

REMINISCING TRAINING AND SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

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Abstract

Reminiscing, a conversation between child and caregiver about past events experienced together, has been extensively studied with parent-child dyads of preschool and school-age children (Sales & Fivush, 2005). Researchers have proposed interventions to enhance the elaborative style and emotional aspects associated with caregivers' reminiscing, with positive effects on children's socio-emotional and cognitive skills (Corsano & Guidotti, 2019). Nevertheless, research within extra-familiar contexts is still limited (Andrews et al., 2019). This study aims to verify the efficacy of training aimed at improving the reminiscing skills of psychologists working with Special Needs children on psycho-educational topics and academic skills. The decision to explore this theme concerning these children was dictated by the awareness that they often present a psychological profile characterized by emotional difficulties, low self-esteem, social and cognitive problems connected to their peculiar condition, which can be improved by reminiscing. Participants were divided into an experimental group (twelve dyads) and a control group (eight dyads). Each dyad comprised of one psychologist and one child with SN aged between 8 and 10 years. The psychologists in the experimental group took part in training (3 meetings) about reminiscing, while those in the control group took part in training (3 meetings) about play. Tools proposed to psychologist in the pre and post-test were Caregiver Child Reminiscence Scale (Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009); Children's Coping Strategies (Goodvin & Romdall, 2013). Tools proposed to children were Test of Emotion Comprehension (Pons & Harris, 2000); Self-Description Questionnaire (Marsh, 1990); Narrative speech evaluation (BVL_4-12, Marini et al., 2015). During an audio-recorded reminiscing conversation in pre and post-test, reminiscing style, presence of emotional terms and references to the Self were measured for each member of the dyad. In the experimental group, the non-parametric ANOVA highlighted, at the post-test, an increase in reminiscing habits and in the use of elaborative style, both for psychologists and children. In general, no increases in children's skills emerged; however, from an analysis of individual children's profile it was found that for some of them training improved their socio-emotional abilities. Training promoted greater awareness of the use of this practice among psychologists, confirming what had already been found in the literature on the effectiveness of training among caregivers.

Keywords: *Reminiscing, training, children with special needs, intervention, psycho-educational skills.*

1. Introduction

Reminiscing is a caregiver-guided conversation about past events experienced by the child and caregiver together (Fivush & Nelson, 2006). Parental reminiscing has been extensively studied, especially with mothers, with preschool and school-age children (Sales & Fivush, 2005). More than 20 years' research has shown that caregivers use different styles when they talk about past experiences. Researchers currently place the reminiscing style along a continuum ranging from more elaborative styles to less elaborative ones (Fivush, 2007). To reminisce with an elaborative style means using "wh- questions" to enrich the conversation, stimulating the child's active participation, encouraging and validating their contributions, and adding new information. A less elaborative style creates few opportunities for conversation and gives rise to short and redundant speeches (Salmon & Reese, 2016). Several studies have shown that the continuous use of elaborative and emotional reminiscing has positive effects on acquiring socio-emotional and cognitive skills among children, such as: construction and consolidation of the sense of the Self, emotional competence, increasing in appropriate coping strategies, and creating coherent narratives (Laible, et al., 2013; Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010). Researchers began to propose to caregivers, in the family context, interventions aimed at enhancing the conversational techniques associated with an elaborative and emotional style, with positive results (Corsano & Guidotti, 2019). In a review, Neale and Pino-Pasternak (2016) began to reflect on the possible application of reminiscing even

within some extra-familiar contexts, such as psycho-educational ones, in which adults have multiple opportunities to reminisce with children about shared experiences. Nonetheless, research is still limited (Andrews et al., 2019). It could be interesting, for theoretical and practical implications, to extend the effectiveness of reminiscing training to other contexts and other populations that could benefit from it.

2. Objectives

The study examined the effect of training aimed at improving the reminiscing skills of psychologists who work on psycho-educational issues and the academic skills of Special Needs children. The choice to explore this theme in this population was dictated by the awareness that Special Needs children often present a psychological profile characterized by emotional difficulties, low self-esteem, social and cognitive problems (Celi, 2017); the literature on training to do with reminiscing has demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing some of these skills (Valentino et al, 2022; Van Bergen et al, 2018). In line with prior research, it was hypothesized that training would have a positive effect on awareness using reminiscing in the psychologists' experimental group. It was also expected that participants belonging to experimental group would reminisce more frequently with an elaborative style, with a greater use of emotional terms, interventions of emotional regulation and references to the Self, in the post-test phase. It was also hypothesized that, by the end of training, children in the experimental group would improve their emotional understanding, coping strategies, self-esteem, in particular regarding school learning, and their narrative competence.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and setting

The study took place in Italy, in centres specialized in special educational needs. Twenty dyads participated, divided into an experimental and a control group. The experimental group comprised of twelve dyads. In each one there was a psychologist (M=1; F=11) aged between 25 and 34 years (M=28.6; SD=3.42) and a child with SN (M=5; F=7) aged between 8 and 10 years (M=9; SD=0.83). Eight dyads were in the control group; in the latter there was a psychologist (F=8) aged between 25 and 35 years (M=28.6; SD=3.66), and a child with SN (M=5; F=3) aged between 8 and 10 years (M=9; SD=0.75).

