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# IDENTIFYING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN VIETNAM: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

A child's or adolescent's social-emotional abilities are crucial as protective components in their overall development since they protect them from a variety of behavioral and mental health problems, including risky conduct and psychological symptoms such as rage, despair, and anxiety. The major purpose of this study was to investigate the social-emotional abilities of Vietnamese elementary school children, specifically their ability to collaborate and empathize with others and the ability to regulate their emotions and solve problems. Students in the 4th and 5th grades completed the 40-item questionnaire, with 562 boys and 764 girls answering the questions in total. As a result of the research, the primary finding indicated that social-emotional skills in elementary school children can be identified, strengthened, and nurtured. These skills enable children to accumulate and apply knowledge effectively to solve problems in life, achieve academic goals and become more empathetic to others, and build and cultivate better relationships with their peers and teachers.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study demonstrates how elementary school children's social-emotional skills can be identified, strengthened, and fostered so that they can effectively acquire and apply the knowledge to solve real-world problems, remain focused and achieve academic goals, understand the emotions of others and be more empathetic, and build and cultivate better relationships.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous researchers considered social and emotional skills as crucial factors for improving mental health, well-being (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008), supporting the holistic development of children, including thinking processes and learning activities that are directly related to cognitive functions (Brokenleg & Brendtro, 1990; Perry, 1999). Particularly, social and emotional skills play an essential role as protective factors protecting children and adolescents from behavioral problems and mental health disorders (Yeates et al., 2007), risk-taking behavior (Payton et al., 2008), psychological symptoms such as aggression, depression and anxiety (Greenberg et al., 2003). Families, teachers and educators have to promote students' social-emotional competencies to safeguard their health, well-being, assist students in achieving academic goals and become better citizens. The social-emotional competence of students could be developed through social and emotional learning. With this approach, children and

young adults can effectively accumulate knowledge and apply it to solve problems in their lives, stay focused on and achieve academic goals, gain a better understanding of themselves, and manage emotions. They can also understand feelings and be more empathetic to others, build and cultivate better relationships, avoid toxic ones for greater happiness, and be more responsible for making decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Social-emotional competence such as social interaction, emotional awareness and self-confidence should be developed in early childhood years when brain development reaches its peak and children are strongly affected by the education and environment surrounding them to build a strong foundation for social-emotional well-being and the accomplishment of the learning process (Cristóvão, Candeias, & Verdasca, 2017; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Tonich & Pisi, 2019).

Goleman (1995) suggested creation of Collaborative Effort for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning in his book on Emotional Intelligence. It contributed positively to creating and introducing the field of social-emotional learning in Promoting Social and Emotional Learning, the publication of Elias et al. (1997). Social-emotional learning is an approach involving the process of acquiring knowledge, essential skills to recognize and manage emotions (Elias & Moceri, 2012), children's self-awareness and social consciousness (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & HJ, 2004). Social-emotional learning mentioned fundamental skills for performing academic tasks or understanding ideas in educational settings, community and life (Elias & Moceri, 2012). These skills are known as 'the CASEL Five' including (i) self-awareness which is understanding emotions and core values and obtaining the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses; self-management; (iii) social awareness, which is expressing empathy positively to others; (iv) relationship skills that are building and maintaining healthy relationships, cooperating effectively, managing and handling conflict constructively with teammates; and (v) be responsible for making all decision, social behaviour and solving problems ethically. According to the findings of Huynh, Tran-Chi, and Nguyen (2018) teachers were aware of the need of implementing Social-Emotional Learning programs and practices in their classrooms.

Collaboration is broadly defined as the ability to establish healthy relationships, work or cooperate effectively and respectfully with members, share the responsibility to set and achieve common goals as well as private goals (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995; Yamin, 2010). Collaboration and communication skills are considered supportive factors are contributing to students' academic success because students can present and analyze creative ideas, express their feelings and thoughts, discuss and assist others with these soft skills (Kafai, 2002). Besides, collaboration skill also promotes students' active learning and help them engage productively in the learning process in the classroom (Jarboe, 1996; Kumpulainen & Mutanen, 2000). Students' collaboration skill has been taught, trained and developed by teachers, educators and families in educational settings and outside the classroom with out-of-school experiences from summer schools, experiential learning activities or daily life. Collaborative skills are fostered through (i) discussion and making appropriate compromises to achieve goals with the flexibility and willingness to assist others in collaborative work; and being responsible for teamwork and contributing to the team's success (Huang et al., 2010). Collaborative learning is an academic content taught in the educational curriculum in every educational stage, such as early childhood education (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000), primary school instructions in the United States, Australia, and Israel (Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). The collaboration skill of every member will create a collaborative and effective group in which students can frequently engage in constructive discussion, giving reasonable explanations more than others (Chan, 2001; Van Boxtel, 2000).

