

Effectiveness of Philosophy for Children on their Loneliness

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is a distressing experience and has destroying psychological consequences for children. This paper explored the effectiveness of instructing philosophy for children on children's loneliness after controlling the role of the social-emotional learning. This study adopted a quasi-experimental method. The statistical population included sixth grade primary school male students of Urmia (N=50) chosen by cluster random sampling method and then randomly assigned to the experimental (N=25) and Control (N=25) groups. The experimental group participated in 12 sessions of philosophy for children instruction while the control group did not receive any special instruction. Children loneliness questionnaire by Asher and Wheeler (1985) and the Social-Emotional Learning scale of Coryn et al. (2009) were administered. The results of this study showed the same patterns as Westerns studies. After controlling the role of covariates variables (the pre-test and social-emotional learning) on loneliness by ANCOVA test, instructing philosophy for children has a significant effect on loneliness. Moreover, after instructing philosophy for children, the experimental group showed lower levels of loneliness than the control group (P<0.001). Although there were two covariate variables, pre-test, and social-emotional learning, instructing philosophy for children had an effect on loneliness, accordingly these findings highlight the importance of philosophy for children in mitigating children's loneliness. This findings may be helpful for school psychologists in schools.

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Introduction

Children who feel lonely often experience poor peer relationships, and therefore, express more loneliness than peers with friends. They often feel excluded, a feeling that can be damaging to their self-esteem. In addition, they may experience feelings of sadness, malaise, boredom, and alienation. Furthermore, early childhood experiences that contribute to loneliness may predict loneliness during adulthood. Consequently, lonely children may miss out on many opportunities to interact with their peers and to learn important lifelong skills. Given the importance placed on the benefits of peer interactions and friendships to children's development, this potential lack of interaction raises many concerns for teachers who work with young children. Peer relations matter to children, and lonely children place as much importance on them as do other children (Ramsey, 1991).

Loneliness is a significant problem that can predispose young children to immediate and long-term negative consequences. However, only recently have research and intervention in educational settings focused on young children who are lonely. It is becoming increasingly clear that many young children understand the concept of loneliness and report feeling lonely. For example, kindergarten and first-grade children responded appropriately to a series of questions regarding what loneliness is ("being sad and alone"), where it comes from ("nobody to play with"), and what one might do to overcome feelings of loneliness ("find a friend") (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). In a more recent study (Ladd et al., 1996), kindergarten children's loneliness in school was reliably measured with a series of questions such as, "Are you lonely in school?"; "Is school a lonely place for you?" and "Are you sad and alone in school?" The study suggested that young children's concepts of loneliness have meaning to them and are similar to those shared by older children and adults.

Loneliness is the difference between the levels of a person demanded social relations and achieved levels of this (Bekhet et al., 2008; Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Although the need to the social relationship is different among the individuals (Weiss, 1973), and social norms can influence the expectation of quality and quantity (De Jong Gierveld, 1998), some researchers indicated that over 70% of individuals experienced occasional loneliness (i.e., Cacioppo, 2008; Inderbitzen-Pisaruk et al., 1992; Saari, 2010). Beutel et al. (2017) in a survey estimated that 10.5% of Germans (35-74 years) experienced a spectrum of loneliness, slight (4.9%), moderate (1.7%), and severe (1.7%). This number in the UK is 6% (Victor & Yang, 2012). There is a significant difference between children and adult loneliness, 12% of

5-6 children, 8% of 8-11 children, and 5%-6% of adults reported loneliness (Masi et al., 2011). In a qualitative study by Berguno et al. (2004), 80% children of 8-10 years old stated they felt alone occasionally.

