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Basic Executive Functions in Early Childhood Education and their Relationship with Social Competence

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Abstract

Due to the relationship found in several studies between executive functions deficits and different psychopathological and behavioral disorders, research on the development of executive functions in children have increased in the last decade. In addition, the increase and improvement of executive functions have linked to the development of social competence. Also, the increase and improvement of social competence and academic achievement have also linked to the development of these functions. However, the researches that study the relationship between executive functions and social competence have focused mainly in adolescence and adulthood, or in people with some kind of disorder. Being less frequent studies in people without any neurological or psychological pathology or in child population. For this reason, the aim of this research is to understand the relationship between executive functions and social competence in children aged 5 years without associated pathologies. The study involved 119 students (60 boys and 59 girls) from 5 years of age, enrolled in the last year of Kindergarten, in two private but publicly funded schools in Granada. The results indicate that there is a positive relationship between social skills and executive functions. However, intervention programs in social competence rarely include executive functions as a key element to be worked on.

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1. Introduction

Antisocial behavior is a complex construct that can not be clearly conceptualized in a single framework, covering a wide range of disapproved social behavior (Rutter, 2003). However, most authors agree that antisocial behavior refers to a set of behaviors that involve property destruction, social norms violation and others basic rights humiliation and violation (Clakins & Keane, 2009; Murray & Farrington, 2010).

These behaviors are considered multi-causal nature, associated with several risk factors that enhance the development of these behaviors, such as contextual, personal, school or family factors (Farrington, 2005).

In addition to risk-factors, there are many protective-factors that promote the reduction of these risk-factors and facilitate that individuals acquire the skills so that their development is standardized, being social competence one of the most important factors in preventing antisocial behavior (Justicia, Benítez, Pichardo, Fernández, García, & Fernández, 2006). In this line, recent research has shown that good social skills are a protective factor against antisocial behavior such as bullying (Ttofi, Bowes, Farrington & Lösel, 2014; Vassallo, Edwards, Olsson & Renda, 2013)

Social competence is understood as the range of skills that allows the person to establish positive interpersonal relationships and facilitates an adequate social and scholar adjustment (Bierman & Welsh, 2000; Mcloughlin, 2009).

In addition, social competence performs a key role in preventing aggression, drug abuse, social isolation, crime or behavior problems such as peer abuse (Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1991; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001).

The difficulties in establishing good social relationships enhance psychological disorders development (Corapci, 2008). Moreover, there are consolidated relationship between social competence in early childhood and subsequent academic, social and psychological adjustment. Consequently, practice and learning social skills that shape social competence favoring adaptation, being essential to develop programs in early childhood intervention (Paula, 2001).

In addition, early interventions have a much lower economic cost for public administration (Reynolds & Temple, 2012), and, without such interventions, behavioral, emotional and social problems tend to worsen (Daly, Nicholls, Aggarwal, & Sander, 2014).

Social Competence and Executive Functions

Although there is no clear and uniform definition of executive functions, many authors agree that executive functions are the set of cognitive processes of higher order, allowing us to achieve objectives through self-regulation strategies, planning and resolution problems use (Séguin & Zelazo, 2005). Also, these functions include a neurocognitive processes series that allow our behavior is goal-directed and intentional, such as setting goals, selecting appropriate behaviors and incorrect behavior inhibition, organizing tasks, design plans and effective monitoring of himself (Delgado-Mejía & Etchepareborda, 2013; Gligorovic & BuhaĐurovic, 2012; Schoemaker, Mulder, Dekovic, & Matthys, 2013; Zelazo & Carlson, 2012).

Executive functions development is a long and complex process, which begins in pregnancy and extends into adulthood, and it is influenced by a variety of exogenous and endogenous processes (Anderson & Spencer-Smith, 2013).

Currently, several authors establish three basic executive functions: inhibition, working memory and cognitive flexibility (i.e., Diamond, 2013; Miyake, Friedman, Emerson, Witzki, Howerter, & Wager, 2000).

In this way, one of the essential processes of executive functions is inhibitory control, defined as the ability to control behavior, thoughts, attention and emotions choosing the needed or more appropriate answer option in a particular context, eliminating the preponderant but inadequate response and allowing individuals adjustment to social norms (Diamond, 2013). Moreover, it relates significantly with adaptive behavior in early childhood and can be a predictor of development (Eisenberg, Hofer, & Vaughan, 2007; Gligorovic & BuhaĐurovic, 2012).

Another executive functions basic processes is working memory, it is a term that refers to the ability to temporarily hold information in mind, select, manipulate and transform it without being perceptually present, guiding behavior toward a future goal (Baddeley, 1992; Ziermans et al., 2012). Inhibitory control, attached to working memory, can enhance the cognitive flexibility development of, essential for solving social conflicts, since it involves the ability to change interpersonal perspective (look at objects and situations from the point of view of another person).

Executive functions develop and improve very quickly from 3 to 5 years old, and it is in this period when first differences arise in cognitive functions (Zelazo, Frye, & Rapus, 1996). These individual differences in emotions

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