

THE NEED TO IMPROVE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES IN THE TRAINING OF FUTURE TEACHERS: STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

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Abstract. Today, scholars raise the need for the development/self-development of social emotional competences in schools and emphasize the importance of its development for successful socialization of children. Scientific articles emphasize the importance of improving teachers' social emotional competences for social emotional education of children. The need to improve social emotional competences is underlined in Lithuanian and European Union documents that point to the importance of high-quality social emotional education and the need to improve teachers' competences. Recently, researches have been focusing mainly on the peculiarities of children's social emotional education, yet the problem of improving social emotional competences of pedagogues is left aside. The article reveals the attitude of students of the Childhood pedagogy study programme towards the existing social emotional competences and substantiates the need for its improvement in the education of future pedagogues. Findings of qualitative research (individual interview with the students) are presented. The results of the study have revealed that students do not always succeed in recognizing and managing the feelings that emerge, especially they lack knowledge and skills to control stressful situations. The analysis of students' perspective highlighted the need for the improvement of social emotional competences in the education of future pedagogues.

Keywords: improvement, social emotional competences, students, training of future teachers.

Introduction

Taking into consideration the context and conditions of students' education, scholars (Goleman, 2009; Frederickson & Cline, 2011; Slušnys & Šukytė, 2016) bring up the need for the development of social emotional competences (hereinafter referred to as SEC) and emphasize their importance for successful socialization of children. S. Neale, L. Spencer-Arnell, & L. Wilson (2009), I. Liubertienė, R. Kunickienė, & J. Kupriūnienė (2015), L. Slušnys & D. Šukytė (2016), note that more attention should be paid to the development of children's SEC, as researches prove the links between these competencies and children's academic achievements (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007;

Liubertienė et al., 2015; Weaver & Wilding, 2020). Students who had acquired good social emotional abilities demonstrated more positive behaviour in the classroom and better learning outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, & Dymnicki, 2011). M. Mykolaiv, K. Clark & S.M. Reich (2016) emphasize that pedagogues play a very important role in developing SEC in students. The question of improving the SEC in both children and pedagogues is raised in national documents: in Lithuania's Progress Strategy "*Lithuania 2030*"; in the *State Education Strategy 2013-2022*, and in the *Law on Education of Lithuania, 2011*. The amendments to the Law on Education that came into force in 2017 put schools under obligation not only to implement at least one social emotional education programme, but also to ensure conditions for the development of pedagogues' SEC: "<< pedagogical staff must improve their qualifications in the development of students' social emotional competences >> (Amendment to the Article 4, Clause 23).

In order to achieve and implement the goals of students' social emotional education, it is necessary for the pedagogues to constantly improve their SEC. According to R. Čiužas (2013), for the pedagogue to be able to meet the expectations of the society for quality education of its citizens, it is no longer enough to acquire a qualification, it is necessary to constantly improve one's competencies to effectively master the role of a teacher (Čiužas, 2013). The education of prospective pedagogues in higher education (hereinafter referred to as the FP) does not place enough attention to the development of SEC, therefore the article raises questions: what social emotional skills, qualities and dispositions that prove the presence of SEC the students have acquired when starting pedagogical studies in higher education and what SEC are to be improved in the education of future pedagogues?

Recently carried out researches into students' SEC serve as the basis for the development of social emotional education programmes. However, little attention is paid to the analysis of SEC possessed by prospective teachers and there are no more detailed discussions on their development in the higher education process.

The object of the article is: social emotional competencies possessed by future pedagogues.

The aim of the article is to reveal the attitude of students of towards the existing social emotional competences and to substantiate the need for their improvement in the education of future pedagogues.

Research methods: analysis of scientific literature and documents, semi-structured interviews, qualitative content analysis.

Review of the Literature

Social emotional education is becoming priority both in foreign countries and in Lithuania, as a number of studies conducted prove the link between the

SEC and the students' achievements (Zakrewski, 2012; Raudienė, 2018). Social emotional education is a process in which knowledge, dispositions, abilities and skills are acquired and applied in identifying one's emotions, managing them, setting goals and achieving them, showing empathy, creating positive relationships with others and making responsible decisions (Venclovaite & Danylienė, 2018). SEC is the ability to communicate and collaborate with others as a team, to learn productively, to perform the most important roles in the family, community and one's professional activities (Liubertienė et al., 2015).