3.2. Procedure

A pre-test/training/post-test design was used.

In the pre- and post-test, data collection was analogous in both the experimental and the control group. Psychologists filled out: • CCRS (Caregiver Child Reminiscence Scale, Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009), which evaluates the reminiscing habits and the value attributed to it; • CCS (Children's Coping Strategies, Goodvin & Romdal, 2013), an 18-item questionnaire completed by the adult to investigate the frequency with which the child implements coping strategies in difficult situations. Children filled out: • the TEC (Test of Emotion Comprehension) (Pons & Harris, 2000), designed to evaluate the child's understanding of nature, causes and possibility of emotional control; • QDS (Questionnaire for the Description of Self, Marsh, 1990), self-assessment questionnaire comprised of 76 items that evaluate the concept of the Self concerning "physical appearance", "physical abilities", "relationships with parents", "relationships with peers", "skills and interest in Italian", "skills and interest in Maths", "ability and interest in school" and "global concept of the Self"; • The "Multilevel Assessment of Narrative Speech" test, from the Battery for Language Assessment (BVL_4-12, Marini et al., 2015). Finally, a psychologist and a child from each dyad had a conversation about a mutually shared past event that was audio-recorded, transcribed and, then, encoded, measuring reminiscing style, presence of emotional terms and references to the Self for each member of the dyad (Corsano et al., 2014; Reese et al., 1993). The analysis of 20% of the transcripts was performed by two independent judges and an agreement index was calculated (Cohen's $K > .80$).

During the training, psychologists in the experimental group attended three meetings. The one-hour workshops were about describing the reminiscing construct and styles, the effects associated with the use of an elaborative and emotional style. Examples of conversations with different styles and role-playing were used. Finally, the psychologists were asked to continue the training, involving the children of the dyad, during their usual support activities. They had to create, in each day of the child's attendance, for a period of three weeks, at least one occasion to reminisce about an episode of the past experienced together. The psychologists were provided with some materials to guide them in this second phase of the training (e.g., a brochure with the "good reminiscing practices," examples of conversation with different styles, a sheet in which to write down, together with child, some events of the past experienced together; an observation grid to mark whether the reminiscing activity had been done and

whether the suggestion of that conversation had been made by the child or psychologist). The control group's psychologists were also involved in three meetings focused on the importance of play in psycho-educational practice. This theme has been selected as it had already been used for control groups in other experimental studies (Cleveland & Morris, 2014; Taumoepeau & Reese, 2013). During the one-hour meetings, the use of play to improve school learning and to develop different skills (executive functions, tolerance to waiting, exposure to loss) were discussed. At the end of the training, the psychologists were asked to involve the children of the dyads, creating, for a period of three weeks, at least one shared play opportunity for each day of the child's attendance. Materials shared with the psychologists were a list containing the play experienced during the meetings and an observation grid where they were asked to mark whether the shared play activity had been carried out, the type of play and whether the game proposal had been made by the child or psychologist.

At the end of the three weeks, a post-test was conducted.

4. Results

First, descriptive analyses of all variables were carried out. Later, non-parametric ANOVA was used (Wilcox, 2017). A profile analysis was carried out to identify any peculiarities related to the performance of each dyad.

CCRS data shows, for the psychologists of the experimental group, an increase in the use of reminiscing, during usual work practice, at the end of the training ($Q(1,5) = 18.03, p = .01$). No significant differences were found for the other variables investigated by the questionnaire (Table 1).

In reminiscing conversations, a significant difference in elaborative style emerged between the two groups of adults [$Q(2,6) = 7.94, p = .02$] (Table 2). Also, for the performance of children in reminiscing conversations, the comparison between the two groups shows, in the post-test phase, a statistically significant difference in the use of sentences attributable to an elaborative style [$Q(2,6) = 9.71, p = .01$] (Table 3). No significant differences were found vis-à-vis the other variables investigated by tests.

Regarding the profile analysis, the variables in which the highest increments were found for each member of the dyad were: use of emotional terms and references to the child's Self. In the post-test, five dyads of the experimental group used emotional terms more frequently (values ranging from 1 to 10); only three dyads of the control group showed an increase (values ranging from 1 to 2). Three dyads of the experimental group increased the use of references to the child's Self (values ranging from 2 to 32); no control group dyads showed an increase.

5. Discussion

The first result that clearly emerges is that the psychologists in the experimental group, at the end of the training, use reminiscing more frequently.

