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Emotional and Social Competencies and Their Relationship to the Professional Competencies of Future Preschool and Early Childhood Education Teachers (pp. 41–64)

Abstract

Research objectives and problem: Preparing to become a preschool and early childhood education teacher requires five years of academic training and many years of self-education. Success in the profession is not only ensured by strong academic performance and achievement of educational goals, but also by the development of emotional and social competencies, which are closely tied to professional competence. The goal of the study was to identify the relationships between emotional intelligence, social competence, and the self-assessment of professional competence among future preschool and early childhood education teachers.

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Research methods: The study utilized the Popular Questionnaire of Emotional Intelligence (PKIE) by Jaworowska, Matczak, Ciechanowicz, Stańczak, and Zalewska, the PROKOS questionnaire by Matczak and Martowska, and an in-house modified version of the Self-Assessment of Teacher Competence survey. Fifty-seven women aged 23 to 48 (mean age: 28) participated in the study.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The findings confirmed a significant relationship between the studied variables. Higher levels of emotional intelligence and social competence correlated with higher self-assessments of professional competence.

Conclusions and recommendations: Emotional and social competencies are strongly associated with readiness for the teaching profession in preschool and early childhood education. These results point out the need for incorporating courses on emotional and social competencies into academic training programs for pedagogical faculties.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, social competence, professional competence, preschool teacher, early childhood education, collaboration with families

Discussions surrounding the reform of Poland's education system persist regardless of the government in power. After the recent elections (October 15, 2023) and the subsequent change in administration, debates about necessary reforms, system improvements, and the incorporation of innovative solutions have gained momentum. Inherent in this discourse are issues related to **preparation for the teaching profession**.

A modern school demands not only a broad pedagogical education from teachers, but also the competencies necessary for effectively teaching and raising children and adolescents. The interactions facilitated by teachers—particularly those responsible for preschool and early education—require the highest levels of competence. As Stefan T. Kwiatkowski notes, "Comparing these interactions with those directed at adults …

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allows us to conclude that meeting the needs of young people, who are actively developing ... constantly learning about and testing the world around them is a task incomparably more complex and involving in-comparably greater responsibility" (Kwiatkowski, 2017, p. 127).

The importance of developing competencies, including emotional and social ones, has been emphasized by the European Union, which points to key competencies for students and teachers in response to the challenges of the modern world (see Council Recommendations of May 22, 2018, on Key Competencies For Lifelong Learning). Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) stress that training in emotional and social competencies should be integrated into the academic curricula for future educators (Martinez, 2005; Llorent, Zych & Varo-Millán, 2020; Valcárcel, 2005). This approach intends to meet the contemporary professional demands on future teachers (Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal & Brackett, 2008). As Kwiatkowski asserts, this can lead to "an increase in their effectiveness or a closely related increase in job satisfaction, while in the sphere concerning their students—optimal preparation for further education (including self-education) and func-tioning in the modern, rapidly changing world in general" (Kwiatkowski, 2017, p. 136).

Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal, and Brackett (2008) reviewed teacher education programs and found that while emotional and social compe-tencies were mentioned in numerous official documents, they were rarely explicitly addressed in the curriculum. Similarly, Cabello, Ruiz-Aranda, and Fernández-Berrocal (2010) noted that programs aimed at enhancing emo-tional and social competencies among teachers were scarce. Valente, Lourenço, and Dominguez Lara (2022) argue that the inclusion of emo-tional intelligence (EI) training into teacher preparation should be a fun-damental aspect of their pedagogical toolkit. However, although teachers are aware of the importance of emotional education, they often lack both the training and resources needed to develop it.

In this context, two closely related constructs—emotional intelli-gence and social competence—emerge as crucial:

Emotional intelligence is defined as "the ability to process emotional information, which forms the basis for developing competencies that aid effective emotional regulation and successful coping in social and task situations" (Jaworowska & Matczak, 2005, p. 4). This definition—one of many present in the literature, refers to Salovey and Mayer's model, which identifies four main components of emotional intelligence: the ability to perceive and express emotions, the ability to integrate emotions into cognitive processes, the ability to understand and analyze emotions, and the ability to manage emotions through control and regulation (Salovey & Mayer, 1999, p. 34).