Scholars agree that to improve the SEC, essential basic social and emotional abilities, skills and dispositions need to be developed in 5 areas: *self-awareness*, *self-control*, *social awareness*, *relationship skills* and *responsible decision-making* (Goleman, 2009; Lekavičienė & Antinienė, 2013; Slušnys & Šukytė, 2016; Bradberry & Greaves, 2020). The founders of the international organization *Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)* distinguish the following essential social emotional abilities and qualities in each area: *self-awareness*, self-control (recognizing one's feelings and emotions, strengthening self-confidence; managing impulsivity and stress, maintaining discipline, self-motivation etc.); *social awareness* (ability to see situations through the eyes of others, empathy, respect for diversity, ability to properly use family, school and community resources etc.); *relationship skills* (ability to build and maintain relationships, work in a team, manage conflicts, seek help etc.); *responsible decision-making* (ability to make decisions based on ethical standards, social norms and expected consequences of actions; ability to contribute to the overall prosperity of the school and community etc. (CASEL website, 2022).

According to J.P. Kremenitzer & R. Miller (2008) before proceeding with social emotional education in schools, it must be ensured that pedagogues have acquired SEC (Liubertienė et al., 2015), which would enable to create suitable conditions for the social emotional development of children. Agliati et.al. (2020) emphasizes that the education of SEC in children justifies the need for professional development of pedagogues, because the skills of pedagogues are an important factor in the development of a child's SEC (Talvio, Berg, Litmanen, & Lonka, 2016). K. Rosenthal & L. Gatt (2010) have established that pedagogues who had participated in SEC improvement programmes were more effective in meeting a child's social emotional needs and more often provided socially emotional support compared to pedagogues who had not participated in such programmes. High-quality social emotional education of children will only be feasible when children and pedagogues work together to improve SEC (Slušnys & Šukytė, 2016). Thus, special attention in the preparation of the FP must be paid to the development of social emotional abilities, skills, relevant dispositions and qualities, which form the basis of SEC.

The research of A. Malinauskaitė (2011), L. Vaišvidienė & G. Gedvilienė (2017) revealed insufficient competencies of a pedagogue to carry out social

emotional education of children. R. Braslauskienė, I. Klanienė, & Budreikaitė (2021) researched the competencies of primary school teachers. The findings of the study revealed that teachers felt the greatest need for the improvement of social competences, especially those of communication and collaboration. In developing children's emotional intelligence, the pedagogues would most be willing to improve the competencies of cognition of differences and opportunities in students, as well as competencies in provision of assistance and motivation of students (Kudriavcevaitė & Lenkauskaitė, 2019). The research of V. Venclovaitė & L. Danylienė (2018) shows the constant need of pedagogues for the improve the competencies.

As pointed out by R. Nedzinskaitė (2013), the education programmes of future teachers must include the development of such social emotional skills as *problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking, assessment of different situations*, and so on. It is particularly important to pay attention to the level of empathy in FP, because in its absence it would be difficult to expect teachers' willingness to learn about the differences of the students, to provide assistance, to use positive tools to manage children's misconduct in the classroom, and so on. *Thus, social emotional education of children is integral to the development of teachers' SEC, because scientific researches show a close link between acquisition of SEC in students and the development of pedagogues' competencies. This way, it can be assumed that it is necessary to create favourable conditions for students to develop social emotional competencies in higher education institutions that prepare FP.*

