Social and emotional competence: the concept evolution and the shift in education

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ABSTRACT: *A large number of studies emphasize social-emotional competence (SEC) as crucial for children not only in their school readiness and academic achievement but also in both their concurrent and later mental and physical health, success and happiness. In the efforts of Vietnam to approach "happy school", social and emotional education (SEE) has come to the fore as a promising school-wide intervention to promote a positive relational and inclusive school culture. Aiming to offer a foundational theory for this movement, this paper presents an overview of how SEC has been conceptualized in the literature. It analyzes and draws conclusions about the shifts in social and emotional competence conceptualization from separate abilities to multi-faceted constructs. It further describes the divergent approaches in developing SEC in schools in which SEE plays an ultimate school-wide approach broadened from social and emotional learning.*

1. Introduction

There has been a great expansion of interest in social and emotional competence (SEC), social and emotional learning (SEL) during the last two decades (Brackett et al., 2012). A number of studies emphasize social-emotional competence as crucial for particularly school readiness and academic achievement, and for both concurrent and later mental and physical health (Denham et al., 2016). In the efforts of Vietnam to approach the "happy school" movement (United Nations Educational, 2022), social and emotional education (SEE) has come to the fore as a promising school-wide intervention to promote a positive relational and inclusive school culture. In modern society, the society of knowledge, technology, and innovation, within the educational context, academic learning has been particularly concerned and strongly invested. However, more than a century ago, Aristotle said: *"Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all",* it means that education for the heart has been around for a long time now. With the development of the SEL framework by Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, n.d.-a), and recently SEE, the SEC concept has brought back the main aim of education which is to educate the *"whole child"* (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017, p.218). As a result, improving other skills for children apart from merely academic ones has attracted more and more attention. Nowadays, SEL/SEE programs have been broadly and effectively implemented in a great number of primary and secondary schools worldwide, especially in North America and European areas. In order to effectively understand and approach this movement, it is critical to have a systematic overview of how SEC has been conceptualized in the literature.

2. Methodology

This paper is a part of a literature review that used a range of relevant search terms with a number of databases including Google Scholar, PsychoInfo, and ProQuest. The search terms were the individuals and combinations of the following terms: social competence, ability, skill, behavior, emotional competence, process, skill, expression, social and emotional learning, social and emotional education. The literature dates back to 1983 with a well-known scholarship by Water and Sroufe about social competence as a construct. After relevant literature had been

collected, document analysis was employed as the data analysis method. Document analysis is used as an independent qualitative research method in social science (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this method, the researcher interprets documents to give them voice and meaning in relation to a certain evaluation issue (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis includes classifying content into themes in the same way that focus groups or interview transcripts are evaluated (Bowen, 2009). In this current study, the document analysis results in the conceptualizing process of social and emotional competence, the analysis and the summary of the shifts in social and emotional competence conceptualization including social competence, emotional competence, social and emotional learning, and social and emotional education.

3. Results

3.1. Social and emotional competence

3.1.1. Social competence

Nearly four decades ago, Waters and Sroufe (1983), Dodge (1985) and many other researchers recognized the divergent definitions in terms of social competence. Kemple (2004) in her influential book namely *Let's Be Friends*, also posits that the number of definitions of social competence nearly approaches the number of investigators gathering data about the topic. However, it seems that the more definitions suggested, the more divergent the ways which lead researchers to measure competence and develop fruitful interventions (Dodge, 1985). The following smattering is culled from a great number of definitions that have been suggested by researchers interested in social competence.

Waters and Sroufe (1983) developed the definition of social competence from Socrates' developmental views. As such, a competent individual is *"able to make use of the environment and personal resources to achieve a good developmental outcome"* (p.81). The aspect of resources within the environment refers to the matter of taking advantage of environmental resources. It requires abilities to coordinate affection, cognition, and behavior in the way one engages in a certain environment. This

aspect also relates to the needs of individuals as major determinants of their own environments. Resources within the individual are the second aspect that relates to abilities to mobilize and coordinate personal resources (ranging from specific skills to general constructs, from environmental labile to highly stable characteristics, genotypic to phenotypic traits, ego resiliency to ego control…) in such a way that *"opportunities are created and the potentials or resources in the environment are realized"* (Waters & Sroufe, 1983, p.81). The third aspect is the good development outcome with two significant criteria, ultimate and proximate. The former refers to health and adaptation during adulthood. The latter requires adequate functioning with respect to issues salient for that period and a transition to the next phase. This developmental construct focuses on what a person does, and it helps to consider which capacities can be assessed, taught and fostered while looking for responses to concrete moments (Varnon-Hughes, 2018).

