

THE FORMATIVE EFFECTS OF READING ON THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract: *This article investigates the formative effects of active and conscious reading on the socio-emotional development of young students. Building on a theoretical framework that articulates the links between literature, developmental neurobiology, and emotional intelligence, the study analyzes how structured reading activities influence the socio-emotional competencies of 10- to 11-year-old students. An experimental research design was implemented over approximately three months with seven fourth-grade students. Data collection included a pre-test, reading sessions based on therapeutic stories, a reading journal, a behavioral observation grid, and a post-test. The study concludes that sustained and reflective reading constitutes an effective pedagogical tool for the development of emotional literacy in early childhood education.*

Key words: *reading, socio-emotional development, early elementary school, emotional literacy, therapeutic stories.*

1. Introduction

The stories we tell ourselves are the fundamental way in which the human mind organizes the world, finds meaning in chaos, and tames uncertainty. From birth to adulthood, narrative accompanies every stage of human development, contributing to the shaping of identity, the cultivation of resilience, and the building of connections with others. In an era dominated by rapid technological change and a growing crisis in literacy and emotional literacy, the question of whether sustained reading can produce measurable benefits for children's socio-emotional skills is particularly relevant.

This article presents an empirical investigation of the formative effects of active and mindful reading on the socio-emotional development of young students aged 10 to 11.

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Anchored in developmental neurobiology, emotional intelligence, and literary pedagogy, this study explores the idea that structured reading interventions can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool for fostering empathy, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and prosocial behavior.

The research has been conducted for three months with seven fourth-grade students from a school in the county of Galaţi, Romania. It combined qualitative observation with pre- and post-intervention assessments to capture the developmental effects of an intensive reading program built around fifteen therapeutic stories.

According to Eurostat data from 2023, only 29.5% of Romanians reported reading at least one book during the previous 12 months, meaning that approximately 70% have not read a single book in the past year, and regular readers account for just over 6% of the population (Eurostat, 2024). This context underscores the urgency of the present study, reinforcing the need to make active reading an educational priority within school curricula.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Reading and Socio-Emotional Development

The relationship between reading and socio-emotional progress has been documented across multiple disciplines. Moraru (2022) defines conscious reading as the process through which meaning is actively constructed by a trained mind, capable of filtering ideological currents, cultural phenomena, and the authority hierarchies of information sources. This definition positions reading not as a mechanical decoding exercise, but as a profoundly formative intellectual and emotional activity.

Psychologist Keith Oatley (2009) argued that fiction functions as a social simulator, allowing readers to rehearse complex interpersonal scenarios in a controlled and safe environment (a view also supported by Gottschall, 2019). This simulation activates neural pathways associated with goal-seeking, relational reasoning, and emotional recognition—the same cognitive mechanisms involved in real-world social interaction. Repeated simulation through reading may, therefore, strengthen these processes and transfer their benefits to contexts beyond the literary world.

Trelease and Giorgis (2022) emphasize that reading functions as a mirror, with books offering children the opportunity to encounter characters who resemble them, to face similar challenges, and to lay the groundwork for developing strategies to navigate difficulties. This reflective quality simultaneously supports the development of self-concept and social understanding. The authors consider reading to be the central pillar of education and a kind of “safety belt” for life.

2.2. The Neurobiology of Reading in Children Aged 5 to 12

Between the ages of five and twelve, the brain undergoes a period of intensive neural consolidation. The process of synaptic pruning eliminates redundant connections, while

myelination accelerates neural signal transmission, enabling children to process more complex information more efficiently. During this period, engagement with stories stimulates both cerebral hemispheres: the right hemisphere processes the emotional and creative dimensions of narratives, while the left hemisphere constructs logical relationships between events (Popan, n.d.).

Vocabulary grows at a remarkable rate during this period. Children between the ages of five and eight acquire approximately twenty new words per day, reaching a vocabulary of about 20,000 words by the age of eight or nine. By ages 10 to 11, this figure doubles to approximately 40,000 words, largely as a result of reading (Reese, 2022). This expansion of linguistic resources directly supports narrative comprehension and socioemotional communication.

Metacognitive abilities also develop significantly during this period. Children begin to systematically reflect on their own ways of thinking and learning, becoming more capable of adopting multiple perspectives—a prerequisite for empathy. Around age twelve, they may begin to view things from a third perspective—that of people who are not very close to them or whom they do not know—while simultaneously coordinating the other two perspectives from a neutral standpoint (Reese, 2022).

