Increasing emotional intelligence among early adolescents: Mythodrama group psychotherapy approach

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**Abstract**

*Adolescents exhibit a range of behavior difficulties as a result of the many physical, emotional, and social stresses associated with this developmental stage. Conflicts and occasional aggressive outbursts are common in this period, but this behavior becomes problematic when becomes persistent. Allan Guggenbühl’s Mythodrama group psychotherapy approach of resolving conflict and bullying in a school setting has been proven successful in Europe and in USA. The aim of the current study was to provide further evaluation of Mythodrama group work to address emotional and behavioral problems with early adolescents. As emotional abilities and dispositions appears to play a crucial role for adjustment and well-being in adolescence period, the present study investigated, using a controlled experimental design, whether it is possible to increase Emotional Intelligence in pupils received Mythodrama group intervention during three months. Sixty three public school pupils aged 10- to 12-years-old (M of age =11.06, SD=0.59), identified by school staff as displaying emotional and behavioral difficulties, were administered with Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) – Childs form (Petrides, 2008) twice, prior and post Mythodrama group intervention. Repeated measures ANOVA revealed a statistically significant change in seven domains of emotional intelligence, while no significant changes were observed in control group except three of domains. These findings suggest that Emotional Intelligence can be improved using Mythodrama group intervention, but more follow-up research is required to reveal the persistence of the result and its influence on school academic achievements.*

**Key words**: *Mythodrama, emotional intelligence, early adolescents*

**Introduction**

In recent times increasing number of adolescents are reported to have emotional and behavioral problems (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2002). Early adolescent emotional and behavioral problems can be classified into two dimensions: internalizing and externalizing groups of problems. Internalizing problems refer to over controlled behaviors which include symptoms related to depression, anxiety, social withdrawal and somatic complains, while externalizing problems refer to under controlled and overt behaviors including aggression, acting out tendencies, disruptive, defiant, and hyperactive behaviors (Merrell, 2003; Zahn-Waxler, Klimes-Dougan & Slattery, 2000). As long as emotional and behavioral problems remain unidentified or untreated, these may have long lasting impact on various domains of functioning of child’s life (Suveg, Zeman, Flannery-Schroeder, & Cassano, 2005) ranging from poor school performance, sense of rejection, unemployment and psychiatric problems in later years (e.g., Hughes, Lourea-Waddell, & Kendall, 2008; Mash & Wolfe, 2005; Nock & Kazdin, 2002; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010). There is evidence that behavioral problems are for many children relatively stable over time (Bilancia & Rescorla, 2010; Blandon at al., 2010; Slemming at al., 2010) although strategic interventions can reduce these challenges (Brotman at al., 2011; Morrison and Braton, 2010).

Researches evidence bold link between emotional intelligence and behavioral problems in adolescence period. Cognitive abilities no more considered the only predictor of successful adaptation but emotional competencies should be taken into consideration

 The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) stems from Thorndike’s (1920) concept of “social intelligence” to refer to the ability to understand and manage people and to act wisely in human relations. The recent roots of the concept lie in Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, especially in his concepts of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence. Since there are different approaches to Emotional Intelligence, Petrides and Furnham (e.g. Petrides & Furnham 2000, 2001) proposed a distinction between two emotional intelligence constructs: trait EI (or trait emotional self-efficacy) and ability EI (or cognitive-emotional ability). This differentiation is based on the type of measurement used in the operationalization process. The first one, Trait EI which concerns behavioral dispositions and self-perceived abilities, is measured through self-report, whereas ability EI refers actual emotion-related abilities and must be measured through maximum-performance tests. Trait EI should be investigated with reference to personality hierarchies, whilst ability EI should be investigated with reference to cognitive ability hierarchies. Trait EI and ability EI are two different constructs conceptually, methodologically and empirically. Researches has consistently supported this distinction by revealing low correlations between the two (e.g. O’Connor & Little, 2003; Warwick & Nettelbeck, 2004). In this study we adopted the concept of Trait emotional intelligence, which is defined as a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions and dispositions at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides & Furnham, 2001).Trait Emotional Intelligence or Trait EI self-efficacy provides a comprehensive coverage of emotion-related personality facets.

