



Tales and the Development of Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood

– Interview with Valéria Kerekes

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1. Everyone listens happily to tales told by their parents and grandparents during their early childhood. What inspired you to stay and work with tales even in your adult life? How did you recognize the healing and developmental effects of tales?

I was led on this path by three different things. I inherited a huge gift from my paternal grandmother who, during the Second World War, gave birth to my father at the age of 15. Even with a child in her arms, in a way, she stayed the same little girl and I received a loving adult-child playing partner who always told me tales when she wasn't singing, teaching me rhymes or playing with me. She showed me every possible version of storytelling, stories from her real life, folk tales and stories from her imagination, so I received very early the urge to work with tales later in life. Even as a kindergartener, I put my teddy bears on the couch and I played out my whole day for them, so there was already much storytelling involved. I included everything my grandmother had taught and told me during her life. Of course, since everyone watches life from their own point of view, back then I thought that everyone had the chance to hear this many tales and to be played with this much. To my parents and my entourage, it became evident quite early on that as an adult, I would teach and work with tales. The second thing which led me on this path is the fact that during university, I had the chance to participate in Dr. Zsuzsa Hunyady's *Children's literature* course, where my connection to tales continued. I learned so much from her. The third aspect which influenced me to go in this direction is also a gift, which I did not necessarily choose myself. Before teaching at ELTE's Faculty of Primary and Pre-School, I was a teacher for 15 years at ELTE's Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education, where I ended up in quite a magical way. When I was studying there to get my second degree, the head teacher of the faculty asked me during one of my exams whether I would like to teach there, which I accepted with great pride and happiness. The retiring

professor, Veronika Winkler, taught Children's literature and Tale therapy, so I overtook these classes from her. My life took a magical turn when the aspects of my childhood met the ones from my studies. Everything led me towards tales and I was sure that this was what I had to do in life.

2. The pandemic affected everyone's lives in many different ways. Even kindergartens had to close temporarily and pedagogues had to hold activities online. This new situation might have affected storytelling and the habits connected to it. Most grandparents were not able to personally tell stories to their grandchildren. During the pandemic, the personal storytelling by parents at home became even more important. What differences are there between personal and online storytelling? Is it possible that online storytelling develops emotional intelligence less efficiently compared to doing it personally?

I could answer this very shortly by saying that yes, it is very much possible. Obviously, having the presence of someone does not have the same effects. I think that once again, it would be interesting to take a look at this question from several points of views. If we look at the essence of this question, we can say that either way, something good happened, since the act of storytelling itself has taken place. This is important, even if it takes place online, because at that moment, someone was present on the screen, with me. Of course, when there is a personal connection during storytelling, that can strengthen the stabilization of every aspect when it comes to emotional intelligence, but storytelling in itself is already important. At that moment, you pay attention to the one who is telling the story, so there is a sort of bridge between the storyteller and the listener which enables the flow of information to take place. Of course, it matters a lot whether children can actually see the one who is telling the story, or all of it is simply happening through a recording, whether the storyteller used a book or told the story without it, and whether there was any sort of interaction before or afterwards, so if the children had the chance to ask questions. These aspects all influence the effects. I cannot name any specific data about the effects of the pandemic, but I think that if the storytelling took place, it certainly had positive effects and the only difference there is in the exact efficiency.

3. What is the parents' role in supporting the development of emotional intelligence of their children?

I think that the primary role of parents is to be steadily present in the lives of their children as well as to provide a sort of emotional security, which the child can immerse itself in with the same intensity every single time. If this is missing, everything else becomes unstable and can only appear partially. The connection of the child is always the strongest to its primary guardian. In the best case, these are the parents and there are two people supporting the child. Unfortunately, in many cases, there is only one parent raising

the child, but if their connection is stable, this can already provide much support to the child. Being present in the lives of our children in an authentic and self-identified way is the key. Another important aspect is that during the upbringing of our children, we should let them know that even if we disagree with one of their actions, we still love them the same. Without this clarification, children will connect their bad actions and their punishment to the fact that they are not loved enough, or the same when it comes to different situations. I think that emotional stability is the most crucial.

4. How easily can children learn from their parents and teachers how to express and cope with their emotions?

It is important for us to know that children learn from the person they are with. Ideally, they are with their parents first and then with their teachers. They will primarily take over the patterns they see from adults, those of their peers will only affect them later. I think that, in this case too, authenticity and self-identity are the most important. To be a congruent personality, do as we feel, communicate as we think. We should be brave enough to let others know that today, we are a bit sad, or tired, or angry because of something, so that children learn to differentiate the primary emotions. Often, we aren't even specific in the familiar environment either. (‘How are you?’, to which we reply: ‘I’m doing fine.’) Parents try to always seem cheerful and balanced. However, they not only teach their children to suppress their emotions, but they can also provoke anxiety in them because children can feel that something is not alright anyway, but because of this uncertainty, they feel tension, fear, anxiety and even fright if they are unable to pinpoint what they are exactly feeling. Children can recognize authentic personalities, the mother, the father and the teacher who have better and worse traits, better and worse days. This helps them deal with and express their feelings in a way that they feel safe.

5. According to what aspects do teachers choose tales in kindergarten?

First of all, they have to choose according to the specificities of the concerned age group. This is not that hard, given that every kindergarten teacher learns by the end of their studies through children's literature and developmental psychology what type of tales there are, and which of them are most suited for kindergarteners. We have to keep folk tales, contemporary tales and fables separated. It might be more difficult to choose a tale for heterogeneous groups, where the children are of different ages. In fact, studies suggest fairy tales from the ages of four-and-a-half, five years old, whereas children are officially enrolled in kindergarten by the age of three. There are fairy tales which can be told in a ‘less dangerous manner’, where there are no bigger magical elements or turns which would cause a problem for them to understand. We should choose from various types of tales, fables and novels that can be told and

listened to without a regard to age, but when it comes to fairy tales, it is good to be a bit more cautious when it comes to choosing. Of course, the right choice also depends on the aim, since we might want to work with the emotions and we might choose according to the different life situations.

