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Changes in the Development of Future Educational Leaders' Social Competencies

Abstract

Social competence is one of the basic key competencies of educational leaders, where the research aimed at targeted facilitation is absent. Thus, the study aims to verify the changes in the development of social competence and coping self-efficacy of future educational leaders within two courses (one-term course at university vs. one-year course at an educational non-profit institution) (university students of teaching branches: $N_{UMB} = 13$; $AM_{age} = 27.8$; $SD_{age} = 7.4$; 29.4% men vs. participants of the educational institution: $N_{NGO} = 14$; $AM_{age} = 38.6$; $SD_{age} = 7.8$; 21% men). The Coping Self-Efficacy Scale, CSES) assessed the overall level of coping self-efficacy and its four factors, and the Inventory of Social Competence (ISK – K) assessed four social competencies. Results showed a significant increase of low practical significance over time (pretest vs. retest) in the level of social orientation (in ISK – K) and an increase of medium significance in overall self-efficacy and in the ability to use strategies focused on problems and unpleasant emotions and thoughts (in CSES) among university students. After completion of the course, NGO participants increased (with a low practical significance) their SK-K levels of offensiveness and self-control and their CSES self-efficacy and ability to use strategies focused on problems and unpleasant emotions and thoughts. There were no significant differences between overall levels in the two courses. The study offers possible implications of social competence facilitation in the context of educational leader formation at Slovak schools.

Keywords: *social competence, self-efficacy, educational courses, educational leader*

Introduction

Social competence – as the ability of an individual to handle social situations successfully, effectively integrate into the social environment, and not only understand the social situation but also solve it according to the needs and interests of its participants (Kanning, 2009) – is a relatively new phenomenon in psychology, pedagogy, and people management. It includes social, emotional and cognitive predispositions and determines the behaviour used in successful social adaptation (Welsh & Bierman, 1998). Currently, review studies focus on the need to use and form social competencies in teachers at various school levels and types (López-Martín et al., 2023; Pituła & Grzyb, 2022; Lozano-Peña et al., 2021). They emphasise strengthening effective communication in situations, making and maintaining relationships, successful and constructive solutions to social problems, forming social and emotional competencies (such as empathy, assertiveness, coping, self-efficacy, etc.), and giving social support or respect.

The targeted facilitation and development of selected social competencies have not been sufficiently explored in Slovak school conditions. However, an ascending trend has been observed in the research of social competence and assessment of the effectiveness of such training and courses (Carstensen & Klusmann, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Sollárová, 2022), confirming their effectiveness already in the preparation of future educational professionals as effective forms of support and development of personal, social and professional competencies.

Educational leaders' social competencies and coping self-efficacy

In this study, social competencies are examined based on Kanning's (2009) theory differentiating them as a potential/trait and a socially competent behaviour - the application of such potential in a specific situation, while the potential of social competence increases the likely occurrence of socially competent behaviour in specific interpersonal relationships (Kanning, 2009). Bandura et al. (2003) and Chesney et al. (2006) assume that one's belief in one's abilities determines the effort one exerts in an activity. If one believes to be capable of achieving a required result or avoiding undesired impacts, he will exert effort. Perceived social support strengthens the belief in one's abilities (coping self-efficacy), where the one perceiving own self-efficacy, has self-confidence, responds better to stress, and exerts more effort to overcome obstacles (Bandura et al., 2003; Chesney et

al., 2006). Kanning (2009; 2019) sees social competencies as multidimensional constructs enabling compromises between an individual's interests and the social environment's interests. In order to reduce the number of competencies usually covered by this concept, he created a tool for their measurement (Inventory of Social Competence, ISK, Kanning, 2009), with 17 primary scales grouped into four factors: *social orientation* (attitude towards others, ability to empathise, to look at the world through their eyes), *offensiveness* (interaction with others, active approach to them, making relationships), *self-control* (coping with normal and stressful situations), and *reflexibility* (ability to reflect on both oneself and others). This theory and the related tool were standardised abroad (Kanning et al., 2012) and in our conditions (Hoskovcová & Vašek, 2017).

Socially competent behaviour and self-efficacy lead the school leader to believe that he can solve the problem, regulate his emotions in (also un/expected) stressful situations, which plays a key role in choosing effective coping strategies in educational settings, and create social ties shaping functional social support in education.

Research Problem

The lac of empirical evaluation studies on the effectiveness of training courses in the Slovak school setting has led us to test two courses aimed at the development of social competencies and coping self-efficacy among teacher students and NGO participants (teachers) of an NGO educational institution as potential educational leaders – bearers of change in current education. Both selected variables (social competencies and self-efficacy) are based on the interpersonally oriented competencies of a leader in the educational context (Sollárová, 2022). The selected variables represent basic characteristics of (effective) educational leaders in reaction to other people and are necessary for effective functioning in relationships, leading people, and handling stressful situations at school.

