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Do Studies Provide Knowledge, Skills, and Social Competences – Are You Sure? Social Competences of Future Special Educators – Longitudinal Studies

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Abstract

The research's aim was to verify whether higher education indeed significantly develops students' social competences as intended. The research project consisted of three separate studies. Anna Matczak's Social Competence Questionnaire was used, which allows for the presentation of results across three subscales related to functioning in intimate situations, situations of social exposure, and situations requiring assertiveness. The study included 66 first-year special education students, 83 STEM students, and 111 fifth-year special education students. A longitudinal study was conducted on a sample of 31 special education students. The results showed that both special education and STEM students have an average level of social competences. Studying special education significantly contributes to the enhancement of social competences, although the impact is moderate/low. The educational environment and the experiences gained throughout the studies appear to play a crucial role in this development.

Keywords: social competences, special education students, special education teacher competences, soft skills, professional predispositions.

Introduction

Many young people around the world are currently contemplating the value of pursuing higher education. They seek answers to the question: what do studies offer to an individual? Scientific research attempts to answer this question.

The Importance of Higher Education in a Person's Life

Research highlights the development of study skills, including the acquisition, organization, and synthesis of information, alongside the enhancement of cognitive-based study strategies (Malhotra & Mehta, 2015; Joseph et al., 2017). University programs support the cultivation of these skills, which are vital for degree completion and employability (Prifti et al., 2017; Tudor, 2019; Duche-Pérez, 2022; Briede & Peks, 2017). Additionally, studies emphasize the development of professional and research skills, which are essential for adapting to contemporary professional environments and society, as well as for conducting scientific research projects (Duche-Pérez, 2022; Briede & Peks, 2017; Ain et al., 2018). Furthermore, these programs facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills pertinent to the knowledge economy, thereby contributing to the development of students' capabilities (Thalgi, 2020). Study programs aim to equip students with essential study skills to enhance their learning and academic competence, including reading, writing, note-taking, and stress management (Malhotra & Mehta, 2015). These programs also emphasize the development of generic competencies, self-directed learning, and the promotion of specialized investigative knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and values (Briede & Peks, 2017). Moreover, academic programs contribute to the development of research skills, time management, teamwork, and soft skills, which are transferable across various contexts (Joseph et al., 2017; Prifti et al., 2017; Duche-Pérez, 2022; Ain et al., 2018).

In the context of academic education, soft skills refer to interpersonal, non-cognitive competencies essential for employability and career development (Ilyina & Kryuchkova, 2021; Jayaram & Musau, 2017). These skills are increasingly important for graduates amidst ongoing globalization and the knowledge-driven economy (Ilyina & Kryuchkova, 2021; Gilyazova et al., 2021; Barakat & Abed, 2023). Soft skills are crucial for effective problem-solving, decision-making, and fostering a collaborative culture in both academic and professional settings (Barakat & Abed, 2023). Developing these skills among students is essential, and various measures are being implemented to transform the educational process at universities to better foster these competencies (Ilyina & Kryuchkova, 2021). However, there is a notable lack of instruments for evaluating soft skills

within educational settings (Escolà-Gascón & Gallifa, 2022). Soft skills, also referred to as behavioral or non-cognitive skills, encompass interpersonal abilities such as communication, problem-solving, punctuality, and flexibility (Jayaram & Musau, 2017). Soft skills are positively correlated with academic outcomes and can mitigate inequalities in academic achievements stemming from differences in cognitive ability (Keng, 2024).

The Importance of Social Competences in Professional Work

In today's world, social competencies are of particular importance as they determine effective social and professional functioning. Social competencies seem to be especially significant in the work of a special educator, whose job is based on interacting with individuals with special needs. Therefore, it is emphasized that students should develop skills such as quick learning, openness to experiences, innovative thinking and action, as well as the ability to adapt socially and professionally, which includes functioning in social and professional roles (Wierzejska, 2014). At the same time, even in technical fields, there is increasing emphasis on the development of social competencies. It is no longer sufficient to have technical knowledge to secure a job; increasingly, employers are also testing "soft skills" during recruitment.

