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Filling the Gap: Improving the Social and Emotional Skills of Pre-Service Teachers[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Although research carried out over the last few decades into social and emotional learning has shown the benefits this can have for the well-being and success of both children and teachers alike, little work has been done with regard to teacher training. The present study explores the impact of a training program focusing on social and emotional learning, implemented in a pre-service teacher curriculum. Using an experiential and collaborative methodology, an attempt is made to develop emotional skills (self-esteem, empathy, affect), as well as their social skills (assertiveness, communication skills). A quasi-experimental study was conducted with 250 students who completed several well-known scales in pre-test, post-test assessment, and control groups. After controlling for personality traits, the findings point to significant effects in favor of the experimental group, who increased self-esteem, empathy, and confidence when speaking in public, while fear of public speaking, and negative affect was seen to decrease significantly.

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Cubriendo el vacío: Mejorando las competencias sociales y emocionales del profesorado en formación

RESUMEN

Aunque la investigación realizada sobre el aprendizaje socio emocional ha demostrado beneficios para el bienestar personal y el éxito, poco se ha investigado al respecto en la formación del profesorado. Es objeto de este artículo presentar el impacto de un programa de entrenamiento en aprendizaje socio emocional implementado en el currículo de Magisterio. Con una metodología experiencial y colaborativa, se pretende desarrollar las competencias emocionales (autoestima, empatía, afectividad), así como las competencias sociales (asertividad, competencias comunicativas). Se ha utilizado una investigación de diseño cuasiexperimental con una muestra de 250 estudiantes, grupo control, y medidas pre- y postest mediante diversos instrumentos validados. Tras controlar los rasgos de personalidad, los resultados en el grupo experimental informan de un aumento significativo en las variables de autoestima, empatía y confianza para hablar en público, así como de una disminución significativa del miedo a hablar en público y de las emociones negativas experimentadas.

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Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed growing interest in the study of Social and Emotional Competencies (SEC), as learning to be and to live together (Delors, 1996) and their influence on learning and social adjustment. More recently, various professionals in the education system have concurred on the importance of understanding and managing both, one's own feelings as well as the ones from the others, in everyday life, and in engaging in

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effective educational processes. Extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of SEC is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties (Eisemberg, Damon, & Lerner, 2006). In order to get these benefits, teachers should acquire SEC to be able to conduct Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs.

Thus, researchers posit the need to promote SEL, not only for children but also for teachers themselves (Greenberg et al., 2003; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016). Moreover, the U.K. Department of Education and Skills carried out a study called the Every Teacher Matters Report (Bassett, Haldenby, Tanner, & Trehwitt, 2010), which concludes by recommending specific development of SEC, not only in schools but also in teacher training institutions, based on the idea that a competence which has not been acquired cannot be taught, since quality teaching is not possible without teacher welfare. Taking all of this into account, we designed a new subject into the curricula of both Kindergarten and Elementary Education Degrees for promoting basic student's competencies, focused on SEC for future teachers.

Recent meta-analysis conducted on SEL training programs with children (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) showed that SEL participants, compared to controls, demonstrated a significant improvement in SEC. However, only few experiences, and validation studies associated, were found for training teachers on SEL. One study conducted by Byron (2001) reported effectiveness with in-service novice teachers, showing emotional competencies increased after training by a seminar. Two experiences with pre-service teachers, showed significant results increasing personal competencies and well-being. First, training students on corporal-mind techniques (Yoga, Mindfulness, Taichi) during 16 group-sessions of 30 minutes, decreased anxiety and stress (Gallego, Aguilar-Parra, Cangas, Rosado, & Langer, 2016) compared with control group; the second study is a 40-hours optative subject, which uses dramatization techniques for training SEC; author showed through qualitative analysis an increase on their student's motivation to use SEC on future as teachers and a better perception of their emotional awareness, expression and regulation (Núñez-Cubero, 2008).

The extent in which this need to train teachers in emotional skills is covered by the teaching curricula offered by institutions in Europe were researched by López-Goñi and Goñi (2012) founding emotional skills at a low position within the group of teaching skills. Authors call for more attention to teacher's emotional skills, as they are the foundation for healthy and long-lasting professional development.

What is social and emotional learning?

We use the broadly accepted definition developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2005) of SEL as the process of promoting the development of five interrelated competencies (SEC). Thus, a socially and emotionally competent teacher will display high levels of:

Self-awareness (SEC1): accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence. Teacher's self-efficacy and self-esteem has a positive influence of diminishing teacher stress (Reilly, Dhingra, & Boduszek, 2014) as well as increasing job satisfaction. Oral Communication is one of the principal resources in teaching, and university students frequently show 'communicative apprehension' (fear, anxiety in communication) with important consequences over their achievement, and well-being (Horwitz, 2002).

Self-management (SEC2): regulating one's emotions to handle stress, impulse controlling, and persevering in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and

academic goals; expressing emotions appropriate. Regulating emotions competence influence teacher's frequency of positive and negative daily affect, what is inversely related with burnout levels (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010), and predicts positive teaching climate and students well-being (Sutton & Harper, 2009). Increase frequency of positive emotions and decrease negative ones is expected as an indirect effect of emotion regulation training in the SEL program.

Social awareness (SEC3): being able to take the perspective of others and empathize; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences. Sinclair and Fraser (2002) found an improvement in the classroom environment of teachers who had participated in training with a component aimed at enhancing empathy. In the same line, Barr (2011) observed that teachers' perspective-taking was positively associated with their positive perceptions of student-peer relations, school norms and educational opportunities.

Relationship skills (SEC4): establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, and resolving interpersonal conflict. Ee and Chang (2010) proposed that assertiveness training would be useful for pre-service teachers to enable them to advocate for themselves, work effectively with administrators, colleagues and parents and ask for the support and assistance they need on the job.

Responsible decision-making (SEC5): making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions.

Because of the findings exposed above, the teacher's SEL program presented focus on development of SEC 1 to 4 (since SEC 5 is already trained through different teacher curricula subjects).

SEL program design

The main objective of the new university subject is to provide SEL training following the SAFE (progressive Sequenced, using Active methodology, Focused on specific competencies and Explicitly trained) success criteria emerged from meta-analysis research conducted in schools (Durlak et al., 2011) as well as recommendations from cited literature concerning effective SEL methodology with adult groups (Kornacki & Caruso, 2007): start with group cohesion dynamics, use personal experiences to work on it, self-assessment and feedback. In this sense, the program is designed to be progressive and to cover from basic emotional competencies to social ones, with specific time and products associated to each, in addition to active and cooperative methodology.

The course took place during the second term of the first year as a compulsory subject and lasts ten weeks with two sessions of two hours training each (40 hours total). Training was conducted in usual university classes of around 50–60 people. The first two weeks, students were organized in small groups by randomization with the objective to deep study in a specific SEC of the program (called 'expert group' of each SEC); at the same time, group cohesion dynamics took place along teacher presentation of SEL framework. After this, every two weeks, teacher introduced a new SEC framework (following this order: self-esteem; emotional regulation; empathy; assertiveness and social skills) and proposed individual and group practices (e.g. role-playing, case studies, video analysis, self-reports, group dynamics), with the help of student's expert groups, who delivers complementary theory knowledge and manages in the classroom an applied work they have designed (under teacher's supervision), in order to practice the competence with their classmates. They got feedback on audiovisual recordings and received a score in relation to several exit criteria: group coordination, communication skills, quality of contents exposed, and

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