Empathy is a critical social cognitive skill that has to be taught, trained and developed in educational settings and daily life for students to understand others' perceptions, concerns and feelings from their point of view, and manage antisocial behaviors, especially aggression (Feshbach & Feshbach, 2009). Empathy is defined as the imagining, discriminating and labelling values, desires, thoughts and emotions of others (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2011; Preston & De Waal, 2002; Wispé, 1986) feeling anxiety, distress when witnessing others' negative experience or emotions (Krebs, 1975). There were several studies

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conducted to examine the effects of empathy or association between empathy and other factors. Rehber (2009) conducted research with 778 students in 6th, 7th and 8th grade and reported that the level of empathy had a positive influence on students' problem-solving skills. Students with low empathic levels had lower scores on aggressiveness. Besides, the positive relationship between empathy and problem-solving skill was proven in a study by De Wied, Branje, and Meeus (2007) with a sample of 325 adolescents from 13 to 16 years old. The authors also revealed that participants' high levels of empathy were significantly related to less conflict engagement. The literature review shows that empathy skill also has a positive relationship with prosocial behavior (Findlay, Girardi, & Coplan, 2006; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003) and academic achievement (Feshbach & Konrad, 2001; Kohn, 1991). Elementary school-age children who joined in The Learning to Care Curriculum (Feshbach, Feshbach, Fauvre, & Ballard-Campbell, 1984), including activities related to components of the model of empathy such as problem-solving games and group discussion, showed more positive social behaviors, be less aggressive and increase in learning outcomes.

Emotion management skill is a set of soft skills improving the abilities to regulate one's emotional responses to people and events. Emotional management skills are frequently used to reduce emotional arousal, particularly unpleasant emotions like anger and impatience (Thompson, 1994). Developing these soft skills made individuals be masters of understanding others' emotions, identifying, expressing and controlling their own feelings strategically within a variety of social contexts (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995) to react constructively in a socially appropriate manner and be a professional and supportive partner. McLin Jr (2002) showed a significant difference in the ability of emotion management in two groups (High Group and Low Group) of boy students from 12 to 14 years old. The High Group includes students with positive feelings about themselves and schools, no suspensions and expulsions, ability to express anger appropriately, recognize to others' emotions, in the spirit of sharing, cooperating effectively, being helpful and vice versa. The researcher indicated that individuals in the High Group had a higher score in emotion management than the others. This finding showed the positive association between emotion management skills and the behavior of boy students. The factors that could limit the emotion management skills are (i) being unable to alter inappropriate emotions when responding to people and given events; being unable to control and express appropriate emotions (McLin Jr, 2002).

Because science and technology such as big data, the Internet of things, artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and renewable energy technologies have developed rapidly and adopted in the economy, society, culture and education, humans have always faced complicated problems in everyday life. Problem-solving skill is an effective tool for individuals to improve their academic learning and essential abilities (Kaptan & Hünkar, 2002) to deal with difficulties. Several problem-solving approaches are based on the nature of issues, the properties and characteristics of activities and individuals related to the problem. Dewey (1910) mentioned the model to solve a problem, including five steps of recognizing the problem's difficulty, locating and defining the problem, proposing reasonable solutions, developing mentioned solutions, observing and assessing to choose the most appropriate solution. To solve complex problems, Shahat, Ohle, Treagust, and Fischer (2013) described a model involving eight steps: (i) characterize, describe and formulate the problem; activate the essential knowledge; (iii) define and represent the problem; (iv) devise the ideal result methodically; (v) discover an appropriate and possible strategy; (vi) perform the chosen solution; (vii) edit and review the selected strategy, and (viii) assess the final outcome.

