

Chapter #16

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES, POSITIVE EXPERIENCE AT SCHOOL AND FUTURE ORIENTATION: DEVELOPMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Studies on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) have shown the benefits of acquiring these competencies on academic performance and current wellbeing and life success. The chapter aims to deepen the understanding on how these developmental assets may vary in primary school children together with the relationship of these patterns with positive experience at school.

Additionally, studies on future time perspective show the relevance and impact of a positive orientation towards future throughout adolescence. A second study question will investigate what the possible role of Social-Emotional Competences (SECs) on attitudes and expectations towards future in primary school children.

One hundred and fifty-four, 8 to 11 years old, primary school students participated in the study.

Specific patterns seem to characterize younger and older primary school students. Specific relationships and patterns of association emerge between main dimensions of Social-Emotional Competences, Positive Experiences and belonging at school, and Future Orientation. The need to address these issues and dimensions early in primary school emerge, to identify vulnerable patterns and promote educational and prevention actions.

Keywords: social-emotional competences, school engagement, future orientation, primary school children.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's development is universally recognized as marked by new tasks and changes in their importance. Successful achievement of old and new developmental tasks leads to well-being and success with later tasks, whereas failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by the society, and difficulty with later tasks. That is, child's functioning now and later is impacted by success or failure on these tasks. A developmental lens, however, not only drives to focus on changes but also on stable functioning. The content of specific skills differs along with changing developmental tasks as children mature. However, some skills reach, high level of organization quite early in the development and remain surprisingly constant for long periods. Using a developmental perspective would allow for variation in what should be attained across age periods as well as identifying the specific goals for the educational actions to support and promote wellbeing of children in their everyday life.

This perspective applies also to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The related competences are, in fact, as well characterized by stability and change over time (Dave, Keefer, Snetsinger, Holden, & Parker, 2021; Denham, 2018). Broad Social-Emotional

Competences (SECs) can be then described focusing on specific age groups or grade levels and, at the same time, exploring patterns emerging at diverse ages while facing the diverse developmental tasks, from elementary to middle and high school. More specifically to deepen our understanding of their role in children development the following research questions have been addressed: Do and how do these developmental assets vary in primary school students of different ages? What are the relations between SEL competences that primary school children recognize themselves and both current wellbeing experienced at school and their attitudes towards their future?

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. SEL, Positive Experience and Climate in School

SEL is recognized as a process that allows children to foster their SECs including the abilities to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015; Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2020). The multidisciplinary work, mainly of psychologists and economists also provide evidence that the positive results obtained by primary school students attending SECs programs last across years, giving a significant sense of return of investment thus fostering an emerging SEL psycho-economic infrastructure that is globally impacting policy makers decisions and orienting the future of SEL policies (Williamson, 2021).

From a psychoeducational perspective, relevant for this study, several studies suggest that nurturing social and emotional learning is vital to lifelong successes. Improvements in SEL, emotional regulation and perceived resilience have been recently found in elementary children who took part in a 11 week training program (Green, Ferrante, Boaz, Kutash, & Wheeldon-Reece, 2021) and, more impressively, children with greater SECs not only have positive relationships and better mental health, are also more likely to be ready for college, succeed in their careers, and become engaged citizens (Green et al, 2021; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg & Durlak, 2017). In addition to individual level benefits, research show at group level class climate and school functioning improve (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017). SEL is in fact recognized as able to transform life environments, facilitating participation of all and reducing inequalities (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019).

Finally, very recently research has highlighted two meaningful research paths, the first orienting to the integration of SEL with career education and the future readiness goals (Howard & Ferrari, 2022), and the second showing the impact of SECs as relevant drivers to social engagement and a positive future time perspective for early adolescents after COVID19 (Sgaramella, 2022).

