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## Social-Emotional Competencies of Future Early Education Teachers

Kompetencje społeczno-emocjonalne przyszłych nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji

### KEYWORDS

social-emotional competencies, social-emotional learning, early education teacher, pre-primary and primary education, early education

### ABSTRACT

Polish and international research has shown serious changes in the behaviour and well-being of children, adolescents, and adults around the world due to the long period of isolation during the pandemic and the pressure of meeting the expectations of the modern world. It is necessary to introduce programs into kindergartens, schools and universities that are aimed at improving the emotional resilience and maintaining health of students and teachers in a rapidly changing reality, as well as at preparing them to cope with crisis situations. The aim of the article is to present some selected results of the cross-cultural research on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) revealed by Polish students of preschool and early school education. The main research problem was: What SEL competencies do you think should teachers use to effectively teach their students? The approach applied was based on grounded theory, with the use of NVivo software data analysis. The research tool was a qualitative research questionnaire

developed by the international research network CASEL (*The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*, casel.org). The findings prove the need, as well as an opportunity, for systemic development of both intrapersonal and interpersonal SEL teacher competencies that are the basis for developing these skills in the teaching process.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

kompetencje społeczno-emocjonalne, społeczno-emocjonalne uczenie się, nauczyciel wczesnej edukacji, pedagogika przedszkolna i wczesnoszkolna, wczesna edukacja

Badania polskie i międzynarodowe wykazują poważne zmiany w zachowaniu i samopoczuciu dzieci, młodzieży i dorosłych po okresie pandemii oraz w związku z narastającą presją sprostania oczekiwaniom współczesnego świata. Niezbędne staje się wprowadzenie na każdym etapie edukacji programów mających na celu systematyczne wzmacnianie odporności emocjonalnej uczniów i nauczycieli w szybko zmieniającej się rzeczywistości w celu zachowania zdrowia oraz ukształtowania umiejętności lepszego radzenia sobie w sytuacjach kryzysowych. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wyników części badań międzykulturowych dotyczących kompetencji w zakresie społeczno-emocjonalnego uczenia się (*Social and Emotional Learning*, SEL) polskich przyszłych nauczycieli pedagogiki przedszkolnej i wczesnoszkolnej. Główny problem badawczy ujęto w pytaniu: Z jakich kompetencji SEL, Twoim zdaniem, powinni korzystać nauczyciele, aby skutecznie uczyć swoich uczniów? Zastosowano podejście oparte na teorii ugruntowanej z wykorzystaniem oprogramowania NVivo do wspomaganego komputerowo analizy danych. Narzędzie badawcze stanowił kwestionariusz ankiety do badań jakościowych opracowany przez międzynarodową sieć badawczą CASEL (*The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning*, casel.org). Przeprowadzone analizy dowiodły potrzeby, ale też możliwości systemowego rozwijania kompetencji zarówno intrapersonalnych, jak i interpersonalnych przyszłych nauczycieli w zakresie SEL jako podstawy nauczania tych umiejętności.

## Introduction

A long period of isolation during the pandemic is associated in many children around the world with the occurrence of severe changes in behaviour and well-being, including in levels of perceived stress/anxiety, violence and bullying in the classroom, feelings of emotional loneliness, or loss of ability to solve problems creatively and cope with the difficulties of daily life. This is indicated by both ongoing meta-analyses (Rogers et al., 2021) and international studies (e.g. Dalton et al., 2020; Racine et al., 2021).

Polish studies of primary school students (e.g. Jaskulska et al., 2022; Sikorska, 2022), including in grades I–III (Bałachowicz & Zbróg, 2023a) found evidence of unmet social-emotional needs in younger school-aged children, mainly related to being a member of a peer group experiencing direct interactions and play with classmates, especially when “incoming information about threats to health and life disrupted the sense of safety and changed the emotional atmosphere of students’ daily experiences, evoking feelings such as: sadness, despair, fear, anger, uncertainty, pain” (Bałachowicz & Zbróg, 2023b, pp. 324–325).

Experiences from remote education demonstrate the need to prepare students and teachers to deal emotionally with crisis situations. Due to the lack of practical tools, adults (parents, teachers, etc.) lose contact with children, thus leaving them without adequate support. The aim of this article, therefore, is to increase knowledge of the social-emotional learning process by presenting a piece of cross-cultural research on the social-emotional competences revealed by Polish preschool and early childhood education students, i.e. future teachers. This type of research using the research tool developed within the international CASEL network has not yet been conducted in Poland.