Research Methodology

The chosen qualitative research strategy helped to obtain significant information about the experience of the research participants, revealing the attitude of students towards the SEC possessed. This strategy has been most instrumental in revealing the attitude towards and how the FP themselves feel about the SEC acquired and those that still need to be improved. According to I. Gaižauskaitė & N. Valavičienė (2016), a qualitative research is a systematic research of a situation, event or a case in a natural environment. By using interviews, the qualitative research allows to delve not only into the facts, but first of all into the feelings and thoughts of participants, to observe non-verbal language. Therefore, it is the most suitable tool for assessing the competencies possessed by FP, to find out which they think are the strongest one and which they would like to improve. An interpretive paradigm (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) and a constructivist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1999) were used to support the research. They are adapted to provide an interpretive and holistic picture of the analysed situation, “experiences” of the individuals involved and the explanation that originates from the analysis of the situation. A semi-

structured interview method was chosen. This method was chosen since it's known to provide detailed, systematically organised data, while the interview itself remains informal, takes place in the form of conversation (Bitinas, Rupšienė, & Žydžiūnaitė, 2008). During the preparation of the research, the topics and problems to be discussed with the informants during the research had been planned in advance.

The topics were planned taking into account the 5 areas of social emotional education identified by Lithuanian and foreign authors: *self-awareness*, *self-control*, *social awareness*, *relationship maintenance (relationship skills)* and *responsible decision-making*. Two topics were identified in the interviews: the strong SEC in students and the weak SEC in students. The study was conducted in October-November 2021. The interview was conducted in the form of direct communication with the research participants in the auditorium of University X. The interview lasted from 40 to 50 minutes.

The sample of research. The method of criteria selection was applied. Essential criteria of selection: first-year students in childhood pedagogy study at the University X, seeking to become pre-school and primary education pedagogues. 12 prospective teachers studying in the first year of the Childhood Pedagogy study programme agreed to participate in the research. All participants were girls in the age range of 19 to 23 years. Informants' responses are coded S-student (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12).

The research data analysis methods. The research data were processed by the content analysis method. At the beginning of the collected data analysis, the data was coded and transcribed. This method includes repeated reading of the text, identification of manifest categories based on keywords, division of the content of categories into subcategories, interpretation and substantiation categories and subcategories with confirmation statements from the text (Bitinas, Rupšienė, & Žydžiūnaitė, 2008).

Validity and reliability of the research. Content analysis is a valid method that allows to draw reliable conclusions based on the text analyzed. According to B. Bitinas (2006), by using this method, the reliability and validity of data in the research is assessed based on examples, quoting excerpts from the informants' answers. Since the researcher themselves is the research instrument in the qualitative research, the reliability of the research was ensured by the authors' personal participation in the research and constant interaction with the informants. The aim was to ensure the validity of the research in the following ways: the informants' statements were recorded on a dictaphone, then copied to the *Microsoft Office Word* and submitted for review and approval. The research participants were presented with the final draft of the research report. The research was constantly monitored, the authors of the article consulted each other, providing remarks on how properly interpret the obtained research data and avoid

bias in the analysis of the research data. These methods allowed the researchers to draw substantiated conclusions from the research.

The ethics of the research. The informants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information received. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics: respect for the dignity of the individual, the right to receive accurate information, and justice (Žydzīūnaitė, 2011).

Research Findings and their Discussion

As mentioned above, the chosen qualitative research strategy provided opportunities to reveal the attitude of the FP themselves towards the SEC they possessed. When analysing the SEC in students, they were asked to rate the SEC they possessed. The students identified which of their SEC were the strongest that they believed would help them as teachers to organise proper social emotional education of their children. In the category “The strongest SEC in students in the area of self-awareness”, the following subcategories have emerged: *recognition and naming of feelings, the feeling of self-confidence*.

When rating their strong SEC, the participants of the research mainly identified the ability to recognize and name feelings. The informants stated that *“they were doing great at recognizing feelings”* (S1); *“I try to express emotions, I know them, and I recognize them easily”* (S10). Several informants identified the sense of self-confidence as their strong ability: *“I have a sense of self-confidence”* (S4). The FP regard this as an essential skill for successful pedagogical work: *“the teacher must be self-confident in order to teach the child something”* (S6). Confidence, according to informants, facilitates communication with children: *“Confidence helps to communicate with children, because when they are self-confident, it is much easier to persuade the child to do the same”* (S11). Thus, in the areas of self-awareness, the FP most value the ability to recognize and name their feelings, and several students feel self-confident.