 According to researches adolescents with higher trait emotional intelligence and stronger social skills are less likely to present emotional and behavioural difficulties ([Maria S. Poulou](http://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?Contrib=Poulou%2C+M+S), 2014), get higher test scores and grades (Jaeger, 2003) and are less likely to have been excluded from school (Petrides,Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004). The higher trait EI is associated with greater well-being and higher self-esteem (Schutte, Malouff, Simunek, McKenley, & Hollander, 2002), as well as a lower risk developing psychological disorders (Gross & Munoz, 1995). The evidence corroborates an important role for trait emotional intelligence in peer relations and socio emotional competence (N. Frederickson, K.V. Petrides, E. Simmonds, 2011).

The therapeutic group work Mythodrama, or as often it is described the "tales, fiction and horror technique" was developed during the last couple of years by Dr. Allan Guggenbühl. The background theory of this group approach is rooted in analytical psychology. Mythodrama group approach is a possible crisis intervention technique for children and juveniles with behavioral and emotional problems. Mythodrama psychotherapy group approach is widely used in Europe, especially in Switzerland as well as United States in terms of theSeven Step Mythodramatic Intervention Program. This program of resolving conflict and bullying in a school setting has proven to be successful in Europe (Guggenbühl A. et al, 2006) and in US schools (Al-Sammaray L., 2011).

The goal of the current study was to examine the efficacy of an intervention based on A.Guggenbuhl’s Mythodrama group approach with young adolescents. More specifically, the study aimed to address the following research questions: Is a Mythodrama group intervention effective in improving trait EI in early adolescents who engage in emotional and behavioral difficulties?

**Methodology of Research**

This study used a repeated measures control design. The main independent variable was time, with assessment occurring twice before the intervention (Time 1) and immediately after the intervention (Time 2). The dependent variables included measure of trait emotional intelligence gathered from participants.

The main hypothesis was as follows: trait EI could be improved among early adolescents after receiving Mythodrama group psychotherapy intervention.

*Participants*

The sample consisted of 63 participants, 40 in the Mythodrama groups, 23 in the controlled group. There were 50% of male and female in Mythodrama group and 47.83% female and 52.17% male in the control group. All participants were public school (Tbilisi, Georgia) 10-12 year old adolescents. The participants for both groups were selected based on emotional and behavioral problems reported by the teachers and parents.

*Measurements and procedure*

The effectiveness of the intervention was assessed by the Georgian version of Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Child Form (TEIQue-CF). The Child Form is based on a sampling domain that has been specifically developed for children aged between 8 and 12 years.  It comprises 75 items responded to on a 5-point scale (1 completely disagree and 5 completely agree) and measures nine distinct facets (Mavroveli, Petrides, Shove, & Whitehead, 2008) (see Table 1). The participants of Mythodrama groups completed the measures two times: prior to Mythodrama circle and at the end of the circle. One Mythodrama circle consisted of 12-15 sessions of two and half hours, one session per week. In each group participated 10 pupils. Mythodrama sessions were conducted by the interventionists in a larger room in the school building. The teachers were not present. Participants of the control groups completed the same measures as the training group but were not attended the Mythodrama sessions.

**Table 1. The Sampling Domain of Trait Emotional Intelligence in children (Mavroveli, S.,Petrides, K. V., Shove, C., & Whitehead, 2008)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  Facets  |  short descriptions of facets |  Example items |
| Adaptability  | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of how well they adapt to new situations and people  | I find it hard to get used to a new school year |
| Affective disposition  | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of the frequency and intensity with which they experience emotions | I’m a very happy kid |
| Emotion expression  | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of how effectively they can express their emotions | I always find the words to show how I feel |
| Emotion perception | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of how accurately they identify their own and others emotions  | It’s easy for me to understand how I feel |
| Emotion regulation | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of how well they can control their emotions | I can control my anger |
| Low impulsivity | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of how effectively they can control their emotions | I do not like waiting to get what I want |
| Peer relations | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their classmates | I listen to other children’s problems |
| Self-esteem | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of their self worth | I feel great about myself |
| Self -motivation | Concerns children’s self-perceptions of their drive and motivation | I always try to become better at school |

**Results of Research**

An independent-sample t-test was conducted to compare the variables scores for both the training and the control group. Table 1 showed that there were no baseline differences between the training and the control group with the exception of Adaptability and Emotion Expression for which scores in the Mythodrama group were higher.