2.3. Socio-Emotional Competence in Primary School Children

Goleman (2018) defines emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as to navigate and respond effectively to the emotions of others. In the context of early childhood education, socio-emotional development encompasses five interconnected domains: self-awareness, emotional regulation, the productive use of emotions, empathy, and the management of interpersonal relationships.

Schaffer (2010) identifies seven fundamental components of emotional competence that children must progressively master: awareness of one's own emotional states; the ability to empathize with others; the understanding that inner states do not always correspond to outward expressions; the appropriate use of emotional vocabulary; the capacity to cope with negative emotions; an awareness of emotional reciprocity in relationships; and, finally, emotional self-efficacy. Shapiro (2016) adds that empathy underlies all other social skills and develops in two phases: an emotional response to others (present from birth) and a cognitive understanding of different perspectives (refined between ages 10 and 12). Around ages 10–12, children extend their empathy beyond those they know directly, including people or groups they have never met and even toward characters encountered in books—a stage known as abstract empathy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Objectives

The study adopted a quasi-experimental design with active manipulation of variables.

The independent variable was the reading activity; the dependent variable was the level of socio-emotional development. Three research objectives guided the study:

O₁ – Identifying the baseline level of socio-emotional development in the group of participants.

O₂ – Designing and implementing a set of supplementary reading activities aimed at optimizing the level of socio-emotional development.

O₃ – To evaluate the formative effects of active and mindful reading on the participants' socio-emotional performance.

The central hypothesis of the study was that active, conscious, and sustained reading promotes the socio-emotional development of young students.

3.2. Participants

Seven students from a class of thirty at a National High School in Galaţi, under the guidance of their primary school teacher, were selected to participate in the study based on four criteria: interest in reading, developed language and communication skills, age and developmental level, as well as their enrollment in the fourth grade. The participants were aged 10 and 11. This age group was deliberately chosen because certain socio-emotional competencies begin to noticeably refine around this developmental threshold, and children's language skills are sufficiently established to capture the interplay between literacy and emotional development.

3.3. Instruments and Procedure

Data collection was conducted using four main instruments. An initial assessment was conducted at the start of the intervention to establish the participants' baseline socioemotional profiles, as well as their proficiency in the Romanian language and literature. This was followed by a program of fifteen structured reading sessions, each built around a therapeutic story selected for its thematic relevance to common socio-emotional challenges (e.g., fear, rejection, fairness, empathy, identity). Participants completed a series of reading worksheets, which made up the reading journal, recording personal reflections, emotional responses, and connections to their own experiences throughout the program, all of which were linked to the therapeutic story being read. The exercises on the sheets focused on expressing oneself in Romanian, understanding the story's message or theme, and free expression through drawing or writing. Structured behavioral observation grids were also completed for the seven subjects during reading sessions, lessons, and breaks. A summative assessment was conducted at the end of the intervention period.

The primary research methods employed were systematic observation, reading journal analysis, and pre/post comparison of evaluation results.

4. Findings

4.1. Findings from the observation grid

Analysis of the behavioral observation data revealed clear progress over the course of the three months. At the start of the intervention, several participants demonstrated a limited capacity for emotional verbalization, a restricted empathetic response, and conflict-management behaviors that were reactive rather than reflective. Specifically, at the initial assessment, all seven subjects scored between 74 and 89 points out of a maximum of 150, with no subject exceeding the 90-point threshold. At the end of the program, all seven students showed improvements in at least three of the five socioemotional domains assessed, with scores rising to 98–111 out of a maximum of 130, representing clear progress across the entire group.