Loneliness is an experience that gives individuals a vexatious statute when they feel it (Krcmar et al., 2011). Like the negative consequences of smoking for the body, loneliness can have such negative consequences for mental health (Barlow & Durand, 2011; Campagne, 2019). Those who suffer loneliness, feel unpleasant consequences such as low mood and low social self-efficacy (Perlman, 2004); and they are also more likely to engross in depression (Erzen & Cikrikci, 2018; Pressman et al., 2005). Also, this is associated with psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation (Schinka, & VanDulmen, 2012), and low self-esteem in general (Arria et al., 2010), even associated with physical problems such as blood pressure (Hawkey et al., 2006), and morality problems (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Moreover, research evidence presented by Berguno et al. (2004) showed that loneliness can lead to antisocial behaviors such as bullying in children. Also, addiction potential and psychological distress are consequences of loneliness in students (Setayeshiazhari et al., 2018). Recently research evidence showed that loneliness can result in paranoia (Lamster et al., 2017). Although poor social and support network has a direct effect on loneliness (Macdonald et al., 2000; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Perlman & Peplau, 1981), loneliness, the same as personality, is heritable (Schemer & Martin, 2019). Several studies indicated that some domains of loneliness in children can be decreased by some psychological interventions such as instructing social skills, CBT techniques, and so on (Masi et al., 2011). Intervention in reducing loneliness by philosophical storytelling is innovative, and thus, this study aimed to explore how philosophy storytelling contributes to the loneliness in male 6th-grade primary school students in Iran.

The educational philosophy (philosophy functioning educationally) or philosophy for children (P4C) is very close to the sociocultural perspective presented by Vygotsky. Vygotsky developed sociocultural theory with the belief that thinking and speech are associated with each other (Yasnitsky et al., 2014). In sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky affirmed that social relationship and dialogue between two people has a major role in constitution of cognition and thinking (Crain, 2015). Intermental is a process that social relationships transfer knowledge in social form to the cognition level and by this process, it enables people to learn from dialogues and their social relationships (Topping & Trickey, 2014; Vygotsky, 1962). "The teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil

interactions involve engagement with socio-cultural theories of effective learning” (Mercer, 2000; Vygotsky, 1962).

Philosophy thinking isn't based on the thought and convention, it is the commitment to think about thinking. Philosophy for children program provides a situation that engages children. This engagement occurs through the challenge of thinking and interaction between pupils. Moreover, this program has social and emotional aims implicitly (Lipman, 1980). Thinking skills can be improvable, if children engage in philosophy matter. Accordingly, Lipman presented philosophy for children program which is systematic and gradual and can be instructed for children who are at the age of 4 to 18 (Lipman, 1980). In addition, the “explorer groups” lead to cooperation and interaction between pupils, and therefore, pupils feel sympathy and respect, and they can be a good listener and state their opinions freely (Daniel, & Auriac, 2011). The developer of the philosophy for children program believed that this program enhances the critical and creative thinking (Lipman, 2003). Philosophy for children is an educational program providing a situation in which children shape their complex thoughts and develop their critical and creative thinking, as they engage in this program (Lipman, 1981). Furthermore, this program has a social and emotional domain suggesting that people who participated in P4C program, more likely have high levels of social self-efficacy and adjustment, social and relational skills, and also emotional sympathy while those who don't participate in this program are more likely to have low levels of this social and emotional domain.

Searching the literature showed that not conducted same study about philosophy for children on loneliness, while there were some studies almost investigated similar topics. Conducted studies in this area often used Australian, East Asian, European, and North American samples, but none was administrated on a Middle Eastern sample. Also, these studies didn't control any covariate variables supposed to associate with the dependent variable. In general, the studies that investigated the effectiveness of philosophy for children on loneliness can be categorized to two groups: A. Studies that investigate the effects of philosophy for children on thinking skills, (e.g. Daniel & Auriac, 2011; Education Testing Service (ETS), 1980; Field, 1995; Haas, 1980; IAPC, 2002; Lipman & Bireman, 1970; Watkin, 2001; William, 1993); and B. Studies that investigated the effects of philosophy for children on the emotional and social domain (e.g., Campbell, 2002; Doherr, 2000; Sasseville, 1994). Moreover, several studies have showed philosophy for children had a significant effect on several emotional and social variables, such as decreasing bullying, attitudes to

mathematics, self-esteem, and social-emotional learning (Collins, 2005; Dawid, 2005; Glina, 2009; Leckey, 2001; Tangen & Campbell, 2010; Trickey, & Topping, 2006).