Dodge (1985) first recognizes the central aspect of social competence as the effectiveness of interaction. He develops a social information processing model which comprises five steps namely encoding of social cues, the mental representation and interpretation of those cues, a search for possible behavioral responses to the cues, an evaluation of the responses including the selection of an optimal response, and the enactment of the chosen response. The model emphasizes the role of *"online processing"* as a series of decisions made to guide the following action (Cooke, 2017, p.50). This 1985 model is later reformulated by Crick and Dodge (1994) which pays more attention to multiple simultaneous paths occurring through information processing. The model is considered to be a powerful mechanism in the social encounter; however, the possible lack could be emotion and affection aspects and the regulations of one's own affect (Halberstadt et al., 2001; Zsolnai, 2015).

Rose-Krasnor's (1997) *"prism model"* defines social competence as *"effectiveness interaction"* (p. 119). Rose-Krasnor agrees with Dodge's

definitions relating to effectiveness in interaction as a central aspect that emerged in social competence literature. Based on this conclusion, the topmost level of the three-level prism metaphor is the theoretical level which emphasizes the effectiveness of action. Effectiveness refers to a system of behavior designated to meet short- and long-term development needs. The two other distinct levels of the model which serve further for social competence analysis are the index level and the motivation/skills level. The index level consists of real-life summary indices of social competence relating to both self and other domains. This level reflects qualities of interaction sequences, relationships, group status, and social self-efficacy (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Yager & Iarocci, 2013). The skills level contains elements as building blocks of social interaction residing within the individual (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The elements include the social, emotional and cognitive abilities and motivations (e.g., perception and processing of social stimuli) together with the more overt, observable social behaviors (e.g., eye contact and conversation ability) (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Yager & Iarocci, 2013).

To combine disparate views of social competence, Cavell (1990) offers a tri-component model of social competence. Basically, the single hierarchical framework is closely related to social skills, but it points to other phenomena. The three components of the model include social adjustment, social performance, and social skills. Social adjustment is at the top of the hierarchy and refers to the whole of judgments about a person's behavior within the framework of the norms held by other members of the society. Meanwhile, social performance or social functioning is regarded as the degree of an individual's response to meet socially valid criteria. The functioning is best assessed by a task-specific criterion (Cavell, 1990). The model is followed with a number of profitable assessment implications by which it is considered to be easy to use and closely relevant to clinical practice.

3.1.2. Emotional competence

Emotion-related capacities are believed to play a major role in the development of social competence (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992; Hubbard et al., 1994; Saarni, 1990). Peter Salovey and John Mayer originally view emotional intelligence as part of social intelligence (1990, p.189, cited by Bar-on, 2006). These competences are apparently intertwined with each other, as such, to properly understand social competence, researchers and others must carefully analyze the construct of emotional competence and how its elements work together with social elements (Denham et al., 2003).

From a developmental perspective, Saarni (1999) takes the notion of emotional competence as a building block of self-efficacy. She defines emotional competence as the functional capacity wherein a human can reach their goals after an emotion-eliciting encounter. Her own model of emotional competence comprises three contributors namely self or ego identity, moral sense, and developmental history. In Saarni's view, emotional competence refers to how people respond emotionally meanwhile apply simultaneously, strategically, their knowledge about emotions and their emotional expressiveness in the interaction with others. As such, skills that constitute emotional competence should be learned and understood in certain social contexts; therefore, they represent certain cultural beliefs. The eight skills posited include awareness of one's own emotions, ability to discern and understand other's emotions, ability to use the vocabulary of emotion and expression, capacity for empathic involvement, ability to differentiate the subjective emotional experience from external emotional expression, adaptive coping with aversive emotions and distressing circumstances, awareness of emotional communication within relationships, and capacity for emotional self-efficacy. Attainment of these interrelated emotional and social skills is crucial to self-efficacy (Bar-On, 2006; Halberstadt et al., 2001)

Halberstadt, Denham, and Dunsmore (2001) create a model of affective social competence (ASC) which comprises many important aspects of emotion-related competence, and a step forward in integrating different aspects of social and emotional competence. Three integrated and

dynamic components of the model are sending affective messages, receiving affective messages, and experiencing affection. Central and interconnected abilities within each component include the following skills: awareness and identification of the effect of self and others, using the skills within display rules; management/ regulation of the receipt of messages, the sending of messages, or the experience of emotions. The ASC model highly focuses on process; it also emphasizes constant changes in social partners and allows for differing cultural meanings emerging in social interaction, which impact social-emotional competencies. However, recognizing the clear differences among the three components of affective competence in the model, Eisenberg (2001) posits that the component *"experiencing emotion"* should be considered as the heart of affective social competence and plays a central role in all three of ASC's components. This critical idea comes from the insight of much overlapping between affection experiencing and the construct of emotion-related regulation by which managing one's own emotion probably contributes substantially to competence in both the ability to receive and send messages, as well as to social behavior (Eisenberg, 2001).