2.2. The Meaning and Role of Future Orientation

Future orientation is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of components essential to envisioning future outcomes (Steinberg et al., 2009). Exemplars of these components include expectation, how likely a given event is expected to occur in the future, perceived likelihood of attaining specific goals, anticipation of future scenarios and consequences among others. The ability to mentally travel into the future and imagine future events or situations, imagine the feelings associated with a certain experience (Atance & O'Neill, 2005) is connected with self-regulatory skills (Daniel, Stanton,

& Epstein, 2013; Daniel, Said, Stanton, & Epstein, 2015) and performance on self-regulated learning tasks (Bembenutty & Karabenick, 2004), with better financial behavior (Jacobs-Lawson & Hershey, 2005), motivation and achieving future goals (Shell & Husman, 2001).

Extended evidence is provided on the relevance of these assets throughout adolescence. In situating themselves in the future, adolescents experience higher motivation to engage in behaviors instrumental to attaining their envisioned goals, and to avoid barriers, tend to be more academically engaged and have better achievement when they think about and act upon their future, less likely to engage in problematic and risky behaviors (Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013; Lindstrom Johnson, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2016; Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2011).

It is then recognized that future orientation could have various developmental implications. But less is known about the development of these assets in primary school children although literature suggests that this period of life is central in the development of executive processes such as anticipating future events and consequences of current actions, understanding the others' behavior and dealing effectively with social problem solving (Zelazo et al., 2003; Housman, Cabral, Aniskovich, & Denham, 2022) and, additionally, that these skills are particularly relevant later during adolescence (Moffitt, et al., 2011). Considering its relevance in designing positive future selves, identifying the role of social-emotional experience and determinants would be essential to promoting positive outcomes and to better inform educators in terms of how to mobilize efforts to support healthy student developments.

2.3. Objectives

The study aims first to delineate possible age differences in SECs in primary school children. We predicted significant differences based on the developmental meaning recognized to this period in both cognitive and relational development.

Secondly, we aimed to investigate the relationships between SECs and positive experience at school, that is with positive climate and experience at school.

Finally, the relationships between SECs components and both expectations about future relationships and future goals, that is two components of positive future orientation, were explored. We predicted significant correlations between dimensions investigated and expected a predictive value of SECs components.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants and Procedure

One hundred and fifty-eight primary school students, 85 boys and 73 girls, living in the North-East area of Italy participated in the study. Their age ranges from 8 to 11 years old. According to their age, for the study presented here they were grouped as younger group (second year primary school; $M_{\text{age}} = 8.5$, $SD = .7$) and older one (third to fourth year; $M_{\text{age}} = 9.8$, $SD = 1.2$). The first group included 40 boys and 33 girls and the second one, 45 boys and 40 girls.

All study procedures were also approved by the board of the schools involved in the program. Additionally, a Certificate of Confidentiality was issued by the study proponents, to protect the privacy of the study participants.

3.2. The Study Context

Data collected in a psychoeducational action promoted by the PSsmile project (Social-Emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education, <http://smile.emundus.it/>) have been used to address research questions. The project aims to contribute building emotionally stable, inclusive and healthy communities in primary education institutions where significant adults, namely parents and teachers, reach a better understanding of what is SEL education, take care of their own Social-Emotional functioning and support its development in children. Outcomes from the project are a Methodological Guide for teachers, a training and assessment procedures for teachers, a curriculum for primary school students that has been already implemented and an App for parents and teachers.

3.3. Measures

The study is based on the answers collected using three tools addressing the following dimensions:

Knowledge About Emotions (based on a tool developed within an Erasmus+ Learning (The Learning to Be Project, <https://learningtobe.net/>) it addresses knowledge and experience about several emotions. The total score is based on the descriptions of the 10 emotions proposed and valued on a three-point scale ranging from *not appropriate* (1) to *effective* (3).

Social-Emotional Experience, from the Learning to Be project, with quantitative (15 items) and qualitative (3 items) questions, it addresses social and emotional experience, focusing on self-awareness and self-management skills and their use to establish and maintain positive relationships; decision making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school and community contexts. Children are asked to rate their experience on a three-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (3) and to describe their relationships with a single element (1) or more than two elements (3).