A specific subset of soft skills crucial for professional success is social competence. Social competence refers to a complex system of social abilities, habits, skills, and knowledge that organizes social behavior and activates individual elements of the system (Zsolnai & Kasik, 2016; Alejziak, 2020). Social competencies encompass a range of skills and behaviors related to social interaction and coexistence (Peñalva-Vélez et al., 2020). They are critical for various aspects of life, including education, vocational training, nursing, and adolescent development (Alejziak, 2020; Myles et al., 2015; Shek & Leung, 2016; Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2017; Chrzan-Rodak et al., 2019). Social competencies develop throughout childhood and can be influenced by internal qualities and environmental factors (Alejziak, 2020; Peñalva-Vélez et al., 2020). Assessing social competencies involves evaluating social behavior, competitiveness, cordiality, aggression, and loneliness, with observed differences across genders and age groups (Peñalva-Vélez et al., 2020).

In this study, social competence is defined as the conformity of human behavior with social expectations while balancing personal and social interests. Thus, individuals are expected to manage the discrepancy between individual and social goals (Matczak, 2007). According to Anna Matczak (2007), social competence emerges from social training, the intensity of which depends on per-

sonality and temperamental variables (such as reactivity or extraversion), and its effectiveness is contingent on intelligence, particularly social and emotional intelligence.

In conclusion, social skills in academic education are vital for students' future career success and are increasingly recognized as essential competencies in the modern knowledge-driven economy. Despite challenges in measuring and developing these skills, their positive association with academic outcomes underscores their significance in educational settings.

Present Study

Given the importance of higher education in a person's life and the skills that are sought after in today's job market, it is crucial to emphasize the enhancement of students' social competences. Although, as highlighted in the introduction, these competences are key in every aspect of life, they seem to hold particular significance in the work of a special educator. Based on this premise, the entire research project's aim was to verify whether higher education indeed significantly develops students' social competences as intended. The research project consisted of three separate studies, each addressing a different research question.

The tool used in each of the three studies was Anna Matczak's Social Competence Questionnaire. It comprises 60 diagnostic items and 30 non-diagnostic items. This tool allows for the presentation of results across three subscales related to functioning in intimate situations, situations of social exposure, and situations requiring assertiveness. Participants are asked to respond to various activities by indicating on a 4-point Likert scale how well they would handle a given task (Matczak, 2007).

Study 1

In Study 1, the aim was to describe and compare the level of social competences between students of special education and students of STEM fields (physics, mathematics, computer science). Given this objective, two research questions were formulated:

— What level of social competences do first-year students of special education and STEM fields exhibit?
— Are there statistically significant differences in social competences between students of STEM fields and students of special education?

Method

Participants

A total of 149 students participated in the study, including 66 first-year special education students (integrated master's program) from the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw and 83 first-year STEM students (bachelor's degree) from the Military University of Technology in Warsaw. The group of STEM students consisted of 33 computer science students, 29 mathematics students, and 21 physics students.

Procedure

Students provided informed verbal consent to participate in the study. The study involved completing a questionnaire and a brief survey regarding the characteristics of the participants (gender, age, field of study, and academic year). Additionally, students from the Academy of Special Education were informed about a planned follow-up study at the end of their studies. Those who expressed interest in participating in the second phase of the study were asked to encode their papers according to the pattern "X123", where "X" is the first letter of their mother's name, and "123" represents the last three digits of their telephone number.

Results

The results showed that both special education students and STEM students exhibit an average level of social competences. Details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Basic descriptive statistics of the studied variables along with the Shapiro-Wilk test regarding social competencies measured by the KKS questionnaire (N = 149)

Variable	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*	*Sk.*	*Kurt.*	*Min.*	*Max.*	*W*	*p*
Social Competence	4.44	4.00	2.53	0.33	-0.88	1	10	0.94	<.001
Intimacy	5.05	5.00	2.30	0.18	-0.83	1	10	0.96	<.001
Social Exposure	4.65	4.00	2.49	0.27	-0.78	1	10	0.95	<.001
Assertiveness	4.94	5.00	2.48	0.36	-0.87	1	10	0.94	<.001

Note. Data collected by author

The statistical analysis conducted indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between students of special education and students of STEM fields in terms of their social competences (Table 2).