Denham and her colleagues (2016) employ an emotional competence definition as *"the ability to purposefully and fully express a variety of emotions, regulate emotional expressiveness and experiences when necessary, and understand the emotions of self and others"* (p.303). Developed from the definition, the three main aspects of emotional competence include emotional expression, emotional regulation, and emotional knowledge. Emotional expression is the first and central aspect, it involves method, intensity and timing to express diverse emotions with different people and in multiple contexts (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Denham et al., 2016). The second aspect, emotional knowledge, refers to the ability to understand the causes and consequences of different emotions of self and others. The understanding of how discrete emotions like disappointment, excitement, and anger may influence their attention, thoughts, decisions, and behavior. The third vital aspect of emotional

competence is emotion regulation which relates the judgment on *"too much"* or *"too little"* experience and expression of emotion to reach the child's desired appropriateness (Denham et al., 2003, p.240). Besides, emotion regulation might consist of the extrinsic and intrinsic factors which are responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions (Thompson, 1994), and young children need external support to be skilled in this competent aspect.

3.1.3. Social and emotional competence

In concert with the above views of social and emotional competence, there is an interdependency between the two competence fields. Denham et al. (2002) argue that the interpersonal function of emotion is central to other aspects of emotional competence. Meanwhile, social interactions and relationships are regulated by emotional processes (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). Emotions are basic components in social interactions throughout the lifespan. They are not only the pivotal information source to all the parties in a communication context but also integral, dynamic processes in social interaction. Emotional components are regarded as the causes as well as the effects created in a relationship. As such, the two competences are intimately intertwined (Denham et al., 2002; Halberstadt et al., 2001). It is, apparently, an easy imagination of the eternal co-existent of social and emotional factors in every normal life communication or relationship. Based on the above, there are reasons for the great expansion of research on social and emotional competence as a composed complex structure.

For the divergence in social competence and emotional competence themselves, it is assumed that there is no common agreement on the definition of social-emotional competence as a combined structure. However, considering the main characteristics of these individual competences, social-emotional competence could be defined as *"the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday*

problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development" (Elias et al., 1997, p2). This definition emphasizes self-regulation and others' relationships. The emotional aspect here refers to self-knowledge, mainly on emotion and feelings, but also includes thoughts and perception, which are linked to emotion. And, the social aspect relates to the various dimensions of interpersonal relationships (Hoang, 2016).

In a nutshell, despite the different definitions relating to social and emotional aspects which arise from divergent approaches, social and emotional competence at least includes the following characteristics: (a) a multifaceted and ever-changing system instead of individual abilities or skills; (b) the development outcomes as effectiveness in interaction and adjustment to the norm, social expectation, conviction to the social moral and value; (c) cognitive process, affection/emotion, and behavior are three main core components; (d) the demonstration of self-efficacy.

3.2. Social and emotional learning and social and emotional education

Social and emotional competencies help us to navigate the world of relationships, whereas emotional competency guides us to regulate our feelings and behaviors evoked by social interactions, to obtain positive and desired outcomes (Hoang, 2016) and these competencies should be embedded in the curriculum (CASEL, 2012).

There are various terms that have been used to describe social and emotional processes in education. One of the most used terms is "social and emotional learning" (SEL) developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The SEL program is based on the requirement of building a learning context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful (Zins et al., 2004). There are five core competencies associated with SEL namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2012; Zins et al., 2004). Through the process, children and adults

acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set, and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2003).

In European countries, there are several other terms that are closely used alongside SEL such as social and emotional skills, life skills, personal and social education or development, citizenship education, character education, health education, and promotion (Cefai et al., 2018).

