

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND FUTURE ORIENTATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

Teresa Maria Sgaramella, Lea Ferrari, Margherita Bortoluzzi, & Grazia Barbara Conti

*Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology
University of Padova (Italy)*

Abstract

Research studies suggest the importance of some developmental assets in promoting positive youth development: studies on Social and Emotional Learning have shown the benefits of acquiring these competencies on academic performance and well-being. In addition, future orientation emerged as a dimension that impacts on nonadaptive behaviors and educational performance but also on the agency they recognize themselves over their life trajectory and goals, reach greater academic achievement. Limited evidence is available on the role of and relationships between the developmental assets mentioned in primary school children.

The study aims to deepen our understanding on how do these developmental assets vary in primary school children and what are the relationships between Social Emotional Competences that primary school children recognize themselves and both school engagement and future orientation.

Data collected in a psychoeducational action promoted by the PSSmile project (Social-Emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education, <http://smile.emundus.it/>) were used to address these questions.

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

Direct and indirect, qualitative and quantitative tools have been used to address the study issues.

The analyses confirm the specific patterns that characterize the two age groups. 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 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.

Keywords: *Socioemotional competences, school engagement and future orientation, primary school.*

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has been recognized as a formal component of educational experience in schools and in informal learning environments (Newman, & Moroney, 2019). Proximal goal of SEL is to foster social and emotional competencies (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).

Studies on Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL; Collaboration for Academic, 2010) have shown the benefits of acquiring these competencies on academic performance and well-being (Taylor, et al. 2017) as well as impacts on nonadaptive behaviors and educational performance (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017). Additionally, studies suggest that nurturing social and emotional learning is vital to lifelong successes: children with greater social emotional competence not only have positive relationships and better mental health, but they are also more likely to be ready for college, succeed in their careers, and become engaged citizens (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017).

A *developmental perspective* to SEL considers stability and change in different domains over time (Denham, 2018). Broad SECs can apply to different ages and grade levels. However, SECs change over time and allow students to succeed at important age-differentiated developmental tasks from elementary to middle and high school.

Additionally, according to research studies, Future Time Perspective (FTP) and a positive future orientation impact a variety of important factors of our lives. Individuals with a perspective directed rather into the future perform better on self-regulated learning tasks (Bembenuddy & Karabenick, 2004), exhibit more successful learning behavior (e.g., Husman & Lens, 1999) as well as better financial behavior (Jacobs-Lawson & Hershey, 2005) and show more motivation in studying and achieving future goals (Shell & Husman, 2001). It emerges then important to focus on the development of a positive future oriented perspective and on factors influencing the development of these resources and attitudes. Extended evidence is provided on the relevance of these assets throughout adolescence, but less is known about the role of and relationships between the developmental assets mentioned in primary school children although this period of life is central in the development of basic cognitive and relational executive processes (Zelazo et al., 2003).

2. Objectives

To deepen our understanding 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?

The first aim aims to delineate possible age differences in SEC in primary school students. We predicted significant differences based on the developmental meaning recognized to this period in the development of basic cognitive and relational executive processes.

The second aim was to investigate the relationships between SEC components and indices of school engagement, that is with current wellbeing experience. Finally, the third aim was to investigate the relationships between SEC components and both expectations about future relationships and future goals, that is two components of positive future orientation. We predicted significant correlations between dimensions investigated and expected a predictive value of SEC components.

3. Methods

Data collected in a psychoeducational action promoted by the PSSmile project (Social-Emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education, <http://smile.emundus.lt/>) have been used to address research questions.

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.

3.1. Participants

A 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 (up to 9 y.o.) and older one (older than 9 y.o.). The first group included 40 boys and 33 girls and the second one, 45 boys and 40 girls.

3.2. Tools

Several tools were provided to participants. Answers to the following tools have been analysed in this study:

My Emotions and Feelings, based on a tool developed within Erasmus+ Learning to Be project, it addresses knowledge and experience about a series of emotions. It requires children to describe diverse emotions and feelings and recall situations in which they experienced both positive and negative emotions. The score is based on the appropriate descriptions and situations provided.

My Personal Learning Log, from the Learning to Be project, with quantitative and qualitative 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).

