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# **Emotional and Social Learning – Optimization and Training Strategies**

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pp.87-96

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# Emotional and Social Learning – Optimization and Training Strategies

Maria Magdalena STAN<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*The holistic approach of this school maturity concept involves the integration of child development domains – physical, motor, social and emotional in a unitary model. Certainly, cognitive maturity plays a central role in academic performance, but emotional and social factors must not be neglected as they can potentiate and empower the child's effort to transit successfully and to obtain school success. The intervention by means of development, optimization and training programs for social and emotional competences represents a modality to improve and optimize the pupils' learning process and school performance implicitly but also a modality to increase their social and academic integration. The present study proposes to demonstrate the efficiency of certain optimization and training techniques for social and emotional competences at early ages, mainly at the beginning of school years.*

## Keywords

*Social and emotional learning, learning strategies, emotional competences, social competences, school adaption.*

## I. Introduction

Recently, educational policies, researchers and the didactic staff boosted their interest in supporting school readiness for preschool children.

At the international level, a study carried out on 3000 teachers shows the fact that 30% of them reported that half of their pupils enter the first class with poor academic abilities, have difficulties in solving school tasks, and 20% reported that more than a half of their class have problems related to social abilities. (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000). The conclusion of this study is that a large number of children are not prepared to transit from kindergarten to school. Exposed to a much more numerous

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number of psychosocial stressors children undergo a high risk to have social and emotional difficulties.

Doubtlessly, cognitive maturity plays a central role in school performance but social and emotional factors must not be neglected, as they can potentiate and empower the child's effort to transit successfully and to obtain school success. School readiness involves the grasp of basic aptitudes and abilities which allow the child to function successfully in the school environment and to adapt at academic and social level (Hair & al, 2006).

It is difficult to explain the fact that children apparently prepared for school activity of the first year adapt with difficulty and obtain poor school performances. The latest researches in the Early Education field focus mainly on underlining the social and emotional factors as powerful impact criteria in school success (Goleman, 2001; Zins et al., 2004; Ladd & Price, 1987). Even the practitioners opinion is unilateral: the emotional and the social affect children's abilities in learning.

Thus, the theory and practice of research reveals the emotional and social ability as an important predictor of the child's academic success since the beginning of the school years.

Under optimal circumstances, children acquire basic social and emotional competences, which allow them to establish and to maintain their first friendship and to get on well with others as members of the community.

Children who have disruptions in acquiring such types of competences present a high risk of difficult behavioural manifestations when entering the first grade which can degenerate into serious emotional doubts and antisocial behaviours during adolescence. Indirectly, all these influence school performances.

Promoting these competences during early ages, especially during the transition period is very important since the first grade stands as a priority.

The intervention by means of development, optimization and training programs for social and emotional competences represent a modality to improve and optimize the pupils' learning process and school performance implicitly but also a modality to increase their social and academic integration. This exercises a preemptive function against academic failure but also against other risk factors such as absenteeism, school abandonment and school violence.

The analysis of the specialty literature emphasizes a few motives which justify the intervention in terms of training and optimizing social and

emotional competences, thus Goleman (2001) in studies carried out on American school population detects a low level of emotional competence at present-day pupils, defined through the term „literary illiteracy”. Other authors, like Ibarrola (2004, et al.), Harvinder, S. (2005) mention the role of implementing programs at early ages, as a prevention measure with a view to minimize the vulnerability of social and emotional development.

The latest tendency in the specialty studies refers to the role of the intellectual factors as being the poorest predictors in obtaining success in one’s life; academic intellect is not adequate for achieving professional success and does not guarantee satisfaction in personal relations. The combined effect of cognitive and socio-emotional factors contributes in a determinant manner to the successful achievement of activities at different levels – academic, professional and personal.

## **II. Social and emotional learning- predictor of academic adaptation**

Social and emotional competences are illustrated as powerful predictors of academic success in numerous studies in the specialty literature, Greenberg, M.T., (2009), LaParo & Pianta, 2000, Pianta & Cox (1999) etc. As an example, a study carried out in 2004 by (Parker et. al) on a sample of students concludes that the development level of social and emotional competences at the beginning of the first semester represents a predictor of academic success of the end of the semester.

Also, pro-social behavior is a predictor of academic success (DiPerna & Elliot, 1999, Malecky & Elliot, 2002; Durkin, K, 2006 etc.), while antisocial behavior is associated with poor academic performances.

Even if some studies emphasized the fact that the influence social and emotional abilities have upon academic performance also depend on other factors too, such as the modality of defining and evaluating academic acquisitions, the learning environment, the degree of conceptualization of academic curricula – as a function of the learning system (Zins, 2004), it is generally accepted that the intervention through specific development, training and optimization programs became a necessity.

Long-term effects of implementing such programs refer to the prevention of risk phenomena at social and behavioural level as we have already mentioned. Short-term effects determine the level of academic performances, which represents in fact the objective of this study.