6. What is the basis of the 'Tales Differently' program, which you have developed?

The Tales Differently program enables kindergarten teachers to get to know the personality-development opportunities which can be found in folk tales, which can be applied in regard to the emotional situation of the concerned group with the help of games that topicalize the emotional focus of the chosen tale (e.g. fear, trust, aggression, acceptance, etc.). In the activities connected to the Tales Differently program, the storylines and the actors of the tales only appear indirectly. Every activity has a constant frame, which encompasses the greeting and the goodbye of the tale, the first question after telling the story by heart, which thematises which actor (alive or inanimate) and which place from the story the child would use in the first few minutes after listening to the tale (of course, the children can choose whether they would like to share their thoughts with their mates). The games connected to the tales are always built upon each other, taking gradualism into consideration. The topics of the suggested activities are not built on each other, thus, kindergarten teachers could freely decide on the activity based on the chosen aim within their group.

7. How can we help children deal with their emotions and process tales in a differentiated way?

In order to let the children process tales, we can help the most if we give them time to work on them internally, without giving them too many tools or external help. First of all, they have to use their imagination to see what they hear. Therefore, we should give them only minimal, if any, visual aid. I know, this might sound peculiar, but I believe that the amount of stimulation flooding children prevents them from working 'only' with their imagination, further using and developing their fantasy. If we tell them a story and let them indulge fully, we promote exactly this imagination. If we really want them to give us any feedback, we can ask them where they are imagining themselves within the story, or who they would like to be. It can be an actor, an object or anything that gives them the opportunity to reindulge in the tale and imagine it. If we want to do an activity related to the tale afterwards, we should give the children time to find what element was the most important for them within the story, so that they can take it with them into the freeplay. If we really want to differentiate within the group, in case we see any problems and we would like to find solutions for them, we can do that using games. Of course, these would be direct games which are related to the specific problem or emotion. The Tales Differently program helps teachers organize

games surrounding one specific/recurring problem, which do not directly affect the children. I believe that tales fulfill exactly this role, to 'just exist' in the heads of children without them having to do something with them or think about them. Of course, we use them as tools for various activities, but when we tell a tale, we must leave time for ourselves to immerse in that story, when we lie at the surface of the water and just listen to its sound.

8. In our ever-evolving world, many kindergarteners already have their own electronic devices, or have access to one, whereas I received my first mobile phone in the first year of high school, while my parents only bought one as adults. They have access to unlimited and unsupervised content, which they do not understand, they are unable to process, which in return leaves its mark on them, let it be a tale, a movie, videogames or videos meant for adults on You Tube or TikTok. They feel the tension, but they do not know how to relieve it. Parents, similarly to teachers, try to supervise the children, but it is exceptionally hard to avoid this, or control whether they are confronted with such content elsewhere. What do you recommend in this situation?

Most of the time, children have access to these electronic devices and the aforementioned contents unfit for their age because there is no alternative option for them. When parents do not set an example for the children by showing them the indispensability of these devices, it will be normal for children to use the toys around them. When the adult joins the game, it is quite improbable that the child would voluntarily choose the device instead of the game.

How can teachers help deal with this and process this?

Primarily by shifting the focus of the activities towards games and by telling many tales, as well as making the children tell their own stories.

What can parents do when something leaves its mark on their child, but it is unable to pinpoint it?

The keyword is prevention. If they insist on having various electronic devices, they should watch the content with their children, so that they can provide immediate feedback regarding the questions which might arise or so that they can react themselves when they see that their child is starting to be anxious because of the seen content.

9. Do you have any 'all time favorite' tales which you would absolutely recommend teachers to use in kindergarten?

From Hungarian folk tales, I would recommend the following ones: A só, Kacor király, Furulyás Palkó, Macskacító, A medve és a macska.

10. There are some parents and teachers who have put some classical tales on a sort of "blacklist" because they are "too aggressive or scary" for the children, such as Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel and Cinderella among others. I was also raised hearing these tales and I feel like they have not caused me any emotional harm. Children do not interpret stories the way adults do. Those parents who do not read their children such tales want the best for them and they would like to protect them. Can you also cause them harm by protecting them excessively?

In this case, what causes the excessive protection is actually the insecurity and fear of the parents/teachers themselves.

Will they not face bigger disappointments growing up when they are too protected?

There are various methods for coping strategies. The parental pattern is the dominant one, but the children see other patterns in their lives as well. Many factors affect what our self-esteem will turn out like as we grow older.

Can this aspect affect their emotional intelligence or maybe even block it?

In a way, yes, but returning to the previous question, there are numerous other factors (grandparents, teachers, classmates, etc.) which also influence the emotional development of the children.

11. "Evening tale" is hopefully a know expression in most households. When choosing a tale by its length and content, do we have to take into consideration that the processing of the tale can affect the dreams of our children?

The content of the tale is always overruled by the time spent together. However, it is important to finish the story even if our child has fallen asleep during the story.

12. What message do you have for the current and future kindergarten teachers?

I encourage them to tell the children not only tales, but also their own life stories. It might also be exciting to set the theme for the tale by framing the story. For example, When I arrived at the kindergarten/school today, there was a letter waiting for me on my desk. I opened it excitedly. An elf wrote it to me. They asked me to tell you that...

Thank you very much for your answers!