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Using the Storytelling Method to Hear Children's Perspectives and Promote Their Social-
Emotional Competence

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of a playful, narrative, vignette-based method, called Story Magician's Play Time (SMPT), in supporting children's social-emotional reasoning and in helping children practice their social skills. We set out to examine (1) in what ways children use SMPT sessions to explore social interaction situations and to practice social skills, and (2) what story content and narrative play behavior during the SMPT sessions reveal about the social-emotional competence of children, in terms of acquisition and performance skills. The data were collected during SMPT storytelling sessions where 5–6-year-old children narrated stories of familiar but challenging daily situations and enacted their story in play. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results suggest that the children had knowledge of socially responsible behaviors, but that they also had difficulties executing these behaviors in play. SMPT enabled the children to participate, experiment, and reflect on the emotions and strategies needed for developing socially sustainable solutions.

Keywords: children's perspective, intervention, social-emotional competence, storytelling

Using the Storytelling Method to Hear Children's Perspectives and Promote Their Social-Emotional Competence

Introduction

Comprehending and evaluating children's perceptions and subjective experiences in relation to their social-emotional challenges is essential in supporting social-emotional competence. Welsh and Bierman (2003) suggested that learning about children's reasoning, their feelings about themselves, and their relationships can help us to better understand the unique challenges that children face so that we might better assist in their education and development. Additionally, the experience of being listened to and made to be fully involved in the process of narrating their perspectives can support children's self-expression, self-awareness, and self-esteem (see, e.g., Engel, 1995). These activities are important for enhancing children's social, emotional, language, and identity development (Cremin & Flewitt, 2017).

This study introduces a storytelling intervention method, which we have called Story Magician's Play Time (SMPT), that enables children to engage in a playful situation and narrate their knowledge and perspectives. At the same time, the SMPT method provides adults with insights regarding children's experiences and behaviors related to emotionally and socially challenging situations. The development of this method was inspired by Gumpel (2007), who argued that, in many cases, children's emotional and behavioral difficulties could be considered as problems of executing already understood behaviors, rather than problems with the acquisition of behavioral knowledge (i.e., difficulties in performing behaviors, even when correct behavior is understood). Informed by this view, we sought to study whether young children with social-emotional challenges could express their knowledge regarding emotions and socially acceptable behaviors through storytelling, while

also testing the children's interpersonal reasoning skills and self-regulatory capacities during play.

The benefits of using role play in promoting children's development, both in typically and atypically developing children, and in using play for therapeutic purposes, especially in children aged 3–8, are well-known in a variety of disciplines (see, e.g., Drewes & Schaefer, 2016; Landreth, 2012). Children express themselves and strive to make sense of their world through play, stories, and narratives (Engel, 1995). The examination of these processes in children with social-emotional challenges is at the heart of this present study. Additionally, this study contributes to the body of evidence that addresses young children's (aged 5–6 years) social-emotional learning through stories and narratives (e.g., Morris, McGuire, & Walker, 2017; Wallbaum, Ananthanarayan, Borojeni, Heuten, & Boll, 2017) by (1) exploring the interconnectedness of narratives and play, and (2) examining the children's performance in imagined situations, which necessitate social-emotional problem-solving.

Theoretical Frame

We acknowledge the depth of research supporting the multifaceted effect of cognitive, socio-emotional, communicative, biological, and environmental dimensions on the development of children's social-emotional competence (see Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010). We drew from developmental science to understand the connection between emotional and social domains of development, as well as the role of emotional knowledge, cognitive reasoning, and various self-regulatory mechanisms in social-emotional difficulties (e.g., Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012).

According to previous studies (e.g., Carter et al., 2010), a significant number of young children from infancy to age 7 exhibit various social-emotional difficulties, including

problems regulating their social interactions and problems with behavioral or emotional functioning. These difficulties may stem from either intrinsic factors (e.g., temperament, self-regulation abilities, expressiveness, emotional competence) and extrinsic factors (e.g., parenting practices, parent-child interactions), and in some cases both (Denham, Bassett, Echeverria, & Knox, 2009). Children's behavior in social situations is brought on by a complex interplay of these factors. Metacognitive skills are needed to regulate emotions and behaviors and to adjust and understand social relationships. Metacognitive skills include attention and executive function skills (e.g., inhibitory control and attention set-shifting), communication, and different social-emotional skills (e.g., attribution, theory of mind, empathy; Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010). Higher-order cognitive functions (e.g., identifying, labeling, and reflecting on one's emotions and behaviors) develop from close interactions and encounters with others, during which children's active participation in knowledge construction, as well as the role of play and imagination, are emphasized (e.g., Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010; Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Cremin & Flewitt, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978).

On a theoretical level, constructs of emotion awareness, emotion knowledge, and emotion management as well as social awareness, responsible social problem-solving, and relationship skills are all included under the conceptual umbrella of social-emotional competence (Denham, 2006; Weissberg et al., 2015). Social-emotional competence plays a key role in many areas of child development. Interventions that aim to improve children's social-emotional competence are associated with improving children's academic performance, social-emotional skills, and attitudes towards oneself and others. They are also associated with reducing behavioral and emotional problems (Weissberg et al., 2015). Furthermore, young children's emotional knowledge uniquely predicts their social competence (Denham et al., 2003). Although studies have shown that interventions that aim

to improve social-emotional competence are successful, opposing views argue that direct teaching is not the best approach for fostering these skills.

Gumpel (2007) presents a view that opposes direct teaching programs. Based on Gresham's (2002) ideas, Gumpel differentiates between acquisition deficits (i.e., the target skill has not been acquired and is not in the child's behavior repertoire) and performance deficits (i.e., the target skill is in the child's skill repertoire but is not being performed at an adequate level) in social skills learning (2007, pp. 351–352). Thus, rather than being an acquisition deficit, the fundamental problem in social behaviors appears to be rooted in various self-regulatory mechanisms (Gumpel, 2007). The idea of learning from the knowledge children have acquired in different social situations and then creating opportunities for children to practice their reasoning in socially and emotionally meaningful contexts, has guided our research approach.