One of the areas of SEC that is important to teachers is self-control. Subcategories identified in this category: *management of feelings, impulsivity and stress, maintenance of discipline and order, proper expression of feelings, endurance*. FP described self-control, management of impulsivity, as their strong ability: *“try not to carry out impulsive, reckless actions that have been affected by my emotions”* (S1). Some informants are happy to be able to manage stress because they understand the benefits of this ability in their pedagogical work *“I can manage stress. Only when the teacher manages to control their stress, alleviate the anxiety, it will be possible to concentrate and start working in the class”* (S3). It is very important for a teacher to be able to maintain order and discipline in the class. Several informants have identified this ability as their strong side: *“I can encourage observe discipline. In the absence of discipline,*

work with children becomes inefficient” (S11); “Lessons require a smooth process for the children to know and learn as much as possible. I know how to maintain discipline and discipline, and I think it will help me in the future” (S6). According to FP, only the teacher that possesses these abilities will ensure a smooth learning process. Teachers who are able to maintain discipline and order in the class without losing self-control help children understand the boundaries, take responsibility for their actions (Weaver & Wilding, 2020).

Another important ability identified by the informants is the appropriate expression of feelings and this is associated with successful communication with children: “The ability to express one's feelings openly is important, because students always sense sincere speaking, and then they open up to the teacher themselves” (S7); “I always speak directly without offending another person. It is useful when one is a pedagogue” (S10). One informant said that endurance is her strong quality: “I am enduring when faced with adversity. This is important for a teacher, because if children see an example of their teacher giving up, then so will the children” (S12). Slightly fewer FP named their ability to manage feelings (S1, S7, S8, S9): “I manage my emotions well enough” (S1), “feeling management has been a weak side so far, but now I’m trying to pay more attention to it and I am doing quite well” (S7). To conclude it can be stated that in the area of self-management, the FP feel that they have the following abilities: management of impulsivity and stress, maintenance of discipline and order, proper expression and management of feelings and endurance.

In the category “The strongest SEC possessed by students in the field of social awareness”, the following subcategories were identified: *the ability to empathize with another person’s situation, empathy, respect and tolerance*. Scholars (Durlak & Weissberg et al., 2011, Mykolaiv et al., 2016) note that the more emotional and warm the pedagogue is with children, the more helpful and friendly the students are in the classroom. The informants first mentioned the ability to understand other people, the effort to empathize with another's situation, that is, most described themselves as empathetic: “I always try to understand how the other person feels, I am empathetic and caring” (S1); another informant evaluates the impact of empathy on the success of pedagogical work: “I can empathize with the situation through the eyes of others. I think this competence will help in my work with children” (S5). V. Zakrewski (2012) substantiates the importance of teachers demonstrating diligence and empathy for students' emotional intelligence, because where students feel the teacher as a caring adult, students' academic achievements are significantly better. The FP have singled out tolerance and respect for human diversity as one of their strengths: “I recognize diversity, I clearly understand that all people are different, and everyone has their own view of the world” (S10). Another participant sees respect as the basis for building inter-relationships: “Respect for others is extremely important in all the situations of life. Relationships between the teacher and children cannot be

established without respect” (S11). One informant has developed tolerance through her negative experience: “I will be a teacher who listens to another opinion. I have such a tolerant attitude because some teachers or lecturers try to impose their opinions or values on me, not allow to defend my own. It hurts, and demotivates from learning that subject” (S3). Thus, in the area of social awareness, the FP are able to empathize with another person’s situation, are empathetic, tolerant, and able to accept and value diversity.

The interviews analysed how informants value their competencies in the area of *relationship maintenance* (relationship skills). Several subcategories were identified in this category: *building relationships with others, constructive conflict resolution, and provision of assistance to others*. Students realize that collaboration with others is an integral part of pedagogical work: *“I know how to build relationships. Relationship building and communication are very important in pedagogical work” (S12); “I try to maintain the best possible relationships, this is a very important competence because at an educational institution one works in a team, not just for oneself” (S9); “I can work in a team” (S10). Also, some informants are able to constructively resolve conflicts: “it is fun to be able to help resolve conflicts” (S5). As the findings of the research show, the FP are able to provide assistance to others, but no one mentioned being able to seek for help, and the following example best illustrates this: “I really like helping others, but I solve my own problems by myself and do not ask for help although children need to be taught from an early age that it is necessary to seek for help” (S11). To conclude, the FP appreciate the ability to build and maintain positive relationships with others, to collaborate, to resolve conflicts constructively, and to provide assistance to others. According to R. Lekavičienė & D. Antinienė (2012), the pedagogues must be able to communicate and collaborate in order to effectively develop children's social competencies.*