In place of the term "emotional intelligence," many authors use "emotional competence," which they argue has a broader scope, emphasizing that the social context plays a key role in a person's emotional functioning (Saarni, 1999, p. 79). Existing research demonstrates links between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, self-esteem, life satisfaction, self-development, and career success (Monnier, 2015; Postigo-Zegarra et al., 2019). Additional studies reveal that high levels of emotional intelligence correlate with enhanced social well-being and improved ability to deal with interpersonal conflicts (Palmer, Donaldson, & Stough, 2002).

Given these findings, emotional intelligence is crucial for professions involving interpersonal relations, such as caregiving, parenting, teaching, and teamwork. In addition to emotional competence, social competence represents the second important determinant of a person's ability to function in social roles including professional ones. The authors of this study adopt Anna Matczak's (2007, p. 7) definition of social competence as "a set of complex skills that determine the effectiveness of coping with specific types of social situations, acquired by an individual through social training." These complex skills include the ability to cope with situations involving close interpersonal contact, social exposure and the need for assertiveness.

Research has consistently demonstrated a relationship between emotional intelligence and social competence. According to Jeruszka "people with a high level of emotional intelligence are more socially competent,

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exhibit stronger tendencies toward cooperative and pro-social behavior, possess a greater sense of efficacy in helping others, are more socially active, and are more likely to use and derive satisfaction from social support" (2016, p. 74). This theme has also been examined in studies on teachers and trainee teachers (Zbróg et al., 2024; Surma et al., 2024).

Emotional and social competencies play a vital role in both academic (González & Wagenaar, 2003) and professional environments (McClelland, 1999; Repetto & Peña, 2010). These competencies significantly contribute to personal and professional development, as well as to fuller participation in society (Garrido & Gaeta, 2016; Rutkowska, 2012). A notable advantage of possessing a high level of emotional and social competence is the ability to cope more successfully with stress. Additionally, these competencies act as a buffer against professional burnout and its associated negative attitudinal effects, which may manifest in cognitive, emotional-motivational, or behavioral spheres. In other words, emotional and social competencies are protective factors against burnout and attrition in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2011).

A high level of emotional and social competence is also linked to greater flexibility in attitudes and behaviors across various social situations, as well as improved adaptation to change (Strelau, 2002). These skills are particularly critical in the 21st century, where the surrounding reality is often described using the acronym VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). These characteristics are especially pronounced in the context of modern schooling.

It is evident that a high level of emotional and social competence is essential for individuals whose work involves frequent interpersonal interactions. These competencies are prerequisites for effectively establishing and maintaining relationships, such as those between teacher and student, teacher and parent, or teacher and colleague, which translates into job satisfaction and professional success. Importantly, only a teacher who possesses a high level of emotional and social competence can shape these qualities in their students—often through modeling (Cywińska, 2017). In such cases, both major groups involved in educational processes benefit: teachers and students alike.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that expectations of teachers possessing high levels of emotional and social competence are not new to social discourse. However, in recent years, these expectations have gained even greater prominence, which signifies the continuous and progressive evolution of the teaching profession and the expanding roles and responsibilities assigned to it" (Kwiatkowski, 2018, p. 106). Preschool and early childhood education teachers face a multitude of tasks, challenges, and difficulties in which emotional intelligence and social competencies play an important role. As Kwiatkowski notes (2017), a high level of these psychological constructs, along with their components, positively influences various aspects of teaching, such as coping with educational uncertainties, mastering and applying required skills effectively, implementing individualized approaches for each student, and managing stress (see Kwiatkowski, 2017).

Given this perspective, reducing the responsibilities of a modern teacher solely to teaching and organizing the educational process is not only unfounded but also unfair. A teacher's professional competence includes not only subject-matter expertise and didactic-methodological and self-educational skills, but also communicative-media and psychological-pedagogical competencies (Strykowski, 2005). Imparting subject knowledge is merely one of many responsibilities a teacher assumes in supporting their students. Today, the teacher's role extends beyond traditional instruction to preparing students to adapt optimally to a rapidly changing society.