Hearing the Perspectives of Children to Explore Social-Emotional Competence

Childhood studies (e.g., Christensen & James, 2008) have brought insights into children's active role in society and the unquestionable need and obligation to directly consult children about their perspectives and experiences surrounding their well-being and development. Listening to a child regarding issues that matter to them is rooted in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). Several studies have shown that listening to children provides unique information about their feelings and thoughts. However, the field of psychology maintains distrust of the ability of children with certain challenges to produce clinically valuable insights (Hogan, 2005; Klimkeit et al., 2006). Nevertheless, children with externalizing problems have been shown to be able to provide useful knowledge about their feelings and behaviors (Klimkeit et al., 2006). Moreover, the methods of listening to children must be carefully considered. Several studies (e.g., Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Cremin &

Flewitt, 2017; Veale, 2005) suggest applying communicational means such as play, stories, narrating, and drawing to tap into the knowledge and understand the perspectives of young children.

From the child's perspective, the experience of being heard and of being fully involved and the process of telling a story can be regarded as important. Children's stories and narratives about real or imagined events produce insights into children's experiences, their ways of thinking, and their personalities (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Engel, 1995). Narratives might also help the child cope with challenging situations and the emotions that are rooted in real-life events (Asplund Ingemark, 2013). Thus, children use stories to make emotional sense not only of themselves but also of other people (Engel, 1995). The potential for using narratives and stories in children's social-emotional learning has been acknowledged and some studies (e.g., Morris, McGuire, & Walker, 2017; Wallbaum et al., 2017) have explored new intervention materials relating to this area. SMPT contributes to this body of research by using narratives and play as an aid to hearing children's subjective perspectives towards performance in socially and emotionally challenging situations.

As narrating stories can be challenging for young children, the use of different objects, materials, and toys can facilitate the narrating process significantly (Wallbaum et al., 2017). Further, we argue that in the context of supporting children with social-emotional challenges and promoting their skills, we must know how young children subjectively experience socially and emotionally challenging situations. This requires ethical sensitivity and the adoption of a child-centered approach, which enables and supports the children's right to express their feelings and thoughts, promotes their participation, and helps them to reflect on their experiences (Cameron, 2005).

Method

Aims of the Current Study

There is a shortage of research-informed experiences with methods that can facilitate better understanding of children's perspectives on socially and emotionally challenging situations, while also promoting social and emotional reasoning and performance skills in children. This study aims to address that shortage by answering the following research questions:

1. How do children with social and emotional challenges use storytelling as a method by which to explore familiar social interaction situations and practice the social performance skills they need in their real life?
2. What do children's story content and narrative play behavior during storytelling sessions reveal about children's emotional competence in terms of acquisition of knowledge regarding social interaction and performance-related skills?

The SMPT Method

We (specifically authors Turja and Laakso) developed in Finland a method known as Story Magician's Play Time, which is based on the well-grounded idea that listening to children's subjective perceptions regarding socially and emotionally challenging situations is critical for developing successful interventions (Welsh & Bierman, 2003). SMPT was developed as a playful storytelling approach for listening to children. It is derived from Vygotsky's (1978) theorization about the role of play as the leading source of development in the preschool years and as a mental space for a child to fulfill their different desires, incentives, and tendencies on an imaginary level, without the situational constraints of reality.

In this study, the aim of the SMPT sessions was to create an imaginary situation for children in which a chosen vignette-picture depicting a familiar and somehow challenging

social interaction could evoke ideas and raise internal meanings, tendencies, and motives for the child during storytelling and playing. The use of creative methods can serve as constructivist tools that help children to give meanings to their experiences and to analyze them (Veale, 2005). We aimed to ensure that the child could explore social interactions, practice control, and relate their desires to play rules during storytelling and play. The SMPT sessions can be conducted in diverse educational or therapeutic settings, done in an on-going manner or as an intervention period including follow-up. The method is designed to help all children with social-emotional challenges. The method has been used by students, graduate students, and researchers.

At the beginning of the SMPT sessions, the children were introduced to a dog puppet called Barney (see Picture 1) who encouraged the children to tell their stories and offered them feedback and an appraisal after each story was told. The pictures and play materials also served as support for the construction of stories. Thus, emotion cards representing different emotions for emotion recognition, miniature wooden dolls, furniture, and scenery were used to stimulate storytelling and involve the child in imaginary situations and play. The researchers emphasized to the children that all stories were welcome. The children were asked to consent to have their stories video recorded. It was explained to them that an imaginary Story was interested in their stories.



Picture 1. The Barney puppet, figures, vignette-picture, emotion cards, and other play materials used in the SMPT sessions.

The SMPT sessions proceeded according to the following structure:

1. Introduce the method to the child at the beginning of the first session. Allow for some warm-up time with the researcher at the beginning of every session to establish a safe and comfortable atmosphere.
2. Choose a vignette-pictures for the story prompt. Vignette-pictures depicted emotionally-tense social situations such as being excluded from play by peers, the child not getting to purchase what they want in a shop, the child refusing to brush their teeth in the evening, the child refusing to eat, and the child being bored and having nothing to do.
3. Construct the storyline verbally (e.g., what has happened in the situation and what will happen in the future so that everyone is happy again).

4. Discuss the characters and their thoughts and feelings in the pictured situation with the support of the emotion cards (i.e., social awareness).
5. Build a play scenario for enacting the crafted story and decide the roles for the child and the researcher and the names of all the characters.
6. Play the story together.
7. Discuss—with the mediating puppet dog—the crafted story and social situation in question with regard to the child's experiences.

Conducting a joint discussion and encouraging the child to reflect on the story is important because it is plausible that the narratives created during the SMPT sessions are not just fiction but have roots in the child's daily life experiences (Engel, 2005). The role of the researcher in this process has to operate in an empathetic and reflective manner (Cameron, 2005) in cooperation with the child to scaffold the child's activity and participate in the storytelling, play, and construction of knowledge. Two of researchers conducting the SMPT sessions in the present study, were the developers of the method. Both were experienced in conducting research with children. Since the use of this method necessitates particular training, the third researcher received training for previously mentioned developers. The method was tested and modified several times before collecting the actual data.