One way repeated measures analyses (ANOVA) revealed a significant difference over time for scores on most TEIQue-CF facets in Mythodrama group, namely: Adaptation Wilks’lamda=0.706, F(1.39)=16.20, p=.00, ηp2 = .294; Emotion Expression Wilks’lamda=0.597, F(1.39)=26.37, p=.00, ηp2=.403; Emotion Perception Wilks’lamda=0.563, F(1.39)=30.23, p=.00, ηp2 = .437; Self Esteem Wilks’lamda=0.641, F(1.39)=21.80, p=.00, ηp2=.359; Low Impulsivity Wilks’lamda=0.757, F(1.39)=12.48, p=.001, ηp2=.243; Peer Relations Wilks’lamda=0.581, F(1.39)=28.09, p=.00, ηp2 = .419; Affective Disposition Wilks’lamda=0.674, F(1.39)=18.82, p=.00, ηp2=.326; no significant changes were found for Emotion Regulation Wilks’lamda=0.994, F(1.39)=.221, p=.641, ηp2=.006; and Self-Motivation Wilks’lamda=0.920, F(1.39)=3.40, p=.00, ηp2=.080. Significant changes were not found in control group except Adaptability Wilks’lamda=0.592, F(1.22)=15.16, p=.001, ηp2=.408; Emotion Expression Wilks’lamda=0.337, F(1.22)=43.32, p=.00, ηp2 =.663; and Self Esteem Wilks’lamda=0.673, F(1.22)=10.68, p=.004, ηp2=.327; (for descriptive statistics see Table 2).

Mixed-Model Group (training vs. control) \_ Time (Time 1 vs. Time 2) repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed on each facets of TELQue-CF, with group as the between-subjects factor and time as the within-subject factor. Analyses yielded a significant GroupXTime interaction for Emotion Perception Wilks’lambda=0.932, F(1.61)=4.471, p=.039, ηp2=.068 and for Affective Disposition Wilks’lambda=0.924, F(1.61)=5.002, p=.029, ηp2=.076.

**Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance of Differences BetweenTime 1 and Time 2 for Each Variable and Each Group**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Intervention Group (n=40)** | **Control Group (n=23)** |
|  | **Time 1** | **Time 2** |  | **Time1** | **Time 2** |  |
| **variable** | **M (SD)** | **M(SD)** | **F(1.39)** | **P** | **M(SD)** | **M(SD)** | **F(1.22)** | **P** |
| Adaptability | 3.47(0.74) | 3.79(0.48) | 16.20 | .00 | 2.97(0.56) | 3.20(0.59) | 15.16 | .001 |
| Emotion Expression | 3.30(0.49) | 3.57(0.60) | 26.37 | .00 | 2.60(0.36) | 2.91(0.30) | 43.20 | .00 |
| Emotion Perception | 3.52(0.58) | 3.98(0.52) | 30.23 | .00 | 3.48(0.50) | 3.67(0.60) | 2.75 | .111 |
| Self Motivation | 3.90(0.58) | 4.05(0.50) | 3.40 | 0.72 | 3.74(0.74) | 3.91(0.55) | 1.09 | .308 |
| Self Esteem | 3.29(0.67) | 3.72(0.53) | 21.80 | 0.00 | 3.32(0.76) | 3.56(0.76) | 10.68 | .00 |
| Low Impulsivity | 2.79(0.67) | 3.10(0.69) | 12.48 | 0.001 | 2.81(0.53) | 2.97(0.51) | 3.29 | .08 |
| Peer Relations | 3.81(0.62) | 4.15(0.42) | 28.09 | 0.00 | 3.57(0.49) | 3.80(0.59) | 3.40 | .07 |
| Emotion Regulation | 3.43(0.49) | 3.40(0.40) | .221 | .641 | 3.41(0.50) | 3.54(0.42) | 4.14 | .06 |
| Affective Disposition | 3.29(0.73) | 3.77(0.54) | 18.82 | .00 | 3.31(0.70) | 3.42(0.54) | 1.46 | .23 |

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether Emotional Intelligence could be increased in early adolescents reporting as emotional and behavioral problems after receiving Mythodrama intervention. The results show that Mythodrama is effective intervention in optimizing participant trait emotional intelligence (trait EI). Our findings indicated that compared with the control group, intervention group shows a significant improvement in trait EI facets, namely Emotion Perception, Affective Disposition, Low Impulsivity and Peer Relations directly after the intervention.