The levels of social competence development in the following two courses were tested and compared: (1) an optional one-term course “Competencies of a Leader in Education”, in the master's study pre-gradual preparation of teacher students, and (2) a one-year educational course of the non-profit educational organisation Komenský Inštitút (KI) (<https://komenskehoinstitut.sk/rocny-program>), targeted on preparation of future leaders in Slovak education.

The study's aims were:

- 1) Verify changes in the development of social competencies and self-efficacy in future educational leaders – students of teaching branches (in the course Competencies of a Leader in Education).

- 2) Verify changes in the development of social competencies and self-efficacy in participants of the one-year course at KI.
- 3) Compare the level of change in the variables – social competencies and coping self-efficacy in the two courses.

The aims of the study were operationalised in three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Will completing the one-term course Competencies of a Leader in Education aimed at the support of interpersonal leadership competencies manifest in an increased level of social competencies and self-efficacy of teacher students?

RQ2: Will completing the one-year course to support interpersonal leadership competencies manifest in an increased level of social competencies and self-efficacy of KI participants?

RQ3: Will there be a difference in the levels of achieved social competencies and self-efficacy after completing the two courses?

Methods

Research Sample

The research sample consisted of:

Students of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (UMB) ($N_{UMB} = 13$; $AM_{age} = 27.8$; $SD_{age} = 7.4$; 29.4% men) studying teaching in combination, who completed the course Competencies of a Leader in Education in the academic year 2020/2021 (Information Sheet of the subject at UMB). They filled in the questionnaires before and after the course;

Participants of a one-year course at Komenský Inštitút ($N_{NGO} = 14$; $AM_{age} = 38.6$; $SD_{age} = 7.8$; 21% men) in the academic year 2020/2021. They were teacher students, teachers with experience, and educational managers. They filled in the battery of questionnaires before and after the course.

It is noted that all participants took the training courses on leadership social competencies voluntarily and signed informed consent specifying their participation in the research and research intents to verify changes in social competence development. After the course, the students received the assessment “passed”.

Methodology

The research used two research methods:

– **Coping Self-Efficacy Scale** (CSES; Chesney et al., 2006) – a 26-item questionnaire measuring the level of self-efficacy in three areas: *Problem-focused Coping* (maximum score 120), *Stop Unpleasant Emotions and Thoughts* (maximum score 90) and *Get Support from Friends and Family* (maximum score 50). Respondents answer on an 11-point Likert scale (with 0 for „cannot do at all” and 10 for „certain can do”). Item ratings are summed up to obtain an overall CSES score (maximum 260). The higher the score, the higher the perceived self-efficacy. The internal consistency for both samples was of a highly acceptable value (1st measurement: $\alpha_{\text{umb}}=0.95$, $\alpha_{\text{KI}}=0.92$; 2nd measurement: $\alpha_{\text{umb}}=0.95$, $\alpha_{\text{KI}}=0.88$).

– **Inventory of Social Competence – short form** (ISK-K; Kanning, 2009) – a 33-item questionnaire measuring the level of social competencies in four so-called secondary subscales – *Scale of Social Orientation*, *Scale of Offensiveness*, *Scale of Self-control*, and *Scale of Reflexibility*. The items are answered on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 for completely disagree and 4 for completely agree. The internal consistency for both samples was highly acceptable in all factors in both measurements ($0.71 \leq \alpha \leq 0.89$).

Research Implementation

Developmental/educational courses:

During one term of master’s study, students of teaching branches completed the course “Competencies of a Leader in Education”, lasting 36 hours, with the instruction in blocks and online due to the 2021 Pandemic measures.

The one-year NGO course (2020/21), usually in the form of experiential and practical multi-day workshops, also ran online. During the year, NGO participants completed six workshops thematically covering areas long absent in Slovak education, lasting 100 hours (e.g., teambuilding and project management, personal vision and power, critical thinking and global education, lazy teacher, effective instruction and communication, perceived school and class, etc.). The one-year course ended with implementing and defending a 120-hour pedagogical project in school settings.

Evaluation of the impact of both educational courses was designed using pre-test and retest measurements, and data were processed using standard procedures of comparison analysis. In addition to descriptive data indicators and internal consistency coefficients, also the normality of data distribution based on measures

of central tendency, differences using the Wilcoxon test of differences for two dependent variables, and the r index called Common Language Effect Size (CLES), which determines the practical significance of differences for non-parametric testing and is a non-parametric analogue of Cohen's d for parametric testing of differences, were determined. Inter-group differences before and after the courses were tested using the Eta Squared coefficient – η^2 . Data were processed using the statistical program SPSS 19.0.