Participants and Data Collection

The data collection of this in-depth qualitative study was embedded in a "Family School" intervention program (Barton & Sandberg 1993) aimed at kindergarten children with overactive and challenging behaviors and their families. The Family School included separate programs for children and their parents, and each group participated in the program ten times. Parents typically described their children as having problems obeying rules and following

instructions. They also said that their children experienced difficulties in social relationships and with controlling their emotions.

Eleven Finnish children (nine boys and two girls) aged 5 to 6 participated in the SMPT sessions and narrated a total of 37 stories. All the children had difficulties with self-regulation and they had been assigned to the Family School program by a medical statement. Moreover, many of the children's parents and other educators had expressed their concern about their challenging behavior. However, for the purpose of this study and piloting SMPT, we did not collect more details regarding the specifics of the children's difficulties and diagnoses. The SMPT sessions were executed as previously described, and the duration of the video-recorded sessions varied from 10 minutes to 22 minutes. Each child was supposed to participate in an SMPT session three times; however, two of the boys participated only once and we respected their decision not to participate in more sessions.

Analysis of the Data

The data were analyzed inductively, using theoretically-oriented thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first phase involved transcribing all the video-recorded SMPT sessions. The transcriptions were 265-pages (Times New Roman, 12 pt., line spacing 1.15). Next, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading it through several times.

The second phase of the analysis involved coding all the data using MS Word. Altogether, 106 different codes were assigned to 7,143 responses. Codes included: *positive feedback, bullying, choosing a character, apologizing, emotion labeling, taking a role, aggression, having fun, and disobeying*. For example, a child's statement "We will play with the wooden dolls, after I have told [the story]" was coded as *motivation towards narration and play*, and "maybe he has done something naughty for them [as the child was excluded from play]" was coded as *interpretation of cause and effect in a social situation*.

To enhance the reliability of the data analysis, two researchers each coded the data and compared their coding, reaching an agreement of 81%, which suggests a high inter-rater agreement in the coding. In the case of a disagreement, the response was reviewed again and consensus over the code was reached through discussion.

The third phase of analysis involved searching for common themes in the data based on the research questions. First, we generated summaries of each of the narrated stories to (1) find patterns, (2) make comparisons between the children's stories, and (3) determine similarities and differences. After creating the summaries, we were able to identify candidate main and sub-themes.

In the fourth phase, we reviewed all the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset.

In the final phase, we narrowed down, defined, and labeled the themes according to our research questions and counted the frequencies relating to each theme (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). In the results, these frequencies are reported as percentages for clarity.

The whole analysis process was executed carefully and systematically. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, researcher triangulation was employed (e.g., employing inter-rater coding, discussions among researchers regarding the analysis process, and the results), and we presented the results using original examples from the data and provided a detailed description of the entire research process.

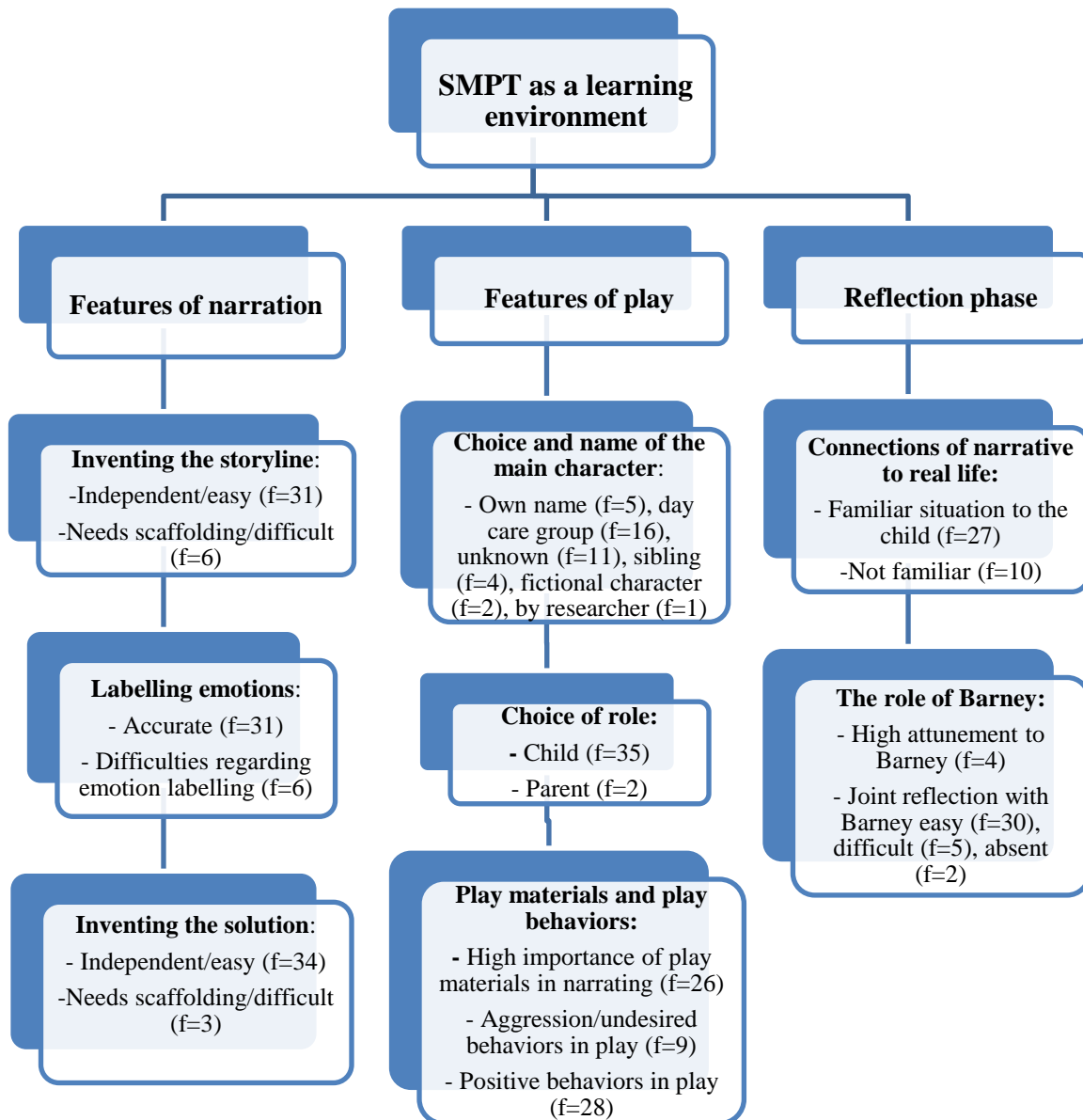


Figure 1. Main and sub-categories and frequencies regarding the first research question.

