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From early childhood to special education: Interactive digital storytelling as a coaching approach for fostering social empathy.

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Abstract

Much research is being conducted over the years about the social inclusion of individuals with special needs. These individuals have to face their own deficiencies in social interaction, but also the social exclusion by other members of their environment. This results often in isolation and the enhancement of their social problems, especially in the case on inclusive classrooms. In this paper, a case study regarding (social) empathy fostering in early childhood with the exploitation of the interactive digital storytelling approach is described. The results were positive. Considering the incomplete development of social dexterities of 3-5 year old children and its similarity to social deficiencies of individuals with special needs, this paper builds a discussion upon the exploitation of the same technique within Special Education as a future research path.

1. Introduction

Undeniably, research upon the social inclusion of children with Special Needs is carried out over the years. In many cases of such children face twofold problems; on one hand their own social deficiency and on the other social exclusion by their environment. In both situations, significant research has been conducted regarding emotional

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intelligence and in particular empathy and its social extensions. This issue is equally important when it concerns the social skills of children with special needs and the social behavior of others towards these children.

This paper builds a discussion upon a case study which aimed at fostering the social empathy of young children (aged 2.5 to 4.5 years) by exploiting an interactive digital story as means of teaching intervention. Since social capacity is similarly limited in the cases of very young children and children with special needs, the results of this study serve as a foundation for the exploration of utilizing interactive digital storytelling as a tool for foster social empathy and, at extension, emotional intelligence for children with special needs, regardless of them belonging to a special education or a normal inclusion classroom. Moreover, this approach could be exploited in other, equally important aspects of the lives of children with special needs, spanning from the family environment to the wider social environment and cases that need further attention, such as adoption of such children.

The paper is structured as follows; initially the theoretical background is presented, focusing on the notions of social cognition and pro-social behavior, empathy and storytelling. Then, the aforementioned case study is described and results are presented. Lastly, a concluding discussion attempts to correlate this case study with special education and raise questions for future research which would exploit interactive digital storytelling for fostering empathy and social cognition, not only for children with special needs but for the members of their immediate environment as well.

2. Theoretical Background

The theoretical background for this paper focuses on two directions. The first one regards emotional intelligence and especially empathy and its social extension. The second one regards digital storytelling and its educational exploitation, mainly through interactive narrative and personal coaching.

2.1. Emotional intelligence and Empathy

Emotions hold a significant role in one's life by guiding and directing behavior. They refer to a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states and range of propensities to act [1]. Emotional intelligence is the combination of cognitive, affective and conative domains, referring to the capacity for recognizing own and others' feelings, for motivating oneself and for managing emotions well internally and within interpersonal relationships of any kind [2]. In this vein, emotional intelligence is a key factor for academic and professional achievement, as it is a set of socio-emotional skills which enable the intellect to turn into action and accomplishment. Moreover, academic discipline and group well-being rely significantly on intra-group relations.

Humans build up the capacity to care for others form an early age [3], by being able to understand another person's need and provide help when needed [4]. Children respond with empathy and prosociality, thus offering their help already by the age of 18 months [5]. Several studies highlight the importance of developing Social Cognition [6], an area that includes children's Theory of Mind, Empathy and Emotion Understanding [7].

Empathy, a fundamental component of social cognition is a complex construct and a specific social cognitive ability related to taking part in the suffering of other people [8]. It encompasses a cognitive dimension which involves the capacity to see things from the perspective of others and an affective dimension that involves sharing other people's emotions [7]. From the school years, children are able to understand that their feelings can be a reaction to something that happened to another person. They are also increasingly helping others by sharing objects and assisting in emergency situation, whereas empathic disposition is directly related to prosocial behavior [9]. Despite its significance, there is a minimal set of studies which focus on empathic training procedures, apart from the cases of bullying prevention [10], but also regarding Emotion Understanding. Such studies [11],[12],[13] concern mainly primary, normal education.

2.2. Social empathy & Special Education

Empathy is an important issue within special education in two basic directions. The first regard students with special needs themselves, such as individuals with problems of the autistic spectrum (AS) appear to have deficits in social perception and cognition, subtle impairment, of verbal and non-verbal communication, presence of