

Social and Emotional Competencies of Elementary School Teachers in México

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, interest in investigating teachers' socio-emotional well-being has had considerable growth. There is strong evidence that demonstrates that the implementation of programs aimed at these purposes positively impacts educators in different aspects, for example, in coping responses, life satisfaction, or work engagement. Despite what research suggests, there is a necessity for more rigorous studies that indicate the level of development of these competencies in school staff and possible factors that influence their achievement. This study aimed to analyze the social and emotional competencies of a sample of 378 elementary school teachers from Zacatecas, Mexico, as well as to observe the mediating effect that some socio-demographic variables have in that process. Teachers completed the Cuestionario de Competencias Socioemocionales (CCSE), a self-report measure that showed a high teacher rating in the socio-emotional dimension of self-awareness, and a lower teacher rating in the socio-emotional dimensions of autonomy and empathy compared to self-awareness, self-regulation, and collaboration. In addition to that, the results of this study showed that variables such as years as an in-service teacher, experience in the implementations of social and emotional learning programs, and training background in the area altogether had a significant impact on the competencies development. These findings are considered to be relevant for the design of future interventions for both pre-service and in-service teachers.

Keywords: emotional development; social and emotional learning; elementary school teachers; teacher competencies; teacher characteristics; teacher survey

1. Introduction

At present, there is a firm agreement that the aspiration of education should be to contribute to the person's integral development. In addition to focusing on their cognitive dimension, the international educative agenda establishes as a priority the achievement of citizens to be able to interact respectfully and efficiently, practice healthy and secure behavior, develop habits for success in life, and know themselves effectively (Weissberg et al., 2015). Resultantly, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has represented an opportunity for the attainment of well-being as a consequence of the development of social and emotional competencies (Bisquerra, 2016; CASEL, 2021; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2016), variables with little relevance until very recently in different educative systems.

Social and Emotional Competencies (SEC) can be categorized as a type of generic competencies, defined as “capacities that, regardless of a particular learning environment, should be trained in all curriculums” (Sanz de Acedo, 2010, p. 19), as a result of the appropriate integration of a variety of knowledge in the personal and social scope: declarative, procedural and attitudinal. Furthermore, SEC can be seen as capacities that have a distinct level of development in the context where they are used and consequently can be assessed.

Scientific evidence obtained due to programs addressed to the achievement of students' SEC supports the idea that these competencies are malleable and, thereby, can be learned (DePaoli et al., 2018; Durlak & Mahoney, 2019; Pérez & Filella, 2019); however, it is clear that learning of students is greatly influenced by the teacher's capacities. Hence, it can be pointed out that to implement SEL programs, it is necessary to provide explicit instruction to the staff in charge of conducting those capacities to practice. As suggested by Bisquerra et al. (2015), having an educator who teaches, models, and makes possible these competencies can positively impact the social and emotional curricula.

Given the relevance of having a professional who masters social and emotional capacities, it is not surprising that in recent years, interest to explore teachers' SEC has had considerable growth. As evidence of the above, studies reported the efficacy of SEL programs directed to the teacher's SEC, as well as the theoretical, technical, and practical training they receive (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; García, 2017; Merchán & González, 2016; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2019; Pérez-Escoda, 2013). Analysis of data obtained in the previously cited literature showed an increase in the general level of teachers' SEC and each of the dimensions that constitute this construct. As reported by the authors, this meant an increment in teachers' capacities to accurately identify emotions, use facilitating thoughts for emotion management, development of assertive behavior, and improvement of empathic capacity.

On the other hand, several studies have focused on investigating existing relationships between teachers' SEC and other relevant variables for the professional practice of teachers (Cassullo & García, 2015; Castillo et al., 2013; García, 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Main, 2018; Torres, 2018). It has been reported that teachers with a higher level of social and emotional competencies show greater achievement of desired outcomes with students, increased coping responses, less symptomatology associated with burnout, and a higher construction of positive relationships, life satisfaction, and work engagement.