The training has probably promoted a greater awareness in the use of this practice during conversations with children. Moreover, only for the psychologists and children in the experimental group, a significant increase in use of elaborative style was detected at the end of the intervention. This confirms what has been found from previous studies with parents (Reese & Newcombe, 2007; Van Bergen et al., 2009), and it is important given the effect of this style for skills development. The lack of statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control group regarding emotional terms and references to the child's Self deviates from previous studies (Valentino et al., 2022; Van Bergen et al., 2009). Perhaps during reminiscing training, the focus was particularly on aspects related to style. Profile analyses have identified that some children of the experimental group achieved greater increases in certain variables. This may well suggest that, with a larger sample or longer training, statistically significant differences between the two groups could emerge. Moreover, the training did not have the same impact on all the participants of the experimental group: indeed, some dyads show more marked increases than others. This suggests that some dyads benefited more from the training, probably due to inter-individual differences between the participants, which were not considered in this study. Future studies could focus on this aspect. The lack of statistically significant results in tests related to children's skills is not in line with the literature (Taumoepeau & Reese, 2013; Valentino et al., 2022; Van Bergen et al., 2009). It could be attributed to the specific context in which the study was conducted. Future research could evaluate changes in skills more related to metacognitive aspects. Moreover, it may be that changes related to these macro-competences will take longer to consolidate and manifest themselves consistently (Leonard et al., 2022; Reese & Newcombe, 2007).

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation and ANOVA results for the CCRS (Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009).

	Control group		Experimental group		Q	Group-Time		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test		Interaction		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		df1	df2	p-value
CCRS Total	4.5 (0.53)	4.62 (0.74)	4.00 (0.74)	5.92 (0.79)	18.03	1	5	.01
Problem solving	5.38 (1.19)	5.17 (1.52)	5.22 (1.28)	5.42 (1.19)	0.31	1	5.88	.60
Emotional control	4.77 (1.34)	4.75 (1.19)	5.33 (0.80)	5.50 (0.94)	0	1	10	.99
Maintaining of relations	4.56 (0.53)	4.57 (0.54)	4.76 (1.08)	4.76 (1.06)	0.05	1	6.5	.83
Behavioural control	4.54 (0.87)	4.62 (0.90)	4.56 (1.37)	4.56 (1.48)	0.26	1	6.3	.63
Functions relating to the Self	3.62 (1.04)	4.15 (1.11)	4.53 (1.21)	4.83 (1.08)	0.33	1	9.89	.58
Conversation	3.73 (1.21)	3.50 (1.36)	4.60 (1.10)	4.60 (1.10)	0.29	1	5	.61
Cognitive skills	3.10 (0.88)	3.08 (0.90)	3.78 (1.55)	4.73 (1.24)	3.15	1	5.57	.13

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation and ANOVA results for psychologists' reminiscing conversation.

	Control group		Experimental group		Q	Group-Time		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test		Interaction		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		df1	df2	p-value
Elaborative style	6.60 (2.88)	6.25 (2.60)	8.83 (4.02)	14.84 (6.55)	7.94	2	6	.02
Repetitive style	2.75 (1.58)	1.38 (0.92)	4.08 (2.15)	2.58 (1.93)	1.72	2	8	.24
Evaluative style	1.62 (1.60)	3.00 (1.20)	1.42 (1.31)	2.08 (1.62)	0.39	2	9	.67
Emotional references	0.75 (1.75)	1.12 (0.83)	0.75 (1.22)	2.92 (3.29)	0.97	2	7	.42
Psychologist Self	1.38 (1.06)	1.38 (0.74)	0.92 (1.38)	2.17 (1.47)	3	2	8	.10
Relational Self Dyad	2.62 (1.19)	3.25 (0.46)	3.25 (1.60)	4.92 (2.31)	0.70	2	7	.53
Self-referred Child	3.12 (1.46)	2.88 (0.35)	3.67 (2.64)	8.00 (8.30)	1.32	2	5	.34

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation and ANOVA results for children reminiscing conversation.

	Control group		Experimental group		Q	Group-Time		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test		Interaction		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		df1	df2	p-value
Elaborative style	3.75 (1.67)	4.25 (1.58)	4.75 (2.70)	10.42 (5.28)	9.71	2	6	.01
Repetitive style	2.75 (2.05)	1.50 (1.07)	2.33 (1.83)	1.25 (1.36)	0.07	2	8	.93
Evaluative style	2.88 (2.17)	4.00 (1.60)	4.33 (2.81)	4.17 (3.33)	1.46	2	8	0.28
Emotional references	0.38 (1.06)	0.88 (0.35)	0.17 (0.39)	1.58 (1.56)	2.38	2	7	0.16
Child Self	1.88 (1.46)	2.12 (0.99)	1.42 (1.51)	4.25 (4.81)	1.08	2	7	0.39
Relational Self Dyad	0.75 (0.89)	2.38 (0.92)	0.92 (0.79)	2.33 (1.50)	0.60	2	8	0.57
Self-referred Psychologist	0.00 (0.00)	0.25 (0.46)	0.08 (0.29)	0.58 (0.79)	-	-	-	-

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