Table 2
Comparison of Special Education and STEM Students in Terms of Social Competences Measured by the KKS Questionnaire – Mann-Whitney Test

Dependent variable	Special education students (n = 66)		Science students (n = 83)		*U*	*p*	η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Social Competence	4.68	2.62	4.24	2.45	2485.50	0.329	.14
Intimacy	5.29	2.17	4.86	2.40	2428.50	0.231	.18
Social Exposure	4.82	2.54	4.52	2.45	2552.00	0.471	.19
Assertiveness	5.15	2.56	4.77	2.41	2516.50	0.391	.18

Note. Data collected by author

Discussion

The results of the conducted research align with those obtained by Wierzejska (2016). They showed that students in Poland generally exhibit, at best, an average level of social competence. According to the author, many of them (about 40%) displayed deficiencies in this area. No significant differences were noted between students of science and natural science disciplines and students of social sciences. However, students of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and political science were better able to function in intimate relationships than students of chemistry, biology, biotechnology, or geography.

Empirical studies demonstrate that competencies positively correlate with mental well-being, overall life satisfaction, the quality of interpersonal relationships, readiness to help others, as well as the use of social support, effective stress coping strategies, and broadly understood adaptation and proper social functioning. Negative correlations were found with various types of mental disorders, somatic symptoms, feelings of loneliness, criminal behavior, and addictions (Argyle, 1999; Cherniss, 2002; Extremera & Fernandez-Berrocal, 2005; Engelberg & Sjoberg, 2004; Gerits et al., 2005; Lopes et al., 2003; Palmer et al., 2002; Schutte et al., 2002; Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004).

Based on the results of the conducted studies, it can be concluded that social skills promote school and academic success, good adaptation to the school environment, faster and easier adaptation to a new school, and even the use of more effective learning strategies by students (Bar-On, 1997; Gil-Olarte Marquez et al., 2006; Goetz et al., 2005; Newsome et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2004a; Parker et al., 2004b; Schutte et al., 1998).

Therefore, it can be concluded that it is possible to improve people's social functioning by developing certain abilities as part of their studies. However, developing appropriate intervention forms requires diagnosing the level of students' social competencies and any potential deficits in this area.

Study 2

In Study 2, the aim was to describe the level of social competences of fifth-year special education students, who are about to enter the job market, and compare it with the level of social competences of first-year students. The research questions were thus formulated as follows:

— What level of social competences do fifth-year special education students exhibit?
— Is there a difference in social competences between first-year and fifth-year special education students?

Method

Participants

The study included a total of 177 special education students – 66 first-year students (data from Study 1) and 111 fifth-year students from the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw.

Procedure

Fifth-year special education students provided verbal consent to participate in the study. The study procedure was similar to that of Study 1. Additionally, students were asked to encode their papers according to the pattern "X123," where "X" is the first letter of their mother's name and "123" represents the last three digits of their telephone number. This coding was necessary for subsequent analyses described in Study 3.

Results

The analysis revealed that fifth-year special education students demonstrated a higher level of social competence compared to first-year students. Detailed results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and Shapiro-Wilk test for social competences measured by the KKS questionnaire (N = 111)

Variable	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*	*Sk.*	*Kurt.*	*Min.*	*Max.*	*W*	*p*
Social Competence	6.24	6.00	2.08	-0.06	-0.60	2	10	0.96	.002
Intimacy	7.20	7.00	1.93	-0.59	-0.40	1	10	0.90	<.001

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and Shapiro-Wilk test… (cont.)