## The Concept of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Poland

The key term in the following discussion will be Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) concerning the efficient recognition and management of one’s own emotions in a variety of, especially crisis, situations (see Bałachowicz, 2023). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control and interpersonal skills necessary for success at school, work and life, as well as for maintaining mental health and well-being (Brackett et al., 2014; Mariani et al., 2016), especially after the pandemic (e.g. Rosanbalm, 2021). SEL is the process by which children, adolescents and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop a healthy identity, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2013).

For several years, Poland has seen a gradual increase in awareness of the importance of social-emotional development for the quality of personal and social life in the context of SEL (Kwiatkowski, 2016). At the same time, the most recent research reveals that Poles are still characterised by some of the lowest SEL indicators as compared to residents of other countries. These include very low levels of social and institutional trust, low levels of capital and social well-being (Glatz & Eder, 2020). Researchers

point to a link between deficiencies in the development of social-emotional competences during childhood and adolescence, and difficulties entering adulthood and taking on developmental adult roles (Appelt & Jabłoński, 2017). Also, employers, while explaining why they do not want to employ young people, usually do not refer to their low professional competencies, but to poor resources in the aspect of so-called soft competencies, i.e. SEL (Appelt & Wojciechowska, 2016).

In Poland, individual elements of SEL are researched and implemented for both teachers and students – rather intuitively; mainly in the context of diagnosing and training children’s emotional and social competences in kindergarten and school, and they usually concern:

1. diagnosis and measuring social competencies (e.g. Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2017);
2. places of social and emotional competencies in curricula and programmes (e.g. Przybylska, 2018);
3. development of social and educational competencies at various stages of education (e.g. Appelt & Jabłoński, 2017);
4. teacher’s social and emotional competencies (np. Kwiatkowski, 2015).

Despite the aforementioned attempts to draw researchers’ attention to this area of human development and functioning, SEL is one of the most neglected areas in both teacher training programmes and the education of preschool and school children. Separate programmes on SEL have neither been created for teachers or for students.

Meanwhile, the pressing need for SEL programmes is indicated by other extremely important social phenomena taking place in the Polish social space in recent years. These include:

- increased suicide attempt ratios revealed in research (e.g. by the GrowSpace Foundation, local police offices, the Capital City Police Headquarters, etc.), including suicide attempts by kindergarten children (in 2022 – 800 attempts; in 2023 – 2031 attempts – increase by 150%; and suicides (even by 7-year-old children) (Starzyńska-Rosiecka, 2023);
- an increase in diagnoses of depression, communication difficulties in interpersonal relationships, increasing cases of isolation from peers, communication incompetence, failure to cope with life’s difficulties, anxiety disorders, etc. (Nowak & Szalonka 2021);
- difficult and locally diverse access to psychological and psychiatric support for children and adolescents (e.g. Wojtczuk, 2020; Mołodecka, 2020);
- the spread of the inclusive education model (including an increasing number of children with autism spectrum disorders (during the school year from 2021/2022 to 2022/2023 an increase of 6.675 thousand pupils with an autism diagnosis in primary schools; Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Education and Science

[MEiN]), being placed in the classrooms of teachers who are not fully ready and do not have the necessary support to work in diverse groups;

- the influx into Poland of thousands of forced migrants as a result of the war in Ukraine, as well as migrants from other countries (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022).

With regard to early childhood education, the particular importance of this developmental period for sensitivity and readiness to develop social-emotional competencies is emphasised (e.g. Kruszewska & Nazaruk, 2020). It is, therefore, also relevant how teachers and future teachers of early childhood education understand the SEL phenomenon.

## Methodology

### Research Objective and Main Goal

The research conducted in Poland is part of a cross-cultural project carried out simultaneously in 17 countries around the world. Their aim was to check the understanding of SEL skills related to students' career development from the perspective of future teachers.

The authors are members of the SEL-IRN (SEL-International-Research-Networks, Connecting Social and Emotional Learning to Professional Development for Educators and Effective Teaching) international research team which conducted this research in Poland within the framework of WERA (World Education Research Association).

The main research problem was framed by the following question: Which SEL skills do you think teachers should use to effectively teach their students?

### Research Methods and Tools

The study used a modified grounded theory approach focused on exploring the model and/or theory underlying the data concerning the topic under investigation, phenomena, relationships, etc. in order to adopt, test or extend existing theories or models (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to the assumptions made, the emergence of theory was sought as a result of the analysis of empirical data, directly relevant to the observed fragment of social reality (Ślęzak & Niedbalski, 2014).