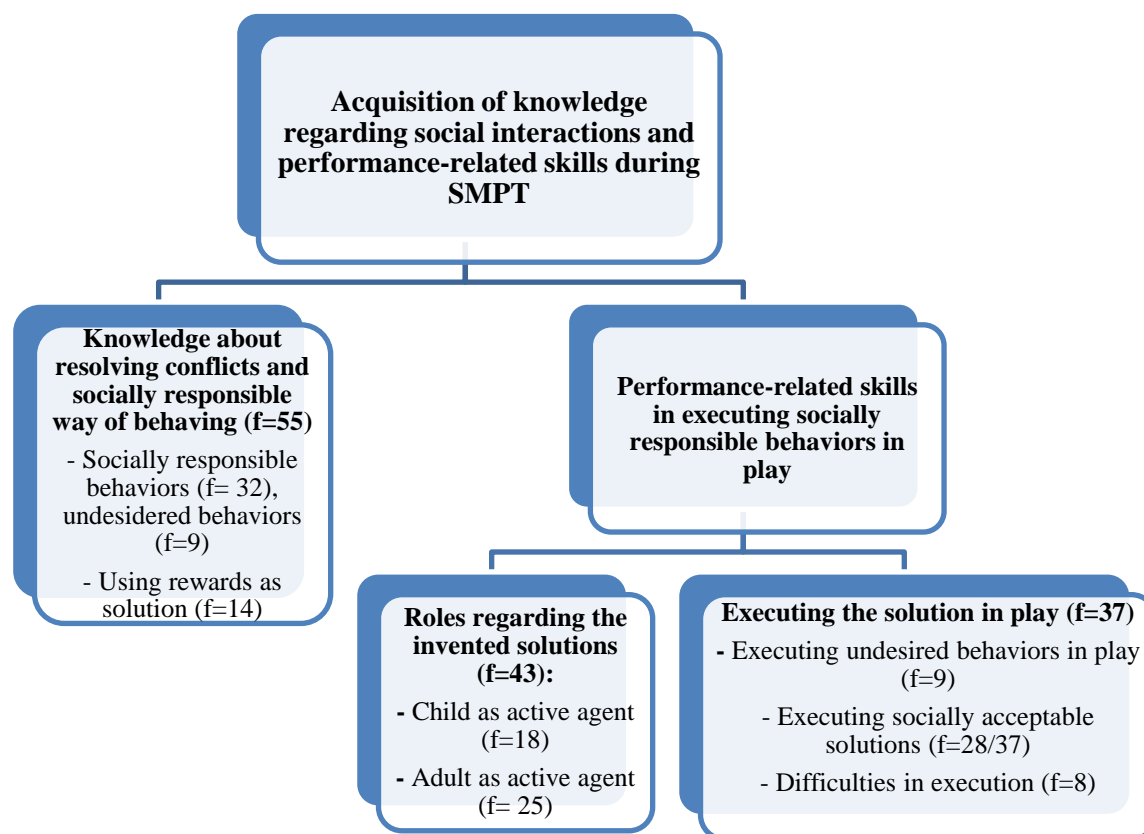


Figure 2. Main and sub-categories and frequencies regarding the second research question.

In Figure 2, the number of solutions reported ($f=55$) and the roles regarding the invented solutions ($f=43$) are higher than the total amount of stories ($n=37$), since some children gave multiple solutions to the situation. In some case, the child planned ($f=9$, see Figure 1) or initially executed ($f=8$) socially undesired behaviors; however, as the story went along all children eventually executed socially acceptable solutions (e.g., apologized for their behavior), and the frequency ($29/37$) describes this: 29 times the children's solution was initially socially acceptable; in all stories, socially acceptable behaviors eventually occurred.

Ethical Standpoints

Various ethical standpoints were considered in the research design of this study. The research design was carefully planned and pre-tested before starting the data collection. Our

leading principle was that the SMPT sessions were executed in a child-friendly manner. Thus, the children were the main actors in the sessions and their ideas, feelings, and wishes were appreciated and respected throughout the research process (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Morrow, 2008). The SMPT sessions necessitated a confidential and respectful relationship between the children participating and the researcher leading the session. This, therefore, required that the researcher gain the trust of the participants, constantly exhibit great sensitivity towards them, and remain cognizant of the power dynamic inherent in their relationship with the children (Cameron, 2005; Morrow, 2008).

We employed standard ethical guidelines included principles such as not harming children, obtaining the children's and parents' informed consents for the research, and creating a supportive and encouraging research environment (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Cameron, 2005). In addition to parents' consent, a written research consent was made with each child, which the child accepted by stamping their fingerprint mark on it. Finally, we took steps throughout the entire research process to ensure confidentiality and privacy (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). For example, the data were stored in a secure password-protected drive, the data were only utilized for reporting the results, the children were assigned pseudonyms, and the video-recordings were never displayed for anyone other than the members of the research group.

Results

The aim of the study was to develop insights as to whether and how the children used the SMPT sessions as a context to explore social interaction situations and practice social performance skills. Some of the children seemed in the first session a bit hesitant to start narrating the story from the vignette-picture because the procedure was new to them. This problem was quickly solved by introducing play materials to motivate the children. In other sessions, if the child had difficulty coming up with the storyline, the researcher suggested

finding the play materials first and then thinking about the plot; this method facilitated the children's narrations. The children enjoyed choosing the wooden characters for play, setting the stage with different accessories, and determining the actions (e.g., selecting a meal); moreover, the children often added extra characters (e.g., pets) to their stories. Thus, the play materials had high importance as facilitators of narrations and play.