Variable	*M*	*Mdn*	*SD*	*Sk.*	*Kurt.*	*Min.*	*Max.*	*W*	*p*
Social Exposure	5.96	6.00	2.14	-0.01	-0.37	1	10	0.97	.006
Assertiveness	6.23	6.00	2.17	-0.08	-0.52	1	10	0.96	.004

Note. Data collected by author

The statistical analysis conducted indicated that fifth-year students exhibit significantly higher social competences compared to first-year special education students (Table 4). The obtained results suggest that higher education in special education contributes to the development of social competences among students. This observation supports the idea that the educational process and the experiences gained during studies can positively influence the enhancement of these competences.

Table 4
Comparison of First-Year and Fifth-Year Special Education Students in Terms of Social Competences Measured by the KKS Questionnaire – Mann-Whitney Test

Dependent variable	1st year students (*n* = 66)		5th year students (*n* = 111)		*U*	*p*	η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Social Competence	4.68	2.62	6.24	2.08	4953.50	<.001	.81
Intimacy	5.29	2.17	7.20	1.93	5432.50	<.001	.90
Social Exposure	4.82	2.54	5.96	2.14	4642.00	.003	.74
Assertiveness	5.15	2.56	6.23	2.17	4612.00	.004	.73

Note. Data collected by author.

Discussion

Based on the research, a good special education teacher should possess several key competencies. These competencies can be divided into four groups. The first group can be defined as Personal, Social, Professional, and Pedagogic Competence. A study conducted by Erna Retna et al. (2019) found that students are generally well-prepared for work in special education, possessing strong pedagogical, personal, and social competences. Among the four areas studied, professional competences scored the lowest, indicating a need for further improvement in this area for future educators. The second group can be defined as Collaboration Skills. Pre-service special educators should possess competencies in instructional expertise, understanding the collaboration process, collaboration

skill development, and character building for effective collaboration with general educators (Jiyeon et al., 2018). The third group can be defined as Smart Education Competency. Special education teachers were found to have a high demand for competencies related to understanding, evaluating, and reflecting on future education, highlighting the importance of smart education competency (Kyoung Ock & Jung, 2022). The last, fourth group can be described as Inclusive Education Competencies. Teachers perceived screening and assessment, differentiation of instruction, classroom and behavior management, and collaboration as key competencies required for inclusive education (Tawanda, 2019).

The findings suggest the need to embed the development of these competencies within existing training and support programs for teachers (Biggs & Gilson, 2019). Both pre-service and in-service training of teachers in key competencies could facilitate successful and effective implementation of inclusive education through equipping them to respond to child diversity (Tawanda, 2019). The results of the presented research also show that special education students have generally good social competences, but there is still much room for improvement in this area.

Study 3

The aim of Study 3 was to examine whether students of special education develop social competences while studying. The research questions were as follows:

— How have the social competences of special education students changed over the course of their studies?

Method

Participants

The study ultimately included 31 special education students who completed both the pre-test (in the first year) and the post-test (in the fifth year).

Procedure

To answer the research question, the results from Study 1 and Study 2 were compared for those who agreed to participate in the longitudinal study and correctly coded their questionnaires.

Results

The results showed that studying special education contributes to the development of social competences (Table 5).

Table 5
Comparison of Social Competences of Special Education Students at the Beginning (Pre-test) and End of Studies (Post-test) – Wilcoxon Test

Dependent variable	Pretest		Posttest		*Z*	*p*	*r*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Social Competence	4.81	2.56	6.48	1.91	-3.43	<.001	.37
Intimacy	5.74	2.11	7.74	1.75	-3.47	<.001	.41
Social Exposure	4.87	2.58	6.13	2.16	-2.44	.015	.20
Assertiveness	5.19	2.39	6.16	2.15	-2.35	.019	.17

Note. Data collected by author

Both in general social competences and its specific components—intimacy, social exposure, and assertiveness—the average scores significantly increased. However, it should be noted that the effect of the variable, which was the time of studies (comparison of first and fifth-year results), is moderate (for overall social competences and intimacy) and weak (for social exposure and assertiveness).