Strykowski (2005, p. 16), reflecting on how pedeutologists of the 20th century conceptualized the "teacher's personality," cites descriptions such as "love of human souls" (J. W. Dawid), "parental instinct," and "the ability to express feelings and externalize the psyche" (Z. Mysłakowski), and "the need to communicate with people" or "spiritual affinity with children" (S. Baley). These attributes complement the teacher's substantive and didactic-methodological expertise ("cold," cognitive preparation) with "hot" soft skills related to emotions and experience. In light of the above, both emotional intelligence and social competence respond to the expectations of professional competence demanded of the modern teacher.

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Method

Problem and Purpose of the Study

The existing literature includes numerous studies on the emotional intelligence and social competence of students and teachers (e.g., Zych & Llorent, 2020; Twardowska-Staszek & Alberska, 2020), as well as their level of professional competence (Surma, 2019). However, there is a notable lack of research examining the relationship between these competencies.

The aim of this study was to identify the relationships between emotional intelligence, social competence, and the self-assessment of professional competence among future preschool and early childhood education teachers. Building on the preceding discussion, we must consider a pivotal question: What is the relationship between emotional intelligence, social competence, and the self-assessment of professional competence among the surveyed female pedagogy students?

To achieve this, the study formulated the following specific research questions:

1. What is the relationship, if any, between emotional intelligence and the self-assessment of professional competence among the surveyed female students?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between social competence and the self-assessment of professional competence among the surveyed female students?

Instruments

The study utilized a questionnaire to collect descriptive data such as age, work experience, and length of service, alongside three standardized survey instruments.

Emotional Intelligence

The **Popular Questionnaire of Emotional Intelligence (PKIE)** developed by Jaworowska, Matczak, Ciechanowicz, Stańczak, and Zalewska

(Jaworowska & Matczak, 2005) was used to measure emotional intelligence. The PKIE consists of 94 items presented as statements (e.g., *I often can't describe how I feel*). Respondents rate the degree to which they agree with each statement on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The answers obtained provide the basis for calculating an overall emotional intelligence score and scores on four subscales: AKC: Accepting, expressing, and using one's emotions in action, EMP: Empathy, including understanding and recognizing others' emotions, KON: Cognitive control over one's own emotions, and ROZ: Understanding and awareness of one's own emotions.

Social Competencies

Social competence was measured using the **PROKOS Questionnaire**, developed by Matczak and Martowska (2013). The PROKOS consists of 90 items, each describing specific activities or tasks. These activities span three domains of human social activity: work, social life, and family life (e.g., *At a social gathering, initiate a conversation with a person you don't know*). Respondents rate how well they believe they would perform in a given situation on a four-point scale ranging from 4 (*definitely good*) to 1 (*definitely bad*).

The questionnaire provides an overall score as well as scores on five subscales: Scale A: Assertive competence, Scale K: Cooperative competence, Scale T: Social competence in specific contexts, Scale Z: Social resourcefulness, and Scale S: General social competence.

Self-Assessment of Teacher Competence

The **Self-Assessment of Teaching Competencies Questionnaire** was used to measure participants' evaluation of their professional competencies. This tool was developed based on Strykowski's (2005) classification of teacher competencies. It consists of 20 items, each describing specific competencies required in teaching practice (e.g., *I can plan activities with children according to methodological requirements*).

These competencies refer to five key areas: Substantive competence, Teaching competencies, Psychological-pedagogical competencies,

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Communication and media competence, and Self-education competencies.

Respondents rate their own competencies on a scale from 1 (*low*) to 4 (*high*).

Participants

Fifty-seven women participated in the study. Of these, 22 were second-year students enrolled in the complementary part-time master's degree program in Pedagogy (specializing in preschool and early childhood pedagogy), while 35 were full-time students in the five-year master's degree program in the same field. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 48 years (M = 26.16, SD = 4.92). The study exclusively included women, which mirrors the demographic trend of a predominantly female student body in this field.

Design and Procedure

The study was conducted in June 2023, following the final semester of the academic program. Participants were personally invited to fill out the prepared questionnaires. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The study adhered to all national and international ethical standards and received approval from the University Committee on Research Ethics at Ignatianum University in Cracow (approval dated May 5, 2023).

Data analysis

The analysis was performed using **R software, version 4.3.1**. Correlations between quantitative variables were analyzed using Spearman's correlation coefficient. A significance level of 0.05 was adopted for the analysis, meaning that all *p-values* below 0.05 were interpreted as indicating significant correlations.