SMPT Sessions as a Learning Environment

In the told and enacted stories, imaginary and real-world aspects were observable in the names the children chose for the characters. Two of the children named characters in their story after fictional characters (e.g., Robin Hood, Donald Duck). However, as the following example illustrates, the children typically gave the characters names they were familiar with in their real-life relationships:

Example 1: Introduction to Anton's character.

Researcher: Is that a girl?

Anton: Yes. Let's say Samantha.

Researcher: Samantha, okay.

Anton: 'Cause in our daycare center we also have a girl called Samantha.

In this example, the child selected a name he was familiar with at his daycare center, which was the most common (44%) justification for names. According to Gupta (2009), children need decision-making skills when choosing characters, organizing a stage, or inventing a plot. For some children, it seemed to be challenging to come up with a name for a character. When this happened, the researcher offered the child help by suggesting a name, which the child either accepted or rejected. Usually, the children could name the main character easily, but they often had trouble coming up with names for the secondary characters. In 14% of the stories, the children used their own names for the main characters.

However, the overall tendency to not use their own name could indicate that the children wanted to distance their story from the situation created in play (e.g., Asplund Ingemark, 2013).

In most narrations (84%), the children invented the storyline with ease and needed only a few prompts from the researcher. However, 17% of the children experienced difficulties either in interpreting the situation in the vignette-picture (6%) or in creating the storyline (11%). Although the children and the researcher collaborated during the narration, it was not always clear for the researcher whether the children were eliciting the happenings of their story or their real life. On four occasions (with three children), the children's tone of voice and expressions seemed to become irritable or even angry if the researcher failed to interpret their intentions correctly. The situation was resolved quickly when the researcher finally understood the child's idea or suggestion. Thus, it was observed how children can oscillate easily between reality (world of *what is*) and play (world of *what if*), which can be difficult for an adult, despite their willingness to understand and follow. Engel (2005) described this process as follows: "Children explore through their narrative play the enacted or narrated world of *what is*, which mirrors every-day lived consensual reality, and the enacted or narrated domain of *what if*, which explores the alternatives for such reality" (p. 515). This alteration between reality (e.g., own experiences of happenings and own ways to react in situations) and play (e.g., immersion in play roles and experimenting with boundaries) was clearly manifested in the SMPT sessions and it offered possibilities to not only imagine and experiment but also practice problem-solving and social-emotional skills in the safe context of play (Veale, 2005).

The SMPT sessions offered opportunities to elicit the children's knowledge of the emotions represented in the vignette-pictures and relate to the social situation in question. Children were quite capable of identifying emotions and only 17% had difficulty in either

labeling the emotion or connecting the correct emotion to picture on the emotion card. In addition, the SMPT sessions enabled children to explore different social situations by taking different roles during play.

In each session, the children were asked which role they would like to play and what they would like the role of the researcher to be. In only two of the narrated stories (6%), did the child chose to play the role of parent. It was far more common for the children to adopt the role of a child, and they often chose to be a child who had experienced difficulties in social situations (e.g., was bullied, was misbehaving). It is plausible that, as previously mentioned, the vignette-pictures used as a baseline for the stories represented situations that were familiar to the children, so the children tended to choose a role for themselves that aligned with their experience of the world of *what is*. Nevertheless, in the world of *what if*, the children could still become emotionally attuned to their role, particularly in narrated stories that included aggressive behavior. In seven stories (19%), narrated by three boys, the children planned aggressive elements into their stories and then enacted them in play. These included hurting other people, staining others with feces, making threats, and forcefully restricting others. The following example illustrates this type of story:

Example 2: Michael is planning his story about a boy who refuses to eat.

Researcher: Nicholas is so angry. How does his mother feel?

Michael: Umm [thinking]... Sad.

Researcher: Why is the mother sad?

Michael: Because Nicholas refuses to come and eat.

Researcher: Yes... you said that she is asking him to come and eat. What does

Nicholas say to her?

Michael: He says I will not go to eat [with angry tone of voice].

Researcher: How could they both be happy? How could this situation be resolved?

Michael: So that she puts harness into the bench and puts him to eat there.

Researcher: Oh, she would put him into harness?

Michael: Yeah.

Researcher: How does Nicholas feel if he sits in the harnesses?

Michael: Well, he wouldn't be mean anymore. He couldn't come [off the harness].

Researcher: Okay. Could he be allowed to come out of the harnesses if he promises to eat properly?

Michael: If he had a hunting knife in his hand.

Researcher: Oh, he threatens his mother, is that so?

Michael: Yes, he swings at her with his knife and she goes [away].

Researcher: The boy swings at the mother with a knife?

Michael: Yes, then she goes and he gets out.

Researcher: Then he gets out of the harness?

Michael: Yes. [...] He just removes the harness and goes back to play in his room.

Researcher: Well, the mother is not very happy, is she?

Michael: Well, no.

Researcher: How do they reach an agreement then?

Michael: Well, he will apologize...

In his story, Michael narrated the character's aggressive behavior towards his mother, and later, during the play phase, Michael wanted to enact the story plot. He instructed the researcher, who was playing the role of the mother, to put him into a harness and he then swung with an imaginary knife. Michael was very persistent in enacting the plot, but in the end, he came up with a solution to resolve the situation: the mother would put him in time-out and after that, the child would be peaceful. In this story, as in all the other ones involving

aggressive behavior, the children calmed down after they were able to execute aggression in the safe context of play.

In some stories (25%), the aggressive behavior seemed to be prompted by the desire to test the existing boundaries of the situation (see Engel, 2005) and to display aggression or non-desired behaviors in play. For example, the children tested whether the researcher would allow them to talk about feces and the act of staining someone with feces in play. The researchers kept their promise that all types of stories would be allowed. One plausible explanation might also be that the children wanted to tell such stories because they enjoyed being in control and exercising that power. According to Engel (2005), narratives function as a tool of thinking for children because, in a narrative, all real-world rules, expectations, and ways of thinking can be molded and altered. When narrating aggression in a story, the children were emotionally attuned to their adopted role (i.e., they displayed aggression when narrating) and they became aroused (i.e., their voice became louder, they used aggressive gestures, and they empathized with the story happenings).