Discussion

It is essential to systematically diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of special education students. The training of special education teachers is crucial for providing psychological and pedagogical support for students with special educational needs (Dyussenbayeva et al., 2022; Babkina & Kochetova, 2022). The studies presented above show that academic programs contribute to enhancing the social competences of future special education teachers, but this is only one of the key competences for this profession. For example, the experimental studies by Artemova et al. (2021) on first- and second-year students in special education programs demonstrated the importance of developing information and communicative competence, essential for future special education teachers. Proper preparation of students for the profession should include practical experiences in educational institutions (Bubnys, 2019). In conclusion, the benefits of studying for first-year students include improved conceptual knowledge, enhanced soft skills, and social interactions (Greene et al., 2020; Mkonto, 2018; Okagbue et al., 2021).

General Results and Discussion

The conducted research revealed that students starting their studies in special education do not exhibit exceptional social competencies. These findings may suggest that individuals choosing this field of study do not naturally possess well-developed social skills, which could stem from various factors such as previous educational and social experiences or personal predispositions. However, the analysis of the results shows that over the course of their studies, the social competencies of special education students significantly improve. The difference between first-year and fifth-year students is statistically significant, indicating that the study program effectively contributes to the development of these skills.

Although the effect of the change in social competencies over the course of the studies is moderate or weak, its importance cannot be overlooked. In the context of a special education teacher's work, where interactions with individuals with special needs are crucial, any improvement in social competencies is valuable. The results suggest that studying special education contributes to developing the skills necessary for effective work in this profession.

Nonetheless, the moderate nature of the effect may indicate the need for further enhancement of study programs to better develop social competencies. This could include a greater emphasis on practical experiences, workshops on interpersonal skills, and a more individualized approach to education.

Based on the conducted research, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the social competencies of special education students:

— Special education studies do not attract individuals with outstanding social competencies at the beginning of their academic career.
— Individuals graduating from special education studies achieve an average level of social competencies.
— Over the course of their studies, the social competencies of special education students significantly increase, suggesting a positive impact of the study program on the development of these skills.
— Despite the moderate or weak effect of the change, it can be assumed that the studies contribute to the development of social competencies in students.

These conclusions highlight the importance of systematically developing social competencies in special education study programs. Given the increasing demands of the job market, particularly in the field of special education, it is crucial that educational programs are continually refined to better prepare students for future professional challenges.

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Studia dają wiedzę, umiejętności i kompetencje społeczne – czy na pewno? Kompetencje społeczne przyszłych pedagogów specjalnych – badania longitudinalne

Streszczenie

Celem badania było sprawdzenie, czy studia wyższe rzeczywiście w sposób istotny rozwijają kompetencje społeczne studentów. Projekt badawczy składał się z trzech odrębnych badań. Wykorzystano Kwestionariusz Kompetencji Społecznych Anny Matczak, który pozwala na przedstawienie wyników w trzech podskalach dotyczących funkcjonowania w sytuacjach intymnych, sytuacjach ekspozycji społecznej oraz sytuacjach wymagających asertywności. W badaniu wzięło

udział 66 studentów pierwszego roku pedagogiki specjalnej, 83 studentów kierunków ścisłych i 111 studentów piątego roku pedagogiki specjalnej. Badanie podłużne przeprowadzono na próbie 31 studentów pedagogiki specjalnej. Wyniki pokazały, że zarówno studenci pedagogiki specjalnej, jak i kierunków ścisłych posiadają przeciętny poziom kompetencji społecznych. Studiowanie pedagogiki specjalnej w istotny sposób przyczynia się do podniesienia kompetencji społecznych, choć wpływ ten jest umiarkowany/niski. Środowisko edukacyjne i doświadczenia zdobyte podczas studiów wydają się odgrywać kluczową rolę w tym rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje społeczne, studenci pedagogiki specjalnej, kompetencje pedagoga specjalnego, umiejętności miękkie, predyspozycje zawodowe.