Results

The results of verifying the two courses aimed at developing social competencies and self-efficacy are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 presents descriptive indicators and analysis of differences in variables of students before and after the course *Competencies of a Leader in Education*. Table 2 presents descriptive indicators and analysis of differences in variables of NGO participants before and after the one-year course.

Table 1. Descriptive indicators of the studied variables in students' pretests and retests (N = 13) and differences before and after the course (Wilcoxon test)

Variables		AM	SD	Med	Skewness	Kurtosis	Z	r	
CSES	Use problem-focus coping	Before	59.08	12.37	61.00	-0.433	-0.793	-2.207*	-0.43
		After	63.62	12.19	67.00	-0.986	-0.310		
	Stop unpleasant emotions and thoughts	Before	94.92	23.12	95.00	-0.110	-1.153	-2.552*	-0.50
		After	104.31	21.68	113.00	-0.839	-1.073		
	Get support from friends and family	Before	40.62	9.49	45.00	-1.098	-0.405	-1.825	-
		After	42.77	8.58	47.00	-1.210	0.346		
Coping self-efficacy	Before	194.62	43.13	201.00	-0.480	-0.792	-2.673**	-0.52	
	After	210.69	40.63	225.00	-1.008	-0.652			
ISK	Social orientation	Before	3.12	0.37	3.10	-0.856	2.619	-2.259a*	-0.44
		After	3.33	0.23	3.30	0.393	-0.997		
	Offensiveness	Before	2.81	0.58	2.60	0.009	-0.547	-0.716	-
		After	2.89	0.61	3.10	-0.035	-1.726		
	Self-control	Before	2.75	0.69	2.90	0.096	-0.850	-1.789	-
		After	2.94	0.61	3.00	0.075	-0.835		
	Reflexibility	Before	3.35	0.31	3.30	-0.177	-0.597	-1.846	-
		After	3.55	0.29	3.40	-0.105	-1.793		

Legend: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; AM – arithmetic mean; SD – standard deviation; Med – median; r – coefficient of Common Language Effect Size (CLES)

Since the analysis of data skewness and kurtosis indicated deviations from the normal distribution of data and both samples were of smaller sizes ($N \leq 20$), the differences between the pretest and retest measurement were determined by the non-parametric version of the Wilcoxon test of differences for two dependent variables. Results of the statistical testing of the differences in teacher students as potential leaders in education confirmed a statistically significant increase after the course in *Use Problem-focused Coping* ($p < 0.05$), *Stop Unpleasant Emotions and Thoughts* ($p < 0.05$), and in the overall level of *Coping Self-efficacy* ($p < 0.01$). As to the social competencies, a statistically significant increase was found only in the variable *Social orientation* ($p < 0.05$). Only low practical differences (CLES ranged from - 0.43 to 0.52) existed in all verified variables.

Table 2. Descriptive indicators of the studied variables in NGO course participants' pretests and retests ($N = 14$) and differences before and after the course (Wilcoxon test)

Variables		AM	SD	Med	Skewness	Kurtosis	Z	r	
CSES	Use problem-focus coping	Before	60.93	12.18	61.00	-0.557	0.069	-2.047*	-0.39
		After	63.93	9.47	65.50	-0.804	0.276		
	Stop unpleasant emotions and thoughts	Before	96.14	13.80	100.00	-0.015	-1.254	-2.639**	-0.50
		After	102.79	13.66	106.00	-0.846	0.002		
	Get support from friends and family	Before	37.64	7.94	39.50	-0.175	-1.091	-0.670	-
		After	38.07	7.62	36.00	0.048	-1.214		
Coping self-efficacy	Before	194.71	26.50	195.00	-0.332	0.412	-2.324*	-0.44	
	After	204.79	24.90	206.00	-0.821	2.242			
ISK	Social orientation	Before	3.05	0.35	3.10	-0.351	0.808	-0.106	-
		After	3.06	0.42	3.05	-0.702	0.527		
	Offensiveness	Before	2.60	0.53	2.69	-0.184	-1.282	-2.284*	-0.43
		After	2.86	0.40	2.88	-0.444	-0.480		
	Self-control	Before	2.87	0.55	3.00	-0.025	-0.547	-2.322*	-0.44
		After	3.15	0.53	3.25	-1.008	0.156		
	Reflexibility	Before	3.01	0.36	3.00	0.840	1.143	0.150	-
		After	2.99	0.40	3.00	-0.297	-0.236		

Legend: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; AM - arithmetic mean; SD - standard deviation; Med - median; r - coefficient of Common Language Effect Size (CLES)

Results of statistical testing of differences confirmed a statistically significant increase after the course also in NGO course participants, this in *Stop Unpleas-*

ant Emotions and Thoughts ($p < 0.01$) and the overall level of Coping Self-efficacy ($p < 0.05$). Social competencies differed in the level of Offensiveness ($p < 0.05$) and Self-control ($p < 0.05$). Here, practical differences were also low ($-0.39 \leq \text{CLES} \leq -0.50$).