The social belief (common sense) is that the success of adapting to the new demands of the environment is mainly due to the development level of intellectual abilities: memory, attention, cognitive capacities,

decision. It is considered that if a person has a high level of intelligence (IQ), he/she will have considerable opportunities of social and professional success. The latest researches in psychology showed that a high level of intelligence can contribute significantly to good results in different domains, especially in the academic one, but is not sufficient for a good adaptation and does not guarantee success in one's existence.

The question which rises logically from the presented situation is: What are the factors which contribute in a percentage of 80% to a successful life when IQ is low? The answer came naturally: for a successful adaptation general intelligence is mediated by emotional intelligence. The latter can be defined as being that ability with which a individual can identify, understand and express emotions in an appropriate manner and can manage them to attain the desired goals. (Catrinel A. Ștefan, Kallay Eva, 2007, p.11).

The term of social competence is used alongside the term of emotional competence. For some researchers social and emotional competences are synonymous, while for others they can be distinguished, although inexplicably intercorrelated. Whereas they can be separated operationally, it is rather difficult to be used as distinct elements.

## **II.1 The integrated model of social and emotional competences at the beginning of school years**

The unitary approach of social and emotional competences represents the efficient model to understand and operationalize these concepts.

In our study social and emotional competences refer to children's ability to identify, understand, process, manage and express social and emotional aspects of their life which reflect in social skills and interpersonal abilities.

The transition from kindergarten to school, from the specific activity of playing to the learning activity represents a challenge for the 6-7 years child, which can be achieved successfully or unsuccessfully. The specific of academic adaptation (V. Negovan, 2006) arises from the blending of relational adaptation mechanisms with instructional adaptation mechanisms, the latter being defined as „the pupil's adequate answer to instructional exigencies, respectively his readiness to acquire the transmitted information and to operationalize them efficiently and creatively” (T. Rudica, 1998, apund. V. Negovan, 2006). Academic adaptation does not refer only to the moment of child's accession to school

but it represents a process which must be appreciated through the reference of academic environment characteristics to a certain developmental stage of the child. The stage and the readiness level of the child represent one of the initial schooling criteria, the assumption of learning in the primary cycle implicitly but also the essential condition of an optimal academic adaptation.

*Emotional competence* represents the capacity to identify and to interpret one's own emotions, others' emotions as well as the ability to manage adequately in different social situations.

*Social competences* refer to children's ability to establish functional social relations with other children and with the adults of their life. These influence positive interactions, corresponding to cultural norms, in such a way that they allow the attainment of own goals and the conformation to others' needs.

**II.2. The Keystone social and emotional competences learning model** is based on the next principles: the needs of *training-development-optimization* of children's competences; *learning environment conditions* – children are offered help on order to be connected to others, to feel unique in a positive way and to experience what they acquire as well as the *set of behavioural strengths*, which refer to the benefits of the received information and to the consequences of the counterproductive strengths; to the abilities to be learned, to the opportunity of using those strengths in specific situations.

**The Keystone learning model** presents the following structure: *involvement* – places children in a specific activity where they can experience the designed strengths within each learning/training unit; *internalization* help children to focus upon they have experienced ; they are encouraged to share their feelings, thoughts, concerns, etc ; it helps them to connect to their own experience and on the other side with others' experience; *reflection* challenges children to find the meaning of the activities they experienced; *generalization* help children understand how they can learn and apply the respective behavior in their own life experiences; *utilization* – help children set goals in using the new strengths.

**III. The practical-operating objectives** of the study refers mainly, in so far as the methodology proves adequate, to a specific approach which aims at training and optimizing the social and emotional

competences of the primary school pupils in the I-st grade who are part of the target group.

- The analysis of the training and development needs of social and emotional competences at the beginning of school years;
- Determination of the efficiency of the social and emotional competences training and optimization program.

Based on the results of the research in the specialty literature *we expect that the intervention based on the training and optimization program of social and emotional competences should potentiate the level of academic adaptation through behavioural strengths formed at the level of emotional control and of solving emotional and social problems.*

## IV. Method

**IV.1.** The research has been performed on a fixed, non-aleatory sample, the group of subjects being formed of 59 children, aged 7 to 8 years, having the average age of  $m = 7.98$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ , 37 boys and 22 girls, which come from school units in the Argeş district.

### IV.2. Experimental design

The research design is a cvasi-experimental 2X2, with an experimental group, a control and pre-test and post-intervention evaluation group. The statistic strategy of data will be achieved through statistical procedure ANOVA mixed 2X2 with avariable intersubjects – intervention versus control and a variable intrasubjects – pre-intervention - post-intervention, as well as through comparisons Test T for independent samples.