There were several studies conducted to analyze the problem-solving skills of students. Canan (2015) surveyed 778 elementary students and discovered that students did not reach the expected level of problem-solving skills, which is considered as a primary and essential skill in the educational curriculum. The authors suggested that problem-solving skills could be developed through the teaching process based on other previous studies (Totan & Kabasakal, 2012). The perception of problem-solving skills of elementary school students was also studied by Yavuz, Yasemin, and Arslan (2017) with 264 elementary students from 5th grade to 8th grade. The researchers indicated that the participants had a high level of perception of problem-solving skills. Students in 8th grade had

lower scores on the perception of problem-solving skills than others. The main aim of this study was to examine elementary students' social-emotional skills, including collaboration skills, empathy skills, emotion management skills and problems solving skills.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in this study comprised 562 boy students and 764 girl students in 4th grade and 5th grade from twelve elementary schools in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh and Danang, Vietnam. All students submitted informed consent after the researchers explained the main purpose of the current study. A survey questionnaire was distributed and introduced to the sampled 1326 respondents, none of which were eliminated after their responses were received and checked.

### 2.2. Measurement

The survey questionnaire comprised four scales: collaboration, empathy, emotion management, and problem-solving skills. Each scale contained ten items. Cronbach's alpha for the collaboration skill scale was 0.661, for empathy skill scale was 0.733, for emotion management skill scale was 0.633, and for problem-solving skill scale was 0.752 which suggests that the scales were significant and reliable. The questionnaire was based on a 4-point Likert scale used for all items, ranging from one to four (1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often). An informed consent process was used to ensure participation. The contribution was taken on a completely voluntary basis.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Collaboration Skill

The mean scores of ten items about collaboration skills of elementary school students are presented in Table 1. The mean score for all ten items was 2.89 (SD = 0.44). Among the ten items, the top four indicators that have the highest average points are: *I ask for permission politely before using other's belongings* (M = 3.46, SD = 0.73), *I listen to older adults attentively and respectfully when they talk to me* (M = 3.45, SD = 0.81), *I finish my homework on time* (M = 3.21, SD = 0.89), and *I complete the work assigned by my team on time* (M = 3.00, SD = 0.92). The indicator with the lowest average points is that w*hen the teacher assigns group tasks, classmates like to choose me to be their teammate* (M = 2.37, SD = 0.92).

**Table 1.** Elementary school student's collaboration skill.

| Statement | M | SD | Order |
|---|---|---|---|
| I often make friends easily. | 2.78 | 0.89 | 9 |
| I ask for permission politely before using others' belongings. | 3.46 | 0.73 | 1 |
| I actively participate in activities of my team in the learning process. | 2.89 | 0.90 | 6 |
| I finish my homework on time. | 3.21 | 0.89 | 3 |
| I listen to older adults attentively and respectfully when they talk to me. | 3.45 | 0.81 | 2 |
| I complete the work assigned by my team on time. | 3.00 | 0.92 | 4 |
| I listen and easily agree with my friends in the group. | 2.85 | 0.87 | 8 |
| I easy to play with friends even though they are different from me in many points. | 2.86 | 0.97 | 7 |
| I have no difficulty every time the group performs a group/team task. | 2.89 | 0.89 | 5 |
| When the teacher assigns group tasks. classmates like to choose me to be their teammate. | 2.37 | 0.92 | 10 |
| Collaboration skill | 2.89 | 0.44 | |

**Note:** M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

### 3.2. Empathy Skill

The mean scores of ten items about empathy skills of elementary school students are presented in Table 2. The mean score for all ten items was 2.67 (SD = 0.51). Among the ten items, the top four indicators that have the

highest average points are: *I ask my friends about their problems or sad things and encourage them* (M = 3.09, SD = 0.90), *I empathize with others when they have bad luck* (M = 3.00, SD = 0.91), *When my friends confide their sad stories, I try to listen to understand and share with them* (M = 2.93, SD = 0.94) and *I listen to my friends when they have problems and want to share* (M = 2.93, SD = 0.98). The indicator with the lowest average points is that *I easily tell others how I feel* (M = 2.10, SD = 0.91).

