes of the emotion. By approximately 6-7 years, children understand the incidence of beliefs, as well as desires, emotional states, and they becomes able to control and regulate their experience. According to Albanese and Molina “the understanding of
emotional ambivalence (VIII), of the moral dimension of emotions (IX) and of possibility of regulation (VI) reflect a higher level of mental elaboration attained only in late childhood or even later” [8, p.40].

The results presented in the paper show that one third of the classroom falls below the first quartile showing a negative performance especially in the components related to morality and desire. In light of these findings, of the natural observations in the classroom and of the interviews with teachers, it was decided to design a hypothesis of intervention targeted to the acquisition and reinforcement of emotional skills for all pupils in the classroom and in particular on the moral dimension of emotions.

Furthermore, the fact that G. had higher emotional skills than the rest of his classmates and had improved, according to the teachers, his behaviour in the classroom is indicative of a psycho-educational work begun two years earlier on an individual setting in managing emotions, a mild pharmacological intervention and a networked approach of shared strategies which over the years has shown results. According to teachers, impulsivity in G., expressed through non-adaptive social behaviours, although improved, continued to be a characteristic of the child that was difficult to manage. The psycho-educational intervention undertaken by G. has opened a virtuous circle of positive reinforcements and behaviours that has improved his classroom stay and his relationships with his classmates. However, the highly difficult context in which G. is included can represent a continuous risk factor for the development and the perpetration of further problematic behaviours. Behavioural problems in children with ADHD, in fact, are often related to external factors like disadvantaged social or family environment, underlining the importance of the environment in the meta-emotional development.

In conclusion, in the case study presented, an educational design aimed at the acquisition of emotional skills for the whole classroom seems to be the way forward so that the results obtained at the individual level through networking between teachers, parents, educators and medical staff won't be lost. This study, finally, confirms the importance of a multi-modal intervention with children with ADHD, that considers not only the individual or parent level but that has to take place also in the classroom, between the child's classmates, in the socio-educational environment where he grows and learns day by day.

REFERENCES