### IV.3. Evaluation instruments

**Social competences** are evaluated with the instrument **Socials Skills Rating System** (Frank M. Gresham, Stephan N. Elliott, 1990). The instrument evaluates children's social behavior involved in the teacher-pupil relation, acceptance of the peer and academic performance. It represents an instrument of evaluating social behaviours, of screening and classification of social behavior problems. The instrument has two forms (parents form – 55 items and teacher form – 57 items). The targeted domains are: social abilities (*cooperation, assertion, responsibility, self-control*); behavioural problems: *externalizing behaviours* (behaviours implying physical or verbal aggression, low temperamental control), *internalizing problems*

(behaviours referring to anxiety, sadness, isolation, poor self-esteem), *hyperactivity* (behaviours which imply excessive gestures and dynamism, impulsive reactions)

**Emotional competences** will be evaluated by adapted tests as it follows:

a. **accepting emotions** (adapted after C. Ștefan, 2010) is evaluated as such: we selected four suggestive images representing male and female faces which expressed *joy, fury, sadness, fear*.

- to evaluate **emotional expressiveness** children are shown the four images by turns and are addressed the following question: „How does he/she feel?”.

- to **intercept emotions** children are presented all images at one time and they are asked: „Which of the characters feels glad/furious/sad/fearful?”.

b. **problem solving** (adapted after C. Ștefan, 2010): children are presented five troublesome situations, with potential conflict, each being accompanied by a suggestive image: assuming mistakes; friend refusal; access restriction to a toy; adult disapproval, unjust treatment from another child. After presenting each situation children are asked to tell what they would do in place of the children in the respective situations. Their answers fall under two categories: positive strategies and negative strategies.

#### **IV.4. Program presentation**

The activities proposed within the program Power-Kids offer a correlation of theoretical aspects, topical concepts and information with role play and group exercises in a practical manner, so that these might be applicable directly in the current subsequent activities of the teachers. The basic principles of this program are: interactivity (facilitators will focus upon concrete examples and will require and support pro-active implication of participants); adaptability (facilitators will approach the themes as regards children’s training needs), comprehension (training activities will be accompanied with support intuitive materials, specific to the age level), practical applicability: the program focus upon the practical applicability of the acquired competences. Each activity had been planned according to Keystone learning model, whose principles had been presented in the previous chapter. A formative evaluation takes place at the end of each activity.

## V. Results

We present hereafter the descriptive analysis of the preliminary results obtained in a pilot study.

### Social competence

As a result of applying the questionnaire for the identification of social competence level Social Skills Rating System- parents form-the following values had been obtained for each dimension:

Dimension	Average	Standard deviation
Cooperation	15,13	2,417
Assertiveness	10,97	2,723
Responsibility	8,23	2,373
Self-control	14,73	2,778
Total score social competence	49,20	5,647

It has been determined that for the dimension assertiveness girls obtain higher scores in comparison with boys,  $m$  (girls)=12,83, standard deviation= 2,167, and  $m$  (boys)=9,72, standard deviation 2,347. Assertiveness being the capacity to assert one's feelings, ideas in a natural way, without implying aggression, it is more specific at this age for girls.

It is observed that at dimension responsibility, girls obtain higher scores than boys:  $m$ (girls)=10,08, standard deviation=1,311, and  $m$ (boys)=7, standard deviation= 2,114. The educational cultural model determines a high value of the ability to be observed at girls mostly; they are those who communicate easier, it seems that they obey the rules imposed by adults effortlessly; they understand better the particularities of working.

It is observed that the total average score of social competence at girls is  $m$ (girls)=52, standard deviation=6,564, and  $m$ (boys)=47,33, standard deviation=4,159.

The sample subjected to testing showed that the level of social competences is higher for girls than boys.

### Emotional competence

As a result of applying the instruments for the identification of emotional awareness for the problem solving we obtained the following global values:

Dimension	Average	Standard deviation
Emotional awareness	12,87	2,255
Problem solving	2,70	0,915

The two instruments being distinct we shall calculate the correlation coefficient Person for the two types of specific competences. The value of the coefficient  $r=0,665$ , is at a signification threshold of  $p=0,000$ . As it is obvious the association capacity of the scores for the two dimensions is high (0,665), which determines us to affirm that the more a child is capable of identifying, describing and understanding emotional expressions, the more he will be able to solve emotional and social problems.

Understanding and identifying emotions implies a non-verbal component besides the verbal designation (mimic, gestures). The manner in which children interpret the non-verbal indices is the result of their previous experiences. In our case girls obtain higher scores for emotional awareness:  $m(\text{girls})=13,92$ , standard deviation = 2,021, and  $m(\text{boys})=12,17$ , standard deviation=2,176.

As concerns problem solving are measured as it follows according to the variable sex:  $m(\text{girls})= 2,61$ , standard deviation =0,979,  $m(\text{boys})=2,83$ , standard deviation=0,835.

## Conclusions

The data analyzed represent only a part of the initial evaluation. Although the number of subjects is limited and does not allow us a laborious statistical processing or generalizations, the data analyzed can offer us useful information about the different dimensions of social and emotional competence, as well as directions of activity in the elaboration of development and optimization programs for schoolchildren in the onset period of school years.

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