However, the children were able to control their behavior. They did not break anything or threaten the researchers; rather, they followed the rules of play and were able to resolve the situation. In these occasions, the researcher remained calm and gave the children an opportunity to narrate their story, but from time to time, the researcher asked the child questions such as “How does the mother feel now,” “What happens next,” and “How can this situation be resolved?” The purpose was to lead the child to think about possible solutions for the situation and to help them control their emotions. For most children (92%), coming up with a socially acceptable solution was easy. However, for three children, the first solution for the situation included executing non-desired behaviors. Although, when playing, these also transformed into desirable outcomes as well.

Thus, through narrating aggressive behaviors children got the opportunity to deal with their emotions in a *what if* world. They also gained a sense of agency as they were able to execute their plan for the play. This sense of agency turned out to be particularly significant in all play phases of the SMPT sessions: the children guided the researcher in play and were very determined and sometimes even inflexible when executing their storylines.

Finally, at the end of each SMPT session, there was a reflection phase, during which Barney the puppet asked the children to describe what was important for others to learn from the story and whether the situations they explored were familiar to them. Some children easily identified with what was learned and mentioned having experienced similar lessons about helping others, apologizing, playing together, and discussing problems. However, for some, this reflection was difficult. They tended to state “I don’t know,” as shown in the following example:

Example 3: Alex’s reflection with Barney the puppet.

Researcher: Well, Barney would like to ask you: What could I learn from your story?

[Alex strokes Barney].

Alex: Whatever.

Researcher: Can you figure it out? What could I learn?

Alex: Oh Barney, I don’t really know [with sad voice].

Researcher: Because you did so great with the solution of the story, and the boy became happy.

Alex: Yes, he did [cuddles and strokes Barney].

Researcher: Can you tell me how one could become happy?

Alex: When one apologizes.

As the example illustrates, it is not easy for Alex to identify the lesson of the story. With the researcher’s help, Alex finally arrives at the solution. Moreover, Alex seems to be

highly attuned to Barney the puppet; he cuddles and strokes Barney and talks to him as if he were real. Four of the children, like Alex, seemed to empathize strongly with Barney, which manifested in stroking him, putting fingers to his mouth, and having fun with him. Barney was an important aid to the children because they all seemed to respond to Barney's questions with pleasure and they talked to him instead of the researcher. Therefore, the use of a puppet was an important mediator and facilitator for reflection.

Another goal of reflection was to determine whether the child was familiar with the occurrences in the story in real life. Twenty-six percent of the children said that they had never experienced events like what they had played in their story. However, the children described the plots and determined the solutions of their stories rather easily. Thus, the children who reported that their life experiences were not similar to those of the story events may have been engaging in distance-taking. According to Engel (2005), through narratives, children explore not only the world but also the narratives themselves. Hence, the majority of the children (74%) reported that the situation narrated in their story was familiar to them. Usually, the children had had similar experiences, but a few of the children said that a family member had gone through similar events, as the next example illustrates:

Example 4: Rachel's reflection on her story.

Researcher: What should the father do for the girl to get her to brush her teeth?

Rachel: He should go and get her because she doesn't come on her own. This was done to David [little brother's name].

Researcher: The father fetched him.

Rachel: Yeah.

Researcher: And what happened next?

Rachel: Well, then the door was locked and David was given the toothbrush and paste, and then threatened; one must threaten that you will have to read the book about the tooth troll if you do not brush your teeth.

Researcher: Well, what does David think when he hears the threats?

Rachel: Well, he just thinks that this time he won't get to hear all of his bedtime story then.

Researcher: Yes, and he would like to hear it.

Rachel: Yes, and then he just comes [and brushes his teeth].

In the example, Rachel gives a detailed account of what happens if her brother does not come to brush his teeth. She gets emotionally attuned to what her brother would be thinking, which demonstrates empathy and a theory of mind. In this way, children not only borrow from stories they hear but also use their own experience to tell stories (Engel, 2005). Thus, the stories reflect the children's experiences and the experiences of others, which is illustrated in Rachel's story. Narrations, therefore, enable children to look back at past experiences and examine their ways of reacting. Although children may dramatize those events, or mold them according to their agendas, these narratives offer children a channel for introspection, learning, and planning possible ways of reacting to future social situations.

Knowledge Acquisition and Performance of Children Manifested in SMPT Sessions

Our second aim was to explore what the story content and narrative play behavior during the SMPT sessions revealed about the social-emotional competence of the children in terms of knowledge acquisition and performance skills. In most of the stories, the children narrated rather quickly the solution to the situation presented in the vignette-picture. However, some children needed the researcher's help to determine a solution. In a few cases (9%), the children had difficulty coming up with a solution and their strategy was to postpone

inventing it. For example, Violet stated, “I don’t know. Maybe we’ll find out when playing the story.” Children’s solutions typically (76%) included socially acceptable ways of behaving, such as apologizing, telling the teacher, or talking to resolve the situation. These may also have been the result of direct teaching. However, 24% of the children manifested solutions with undesired behaviors in conflict situations, despite being asked about the ways the conflict could be resolved. These may stem from children’s self-regulation difficulties in social situations. With regard to the socially acceptable ways of resolving conflicts, some children developed solutions that were not so obvious. In many stories (22%), children used humor and play as a way to resolve the situation and make it easier for the character to cope, as in the following example:

Example 5: James is planning a solution to a story about a child refusing to brush his teeth.

Researcher: What could happen there? What could the father do?

James: Joke.

Researcher: Is the father good at telling jokes?

James: At least my daddy is. Sometimes he fools around that he is a baby. And sometimes he plays Donald Duck.

Researcher: Okay. How would the daddy fool around now? What kind of joke he might tell?

James: Let’s say something about a pirate ship.

In this example, James borrows from his real-life experiences with his father, who is, according to James, skilled in telling jokes. However, other frequent solutions (26%) that the children developed were that the child character would receive a reward or get what they wanted (e.g., the mother should offer the child ice cream or candy) even after they behaved aggressively. The children also suggested that the child-character give another child

something desirable, such as candy, so that the other child would allow the first child to participate in play. The children also described surprises as rewards such as a mother surprising her child with a teddy bear or a mother buying a puppy. These all revealed the children's way of thinking, but also expressed their wishes regarding these situations. The following example illustrates a child's wish during a shopping trip:

Example 6: James' story about shopping.