Also, in the beginning, before the courses, differences between the two samples in the studied variables were tested, where the non-existence of differences between students and NGO participants in all CSES variables was confirmed (CSES: $70.50 \leq U \leq 90.00$, $p \geq 0.05$). Also, no significance was confirmed of differences between both samples (students vs. NGO participants) in four variables of self-efficacy even after the courses (CSES: $55.00 \leq U \leq 87.00$, $p \geq 0.05$).

On the other hand, as to the questionnaire ISK-K, tests of differences between the two samples showed a significant difference in Reflexibility ($U = 40.00$, $p = .021$; $\eta^2 = .23$) before the course in favour of students. After the course, a significant difference was found in Social Orientation ($U = 42.50$; $p = .030$; $\eta^2 = .21$) and Reflexibility ($U = 22.50$; $p = .001$; $\eta^2 = .41$) in both variables in favour of students against NGO participants.

Also, differences in the level of social competencies and self-efficacy were tested in both courses. It was proved that there were no differences between the two courses (one-term course vs. one-year course) in the studied variables ($70.50 \leq U \leq 339.50$, $p \geq 0.05$). Despite no difference confirmed in the overall level of changes between the courses, individuals' differences (pretest vs. retest) ranged from 0 to 25 points in CSES factors and from 0 to 1.25 in ISK-K. A more marked individual shift was recorded in students.

Discussion

Our study aimed to analyse changes in levels of social competencies and self-efficacy achieved in two courses for future leaders in education, students of teaching branches through a one-term course, and current teachers through a one-year non-formal training in NGO. Both courses focused on the development of key social competencies. Verification of the changes in two different types of courses in two different research samples (NGO participants and teacher students) points to a potential of targeted facilitation and development of coping self-efficacy strategies by focusing on a specific problem, coping with unpleasant emotions and thoughts and getting help and support from family and professionals by strengthening mutual understanding and tolerance while seeking a possible resolution of conflicts in particular during preparation for the teaching profession. Significant changes after the courses were recorded in the factor *Social Orientation* in students vs. NGO participants. Teacher students as individuals seemed to be more flexible and open during their professional

preparation. Owing to the course *Competencies of a Leader in Education*, they chose and performed activities they considered useful and effective for coping in their personal and professional lives. Their ability to focus purposefully on the problem itself, as well as to manage their emotions in stressful and interpersonal situations, increased. Significant changes were also observed in the self-efficacy factors of NGO participants, while their social competencies also developed significantly, e.g., the awareness of their own needs, active approach to others, making contacts, effective enforcement of their decisions (factor of offensiveness), as well as the focus on coping with ordinary and stressful situations where their self-awareness deepened of being the authors of their behaviour as well as the cause of the events in their surroundings (factor of self-control), Kanning (2009), Hoskovcová and Vašek (2017) in the process of ISK standardisation, and Barnová and Gabrhelová (2022), Pituła and Grzyb (2022), showed that psychosocial competencies and mainly positive interpersonal relationships at work are important for the perception of the climate in the environment and the basis of professional success in several professions not excluding teachers as future educational leaders, and that they should be developed purposefully.

Our research has several limitations, including the selection of respondents, the missing control group for the courses, and the course form, extent, time, and content. The research focused only on social variables and used self-report methods that did not capture respondents' mental states and current moods. It also prevented generalising the results to a broader population and other personality or contextual variables.

Conclusions and Recommendations

However, we state that our study managed to highlight the possibilities of targeted facilitation and development of key social competencies, which are part of the basic competencies of future leaders as bearers of changes in Slovak education (Carstensen & Klusmann, 2021; Sollárová, 2022). Last but not least, however, following the participants over a longer time after the courses to verify the sustainability of the changes or seeking a deeper context of the changes through focus groups or experimental designs for verification of the effectiveness allows for further investigation in the area of leadership. Pupils perceive satisfied, self-confident, motivated and positive teachers as good leaders, helpful, willing, accepting, capable of coping with failure and creating a positive climate at school and in the classroom (Petrík & Vašašová, 2022; Pituła & Grzyb, 2022). Diagnostics of social competencies, knowledge of their structure, and

their assessment have the potential to be implemented in designs of developmental educational courses for students of teaching branches, teachers and managers in education as part of the support of their leadership competencies.

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