My Positive Experiences at School, based on the tool developed by Furlong, You, Renshaw, O'Malley & Rebelez (2013), it is a brief, self-report, developmentally appropriate assessment of wellbeing and school engagement. The questions ask students about what they think, feel, and do at school. They are asked to read each sentence and choose the response that tells how true the sentence is for them. The answers are scored on a four-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4)

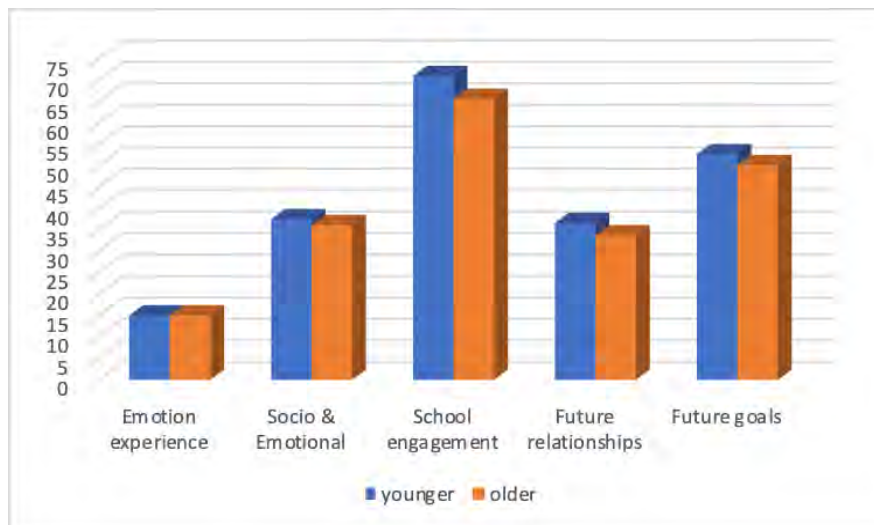
and then summed to form a total score. Higher levels of a positive engagement are indicated by higher total scores.

My Future Orientation (from Saigh, 1995) examines the person orientation towards his/her future. It consists of 8 items covering *Future Interpersonal relationships* and *Expectations about future plans and goals*. The participant is asked to rate the extent to which he/she agrees with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). High positive orientation towards future is indicated by the higher scores in the two components investigated.

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 not normally distributed and that there were no differences in mean scores as related to gender. Age related patterns are reported in Figure 1.

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



No statistically significant differences emerged in knowledge and experience about emotions between the two groups [$F(1, 157) = .151, p = .698$]. The analysis 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 school engagement [$F(1, 157) = 11.930, p = .001; \eta^2_p = .71$]. 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 expectations about future goals [$F(1, 157) = 5.684, p = .018, \eta^2_p = .35$].

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 [$R^2 = .089, F(2, 155) = 7.611, p = .001$]. It was found that *social-emotional experience significantly predicted engagement in school life* ($\beta = .258, p = .001$), moreover, knowledge about and experience with emotions did not significantly predict school engagement ($\beta = -.133, p = .084$).

When addressing the relationship between respectively knowledge and experience about emotions and socio-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, it was found that 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 ($\beta = -.041, p = .599$).

5. Discussion

The analyses conducted on this first study confirm the emerging of specific patterns that characterize primary school students of different ages in SECs. While knowledge and experience about emotions they activate during the tasks do not seem to differ, differences emerge in 8-9 when compared with 9-11 years old children both on SE competencies, school engagement and future orientation.

A closer look to the patterns emerged show a general trend towards older children being less confident in their Social-Emotional Competencies as well as their Orientation towards the Future. It is possible that two different factors come into play. The first calls for developmental differences in cognitive resources used for addressing the tasks proposed, namely in the ability to plan, organize, initiate, and hold information in mind for future-oriented problem solving. The second is related to the increased requests from the educational context that often characterise the experience of 9 to 11 years old students. In both cases it may result in making them more cautious in their opening to context and future. More attention and deeper study should be devoted to explore their meaning and impact on development.

The study provides evidence for specific relationships emerge between social-emotional competencies and respectively school wellbeing and engagement, and dimensions of future orientation. The predictive relationships identified between social-emotional experience and engagement in school life confirm results in the literature and more specifically the contribution of positive social-emotional relationships on school wellbeing (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 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. Additionally, the study provides evidence for a role of SECs on the development of a rich and positive future orientation already in primary school students. And interestingly, these relationships hold both when focusing on aspects related more to intraindividual aspects and when orienting the attention to social future life thus underlining the relevance of these competences for the development of active and socially responsible future adults.