[The teacher assumes the role of the parent, and James adopts the role of a child called Donald Duck.]

Researcher: But now we are in a hurry—we must go home.

James: I won't come.

Researcher: What are you still looking at?

James: That toy car.

Researcher: But we just came to buy food. Should we just leave the car on the shelf?

James: No.

Researcher: No? Well don't just start getting angry in the shop. We must go home.

James: No.

Researcher: How should we resolve this? Do you have a suggestion?

James: I will get that car.

[negotiation continues]

Researcher: Okay. Here are all the groceries. What does this cost? It's 62 euros, and I have 68 euros. I have 6 euros left. But Donald that car was expensive, wasn't it?

James: It's 6 euros.

Researcher: Well, what do we do now?

James: He gets the car.

In the example, James is very persistent in the role of the character that he must get the car. Despite negotiations, he insisted that his wish as fulfilled. Play is a means for the child to fulfill unmet desires (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, several children wanted to receive rewards in the social situations. If the children behaved badly in play, one solution was to use rewards as a means for ceasing undesired behavior. However, sometimes their solutions involved using punishments or threats (as in Examples 2 and 4) or lying. In addition, some of the children were convinced that time-out helped to end unwanted behavior.

Altogether, the children had an array of knowledge regarding plausible solutions. Of their solutions, 41% involved the child engaging in an active role (e.g., the child apologizes, asks permission to enter the play, or discusses with the adult). In 59% of the solutions, the adult was in an active role (e.g., the adult gives the child prizes or rewards, apologizes, asks the child to obey, threatens, executes time-out, or uses humor). The children who participated in the SMPT sessions had problems with self-regulation and socially responsible ways of behaving, which may also be represented in the children's willingness to rely on adults to resolve the conflict situations, given that children may use adults to help regulate their actions and master their emotions (Engel, 1995). It is plausible that the children's choice of a more passive role in resolving the conflicts denotes their deficits in executing solutions. However, the SMPT sessions revealed that many children were aware of their behavior and its effects, as the following example illustrates:

Example 7: Violet's reflection of her behaviors when being excluded.

Researcher: Has this happened to you that you were excluded from the play?

Violet: Yes.

Researcher: What did you do then?

Violet: I attacked them.

Researcher: What happened next.

Violet: Well, I had to have a time-out.

Researcher: And after that?

Violet: I had to apologize.

Researcher: Did you then get to play with them?

Violet: No.

Violet describes her behavior and its consequences rationally and discusses causes and effects. She displays knowledge regarding her ways of behaving but she also identifies the expectations of her social environment. Thus, the SMPT sessions revealed that, despite their knowledge, some children were not only unable to execute socially acceptable behaviors (22%) in a *what is* world but also in play, as the following example shows:

Example 8: Eric's story is set in the playground, where one child gets excluded from the play.

[Eric plays the role of the excluded child called Eddie, and the researcher plays the roles of two other children.]

Researcher (as Child 1): We have such a nice play here.

Eric: Do I go and break it up? Yes.

Researcher (as Child 2): Hey, why did you break up our play? Now you cannot come and play with us anymore, because you ruined everything. We won't play with you.

Researcher: I wonder how Eddie feels because we don't play with him?

Eric: Bad.

Researcher (as Child 2): But we won't play with him, because he broke up our play.

Eric: He will apologize then [does not enact it in play].

[He starts to avoid apologizing and does other things in play and in role.]

Researcher: What does Eddie think?

Eric: He thinks about whether he should apologize.

Researcher: Well, that may not be so easy for him because he doesn't come to do it right away.

[Play continues and Eric avoids apologizing.]

Researcher: At what point does Eddie come [to apologize]?

Eric: When they tell him to do so.

Researcher (as Child 1): I wish Eddie would come and apologize. It would be so nice to play with him.

Eric: He hides behind swings.

[Eric takes the character behind the scenes. It still takes time for him to enact the plot.]

Eric: Sorry [apologizes quickly from behind the scenes and hides again].

In the example, Eric manifests his knowledge about an apology as a solution to the situation; however, he is clearly reluctant to enact this solution in play. Eric explained that he was thinking about apologizing but wanted the other children to invite him to apologize. The play lasted for a while because Eric avoided apologizing and conducted other play acts instead. This type of avoidance behavior was typical in situations where the children had difficulty performing the socially acceptable solution. When facing difficult questions, and perhaps experiencing difficult emotions, the children exhibited avoidance by focusing on play with side characters, directing play to another direction, changing the subject, or resolving the situation quickly by apologizing and then wanting to continue play.

Overall, the results suggest that the SMPT sessions enabled children to become emotionally attuned to the imagined situations and, therefore, allowed the children to practice their problem-solving skills and identify socially responsible ways of behaving. Although, in some situations, such as in the previous example, the execution of the child's plan was not easy and

reaching a positive solution took some time. In these instances, it was important for the child to practice a certain behavior, such as apologizing, and to successfully resolve a situation.

Discussion

Our results suggest that the SMPT sessions are a motivating and child-centered way of promoting children's social awareness and problem-solving skills by exploring social interactions through storytelling from an imaginary social situation. The SMPT sessions aimed to motivate the children to reflect on challenging situations, acknowledge their existing knowledge, and learn alternative ways of resolving conflicts in a non-stressful environment. Nonetheless, in the present study, the agenda of the SMPT sessions was not clinically or therapeutically motivated. Rather, the SMPT sessions emphasized the importance of hearing children's perspectives (Asplund Ingemark, 2013), which might also provide opportunities for their social-emotional learning.

During the SMPT sessions, the children were provided with vignette-pictures, emotion cards, and a variety of wooden play-materials to facilitate storytelling and enable joint play. The reason for utilizing play to reflect on challenging social situations in the SMPT sessions was grounded in the understanding that each imaginary situation contained rules of behavior, which the playing children established based on their socio-cultural knowledge of the situation imagined in the SMPT session. For children, play is a natural and non-threatening means of exploring the self and the world. Play, therefore, offered children the freedom to express their emotions and thoughts and allowed them to examine difficult feelings and situations (e.g., Bierman & Motamedi 2015). Thus, the present study adds to the empirical research on play as a useful intervention tool and aid for children in moving across spaces of *what is* and *what if* (see Engel, 2005) in learning social-emotional skills and practicing self-regulation.