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Results

Emotional Intelligence and Self-Assessment of Professional Competence

The relationship between emotional intelligence and the self-assessment of professional competence was examined using Spearman's correlation coefficient. The mean level of emotional intelligence among the surveyed students was a sten score of 6, representing an average level.

Table 1 presents the correlations between PKIE (Popular Questionnaire of Emotional Intelligence) and its four scales, as well as the 20 teaching competencies assessed. A total of 24 statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.05$) were identified.

**Table 1. Correlation of PKIE and Self-Assessment
of Teacher Competence**

Self-assessment of teacher competence	AKC	EMP	KON	ROZ	PKIE total score
Substantive competence					
I know what the process of integrated teaching entails	r=-0.057, p=0.672	r=0.183, p=0.173	r=0.244, p=0.067	r=-0.056, p=0.679	r=0.181, p=0.178
I have enough subject knowledge to teach mathematics	r=-0.01, p=0.943	r=0.032, p=0.816	r=0.247, p=0.064	r=0.071, p=0.6	r=0.134, p=0.321
I have enough subject knowledge to teach nature	r=0.044, p=0.747	r=0.231, p=0.084	r=0.062, p=0.649	r=-0.032, p=0.813	r=0.149, p=0.268
I have enough subject knowledge to teach Polish	r=0.113, p=0.401	r=0.224, p=0.095	r=0.162, p=0.229	r=-0.02, p=0.884	r=0.237, p=0.076
Teaching competencies					
I am able to plan activities with children according to methodological requirements	r=0.184, p=0.17	r=0.131, p=0.331	r=0.232, p=0.082	r=0.106, p=0.431	r=0.21, p=0.116
I can plan goals and check if they have been achieved	r=0.191, p=0.155	r=0.387, **p=0.003 ***	r=0.05, p=0.712	r=-0.044, p=0.748	r=0.301, **p=0.023 ***
I know the methods of working with children in preschool	r=0.18, p=0.181	r=0.245, p=0.067	r=0.216, p=0.106	r=-0.09, p=0.504	r=0.29, **p=0.029 ***
I interpret the teacher's work (I can evaluate their good and bad approaches to children)	r=0.31, **p=0.019 ***	r=0.26, p=0.051	r=0.19, p=0.156	r=-0.007, p=0.956	r=0.378, **p=0.004 ***

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Self-assessment of teacher competence	AKC	EMP	KON	ROZ	PKIE total score
Psychological and pedagogical competencies					
I can effectively involve students in the learning process	r=0.393, **p=0.002 ***	r=0.523, **p<0.001 ***	r=0.139, p=0.302	r=0.038, p=0.78	r=0.465, **p<0.001 ***
I can direct children's activities so that they are focused and interested	r=0.204, p=0.127	r=0.273, **p=0.04 ***	r=0.244, p=0.068	r=0.047, p=0.729	r=0.28, **p=0.035 ***
I have sufficient skills and knowledge to diagnose the learning process of children	r=0.114, p=0.4	r=0.163, p=0.224	r=0.151, p=0.264	r=0.06, p=0.66	r=0.169, p=0.209
In my work with children, I am guided by empathy	r=0.188, p=0.162	r=0.121, p=0.37	r=0.364, **p=0.005 ***	r=-0.032, p=0.816	r=0.316, **p=0.017 ***
Communication and media competence					
I can cooperate with teachers	r=0.133, p=0.325	r=0.031, p=0.819	r=0.257, p=0.054	r=0.003, p=0.984	r=0.164, p=0.223
I am prepared to work with parents	r=0.173, p=0.198	r=0.106, p=0.432	r=-0.032, p=0.814	r=-0.187, p=0.164	r=0.089, p=0.513
I don't have a problem with networking with others	r=0.474, **p<0.001 ***	r=0.289, **p=0.029 ***	r=0.215, p=0.109	r=0.057, p=0.674	r=0.435, **p=0.001 ***
I have no problems with interpersonal communication	r=0.336, **p=0.011 ***	r=0.119, p=0.379	r=0.257, p=0.054	r=0.269, **p=0.043 ***	r=0.328, **p=0.013 ***
I have no problems using information technology to conduct activities with children	r=0.024, p=0.859	r=0.119, p=0.378	r=0.294, **p=0.027 ***	r=0.198, p=0.14	r=0.209, p=0.119
Self-education competencies					
I know that it is necessary to keep improving	r=-0.059, p=0.663	r=-0.003, p=0.983	r=0.276, **p=0.038 ***	r=-0.003, p=0.982	r=0.118, p=0.381
I am open to acquiring new knowledge	r=0.123, p=0.362	r=0.066, p=0.626	r=0.281, **p=0.034 ***	r=0.01, p=0.939	r=0.165, p=0.221
I know my strengths and weaknesses	r=0.345, **p=0.009 ***	r=0.364, **p=0.005 ***	r=0.25, p=0.061	r=0.006, p=0.964	r=0.457, **p<0.001 ***