Our findings corroborate those of several studies addressing the question of optimizing trait emotional intelligence following carefully developed intervention programmes (see also Nelis, Quoidbach, Mikolajczak, & Hansenne, 2009; Richard A. Ruttledge and K. V. Petrides, 2011). However, most of the studies refer to late adolescence and adult period of life. In this view our findings are particularly breaking a new ground, but future research is called for to explore further correlations with emotional and behavioral problems. Trait EI is a multidimensional construct comprising several broad sub-domains, including well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability. As K.V. Petrides at al. (2006) point when certain sub-domains appear to be strongly associated with a criterion than the global construct itself, it is always useful to follow-up exploratory studies of global constructs with in-depth investigations of their constituent sub-domains. In view of this the present study tries to explore better understanding of which specific facets improve during and after psychological intervention, in this case, Mythodrama group work.

We have to note that Mythodrama group psychotherapy approach is not oriented specifically on training emotional skills and providing theoretical knowledge of emotion related competencies. Mythodrama relates participants to a story, legend, myth or real event, which are carefully selected by group therapists according to the problem, challenge or difficulty the group is facing (Guggenbühl A., 1999). Stories evoke emotions that are expressed and discussed during sessions in the whole group via drama performance or drawing. Mythodrama functions as a container, as during sessions the pupils have to confront their bad feelings, conflicts, aggression and violence. Mythodrama enables them to speak about their difficulties in a playful way and find new perspectives. Since the research evidence effects of Mythodrama in group cohesion, bulling and aggression (Guggenbühl, A. et al. 2006), it was expected that the trait EI facets responding the understanding of own and others emotions, such as motion perception and peer relations would be increased.

Researches indicate that children who perceive themselves as emotionally adept are more desirable as friends than children who perceive themselves as emotionally cold and withdrawn. (Petrides et al. 2006). The negative association between bulling and trait EI was confirmed by researches (e.g. Petrides et al. 2004; Mavroveli and Sánchez-Ruiz 2011; Mavroveli et al. 2009) as well as aggressive and disruptive behavior (Petrides et al. 2006).

Peer difficulties in childhood, such as peer rejection, aggression and withdrawal, can have damaging consequences for later personal adjustment (Parker & Asher, 1987; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). The vital importance of friends as an information source and an emotional resource (Blatchford, 1996; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995) require a careful examination of the factors that could facilitate or impede socially adaptive behavior in school and outside (Petrides et al., 2006) Low trait emotional self-efficacy may be a key risk factor, alienating children from their peers and leading to antisocial conduct and delinquency later on in life (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004,).

**Conclusions**

A Growing number of studies emphasize the importance of social-emotional learning for children’s mental health, social relationships, and school performance (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). As Trait emotional intelligence along with the social skills appears to be influential factors of children’s emotional and behavioral difficulties, interventions designed to improve Emotional Intelligence in children have multiplied in the last few decades. However, very few have been rigorously evaluated (Matthews et al., 2002).

Since trait emotional intelligence seems to be the predictor of numerous positive outcomes such as social relationships, school performance, psychological well being, our findings attain practical value for educators. It opens a new application of Mythodrama intervention by making accent on improvement emotional competencies in early adolescents.

While the results of this study are encouraging, a number of limitations have been identified regarding the methodologies used in the research design. First, In order to draw firm conclusions about the positive and long term effects of the intervention, the results would have to be compared to a six month follow up results. Second, the relatively small sample size makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other adolescents, and to answer questions such as whether the intervention outcomes are the same for boys and girls. Third, the follow up data from parents and teachers were collected in many cases anecdotal, quantitative measures would have to be done to find the firm associations between trait EI and emotional and behavioral difficulties as an effect of Mythodrama intervention.

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