**The research tool** was jointly developed by the international research network CASEL, and it is a survey questionnaire for qualitative research on social-emotional competencies in education. The respondents answered 20 questions, 8 of which were structured as a personal data form, while the remaining 12 covered 5 broad and

interrelated areas of SEL competencies that can be taught and applied at different stages of development, from childhood to adulthood, in different cultural contexts, and these were:

1. **Self-awareness** – the ability to recognise one's emotions, thoughts and values, as well as their influence on behaviour (e.g. recognising one's own strengths and the sense of one's efficiency);
2. **Self-management** – the ability to effectively regulate one's own emotions, thoughts and behaviour in different situations (e.g. stress management, personal motivation and goal setting);
3. **Social awareness** – the ability to understand the perspective of others, including those from different backgrounds and cultures (e.g. empathy and respect for others);
4. **Building relationships and communication** – the ability to establish and maintain healthy and satisfying relationships with a variety of individuals and groups (e.g. communication and teamwork);
5. **Decision-making** – the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behaviour and social interactions on the basis of ethical standards, safety considerations, social norms, realistic assessment of consequences, and the welfare of oneself and others.

## Research Participants

A total of 131 future early childhood education teachers in Poland participated in the study (99% were female). The vast majority (91%) were fourth- and fifth-year students of full-time and part-time studies, with the remaining 8% in their third year. All the research participants had 1–5 years of experience (internship) in public schools located in urban areas.

## Data Collection

The research was carried out personally by the authors at Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education in Warsaw and Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, in collaboration with Ewa Sosnowska-Bielicz (UMCS Lublin), Agnieszka Rowicka and Ewa Skrzetuska (SGGW Warsaw). The data was collected through the Google Forms platform in the period May–June 2021.

## Data Analysis

The analysis of the data in each country, including Poland, started with an open coding process of the data obtained from the questionnaire in order to identify themes/motifs corresponding to the SEL framework competencies. At this stage, the text was coded line by line until saturation of the extracted themes was achieved. This allowed the preparation of a code book containing the themes that emerged from the analysis, their definitions and sample quotes from the respondents. The open coding process resulted in a country-specific dictionary containing a set of SEL skills linked to students' career development from the teachers' perspective. Each dictionary was then translated into English.

The research used several criteria to ensure the reliability of the study (e.g. Creswell, 2013). First of all, the cross-cultural researchers met online as part of a cross-cultural project to discuss the research objectives and to ensure that they would follow a similar procedure for data collection and analysis. The questionnaire was developed through collaboration with an international team, which enabled a peer review process. Nvivo software was used to analyse the data, which allowed for secure data storage and similar data analysis procedures to be followed (Ślęzak & Niedbalski, 2014).

## Research Results

The Polish code book contained 49 nodes (codes) describing the SEL competences of future teachers, grouped into 7 categories (a–g). The future teachers participating in the study explained in their own words the way in which they understood each category, e.g.:

(a) **Interpersonal competencies** relating to the ability to influence students' learning and their engagement in studying (e.g. adaptation skills, attentiveness, communication skills, flexibility, perseverance, emotional intelligence), were described by the interviewed future teachers as follows:

- *A teacher who seeks to understand the student will, in my opinion, seek effective methods of working with the student to the end, and will not be discouraged by failures.*
- *Communicativeness is useful when we transfer some information and we want the recipient to understand us properly.*

(b) **Relational skills** relating to establishing and maintaining healthy and satisfying relationships with diverse individuals and groups (e.g. spotting and solving problems, impartiality/equality, individual approach, interpersonal skills, openness in communication, comfort and relaxation):

- *To support others, we can – e.g. due to our empathy or attentiveness – identify problems and notice what the class teacher hasn't noticed, and then we can inform her/him about various situations.*
- *An equally important skill is openness, so that pupils do not see the teacher only as a mentor, but also as a friend to whom they can come with any problem – they can talk frankly and listen to advice on how to solve their worries.*

(c) **Class management skills** (appropriate group leadership, showing how to manage emotions, good atmosphere, teacher as role model, safety, team building, preparing pupils for self-discipline):

- *The teacher's emotional and social competencies lead to building respect for the teacher (authority), and thus to the teacher's being a role model. Through such competencies, the teacher becomes a role model worthy of imitation, which is crucial in exerting a good influence in shaping the attitude of the student.*
- *These skills enable the teacher to develop children's ability to cope with stressful situations; to know how to teach them intrinsic motivation and to make them willingly strive to set and achieve goals.*