* a statistically significant relationship (p<0.05).
AKC – accepting, expressing and using one's own emotions in action, EMP – empathy, i.e. understanding and recognizing other people's emotions, KON – control, including cognitive control, over one's own emotions and ROZ – understanding and awareness of one's own emotions. Source: own research.

It is clear that emotional intelligence correlates significantly and positively with the self-assessment of teaching, psychological-pedagogical, communication and media, and self-education competencies. However, no correlation was observed between emotional intelligence and the self-assessment of substantive competence. The items that correlated most

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strongly with the overall emotional intelligence scale score were: "I can effectively involve students in the learning process" ($p < 0.001$), "I have no problems with networking with others" ($p = 0.001$), and "I know my strengths and weaknesses" ($p < 0.001$). A slightly weaker relationship was observed for the item "I interpret the teacher's work (I can evaluate their good and bad approaches to children)" ($p = 0.001$).

A more detailed analysis of teaching competencies reveals that respondents' self-assessment of their ability to plan goals and evaluate their achievement correlates positively with empathy. Similarly, their self-assessment of their ability to interpret the teacher's work correlates positively with the acceptance, expression, and use of their own emotions in action. For psychological-pedagogical competencies, a stronger belief in the ability to effectively involve students in the learning process is associated with a greater ability to accept, express, and use one's emotions in action, as well as higher empathy levels. Similarly, a stronger belief in the ability to guide children's activities to ensure focus and engagement also correlates positively with empathy. Additionally, the belief in being guided by empathy when working with children correlates positively with control over one's own emotions.

An analogous analysis was conducted for communication and media competencies. The belief that one has no problems in building relationships with others correlates positively with acceptance, expression, and the use of one's emotions in action, as well as empathy. Furthermore, the belief that there are no issues with interpersonal communication correlates positively with the understanding and awareness of one's own emotions. Notably, greater cognitive control over one's emotions is associated with a stronger belief in the ability to use information technology effectively when conducting activities with children.

Finally, the relationship between emotional intelligence and self-education competencies is evident across all studied aspects. Awareness of self-improvement and acquiring new knowledge correlates positively with cognitive control (KON), while knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses correlates positively with acceptance, expression, and use of one's own emotions (AKC) and empathy (EMP).

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Social Competence and Self-Assessment of Teacher Competence

Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between social competence and the self-assessment of professional competence. The mean level of social competence among the respondents was found to be a sten score of 5, indicating an average level.

Table 2 shows the correlations between the PROKOS questionnaire and its five scales and 20 teaching competencies. A total of 43 statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.05$) were identified.