Engagement in school life, based on the tool developed by Furlong, You, Renshaw, O'Malley & Rebelez (2013), consists in a 20 self-report, developmentally appropriate questionnaire on wellbeing and school engagement. Children are asked to rate each sentence on a four-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4) and then summed to form a total score where a better school experience is indicated by higher score.

Future Orientation for Relationships and Goals (from Saigh, 1995) examines children orientation towards their future. It consists of 10 items covering interpersonal *Relationships* and 12 items addressing future *Goals* (4 items). Children are asked to rate the extent to which they agree with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores in the two components investigated indicate higher positive orientation towards future.

Basically, quantitative data and qualitative answers converted into quantitative indices were then used in the analyses that are described in this chapter.

3.4. Results

Age group differences were investigated to highlight specific patterns in main study variables through Analysis of Variance. Data analysis was realized using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27. Data screening showed that most of the reviewed variables were normally distributed and that there were no differences in mean scores as related to gender. Age related patterns are reported in Figure 1.

Statistically significant differences did not emerge in knowledge and experience about emotions between the two groups [$F(1, 157) = .151, p = .698$]. The analyses revealed a statistically significant difference in mean score reported on the social-emotional experience [$F(1, 156) = 3.967, p = .049; \eta^2_p = .25$]. The two groups also differed significantly with respect to Engagement in school life [$F(1, 157) = 11.930, p = .001; \eta^2_p = .71$]. Similarly, as regards future the two groups differed significantly both in expectations about future relationships [$F(1, 157) = 10.459, p = .001; \eta^2_p = .63$] and about future goals [$F(1, 157) = 5.684, p = .018, \eta^2_p = .35$].

Table 1.
Mean based patterns emerging in the two groups of primary school students on the dimensions investigated.

	<i>Younger</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Older</i>	<i>Students</i>
	<i>Means</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>	<i>Score</i> <i>range</i>	<i>Means</i> <i>(s.d.)</i>	<i>Score</i> <i>range</i>
Knowledge about emotions <i>(Maximum score 30)</i>	15,03 (3,83)	3-18	15,04 (3,52)	5- 25
Social-Emotional experience <i>(Maximum score 54)</i>	37,51 (4,37)	15-45	36,14 (4,23)	23-45
Engagement in school life <i>(Maximum score 80)</i>	70,93 (9,21)	42-80	50,13 (7,27)	33-80
Orientation to future relationships <i>(Maximum score 50)</i>	36,62 (6,12)	20-50	33,75 (5,01)	20-47
Orientation to future goals <i>(Maximum score 60)</i>	52,67 (5,92)	36-60	50,13 (7,27)	30-60

Based on preliminary correlations, specific regression analyses were conducted to highlight predictive relationships amongst dimensions investigated. As regards the relationship between respectively knowledge and experience about emotions and social-emotional experience, and engagement in school life, the overall regression was statistically significant [$R^2 = .089, F(2, 155) = 7.611, p = .001$]. Social-emotional experience significantly predicted Engagement in school life ($\beta = .258, p = .001$), moreover, knowledge about and experience with emotions did not predict school engagement ($\beta = -.133, p = .084$).

When addressing the relationship between respectively knowledge and experience about emotions and Social-Emotional experience with future orientation in relationships, the overall regression was statistically significant [$R^2 = .060, F(2, 155) = 4,960, p = .01$]. Social-emotional experience significantly predicted positive orientation towards future relationships ($\beta = .245, p = .002$) while knowledge about and experience with emotions did not predict positive orientation towards future relationships ($\beta = -.041, p = .599$).

Finally, when addressing the relationship between knowledge about and experience with emotions and social-emotional experience, and positive future expectations, the overall regression was statistically significant [$R^2 = .041, F(2, 155) = 3.281, p = .04$]. Again, social-emotional experience significantly predicted positive future expectations ($\beta = .196, p = .01$) while knowledge about and experience with emotions did not significantly predict positive future expectations ($\beta = -.041, p = .599$).