**Table 2.** Elementary school student's empathy skill.

| Statement | M | SD | Order |
|---|---|---|---|
| I often smile, wave or nod my head to show greeting. | 2.92 | 0.96 | 5 |
| I listen to my friends when they have problems and want to share. | 2.93 | 0.98 | 4 |
| I try to understand other people when they are irritated or angry. | 2.58 | 0.98 | 7 |
| I ask my friends about their problems or sad things and encourage them. | 3.09 | 0.90 | 1 |
| I know when my best friend is unhappy. | 2.68 | 1.00 | 6 |
| I empathize with others when they have bad luck. | 3.00 | 0.91 | 2 |
| Classmates who have trouble like to talk to me. | 2.25 | 0.95 | 9 |
| I know when people feel upset, even though they don't say it. | 2.27 | 0.96 | 8 |
| I easily tell others how I feel. | 2.10 | 0.91 | 10 |
| When my friends confide their sad stories. I try to listen to understand and share with them. | 2.93 | 0.94 | 3 |
| Empathy skill | 2.67 | 0.51 | |

**Note:** M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

## 3.3. Emotion Management Skill

The mean scores of ten items about emotion management skills of elementary school students are presented in Table 3. The mean score for all ten items was 2.25 (SD = 0.38). Among the ten items, the top three indicators that have the highest average points are: *I don't argue or fight with my friends* (M = 3.30, SD = 0.82), *I am not surly or angry when others don't satisfy my needs* (M = 3.22, SD = 0.86), and *I don't often get upset about many things in life* (M = 3.03, SD = 0.83). The indicator that has the lowest average points is *I don't get angry when others become angry toward me* (M = 2.31, SD = 1.01).

**Table 3.** Elementary school student's emotion management skill.

| Statement | M | SD | Order |
|---|---|---|---|
| I ignore people who make fun of or attempt to provoke me. | 2.33 | 1.02 | 9 |
| When I don't like something or get angry with someone, I have to say it right away | 2.40 | 1.01 | 7 |
| I don't get angry when others become angry toward me. | 2.31 | 1.01 | 10 |
| I don't get angry when my parents scold me. | 2.65 | 1.03 | 4 |
| I am not surly or angry when others don't satisfy my needs. | 3.22 | 0.86 | 2 |
| I have the ability to be patient and restrain myself when I encounter frustrating things. | 2.40 | 0.95 | 6 |
| I can keep calm when faced with frustrating things. | 2.40 | 0.96 | 7 |
| I don't argue or fight with my friends. | 3.30 | 0.82 | 1 |
| I know how to stay calm. | 2.59 | 0.94 | 5 |
| I don't often get upset about many things in life. | 3.03 | 0.93 | 3 |
| Emotion management skill | 2.25 | 0.38 | |

**Note:** M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

## 3.4. Problem-Solving Skills

The mean scores of ten items about problem-solving skills of elementary school students are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Elementary school student's problem-solving skill.

| Statement | M | SD | Order |
|---|---|---|---|
| I ask adults for help and intervention when I am beaten or teased by other children. | 2.60 | 0.93 | 2 |
| I say, "It should end here" when everyone in my family has a heated discussion or argument about problems. | 2.05 | 1.06 | 10 |
| I try to put myself in my friends' shoes to understand why they are angry. | 2.40 | 0.97 | 7 |
| I can come up with good ideas or answers to tough questions. | 2.14 | 0.87 | 9 |
| I can think of many ways to answer a difficult question. | 2.31 | 0.88 | 8 |
| When my friends have a problem. they often ask my opinion to solve it. | 2.41 | 0.90 | 6 |
| I know how to convince my friends when we have disagreements. | 2.45 | 0.92 | 5 |
| When solving a problem, I try to think of many solutions, and then choose the most suitable one. | 2.60 | 1.09 | 3 |
| I think of different ways to solve the problem. | 2.51 | 0.91 | 4 |
| To solve a problem, I usually try to the end. | 2.80 | 0.92 | 1 |
| Problem-solving skill | 2.42 | 0.53 | |

**Note:** M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

The mean score for all ten items was 2.42 (SD = 0.53). Among the ten items, the top four indicators that have the highest average points are: *To solve a problem, I usually try to the end* (M = 2.80, SD = 0.92), *I ask adults for help and intervention when I am beaten or teased by other children* (M = 2.60, SD = 0.93), *When solving a problem, I try to think of many solutions, and then choose the most suitable one* (M = 2.60, SD = 1.09) and *I think of different ways to solve the problem* (M = 2.51, SD = 0.91). The indicator with the lowest average points is *"It should end here" when everyone in my family has a heated discussion or argument about problems* (M = 2.05, SD = 1.06).