There are three steps for philosophy for children program: at first, students read a story or a teacher reads for them; second, students' questions are gathered; third, the community of inquiry (CI) starts a dialogue. At the stage of CI, students can have face to face interaction and there is a dialogue among them about paradoxical and ambiguous parts of the story which increases their social skills (Giménez-Dasí et al., 2013) and emotional intelligence (Gazzard, 2000). Reviewing these studies shows positive effects of philosophy for children, but many of them didn't consider the type of emotional effects which has a destructive effects on mental health such as loneliness. Also, the social-emotional learning was administrated as a covariate variable in this study. Although literature showed a positive effectiveness of philosophy for children, there is no study that controls the covariate variable and these studies reported their results without controlling a covariate variable. According to the literature, philosophical dialogue and discussion can result in improving emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning. However, it is not determined whether philosophy for children program affects loneliness directly or by mediating the role of social-emotional learning; that's why this study was designed considering social-emotional learning as a covariate variable, trying to control the role of the social-emotional learning as dependent variable. In this way, the effects of philosophy for children on loneliness and the mechanism of the effects of philosophy for children on loneliness can be determined more precisely.

Thus, this study was designed to investigate whether children who participated in philosophy for children program feel low levels of loneliness in comparison with the control group moderating the role of the social-emotional learning conducted. Past studies considered above, show that philosophy for children program affects social and emotional domain, albeit more study is needed to investigate the effects of the this program on loneliness as an emotional variable. Conducting this study with a covariate variable (social-emotional learning) is innovative, because one of the main effects of philosophy for children program is on the emotional intelligence and social-emotional learning, and thus, by improving this variable, loneliness may decrease. Hence, it seems essential to do a study which focuses on the effect of social-emotional learning on the loneliness, and determine the effectiveness of philosophy for children program on loneliness precisely to probe whether philosophy for children program affects the loneliness directly or indirectly.

This study was designed to follow two main aims. The first aim was to investigate whether covariate variables (the pre-test and social-emotional learning) have a role in loneliness variance or not. With respect to this matter, philosophy for children effects on loneliness can be predicable. Moreover, as controlling the role of the social-emotional learning is especially important, after controlling the role of the social-emotional learning and the pre-test, the second aim of the present study was to examine the effectiveness of philosophy for children on loneliness concerning the probable differences between the experimental and control groups regarding loneliness.

Method

Design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental method with the pre-test/post-test and a control group.

Participants

The population of this study included all sixth grade primary school male students of Urmia city in the academic year of 2018-2019. Multiple cluster sampling method was administrated to choose a sample of students. At first, from among the educational districts in Urmia, the second district was chosen. Then, from among the schools in this district, one school was selected from which two classes were randomly selected as the control (N=25) and experimental (N=25) groups. The total population of the two classes was 50 sixth grade primary school male students. The age of the students was at the range of 11-12. All the participants were made sure that their information would be kept confidential and all the students were freely consent to participate in study. The protocol of study was approved by the educational ministry.

Instruments

The Questionnaire of Loneliness

Asher and Wheeler questionnaire (1985) was used to measure loneliness in children specifically. This measurement has no subscales in which the participants determine their levels of acceptance on 5 point Likert scale (from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). This scale included 24 statements which participants responded self-reportedly. Asher and Wheeler (1985) measured the reliability coefficients based on Cronbach's Alpha to be 0.9. In Iran Farsani et al. (2013) translated this scale in Persian and investigated the validity and reliability of this scale using the conformity and exploratory factor analysis. They reported the

comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) as 0.93 and 0.04 respectively which shows an acceptable validity. Also, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was .66. In this paper, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and Spearman-Brown coefficient were .87 and .82 respectively. Moreover, in Iran, Shoae et al. (2013) showed that there are some subscales for this measurement by conformity factor analysis and also reported the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient as .69. In this paper, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was .69.

The Questionnaire of Social-Emotional Learning

Cyron et al. questionnaire (2009) was used to measure social-emotional learning. This questionnaire measures loneliness in children specifically in which participants determine their levels of acceptance on a five point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). This scale includes 20 statements based on participants' self-reports. This measurement has three subscales including Emotional Intelligence, Task articulation, Peer relationships, and self-regulation. Cyron et al. (2009) calculated the Cronbach's Alpha for task articulation (TA), peer relationships (PR), and self-regulation (SR) as .69, .8, and .8 respectively. Cyron et al. (2009) also investigated the validity and reliability of this scale using the conformity and exploratory factor analysis and reported the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) as .85 and .072 respectively which shows an acceptable validity. In Iran, Cherghnoorani (2015) by conformity factor analysis showed that there are three subscales for this measurement and Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .79. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and Spearman-Brown coefficient were .84 and .80 respectively.