Even though reported findings state that teachers' SEC is a success factor for the intra and interpersonal relationships that interact in the learning context, it has been difficult to identify studies that divulge the level of achievement of these competencies in certain educative systems. Few or no training opportunities for teachers, as well as emotional neglect in the educational field, have possibly made it difficult to pick out the variable of SEC and, as a consequence, deepened the incomprehension of teachers' emotional dimension.

Besides, literature in this research area does not show an agreement about the moderator role that some sociodemographic characteristics have in their development. While Mikulic et al. (2017) reported that age and gender are related to the achievement of SEC, Kotsou et al. (2019) found conflicting results related to gender, age, or initial level of some cognitive capacities and SEC. Therefore, this suggests that it is important to analyze how these factors influence the development of teachers' SEC to foster a better understanding of this topic.

Given the arguments exposed above, the present study is aimed to inquire about elementary school teachers' SEC in the Mexican educative system. The questions that guided this research were: 1) what is the level of development of social and emotional competencies of a sample of elementary school teachers in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico? 2) what sociodemographic variables are related to the development of these competencies in teachers?

2. Method

The current research used a quantitative method, specifically a survey-type study with a cross-sectional approach and a descriptive scope since it intends to represent the variable social and emotional competencies and its relationship with sociodemographic variables of interest. This research addresses each of the social and emotional competencies also referred to as socio-emotional dimensions, that comprise the construct according to the model established by the Secretaría de Educación Pública from México (SEP, 2017): self-awareness, self-regulation, autonomy, empathy, and collaboration.

For purposes of this research, social and emotional competencies are defined as the set of concepts, skills, attitudes, and values that allow a person to understand and manage their emotions, to construct identity, to show attention and care about others, to collaborate, to establish positive relationships, to make responsible decisions and to learn to take control of challenging situations in an ethic and helpful way (SEP, 2017).

2.1 Sample

The sample was composed of 378 in-service elementary school teachers working in different regions of the state, belonging to school sectors 02, 10, and 14 of the federal elementary school's system. Women represented 59.5 % of the sample while 40.5 % were men. 94.7 % of the sample had a permanent contract, and only 19 % of them worked in multigrade classrooms, contrary to the 81 % who taught in regular schools (single grade schools). Additionally, 82.3 % of the teachers graduated from a public teacher training institution while the remaining 17.7 % declared having graduated from another kind of higher education

institution. Regarding educational preparation, only 26.2 % have completed a graduate program. Finally, it is relevant to note that 47.1 % of the sample has been involved as part of an SEL preparation course in the teaching area, while the rest of the teachers did not have the opportunity to access SEL programs.

2.2 Instrument

Cuestionario de Competencias Socioemocionales (CCSE) was designed for this purpose, which is a self-report type instrument that uses a seven points Likert scale going from strongly agree (7) to strongly disagree (1). This questionnaire is composed of 59 items and assesses the five socio-emotional dimensions or competencies described in the previous section.

CCSE was developed in the Google Forms platform. The description of the instrument, its research objectives, and instructions to complete its filling were included. Moreover, participants' data anonymity and their use for only research purposes were assured. The time estimated for participants to answer the questionnaire was between fifteen to twenty minutes.

The questionnaire's reliability was assessed through the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, resulting in the entire instrument reaching a value equal to .919. Previous studies indicate that the instrument's internal consistency is very high (Cohen et al., 2007; George & Mallery, 2020). On the other hand, content validity was determined by experts' judgment.

2.3 Procedure

Data collection was developed throughout the second semester of the school year 2020-2021, between March and April of 2021. Support was requested from the principals of the participating sectors to distribute the online questionnaire among the in-service elementary school teachers.

2.4 Data Analysis

Once collected, data analysis was carried out as follows: 1) analysis of frequencies distribution and descriptive statistics of each of the construct's socio-emotional dimensions; 2) comparative analysis of the general level of development of teachers' socio-emotional dimensions; 3) development level contrast of teachers' socio-emotional dimensions with variables of interest.