Notable progress was recorded in the areas of empathy and perspective-taking through role-playing/adaptation. Students who initially struggled to articulate the emotional states of story characters gradually demonstrated more nuanced and spontaneous empathetic engagement. Several participants began applying narrative frameworks to real-life situations, verbally linking story scenarios to personal conflicts or social dilemmas encountered in class or during breaks. Competency No. VII—which encompassed behaviors directly related to reading, empathy, and emotional expression—had an initial score of 21–26 out of a maximum of 45 for four of the seven subjects, reaching 30–36 at the final assessment. Five of the seven subjects showed a gain of exactly 24 points between the first and last observations; individual gains ranged from 12 points (subject 6) to 24 points (subjects 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

The reading journal proved to be a particularly productive tool. The entries on the reading sheets that made up the journal gradually became richer in emotional vocabulary over the course of the intervention, and the students gradually moved beyond literal plot summaries to offer more nuanced and analytical insights. Recurring themes in the sheets included recognizing a shared experience between themselves and the character, identifying and resolving interpersonal and intrapersonal problems by relating to the stories, and self-correction in attitudes or behavior. Each participant completed an average of 13 out of the 15 reading worksheets; absences were due to non-attendance at the activity for that week. Scores on the sheets ranged from 10–13 points in the first sessions to 13–15 in the final third of the program; Subjects 4 and 5 came closest to the maximum possible, scoring 186 and 188 points, respectively, out of a maximum of 195 (13 worksheets x 15 points). The most dramatic individual improvement was shown by Subject 7, who started from 11 points on the first worksheet and achieved the maximum of 15 on the last one.

4.2. Findings from the initial and final assessments

A comparison of the initial and final assessments confirmed significant progress within the sample. The areas showing the greatest improvement were emotional self-

awareness and prosocial behavior, followed by perspective-taking and emotional regulation. Emotional vocabulary also showed a notable increase, consistent with the literature on brain neurobiology, which identifies reading as one of the strongest factors in lexical expansion during middle childhood.

At the initial assessment, five subjects received a “Good” rating, and two received a “Very Good” rating. At the final assessment, four subjects received a “Very Good” rating, two maintained the “Good” rating and only one subject showed a decline, from “Very Good” to “Satisfactory”—possibly due to the difference in difficulty and the type of requirement in item 7, which called for personal reflection and extensive reasoning. The most significant individual progress was observed among students with the lowest baseline scores, suggesting that structured reading interventions may be particularly beneficial for children with less developed socio-emotional profiles.

4.3. Discussion

These findings are consistent with the theoretical framework outlined in the second section of the article. The Simulation Model proposed by Oatley and operationalized through therapeutic stories appears to offer an effective mechanism for developing social-emotional skills in this age group. The safety of the fictional experience—what Moraru (2022) describes as a closed, safe circle that always ends well—creates conditions in which children can confront fear, rejection, betrayal, and loneliness without real risk, gradually internalizing strategies for managing these experiences.

The reading journal served as a bridge between the personal experience of the story and the social context of the classroom. By externalizing their emotional responses in writing, students developed a meta-emotional vocabulary that facilitated subsequent group/class discussions and interactions. This aligns with Shapiro’s (2016) observation that talking about feelings is the most effective way to understand and manage them.

The results also highlight the importance of adult mediation. The teacher’s role—in creating a trusting environment, maintaining consistency throughout the sessions, and modeling reflective engagement with the texts—likely served as a significant moderating variable. This confirms the argument by Trelease and Giorgis (2022) that the development of “long-term” readers requires the active involvement of significant adults who model and support a positive attitude toward books.

5. Conclusions

The present study provided empirical support for the hypothesis that active, mindful, and sustained reading promotes the socio-emotional development of young schoolchildren. For all seven participants, structured engagement with therapeutic stories led to measurable improvements in empathy, emotional self-awareness, emotional vocabulary, perspective-taking, and prosocial behavior over approximately twelve weeks.

These findings give rise to several broader implications. First, literary education should be reconceptualized not as a mere technical skill, but as a tool for emotional and social development. The systematic integration of reading activities that encourage reflection, discussion, and personal connection into primary school curricula would constitute a significant contribution to the child's holistic development. Second, the reading journal and structured observation grid developed for this study are replicable pedagogical tools that practitioners can adapt for use in various school contexts.

The main limitation of the study is the small sample size of seven participants, which limits the generalizability of the results. Future research should aim to replicate these results with larger, more diverse populations, while utilizing longitudinal designs capable of assessing the durability of socio-emotional gains beyond the intervention period. Comparative studies on the relative effectiveness of different genres—therapeutic, literary, biographical, and folkloric—would advance our understanding of the mechanisms through which reading produces developmental effects (socio-emotional, language skills, and personal/professional).

The national context lends this study additional significance, underscoring the need to cultivate lifelong readers from childhood who, as adults, will view reading not as an obligation or a performance metric, but as a source of personal enrichment.

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