Personal and social education/development usually includes areas such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, communication skills, decision-making, social responsibility, character development, family life, and social issues such as gender, equity, and human rights. In other countries, the term might cover other aspects of children's development such as health, personal, social, health and economics, and careers… (Cefai et al., 2018). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015) uses the term *"social and emotional skills"* as *"non-cognitive skills"*, *"soft skills"*, or *"character skills"* to describe *"the kind of skills involved in achieving goals, working with others, and managing emotions"* (p.34). Meanwhile, *"life skills"* is a commonly used term to describe *"the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable humans to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life"* (World Health Organization, 1997, p.2).

To embed social and emotional learning in a core curriculum across European countries, the Network of Experts working on the Social dimension of Education and Training (NESET) lists down a variety of social and emotional related terms and approaches respectively used in the education system of the 27 European Union's members. The review demonstrates the divergent approaches in different countries, the social and emotional issues, however, are their common concern. As a result, NESET uses the term "social and emotional education" (SEE) as a shift into a wider insight into social and emotional matters in school. SEE refers to the educational process by which an individual develops social

and emotional competence for personal, social, and academic growth and development through curricular, embedded, relational and contextual approaches (Cefai et al., 2018). The concept, on the one hand, encapsulates CASEL's social and emotional learning, on the other hand, employs more recent development in the field such as positive psychology, positive education, resilience, and mindfulness. The new concept is also expected to bring a broader perspective on teaching and learning, inclusive of classroom climate, whole-school ecology, parental involvement, and teacher.

Due to the conceptualization shift of social and emotional issues for students to SEE as a broad whole-school approach, the education and literature have observed changes in their insights and practices. Social and emotional programs nowadays are required to be designated and integrated into the curriculum (Cefai et al., 2018). There exist critiques of schools where SEL or SEE is not seen as a core part of the educational mission and, therefore there is little effort to apply the skills learned during SEL or SEE programming (Jone et al., 2017). Also, in alignment with the SEE concept, a concept *"Climate: taught and caught approach"* is employed (Cefai et al., 2018, p.59). The primary suggestion here is to create a whole-school positive and favorable environment where children are explicitly taught certain social and emotional skills in the classroom, and practice, experience, assess, and get constructive feedback (Elias, 2019; Jones et al., 2015). Besides, SEE is recognized as powerfully beneficial with early and targeted intervention. SEE is needed for people from every range of age, however, early intervention is more effective than the one made in the later phase of individual life (Blewitt et al., 2020; Housman, 2017). Also, there is evidence that SEE brings tremendous support to children at risk either in their physical, and mental development or in their socio-economic context (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Elliott et al., 2018). Student voices as the key stakeholders in any teaching-learning process are particularly emphasized in the current SEE. Students, apart from being active learners and lively actors, are capable and necessary to take part in the design and establishment of SEE activities (Cefai et al., 2015; Hutzel et al., 2010). Teachers, educators, and staff inside and outside school are reckoned as the primary deliverer of SEE programs, therefore, it is crucial to prepare them for the best social and emotional competences and well-being before implementing any SEE activities. In addition, parental collaboration and education are decisive factors in SEE success (Cefai & Cavioni, 2014; Downes & Cefai, 2016). A challenging mission in SEE practice currently is how to build a dynamic, effective and culturally appropriate partnership between school, parents, and community (Azar, 2017; Dinallo, 2016). Nevertheless, school-parent-community partnerships are the priority of any SEE program nowadays (CASEL, n.d.-b). Lastly, the fidelity of the designated plan or curriculum is highly emphasized in SEE. Whatever steps, procedures, and elements have been studied and included in SEE, they are not unlikely to be effective without a high degree of fidelity (Jones et al., 2017; Van Loan et al., 2019; Zins & Elias, 2007). In general, the concept of schoolwide SEE has been widely recognized and supported by educational research and practices.

4. Conclusions

The literature illustrates the divergence in the approaches to defining social and emotional competence. It is, however, obvious that scholars have begun to shift their attention from describing social and emotional skills as separate abilities to social and emotional skills as a multifaceted construct; from specific skills/abilities to the comprehensive structured competence; from the structure itself to the process and product of the social-emotional learning. Especially, when it is impossible to discuss educational processes, pedagogy, curriculum and instruction, prevention, academic achievement, and the culture and climate of schools without discussing social and emotional competencies (Elias, 2019), the literature has witnessed a great leap from social and emotional learning to social and emotional education paradigm which brings a brand-new broad perspective of developing social and

emotional competence. In Vietnam, together with the increasing interest in SEL aiming to build up warm, supportive, and welcoming schools, SEE could be the ultimate approach to a school-wide level. This approach is believed to not only benefit students' academic achievement and life success but promote the happiness of school principals, teachers, other school staff, parents, and any other related stakeholders.

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