The results described provide evidence for specific patterns of SECs in primary school children of different ages. Additionally, the predictive relationships identified between social-emotional experience and engagement in school life confirm results in the literature and more specifically describe the contribution of positive social-emotional relationships on wellbeing experienced at school (Jones et al., 2017). Children with strong social skills are more likely to make and sustain friendships, initiate positive relationships with teachers, participate in classroom activities, and be positively engaged in learning.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The results open to further research questions. Besides more clearly identifying the age period crucial for their appearance, longitudinal studies may highlight the impact of an early and supported development of these dimensions and the strength of their relationship on later adolescence life.

More specifically studies should investigate the role of knowledge they develop on emotion and social skills as distinct from direct experience of these skills in the two age groups identified in this study. Diverse paths for educational actions might follow for more at-risk children. Flexible programs that allow higher level of personalization might help to better respond specific students' needs and meet social justice goals (Green, et al., 2021).

The limited percentage of variance explained that characterize some of the relationships addressed, may again resonate the meaning of the age intervals considered and the need to identify more adequate tools to measure the Social-Emotional experience and future orientation in younger primary school students. Addressing these issues in larger studies may allow grouping participants into even more circumscribed age ranges and highlight more specific, both qualitative and quantitative, changes in the paths to positive and integrated development of competences.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A first contribution of the study described in this chapter is the evidence provided for specific patterns of SECs professionals interested in supporting a positive development should be aware of. A closer look to the patterns emerged shows, in fact, a general trend towards 9 to 11 years old children being less confident in their SECs as well as their Orientation towards the Future. There are at least two possible general determinants underlying this pattern.

The first calls for developmental differences in cognitive resources used for addressing the tasks proposed, namely a shift towards the use of newly (hence less automatic) acquired skills such as the ability to plan, organize, initiate, and hold information in mind for future-oriented problem solving.

The seconds might be a contextual one, related to the increased requests from the educational context that often characterize the experience of children of this age and may impact on their confidence on the ability to effectively carry out the new tasks according to the expectations.

Professionals interested in supporting a positive development should then open their attention to and consider at least these two determinants in making 9 to 11 years old children more cautious in their opening to context and future, hence more exposed to vulnerability in their positive identity development. More attention and deeper study should

be devoted in the future to explore the meaning and impact of these two determinants on development.

The current study explored two possible pathways (i.e., through engagement in school life and future orientation) by which Social-Emotional Competencies can influence psychological development for primary school students of different ages.

As regards the engagement in school life, professionals should reflect on the usefulness of SECs to increase a positive class climate and school functioning, as an effective strategy to transform life environments, facilitating participation of all and reducing.

The relationships between SECs and future orientation, on the other hand, seem to hold both when focusing on aspects related to more intraindividual dimensions and when orienting the attention to social future life. This underlines the relevance of addressing these dimensions in the activities to support the development of active and socially responsible future adults.

Evidence provided should inform the programming of SECs curricula that help all students acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to deal effectively with daily tasks and challenges and achieve success in current and future school, work, and life.

Generally, the education systems have not primarily been organized around the social and emotional aspects of learning (Elias, 2019). However, increasingly Social-Emotional Competencies are seen as “part of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen students’ academic performance, improve school and classroom climate, and lessen conduct problems” (Green et al., 2021; Herrenkohl, Lea, Jones, & Malorni, 2019). Long term benefits (i.e., when 18 years old; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017) and a return of investment (Belfield et al. 2015) are some of the impressive supporting data that are playing a role in fostering an emerging SEL psycho-economic infrastructure that is globally impacting policy makers decisions and orienting the future of SEL policies (Williamson, 2021).

Evidence of changes in the developmental tasks underlines the need to address these issues early in primary school and understand the variability that may lead to vulnerability in the development emerge, and, stemming also from current societal challenges and consequences of the global pandemic, to promote educational and prevention actions.

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