Procedure

To conduct this study, at first the researchers obtained the education ministry of Urmie permission. Then, the two questionnaires were administered to each student and they were guided how to respond the statements. One of the most important factors in philosophy for children is the class direction and the way students sit. For this aim, the participants were asked to sit in circle to encourage exploration and social groups. This type of sitting provides a cooperation and sympathy atmosphere. Before starting the intervention, it was explained to the participants that they were a part of exploration groups and supposed to discuss about the story and matters presented and discover ambiguous and paradoxical part of the story.

In addition, the participants were required to respect to others' opinions, listen to others carefully, and state their opinions. For intervention, the story was read for the students at the classroom and then they started to discuss and ask questions about the story. It was explained for

students that they were able to discuss about what was marvelous and problematic. When a student asked a question, that question was written on the whiteboard and other students were guided to answer the question.

Table 1.

Intervention Sessions

Sessions	Story
Session 1	Who Am I (small mirror)
Session 2	Wisdom and Learning (Master and Captain Free)
Session 3	Knowledge (Coward Rabbits)
Session 4	Memory (that Jelma)
Session 5	Questions and Answers (The Boy Who Always Asked Questions)
Session 6	Friendship (The Talking Bear)
Session 7	Courage and Fear (Princess Sana)
Session 8	Fair (Workers In The Vineyard)
Session 9	Change
Session 10	Anger (Gelleret's story)
Session 11	Freedom (Willam Tell)
Session 12	Death (The Boy Who Wanted to Live Forever)

Findings

The present study used an ANCOVA test to investigate the effectiveness of philosophy for children on

loneliness. The covariate variables were the pre-test and social-emotional learning.

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistic

Variables	Test	Group	Mean	SD	N
Loneliness	Pre	Ex.	49.28	3.58	25
		Control	44.88	3.44	25
		Total	47.08	4.12	50
	Post	Ex.	38.88	4.28	25
		Control	44.68	3.03	25
		Total	41.78	4.7	50
Social-Emotional Learning	Pre	Ex.	40.84	8.42	25
		Control	52.56	6.2	25
		Total	46.7	9.41	50

Figure 1.
Loneliness Means Based on Groups and Pre/Post-Tests

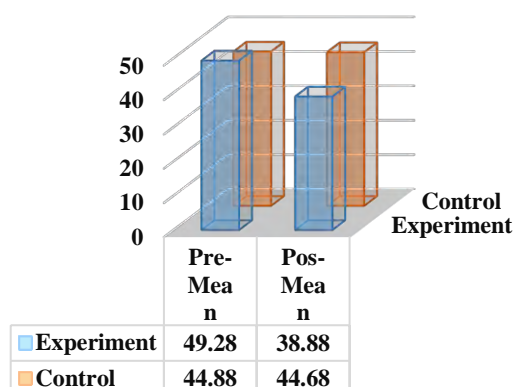


Table 3 shows Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results for the pre- and post-tests of loneliness in the control and experimental groups separately.

Table 3.
The Results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

Variable	Groups	Tests	Z	P
Loneliness	Ex.	Pre	.603	.860
		Post	.654	.786
	Control	Pre	.55	.923
		Post	.743	.639

Based on the results, the post-tests of loneliness in the control and experimental groups show a normal distribution, because Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is not significant at the level of 0.05 ($P > 0.05$).

Table 4.
Levene Test for Equality of Variances

Variable	F	df 1	df 2	P
Loneliness	2.983	1	48	.091

Table 4 reveals that there is no significant difference between control and experimental groups ($P > 0.05$).

Table 5.
Homogeneity of Regression Slopes

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Loneliness	20.26	1	20.26	1.44	.236
Social-Emotional Learning	39.37	1	39.37	2.88	.096
Group*Social-Emotional Learning* Pre test	45.54	2	22.77	1.69	.194
Error	616.53	46	13.4		
Total	88361	50			

According to the results in Table 5, there is no interaction between the covariate variable and the independent variable ($P > 0.05$).

Table 6.
The Results of ANCOVA Test

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P	Eta Squared	Observed Power
Social-Emotional Learning	5.69	1	5.69	.43	.515	.009	.098
Pre Test	51.93	1	51.93	3.92	.054	.079	.492
Groups	283.15	1	283.15	21.39	.001	.317	.995
Error	608.91	46	13.23				
Total	88361	50					

As Table 6 reveals, the post-test of loneliness is the dependent variable. According to the F and P values ($F = 21.36$, $DF = 1$, $P < 0.001$), the effectiveness of philosophy for children program after moderating the

role of the pre-test and social-emotional learning is significant ($P = 0.001$).