Concerning this last analysis, fulfillment of parametric assumptions was proved by way of determination of sample normality for all the dimensions through the Shapiro-Wilk test (SW). The indicated test showed statistically significant results in all the dimensions, consequently, it was concluded that the sample does not follow a normal distribution. Thus, the Man-Whitney U test was used to identify statistically significant differences between associated groups. Data were analyzed with the Software Package for Social Sciences 22.0 (SPSS).

3. Results

The main findings in each of the analyses carried out are shown in the next section.

3.1 Previous Socio-emotional Training of Teachers

In addition to characterizing the sample, the study aimed to inquire if teachers had received training in SEL programs as well as their experience in the implementation of that kind of program, both taken as intermediate type variables that would allow contrasting the contributions found in the international literature. Results exhibit that the majority of teachers have not had the opportunity to be part of a training or update program in this field. Similarly, it was found that 90.5 % of participants report having worked with content related to the established SEL program as part of their weekly work. Figure 1 yields the results corresponding to the first variable exposed in this paragraph.

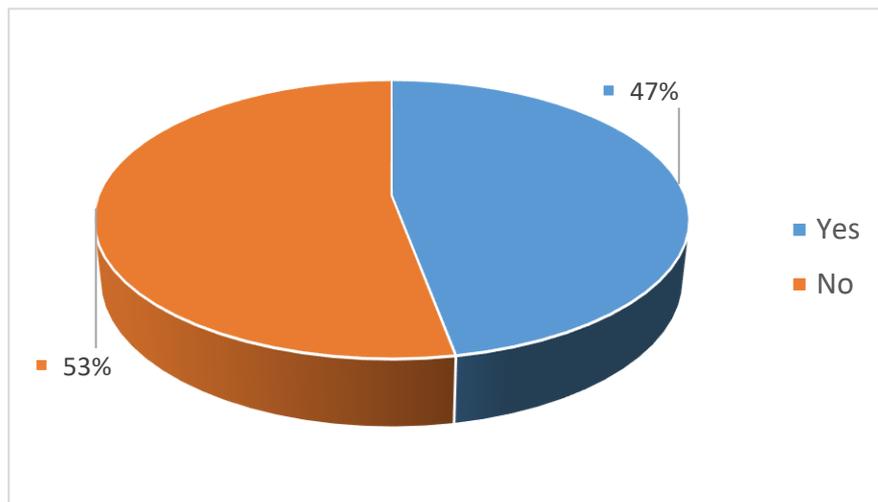


Figure 1. Teachers' Training Background in the Socioemotional Area

Confrontation of the variables reported above showed that, although almost the entire sample has reported implementing SEL content in their classrooms, a big number of teachers have not received previous training in that area, which could lead to wrong program implementation and failure about modeling competencies.

3.2 Overall Level of Development of Teachers' SEC

Table 1. Descriptives of the Teachers' SEC

Dimension	Min	Max	M	SD
Self-awareness	2.92	7.00	5.5337	.61251
Self-regulation	2.92	7.00	5.1806	.66546
Autonomy	2.64	7.00	4.6388	.88969
Collaboration	2.83	7.00	4.7705	.88945
Empathy	2.75	7.00	4.6294	.81342

Once data behavior was examined in every socio-emotional dimension, the level of teachers' SEC was analyzed through the mean of each factor. Table 1 shows descriptive data of interest, within which it is located the mean thrown in each of the five dimensions that constitute the construct.

Besides the mean and standard deviation of each dimension, Table 1 shows participants' minimum and maximum mean values. About these last two dispersion measures, it is pointed out a similarity regarding the maximum mean obtained in all the socio-emotional dimensions, a situation that is not repeated in the minimum mean. Specifically, note that the autonomy dimension is presented as the one with the lowest value in this measure, which could help to identify necessities in the sample of this study.

It is observed that statistical results indicate a higher level of development in the self-awareness dimension, slightly rated higher than the self-regulation dimension. Conversely, even though it does not show a significant difference with the autonomy dimension, data revealed that empathy was the worst rated.