Table 2. Correlation of PROKOS and Self-Assessment of Teacher Competence

Self-assessment of teacher competence	A scale	K scale	T scale	Z scale	S scale	PROKOS total score
Substantive competence						
I know what the process of integrated teaching entails	r=-0.026, p=0.846	r=0.233, p=0.082	r=0.21, p=0.117	r=0.16, p=0.234	r=0.077, p=0.568	r=0.184, p=0.171
I have enough subject knowledge to teach mathematics	r=0.148, p=0.272	r=0.209, p=0.119	r=0.087, p=0.521	r=0.061, p=0.654	r=0.265, **p=0.047 ***	r=0.189, p=0.158
I have enough subject knowledge to teach nature	r=0.191, p=0.154	r=0.181, p=0.177	r=0.043, p=0.749	r=0.145, p=0.283	r=0.248, p=0.063	r=0.219, p=0.102
I have enough subject knowledge to teach Polish	r=-0.124, p=0.36	r=0.217, p=0.105	r=0, p=0.998	r=0.102, p=0.449	r=0.067, p=0.623	r=0.078, p=0.565
Teaching competencies						
I can plan activities with children in accordance with methodological requirements	r=0.281, **p=0.034 ***	r=0.313, **p=0.018 ***	r=0.204, p=0.127	r=0.216, p=0.107	r=0.102, p=0.449	r=0.292, **p=0.027 ***
I can plan goals and check if they have been achieved	r=0.243, p=0.068	r=0.299, **p=0.024 ***	r=0.297, **p=0.025 ***	r=0.289, **p=0.029 ***	r=0.183, p=0.173	r=0.346, **p=0.008 ***
I know the methods of working with children in preschool	r=0.038, p=0.777	r=0.35, **p=0.008 ***	r=0.152, p=0.258	r=0.206, p=0.124	r=0.09, p=0.506	r=0.241, p=0.071
I interpret the teacher's work (I can evaluate their good and bad approaches to children)	r=0.104, p=0.442	r=0.435, **p=0.001 ***	7r=0.33, **p=0.012 ***	7r=0.395, **p=0.002 ***	7r=0.242, p=0.07	r=0.385, **p=0.003 ***
Psychological and pedagogical competencies						
I can effectively involve students in the learning process	r=0.149, p=0.268	r=0.423, **p=0.001 ***	r=0.261, **p=0.049 ***	r=0.312, **p=0.018 ***	r=0.132, p=0.329	r=0.344, **p=0.009 ***
I can direct children's activities so that they are focused and interested	r=0.039, p=0.771	r=0.344, **p=0.009 ***	r=0.19, p=0.156	r=0.133, p=0.325	r=0.078, p=0.565	r=0.187, p=0.164

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Self-assessment of teacher competence	A scale	K scale	T scale	Z scale	S scale	PROKOS total score
Psychological and pedagogical competencies						
I have sufficient skills and knowledge to diagnose the learning process of children	r=0.344, **p=0.009 ***	r=0.262, **p=0.049 ***	r=0.163, p=0.227	r=0.345, **p=0.008 ***	r=0.228, p=0.088	r=0.339, **p=0.01 ***
In my work with children, I am guided by empathy	r=-0.038, p=0.78	r=0.295, **p=0.026 ***	r=0.204, p=0.128	r=0.346, **p=0.008 ***	r=0.147, p=0.275	r=0.244, p=0.067
Communication and media competence						
I can cooperate with teachers	r=0.023, p=0.864	r=0.296, **p=0.025 ***	r=0.333, **p=0.011 ***	r=0.238, p=0.075	r=0.114, p=0.4	r=0.214, p=0.109
I am prepared to work with parents	r=0.109, p=0.419	r=0.131, p=0.332	r=0.338, **p=0.01 ***	r=0.213, p=0.113	r=0.236, p=0.078	r=0.217, p=0.105
I don't have a problem with networking with others	r=0.263, **p=0.048 ***	r=0.434, **p=0.001 ***	r=0.548, **p<0.001 ***	r=0.322, **p=0.015 ***	r=0.28, **p=0.035 ***	r=0.451, **p<0.001 ***
I have no problems with interpersonal communication	r=0.358, **p=0.006 ***	r=0.317, **p=0.016 ***	r=0.49, **p<0.001 ***	r=0.193, p=0.15	r=0.318, **p=0.016 ***	r=0.399, **p=0.002 ***
I have no problems using information technology to conduct activities with children	r=0.328, **p=0.013 ***	r=0.219, p=0.102	r=0.118, p=0.382	r=0.145, p=0.283	r=0.199, p=0.137	r=0.237, p=0.076
Self-education competencies						
I know that it is necessary to keep improving	r=0.042, p=0.755	r=0.143, p=0.288	r=0.024, p=0.857	r=0.058, p=0.67	r=0.181, p=0.178	r=0.112, p=0.405
I am open to acquiring new knowledge	r=0.17, p=0.206	r=0.197, p=0.141	r=0.177, p=0.187	r=0.167, p=0.213	r=0.376, **p=0.004 ***	r=0.258, p=0.053
I know my strengths and weaknesses	r=0.217, p=0.105	r=0.449, **p<0.001 ***	r=0.276, **p=0.038 ***	r=0.368, **p=0.005 ***	r=0.221, p=0.099	r=0.411, **p=0.002 ***

* a statistically significant relationship (p<0.05).
Scale A - assertive competence, scale K - cooperative competence, scale T - social competence in specific contexts,
scale Z - social resourcefulness, scale S - general social competence. Source: own research.