## 4. DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate elementary school students' social-emotional skills, including collaboration skills, empathy skills, emotion management skills and problem-solving skills. The main result showed that Vietnamese elementary school students were educated and trained relatively well about social-emotional skills to achieve academic goals and become better citizens. This finding is consistent with previous research, which found that families, teachers, and educators noticed and promoted students' social and emotional competencies, such as collaboration skills, empathy skills, emotion management skills, and problem-solving skills, in order to encourage students' holistic development (Brokenleg & Brendtro, 1990; Perry, 1999), to assist students in accumulating effectively and applying the knowledge to solve problems in learning and daily life, building and cultivating better relationships and avoiding toxic ones (Weissberg et al., 2015). Parents, teachers and educators recognized that students who have enough social and emotional skills accumulate effectively and apply the knowledge to solve problems in life, stay focused on and accomplish academic goals, manage emotions, understand feelings and be more empathetic to others, build and cultivate better relationships (Weissberg et al., 2015).

The analyzed data reported that collaboration skills were taught and developed for Vietnamese elementary school students to establish healthy relationships and cooperate effectively and respectfully with others in educational settings. Most of the students participating in this study can communicate politely and respectfully with their friends, engage productively in the classroom's learning process, and listen to older adults attentively to get better advice. Besides, the findings revealed that students had enough empathy skills to listen and understand their friends' perceptions and feelings. Poor collaboration skills and empathy skills may result in relationships breaking apart because individuals cannot keep relationships intact and eliminate conflicts as they arise. With these skills, elementary school students created collaborative and effective study groups and established close relationships as also found in studies (Chan, 2001; Van Boxtel, 2000). This finding also showed a potential relationship between collaboration skill and empathy skill, which is consistent with a study by Rehber (2009) who indicated that empathy had a positive effect on students' problem-solving skills.

The evaluation scores of the survey showed that emotion management skill was trained and developed well for Vietnamese elementary school students. Most of the students in this survey can manage their feelings within a variety of contexts such as *"others don't satisfy my needs"*, *"my parents scold me"*, *"know how to stay calm"*, and *"not get upset about many things in life"*. This finding supported (Thompson, 1994), who indicated that emotional management skills reduce emotional arousal, especially individuals' unpleasant emotions like anger and impatience. Besides, extensive results also revealed that families, teachers, and educators strengthened and nurtured problem-solving skills to help students cope with challenges in the learning process and everyday life. Vietnamese elementary school students participating in this study had enough ability to solve problems when learning at school and in daily life. They can face and resolve a wide variety of problems, think of many solutions, try to the end and then choose the most suitable one for solving complex problems efficiently and without resulting in a breakdown.

Moreover, elementary school students could ask adults for help and prompt intervention when they were beaten or teased by other children instead of just suffering all of the things. This finding is contrary to the result of Canan (2015), who concluded that elementary students did not reach the expected level of problem-solving skills, which is considered as a primary and essential skill in the educational curriculum. However, problem-solving skills could be developed through the teaching process (Perels, Gürtler, & Schmitz, 2005; Totan & Kabasakal, 2012).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Social and emotional skills play an essential role as protective factors supporting the holistic development of children, protecting children and adolescents from behavioral problems and mental health disorders, risk-taking behaviour, psychological symptoms such as aggression, depression, and anxiety. The authors conducted this study to investigate Vietnamese elementary school students' social-emotional skills. The main result indicated that social-emotional skill has been noticed, strengthened and nurtured for elementary school children to accumulate effectively and apply the knowledge to solve problems in life, stay focused on and accomplish academic goals, understand others' feelings and be more empathetic to others, build and cultivate better relationships. The social-emotional skill of students should be further studied from a variety of angles and aspects to develop essential skills for students. Future study could aim to (i) examine the social-emotional skill of secondary or high school students; (ii)study the potential relationship between students' social-emotional skill and other factors such as their making decisions, self-confidence, the quality of relationships and behavioral problems; and (iii) study the approaches to develop students' social-emotional skill. This study would provide additional information about elementary school students' social-emotional skills for educators to apply the appropriate methods and approaches in developing their crucial skills.

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