During the analysis of the research data, the following subcategories have been identified in the area “The strongest SEC in students in the area of responsible decision-making”: *the ability to make decisions taking into consideration the consequences for others, contribution to the prosperity of others*. The fewest BP claimed to have acquired the ability of responsible decision-making. Two informants (S5, S8) have assessed that they are able to: *“I can make a decision based not on emotions, but on social norms, on respect for others” (S8), “I always think through the course of actions, the consequences of my decision, because I know that one or another the decision made may affect the child” (S5). One student names the ability to contribute to the prosperity of others: “Everyone should contribute to the prosperity of the school and the community; then not only will they feel good, but they will also receive feedback” (S11). To conclude it can be said that the FP feel able to make decisions with the consequences for the child and other members of society taken into consideration, to contribute to the prosperity of the school and the community.*

In order to justify the need for future pedagogues to improve the SEC in preparation for pedagogical work with children, it is important to determine what competencies they lack. Having summed up the data in the category “The SEC in students assessed as the weakest”, the following subcategories have been identified: *self-confidence, recognition of one's strengths, emotion management, self-motivation, stress management, endurance in the face of difficulties, impulsivity management, proper expression of emotions, seeking for assistance, conflict management in the team*. The studies by L. Vaišvidienė & G. Gedvilienė's (2017) have also revealed insufficient competencies to carry out social emotional education of children.

Most of FP mentioned that the weakest aspect in assessing the SEC is the sense of self-confidence. The students associate this primarily with self-criticism and sensitive response to criticism from others: *“the distrust because I am often afraid to express my thoughts, afraid to receive criticism or bad comments about my work”* (S10). This makes the FP doubt the success of pedagogical work: *“I often criticize myself. This will interfere with my work with children. I doubt that I will be able to motivate children properly if I carry a lot of negative thoughts in my mind and underestimate myself”* (S2). One informant stated that it was difficult for them to recognize their strengths: *“it is still very difficult for me to recognize my strengths”* (S4). Thus, in the area of self-awareness, students would most like to increase their self-confidence and be able to recognize their strengths in order to succeed in their professional activities. The statements of the FP brought to light the weak spots in the area of self-management. First of all, some students lack self-motivation: *“I find it difficult to motivate myself to perform certain tasks”* (S2). Another ability they would most like to develop in preparation for the teaching profession is stress management: *“it seems I have been struggling with this for many years, but it is not going away. I think I will have to get used to it”* (S4); *“I also have a hard time managing stress. I think that the lack of such competence may prevent me from working with children”* (S6).

Some students admit that they are not able to control their emotions, but in the study process they are willing to improve them: *“I have a hard time controlling my feelings, because I fire up quickly, I raise my voice”* (S2), *“sometimes I can not control my emotions properly. I understand that this is a negative quality in pedagogical work, I am working on this quality. The lectures of Social Emotional Education course helped me a lot. I think I will be able to reach the desired result”* (S6). Informants note that it is difficult for them to endure in the face of adversity/difficulties: *“I lose endurance when faced with adversity”* (S11). Others have difficulty managing their impulsivity: *“I am a very impulsive person, I can fire up quickly, I can get angry quickly, I succumb to impulses easily”* (S10); one informant is concerned that she would not be a good example to children: *“I am quite impulsive when I notice there is injustice, I raise*

my voice, I seek justice. If we do not learn to manage our impulsivity, children will learn the same” (S11).