The analyses indicate a correlation between social competence and self-assessment of professional competence across all areas studied. The weakest correlation with social competence was observed in the self-assessment of substantive competence. In this area, no significant relationships were found between the overall scale score and individual aspects of self-assessment related to teaching competence. The items showing the strongest correlations with the overall scale score were: "I don't have problems with networking with others" (p<0.001), "I don't have problems with interpersonal communication" (p=0.002), "I know my strengths and

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weaknesses" (p=0.002), and "I interpret the teacher's work (I can evaluate their good and bad approaches to children)" (p=0.003).

A detailed analysis of self-assessed skills necessary for preschool and early childhood education teachers, along with individual scales in the domain of social competence, reveals a significant positive correlation. These analyses are discussed in detail below. In the domain of substantive competence, only the belief that one has sufficient knowledge to teach mathematics demonstrates a connection with social competence. Specifically, higher levels of social competence correspond to higher self-assessments of background in teaching mathematics.

Regarding teaching competencies, two areas are particularly related to social competence. A strong belief in one's ability to set goals and assess their achievement, as well as the ability to evaluate a teacher's work, correlates significantly and positively with cooperative, social competence in specific contexts, and social resourcefulness scales. Similarly, a high self-assessment of the ability to plan activities with children in accordance with methodological requirements is linked to assertive and cooperative competencies. Additionally, knowledge of methods for working with preschool children is associated with cooperative competencies.

The next analysis focuses on psychological and pedagogical competencies, where a significant positive correlation is observed between the belief in one's ability to effectively engage students in the learning process and cooperative competence, social competence in specific contexts, and social resourcefulness. Additionally, cooperative competence contributes to greater confidence in managing children's activities to keep them focused and interested. Similarly, higher scores on the A, K, and Z scales are associated with a stronger belief in one's preparedness to design children's learning. In contrast, self-assessment of the ability to empathize correlates with the K and Z scales.

Each communication and media competency also shows a significant positive correlation with individual social competencies. Specifically, the belief in one's ability to cooperate with teachers correlates positively with cooperative and social competence in specific contexts. However, the ability to work with parents is associated solely with social competencies

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in specific contexts. An interesting result emerged among the students surveyed: higher levels of social competence in all dimensions correspond to higher self-assessments of their ability to relate to others. A similar trend was observed in the self-assessment of interpersonal communication, though no significant correlation was found with social resourcefulness in this area. Lastly, the communication and media competency, defined as confidence that there are no problems using information technology in activities with children correlates positively with assertive competence.

The final area of teacher competencies, self-education competencies, indicates no relationship between social competencies and awareness of the need for self-improvement. However, a significant positive correlation exists between a positive attitude toward acquiring new knowledge and general social competencies, as well as between knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses and the K, T, and Z scales.

Discussion

Preparation for the profession of a preschool and early childhood education teacher involves equipping individuals to work not only with individual children, but also with groups of children, parents, and other stakeholders involved in the process of upbringing and education. This work requires not only subject matter knowledge but also strong intra- and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, research indicates that soft skills are more essential than hard skills in the teaching profession.

Our study revealed statistically significant correlations between emotional intelligence, social competence, and self-assessment of professional competence among students in their final year of studies preparing for the preschool and early childhood education teaching profession. Before analyzing the detailed results and offering interpretations, it is important to point out some similarities between the two correlation matrices. Both emotional intelligence and social competence exhibit little to no correlation with self-assessment of substantive (content) competence. However,

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they strongly correlate with certain items, including: "I have no problems with networking with others," "I know my strengths and weaknesses," and "I interpret the teacher's work (I can evaluate their good and bad approaches to children)."

This observation raises questions about the competency model used in training future teachers. Teachers need training that equips them not only to function as "cold" professionals but also as reflective practitioners capable of building relationships, self-reflection and critical thinking. Discussions about teacher education models often incorporate three approaches: technological, humanistic, and functional (Klus-Stańska, 2009; Kwiatkowska, 1989; Lewowicki, 1991). Given the rapid pace of social change and the necessity of preparing young people to cope with constant change, the humanistic model and the concept of the reflective practitioner should be taken into account in professional teacher education (Skrzetuska, 2022).