(d) **Social awareness** relating to the ability to understand the point of view of others, including those from different backgrounds and cultures (e.g. empathy, respect, tolerance, trust, justice):

- *The teacher understands that everyone is different and acquires different skills at different times, and that not everyone can sing, play or paint (everyone has different talents); the teacher is also tolerant and teaches this to children – to accept others and respect them, because there are people in the world who, for example, have darker skin than us.*
- *The teacher needs to be empathic because every child is different, needs a different kind of help, and sometimes is in a difficult situation in which they need the support of the teacher. Empathy and understanding of others is an emotional support; by understanding others you build a greater bond with the student and thus support them in learning.*

(e) **Responsible decision-making** relating to the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behaviour and social interactions based on ethical standards (safety considerations, social norms, realistic assessment of consequences, and the well-being of oneself and others):

- *The teacher's decision-making is useful because the children watch the teacher and when they see that he or she is making the right decisions, they feel safe at school and on trips, and outside school. They can trust the teacher.*
- *The teacher should not make his or her decisions on the basis of any kind of prejudice against the student, but on the basis of fair evaluation. There are often situations in which the teacher should be guided by empathy and understanding, rather than just a plain assessment.*



(f) **Self-awareness** relating to the ability to accurately recognise emotions, thoughts and values and their impact on behaviour (e.g. self-control, understanding one's own emotions):

- *A teacher who has a good understanding of himself/herself and his/her emotions will be able to understand and motivate his/her students to effective learning. By understanding himself/herself, the teacher should be able to recognise and identify the thoughts, emotions of the learner.*

(g) **Self-control** relating to the ability to regulate one's own emotions, thoughts and behaviour in different situations (e.g. controlling one's own emotions, continuous learning, self-efficacy, emotional balance, getting everything in order and coping with stress):

- *In any job a key competence is stress management; we are functioning in the 21st century, the constant and fast pace of life forces most people to work on this competence. In this profession, self-management and coping with stress is the key competence.*

All the nodes (codes) could be divided into 2 groups:

(1) SEL competencies of future teachers related to their personality traits, self-awareness and self-management skills,

(2) SEL competencies which can be described as relational, related to the ability to establish, maintain and manage valuable social relationships.

## Conclusions

In today's reality, the importance of interpersonal skills and social awareness, including relationship building, conflict resolution, empathy and respect for diversity, is greater than before due to the increase in frequency and severity of crisis situations, intensification of intercultural interactions through migration, as well as minimisation of interpersonal relationships as a result of the dominance of contacts through the media, etc.

The surveyed future teachers correctly perceive SEL competences in terms of both intrapersonal and interpersonal competences. However, it is one thing to understand the concept and another to achieve competence. It is to this end that it is necessary to implement a universal programme for the formation of social-emotional learning competences at the stage of higher education, in the faculties in which future teachers are trained. The development of SEL curricula for children and adolescents, on the other hand, should provide opportunities to meet the requirement for children and adolescents to develop the social-emotional competences to be more resilient than they

currently are to crises and a variety of new, socially and emotionally challenging events and situations, but this requires structured learning from an early age (CASEL, 2013).

The analyses carried out highlight both the need to develop teachers' SEL skills, as they are the basis for teaching these skills to children, young people and parents (Gimbert et al., 2021), but also the existence of a favourable predisposition for shaping these competencies in future teachers who took part in the research.

This makes it all the more justifiable to prepare and conduct systemic preparation of future teachers within the scope of SEL at each educational stage.

Due to the fulfilment of the SEL programme in preschool and grades 1–3, children learn how to:

- talk to one another and listen attentively;
- establish relationships with others, including getting to know peers and maintaining friendly relationships with them;
- recognise and name their emotions;
- empathy and assertiveness;
- deal with difficult situations, including peer conflicts;
- support others (pro-social activity);
- recognise their interests and what motivates them;
- recognise effective individual strategies of learning.

Due to the SEL programme, teachers and future students (also parents) may learn:

- individual, empathic approach to each child;
- to motivate and encourage children to playing and learning;
- emotional resilience to everyday problems;
- to support the development of social competencies;
- to provide children with constructive feedback;
- to prevent problems with children's behaviour.

Achieving these learning outcomes requires teachers to enrich their competence and to continue their lifelong learning, including by becoming aware of and understanding SEL.

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