The limited percentage of variance explained that characterizes some of the relationships addressed, may again resonate the meaning of the age specific intervals considered. The study, in fact, involved 9-10 years old students, that is boys and girls currently in transition to a new and more complex organization of their knowledge and use of their Socio-Emotional Competences but also attitudes towards future. It may nonetheless reveal important to address these issues as prerequisite for further positive development in larger studies that may allow grouping participants into even more circumscribed age ranges to highlight more steps in the development of competences and relationships between them.

6. Conclusions

The current study explored two possible pathways (i.e., through school engagement and future orientation) by which SECs influence psychological development for primary school students of different ages. Evidence provided should inform the SEL programming insofar it can 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.

The education systems have not primarily been organized around the social and emotional aspects of learning (Elias, 2019). However, increasingly Social-Emotional Competences are currently seen as “part of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen students’ academic performance, improve school and classroom climate, and lessen conduct problems” (Herrenkohl, Lea, Jones, & Malorni, 2019).

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.

References

- Bembunty, H., & Karabenick, S. A. (2004). Inherent association between academic delay of gratification, future time perspective, and self-regulated learning. *Educational psychology review*, 16(1), 35-57 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:EDPR.0000012344.34008.5c>
- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). <https://casel.org/casel-sel-framework-11-2020>
- Denham, S. A. (2018). Keeping SEL developmental: The importance of a developmental lens for fostering and assessing SEL competencies. *Measuring SEL*. Retrieved November, 20, 2018. <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/CASEL-Resources-Keeping-SEL-Developmental.pdf>

- Elias, M. J. (2019). What if the doors of every schoolhouse opened to social-emotional learning tomorrow: Reflections on how to feasibly scale up high-quality SEL. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3),233-245 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00461520.2019.1636655>
- Furlong, M. J., You, S., Renshaw, T. L., O'Malley, M. D., & Rebelez, J. (2013). Preliminary development of the Positive Experiences at School Scale for elementary school children. *Child Indicators Research*, 6(4), 753-775. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12187-013-9193-7.pdf>
- Greenberg, M. T., Domitrovich, C. E., Weissberg, R. P., & Durlak, J. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning as a public health approach to education. *The future of children*, 13-32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219019>
- Herrenkohl, T., Lea, C., Jones, T. & Malorni, A. (2019). *Leading with Data: Using an impact-driven research consortium model for the advancement of social emotional learning and youth development programs*. Society of Social Work Research (SSWR). San Francisco, CA.
- Husman, J., & Lens, W. (1999). The role of the future in student motivation. *Educational psychologist*, 34(2), 113-125. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s15326985ep3402_4
- Jacobs-Lawson, J. M., & Hershey, D. A. (2005). Influence of future time perspective, financial knowledge, and financial risk tolerance on retirement saving behaviors. *Financial Services Review-greenwich*, 14(4), 331. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.392.5839&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Jones, S. M., Barnes, S. P., Bailey, R., & Doolittle, E. J. (2017). Promoting social and emotional competencies in elementary school. *The future of children*, 49-72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219021>
- Newman, J., & Moroney, D. (2019). Reading Between the Lines of Social and Emotional Learning: Discover what SEL is all about and why it's important to consider when designing and implementing teen services. *Young Adult Library Services*, 17(2), 16-21.
- Saigh, P. A. (1995). *The Children's Future Orientation Scale*. Princeton, NJ: Trauma Resources.
- Socio-Emotional Capacity Building in Primary Education: <http://smile.emundus.lt/>
- Shell, D. F., & Husman, J. (2001). The multivariate dimensionality of personal control and future time perspective beliefs in achievement and self-regulation. *Contemporary educational psychology*, 26(4), 481-506 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0361476X00910737>
- The Learning to Be Project (2021). <https://learningtobe.net/>
- Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child development*, 88(4), 1156-1171. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28685826/>
- Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullotta, T. P. (Eds.). (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future. In J. A. Durlak, C. E. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning: Research and practice* (pp. 3–19). New York City: The Guilford Press
- Zelazo, P. D., Müller, U., Frye, D., Marcovitch, S., Argitis, G., Boseovski, J., ... & Carlson, S. M. (2003). The development of executive function in early childhood. *Monographs of the society for research in child development*, i-151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1166202>