Based on the research findings, it is reasonable to conclude that a good preschool and early childhood education teacher is characterized by a high level of emotional intelligence and social competence. Therefore, both aspiring and current teachers must actively work to strengthen and develop these competencies. Failing to do so could lead to significant difficulties in their professional lives, with negative repercussions not only for themselves, but also for the children in their care.

As the study results indicate, students who accept their own emotions—both positive and negative—and can express them to others tend to evaluate their competence in tasks that require collaboration with others more favorably. This may be because others can easily recognize what these individuals are experiencing and respond appropriately. Similarly, respondents with high levels of empathy, who can recognize and understand the emotions of others, rate their preparedness to lead a group and collaborate with others more highly. The ability to interpret children's emotional states is undoubtedly an asset when working in a preschool group or school classroom.

Respondents who are skilled at controlling their own emotions rated their teaching competencies highly, particularly in terms of their ability

to use information technology and their self-education skills. This may reflect an overall sense of control and influence over various aspects of life. Notably, the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required a shift to online instruction and greater self-directed effort from students. Additionally, students who understand and are aware of their own emotions rated their interpersonal communication skills highly. Being conscious of what one is experiencing and why makes it easier to articulate emotions and expectations to others. Students who excel at recognizing social needs and goals, organizing activities to meet those goals, and involving others in the process also rated their knowledge and preparation for teaching mathematics higher.

One noteworthy finding is that all subscales of social competence correlate with self-assessed ability to relate to others. Specifically, the more students demonstrate the ability to express their needs and influence others (A), the more effective they are at helping and supporting others (K), the better they handle social situations and social exposure (T), the more proficient they are at carrying out tasks that require support from others (Z), and the more they demonstrate the ability to perceive social needs and goals, organize activities to achieve them and include other people in those activities (S), and the better they feel prepared to establish and maintain relationships with others.

The need to develop emotional intelligence and social competence in future teachers is clear. A growing number of initiatives for teachers and as well as academic-level programs are being introduced to accommodate this need. Students themselves recognize the importance of developing soft skills. Findings from a focus group study conducted by Irena Przybylska (2024) show that students view academic training as crucial for the development of their social competences. Furthermore, over two-thirds of participants emphasize the role of the university in diagnosing students' social problems and deficits early in their educational journey (Przybylska, 2024).

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Applications

Based on the data presented, there is no doubt that modern teachers—especially those responsible for the education of preschool and elementary school children—must possess high professional competence, including emotional and social competence. These emotional and social competencies should be nurtured and developed both during the academic training of pedagogy students and throughout the careers of active teachers. As Kwiatkowski (2017) notes, "this will undoubtedly require coordinated efforts by educational authorities and universities that train teachers—using so-called 'best practices'" (p. 156). Participants in Przybylska's studies proposed several methods to foster these competencies, including mentoring, workshops and training sessions on soft skills, participation in the social and cultural life of the university, group project work, collaborative projects with academic teachers, volunteering, participation in local pro-social initiatives, and coaching programs (2024).

Additionally, it should be emphasized that soft skills, particularly emotional intelligence and social competence, are developed in diverse contexts as part of lifelong learning. Therefore, educational processes—especially methodological classes—should include opportunities for students to assess their current level of social competence and plan their further development, e.g. through tutoring sessions. Social competence and emotional intelligence are indispensable in fulfilling the various roles of teachers, including care, education, diagnostics, and instruction, at both kindergarten and school levels. These competencies are particularly important for recognizing children's needs, supporting their development, resolving conflicts, and building strong relationships with families.

Limitations of the study

The authors acknowledge several limitations of this research. First, the study group was not representative due to purposive sampling and a small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings

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and conclusions to the broader population of students preparing for preschool and early childhood education teaching roles. Additionally, the study relied on self-report surveys, which are inherently declarative and do not provide direct insight into actual competencies but rather into respondents' perceptions of their competencies.

Despite these limitations, the relationships observed between variables in this study could likely be replicated in future research conducted on larger, more representative samples.

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