The FP emphasize the importance of cultivating patience in pedagogical work: *“The lack of patience can be very damaging to me as a future teacher. To be honest, I don’t have it at all. However, I am practicing every day and try to cultivate it” (S9).* To conclude, it can be assumed that the competencies in the area of self-management that the FP need most improvement in include self-motivation for work, management of stress, impulsivity and emotions and maintenance of discipline. The students would also like to learn to overcome difficulties and cultivate patience in their work with children. The studies by Braslauskienė & Klanienė et al., (2021) prove that pedagogues lack the ability to employ positive tools in order to maintain discipline in the classroom to facilitate learning for all students. The ability to manage emotions, the ability to say „No“, to have a strong psychological resilience to negative phenomena is not only one of the conditions for successful socialization, but also for effective learning (Weaver & Wilding, 2020).

When the students were evaluating the SEC in the area of relationship maintenance (relationship skills), they identified the ability to reach out for help as one of the abilities in need for improvement: *“I am usually trying to solve problems myself without asking others for opinion” (S2).* One of the reasons why the FP are not seeking for help is the lack of trust in other people: *“It is difficult for me to trust others and not to have doubts that maybe the person wanted not to help, but rather to hurt or to mock. The teacher should not be like that, on the contrary, they could develop various activities and projects by trusting their students and colleagues” (S3), “I am often not willing to accept help immediately when doing some work, even though it is really needed. This feature will my pedagogical work” (S12).* One informant is concerned that she finds it difficult to work in a team because she understands its importance in pedagogical work: *“being able to work in a team is important for teachers because it facilitates their work, gives knowledge, strengthens interrelationships, and sets a good example for children. This is my weak competence” (S11).* One of the essential abilities that is very important, especially for the pre-school and primary education pedagogues, is conflict management. However, some informants rate their ability of conflict-management as weak: *“I have difficulty managing conflicts” (S10).* Thus, to sum up the statements of informants it shows that in the area of relationship maintenance (relationship skills), students should primarily learn how to reach out for help, to work in a team and to manage conflicts.

The interviews with the FP suggest that it is necessary to improve their social emotional competencies during their studies so that they could further engage in social emotional education of children in educational institutions. And the fact that all but one FP have not participated in social emotional education programmes because such programmes did not take place while they were at

school also supports this. The findings of the research allow making an assumption that, from the students' perspective, they feel the need for the improvement of SEC, so it is very important to enable this in the education of future pedagogues from their very first year.

Conclusions

1. The insights of scholars and strategic educational documents of the Republic of Lithuania put under obligation to ensure high-quality social emotional education of students. Scholars agree that students need to develop SEC in five areas of: self-awareness, self-control, social awareness, relationship maintenance (relationship skills) and responsible decision-making. The role of the teacher is essential in the development of SEC in these areas, as scholars bring up arguments that prove the link among the development of teachers' competencies and students' academic achievement and successful socialization. Therefore, it is necessary to develop conditions in the education of future pedagogues in higher education institutions for them to acquire SEC and to improve them during the entire period of their pedagogical studies.
2. In evaluating the SEC possessed, the FP singled out the main competencies and qualities they held in all 5 areas that, in their view, would contribute to successful social emotional development of their students. The findings of the research suggest that, in the areas of self-awareness and self-control the FP have acquired the ability to recognize feelings, feel confident, can manage impulsivity and stress, appropriately express feelings, maintain positive discipline etc. Meanwhile, in the field of social awareness, they are able to empathize with another person's situation, demonstrate empathy, tolerance and respect for different people. The FP appreciate the ability to maintain positive relationships with others, collaborate, constructively resolve conflicts and provide assistance to others. The students have also positively assessed the following abilities in the area of responsible decision-making: to make decisions taking into consideration possible consequences, and to contribute to the prosperity of society. All these abilities and qualities, from their perspective, form the core of pedagogical interaction and guarantee success in pedagogical work.
3. The data collected during the interviews reveal the following abilities and qualities that the FP need to improve: in the area of self-awareness (self-confidence, management of emotions and identification of strengths), in the area of, self-control (management of feelings and stress, maintenance of discipline and order, endurance and patience, self-motivation), in the area of relationship maintenance (relationship skills) (reaching out for help, teamwork, conflict management). The findings of the research allow

projecting the continuity of the research on the improvement of SEC in students in higher education, in the education of future pedagogues.

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