Discussion

According to Lipman, in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program, children learn a variety of skills such as reasoning, conceptualization, research and exploration, dialogue and discussion, emotional and social skills. Children who engage in group discussions and exploration often experience emotional and social states. Feeling of loneliness as a dependent variable of the present study decreased in the experimental group due to philosophy for children program. According to the results of this study, students experienced a lower level of loneliness after P4C when they participated in a philosophy education program for children.

In general, the philosophy training program for children provides an opportunity for children to explore and practice cognitive skills, and these trainings provide an opportunity that, in addition to strengthening cognitive skills, also leads to emotional and social development. It seems that presenting students in a research community as a group with a philosophical background reduces their loneliness. Exploratory circles provide children with the opportunity for flexibility, creative thinking, cognition, and contemplation. In other words, being in exploratory circles has probably led to cognitive, emotional and social development, and by increasing social skills as well as being exposed to interaction with others, it has reduced the feeling of loneliness in these children.

Moreover, it seems that the philosophy education program has reduced the students' frustration by creating purpose, increasing self-esteem and increasing responsibility in children. As noted, teaching philosophy to children is rooted in Vygotsky's ideas. Vygotsky considered the cultural, historical, and social aspects to be very important in cognition and he believed that the interaction between the learner and the social environment is the main determinant of their cognitive development. The place of the human's mind development is social, and the process that shapes it is communication. In the process of group discussion in which students are involved and discuss with other group members, children with low levels of social interaction, whether they want to or not, enter into social interaction, and through group discussion, they interact socially with other members of the group.

As a result, teaching philosophy can be effective in reducing the feelings of loneliness. The philosophy for children improves talking and reasoning skills. Philosophy for children decreases aggression in children and destroying behaviors. In general, it can be claimed that philosophy for children program makes a good opportunity for cognitive and exploratory abilities for children. The philosophy for children, via improving

cognitive abilities, can also develop emotions and social perception. Hedayati et al. (2016) reported that the philosophy for children has a positive effect on attitudes. As matter of fact, students in this program learn how to respect to others' opinions and how to cooperate with others. Empirical evidence show that philosophy for children develops social skills such as face to face interaction, and encourages speaking to others. It seems that students in the philosophy for children feel less loneliness as the program gives opportunity for developing social skills and interaction with others which in turn, helps them feel less loneliness.

Conclusions

Philosophy for children program helps develop social skills, such as visual communication, or verbal development, and an enthusiasm to exchange with others. This study enriched our understanding of teaching philosophy effectiveness on the feeling of loneliness as it was the only study carried out in the Middle East. According to the background, teaching philosophy has a positive effect on emotional variables. Among these, the feeling of loneliness was a variable on which the effectiveness of teaching philosophy was not studied. However, this research has some limitations. One of the limitations of this research was that it was carried out on normal students. It would have been better if this research had been done on a sample of students who had felt lonely and were shy.

Also, all data in this study were collected based on self-report. One of the biggest problems of this method of data collection is controlling the impact of latent social utility. In other words, in self-reports, the participants choose an option that describes them best rather than one that accurately describes their current situation. Thus, this reduces the efficiency of the measurement tool, the use of other measurement methods such as behavioral observation can solve this problem. Another limitation can be considered as the effect of novelty and disorder. The effect of novelty is that an independent experimental variable may be effective only because it differs from the training the experimental group normally receive.

In this study, the teaching of philosophy is completely different from the teaching method that is common in Iranian schools, so in generalizing the results, special attention should be paid to this issue. The use of common classroom environment, which is often used to learn other subjects, can solve this problem to some extent. Furthermore, the effect of the trainer can be considered as another factor that is one of the limitations of this research. In this research, all philosophical teachings were done by a person who was a teacher

himself, which should be considered in generalizing the findings. The results of this research can be used in educational contexts for teachers and school counselors. On a large scale, a cohesive intervention program can be implemented to prevent students from feeling lonely. This may be appropriate for school psychologists to take steps to prevent the problem of loneliness in students.

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