

Second grade students' social-emotional competence in relation to strengths and difficulties assessed by teachers and parents

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Summary

Social-emotional competence describes a set of knowledge, skills and beliefs needed for coping in social situations. Different models of social-emotional competence have been offered where (a) awareness and flexible management of one's thinking, feelings and behaviour in communication situations, (b) understanding of other perspectives and (c) using communication skills to achieve set positive goals can be seen as common aspects (Durlak et al., 2011, Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Social-emotional competence can also be described in relation to a variety of strengths and difficulties that characterise students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in a variety of life situations. One possibility is to describe three factors (Goodman, Lamping, & Ploubidis, 2010) where prosocial behaviour is considered as a strength, but difficulties are characterised when distinguishing between internalising problems (e.g. anxiety, worry) and externalising problems (aggression, hyperactivity). In order to support the development of students' competencies needed for positive behavioural outcomes, it is also necessary to understand how such strengths and difficulties have developed and what can be done to support changes in behavioural patterns. Children with better social-emotional competence have fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties (Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004). Prosociality (e.g., helping others and empathetic behaviour) is also an indicator of social-emotional competence (Coyne et al., 2018). Previous research has found that children prone to prosocial behaviour are more popular among peers and experience more positive relationships (Attili, Vermigli & Roazzi, 2010). The emergence of internalised and externalised problems is associated with poor experiences in communication situations (van Lier & Koot, 2010) and, vice versa, poor communication experiences can also contribute to the emergence of various problems (Boutin et al., 2020).

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Some aspects of social-emotional competence can be described using the model of Social Information Processing (SIP; Crick & Dodge, 1994). Emotional processes related to the SIP model are offered by Lemerise & Aresenio (2000). According to the SIP model by Crick and Dodge (1994), better coping in social situations can be described through the ability to interpret social cues and solve social problems. This means that, in a social situation, information is encoded and interpreted, then suitable goals and solutions are selected based on previously acquired experience, e.g. knowledge, skills and beliefs. At different stages of SIP, there are a number of options for different information processing schemas that reflect more or less suitable solutions towards maintaining good relationships. Therefore, the SIP model helps to understand better the communication process that happens very quickly in practice, providing an opportunity to find more versatile support options.

Conscious, planned, and systematic activities are important for developing social-emotional competence requiring knowledge of various aspects of the competence and its development to find appropriate action strategies that support different students (Durlak et al., 2011). Multiple studies have shown that the development of social-emotional competence is not always approached in sufficient depth, which means that activities remain superficial and do not lead to the desired change in students' thinking, behaviour and interactions (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Assessment of social-emotional competence is one of the first steps in gaining a more systematic overview of students' development and planning further interventions. Teachers need reliable methods for assessing students' social-emotional competence, which would provide an overview of the whole class. For this purpose, computer-based tests have been created in the Estonian Examination Information System for mapping various general competencies, including different aspects of social-emotional competence through the Communication and Self-Determination Competence Test (CSDCT).

There are several limitations when measuring social and emotional competence in a computer-based test format, so it is essential to examine how test results relate to other indicators that help to describe coping in communication situations. The use of computer-based class tests may be specifically more problematic for younger students, whereas teachers' and parents' assessments and various situation-based discussions are more often used to measure social-emotional skills (Matson & Wilkins, 2009). Therefore, comparing the results of CSDCT with the teachers' and parents' ratings of students' coping in different situations is valuable to better understand the possible application of the test. The aim of this study was to describe how different aspects of students' social-emotional competence assessed with CSDCT are related to the levels of

externalised and internalised problems and pro-sociality assessed by children's teachers and parents.

Relationships between children's social-emotional competence and their strengths and difficulties were assessed on the basis of the 2nd grade students ($n = 250$) results of a CSDCT computer test and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997) assessed by their teachers ($n = 16$) and parents ($n = 109$). The sample was formed from students, their teachers and parents who were participating in a larger research project.

The aspects of social-emotional competence were assessed with CSDCT. The SIP model described above is also used as a foundation for a computer-based CSDCT for 2nd, 3rd and 6th grade students, located in the EIS test environment (Kikas et al., 2018). The CSDCT's goal is to support teachers to gain an overview of students' knowledge and beliefs in coping in communication situations. The CSDCT includes various questionnaires, tests and video assignments. The test aims to assess the following aspects: a) general knowledge, skills, and attitudes that constitute the "database" are assessed through growth mindset beliefs, emotion expression recognition, vocabulary competence, and sociolinguistic knowledge; b) aspects related to the interpersonal interaction process: encoding and interpreting social information, negative emotions regulation strategies, response (behaviour and verbal reply) planning and assessment of consequences.

The results showed statistically significant relations with teachers' ratings of SDQ, but there were only single correlations with students' computer test results and the parents' assessments. The students who rather believed that social experiences are not changeable, were assessed to be more likely to have internalised problems rated by both teachers and parents. The students who had better scores in recognising emotions through facial expressions, better vocabulary and sociolinguistics scores also had fewer externalising problems and more prosocial behaviour.

The results in the social information processing category showed that students who noticed more accurate information needed to understand the situation in the video assignments and interpreted the situation in a way that was more towards coping and holding better relationships had fewer externalising problems and more prosocial behaviour based on teachers' ratings. Students who chose more appropriate behaviours in the test also received lower ratings from teachers for internalising problems. In contrast, more frequent selection of inappropriate behaviour was associated with higher ratings for externalising problems and lower assessments of prosocial behaviour. The higher score for choosing inappropriate behaviour was also related to the higher ratings of externalising problems assessed by parents.

The study results show that different aspects of social-emotional competence are reflected both in the CSDCT test and in teachers' assessments. In order to be able to better support the development of students' competencies, it is important to map the current situation using different assessment methods that allow us to get a better picture of possible aspects that need support. Teachers may see students more often in different collaborative situations than their parents and, therefore, teachers' assessments may be more accurate at some points, but the parents' perspective is also important in order to get a more diverse picture. Assessing an SE's competence through a computer test is extremely difficult, but the results suggest that certain aspects (knowledge, beliefs, preferences) can still be mapped using such a method.

Keywords: general competence assessment, social-emotional competence, computerised assessment