For children, the play phase in SMPT was a key source of motivation. For some children, play was clearly the most important element of the sessions because they wanted to continue the play for a longer period and they introduced several new plot developments. Furthermore, the children seemed to become emotionally attuned during joint play and they became immersed in their play roles with the researcher. As our empirical examples highlight, this emotional attunement manifested, for example, in the children's aggressive behavior during play. In these play situations, the children dealt with aggression in a constructive manner and, during the later reflection phase, the children were able to reflect on what happened during play and examine their perceptions and feelings regarding the situation. This corresponded to their transfer between the *what if* and *what is* worlds.

Through SMPT, we explored the emotional knowledge and conflict solutions (acquisition skills) the children generated as responses to vignette-pictures that depicted every-day social interactions (including interpersonal conflicts), and through enacting those scenarios in play. In targeting the intervention to enhance children's self-regulatory capacities (performance skills), we focused on perceiving, interpreting, and naming emotions, as well as talking aloud about alternative conflict-solving strategies and reflecting on their possible consequences. Our empirical results correspond with Gumpel (2007) and support his notion regarding the significance of acquisition and performance skills.

Despite their knowledge of socially acceptable ways of behaving and having an awareness of the emotions of others, for some children, executing the solutions of the situation in play turned out to be very difficult and demanded time and encouragement from the researcher. For example, some children experienced difficulty apologizing, while others had difficulties adapting their perspective to the situation and were instead adamant about executing their own wishes in play. As Gupta (2009) suggested, the children strive to achieve a balance between their desires and the desires existing in their social environment. Thus,

there is great potential in an intervention tool such as SMPT, which uses play as a mediator in examining and practicing social situations. In play, the children can experience the feeling of control and, through the imagined story, they can confront different experiences with connections to the real world, be in charge of the outcome, and develop an understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others (Drewes & Schaefer, 2016; Landreth, 2012). In addition, the SMPT sessions allow the researcher and the child to engage in joint reflection on the solutions suggested by the child and to think together about alternative ways of behaving and the consequences of behavior.

With regard to performance skills, it was noteworthy that the majority of the children preferred to take a more passive role and relied heavily on the adults to resolve conflicts. Because children who are ages 5 to 6 are in an intensive phase of developing their social-emotional skills (see, e.g., Bierman & Motamedi, 2015), this reliance and need for adult support can be considered typical. However, this reliance also suggests children's difficulties with performance skills. The contribution of the SMPT sessions is grounded in the importance of identifying children's difficulties in performance skills and practicing these skills with adults in a safe and playful context. With the help and support of a researcher, the children were able to invent the storyline, enact it in practice, and learn from play and reflection. However, differences exist between the children in their ability to narrate and play. Some needed more prompts and questions from the researcher to spur on the narration, while other children carried out their storylines with minimal assistance. In addition, we noticed that the children typically needed more support from the researcher during their first SMPT sessions and less as they became familiar with the structure and idea of the sessions.

Overall, from the SMPT sessions, the children seemed to gain confidence in storytelling, dealing with their emotions, and reflecting on their ways of behaving. Our findings highlight that the SMPT sessions provide the children opportunities to acquire

important knowledge and skills for different social situations in daily life, practice transferring that knowledge to the level of performance (see Gumpel, 2007), and practice their social skills in a safe environment. For the researchers and other adults, the SMPT sessions offer insight into children's perceptions, their ways of thinking, their behavior, and their ability to invent socially acceptable solutions. Our results suggest that the children were skilled in inventing positive outcomes in conflict situations; however, some children manifested negative behaviors during SMPT sessions, which may have stemmed from a desire to test boundaries or from the enjoyment of being in charge of the situation. However, as the reflection phase of SMPT suggests, the children were aware of behaviors that are regarded as socially desirable (e.g., apologizing or taking others to play) or undesirable (e.g., lying or aggressive behaviors); in other words, the children possessed acquisition skills.

Despite its findings, this study had several limitations. Because our purpose was to hear children's thoughts and ideas, and not to conduct a clinical evaluation, we did not measure the children's level of performance before and after the SMPT sessions. Therefore, we can only state that the SMPT method seems to be promising and may be effective in supporting children's social-emotional and problem-solving skills and enhancing their self-regulation abilities. Further research is needed to demonstrate the effectiveness of SMPT as an intervention method and to examine the applicability of the method in children of different ages and in children with different developmental difficulties. The low number of participants limits the study in that the results are not generalizable. However, the results do suggest the potential of the method to support children with overactive and challenging behaviors. The structure of the SMPT sessions, along with the play materials utilized, seemed to function well for the 5–6-year-old children who participated in the study; this is an advantage because there is a lack of child-focused rehabilitation methods. In terms of the materials that were used, the use of the vignette-picture was somewhat limited. For some children, it was not

easy to interpret the social situations represented in the pictures, so the drawing style of the picture may need to be revised. Moreover, SMPT sessions require time and repetition.

Sufficient time must be allocated to the SMPT sessions so that the session can proceed in a child-centered manner and the researcher can follow the child's storylines. Furthermore, the method requires that the researcher is prepared, sensitive, and highly skilled in the practical execution of the SMPT session.

Conclusion

This study contributes to research literature by adding knowledge about the importance of identifying children's acquisition and performance skills to promote their social-emotional competence. Although several programs aim to improve social-emotional competence (e.g., Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015), child-centered programs that seek to support the social-emotional competence of children, preschool-age or younger, are not that common. SMPT represents a promising method with playful and narrative elements that encourage children to express their thinking about the social-emotional domain and social relationships. SMPT also provides an interactive environment for a child to practice and reflect on social-emotional skills with the cooperating adult. At the same time, SMPT allows the adult to understand the child's way of thinking and acting in narrated situations with social-emotional tensions, and to discover possible connections to the child's real life. Although the practical execution of SMPT demands materials, training, and time for implementation, sessions can be conducted in ordinary educational settings (e.g., daycare centers) and in clinical settings for enabling the children's thinking to be heard and acknowledged while enhancing their social-emotional competence.

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