3.3 Development of Teachers' SEC According to Sociodemographic Variables

To deepen teachers' socio-emotional profile, levels of development of socio-emotional dimensions were contrasted with variables of interest. Sociodemographic variables were the following: 1) gender; 2) education level; 3) years as an in-service teacher; 4) experience in the implementations of SEL programs; 5) training background in SEL programs; and 6) initial training institution.

The first analysis aimed to inquire if gender was related to the development of teachers' SEC. Although results showed a slightly higher average range in women in all the socio-emotional dimensions addressed, there was no statistically significant difference about men, therefore it is inferred that the development of teachers' SEC is not associated with gender.

A second aspect addressed was to investigate the level of teachers' SEC according to education level. Two categories were established: 1) teachers with a bachelor's degree; 2) teachers with a graduate program. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Teachers' SEC According to Education Level

Dimension	GP (average range)	BD (average range)	U	p
Self-awareness	180.90	192.55	12959.5	.362
Self-regulation	180.41	192.73	12910.5	.335
Autonomy	160.71	199.72	10960.0	.002
Collaboration	179.37	193.09	12808.0	.283
Empathy	170.68	196.18	11947.5	0.046

Note. GP= teachers with a graduate program; BD= teachers with a bachelor's degree

Table 2 displays a p-value less than .05 both in the dimensions of autonomy and empathy, which indicates a statistically significant difference related to education level. Thus, teachers that have not taken a graduate program have greater development in the competencies indicated above than teachers with a graduate program.

The analysis with the variable years as an in-service teacher was also included. This variable was divided into two groups taking as reference an average of years in service that an elementary school teacher completes. The first category was assigned to elementary school teachers with less than fifteen years of service and the second one was to teachers with more than fifteen years of service. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers' SEC According to Years as an In-Service Teacher

Dimension	<15 (average range)	>15 (average range)	U	p
Self-awareness	183.72	199.11	15392.0	.184
Self-regulation	174.19	214.95	13142.5	.000*
Autonomy	174.66	214.16	13254.5	.000*
Collaboration	176.03	211.86	13576.5	.002
Empathy	182.51	201.11	15107.0	.109

Note. * $p < .001$

Table 3 shows that all the socio-emotional dimensions displayed a higher average range in the group with more than fifteen years of service. Of these scores, social and emotional competencies of self-regulation, autonomy, and collaboration indicated statistically significant results, which means that the development of these competencies can be related to the variable addressed.

For the variable that refers to the experience of implementation of SEL programs into the teachers' classrooms, results indicated relevance in some of the competencies. Table 4 shows the analysis results.

Table 4. Teachers' SEC According to Experience in the Implementation of SEL Programs

Dimension	Experience (average range)	No experience (average range)	U	p
Self-awareness	193.12	155.10	4917.5	.047
Self-regulation	194.45	142.51	4464.5	.007
Autonomy	189.44	190.08	6135.0	.973
Collaboration	190.31	181.83	5880.0	.658
Empathy	190.89	176.29	5680.5	.445

As shown in Table 4, the p-value denotes a statistically significant difference in the dimension of self-awareness and self-regulation, which suggests a relationship between this first approach that elementary school teachers have with socio-emotional content and the development of certain competencies.

Additionally, the effect of SEL training programs on teachers has been analyzed. The sample was divided into two groups, corresponding to teachers with participation in previous training and teachers with no participation in previous training. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Teachers' SEC According to Training Background in SEL Programs

Dimension	Yes (average range)	No (average range)	U	p
Self-awareness	197.86	182.06	16311.5	.160
Self-regulation	201.86	178.50	15599.5	.038
Autonomy	186.12	192.51	17199.0	.571
Collaboration	199.86	180.28	15955.5	.082
Empathy	200.20	179.98	15895.0	.072

Scores obtained in Table 5 manifest a higher average range in almost every socio-emotional dimension of teachers that have participated in a training course, but only statistically significant results are observed in the dimension of self-regulation. This finding reveals the development of the dimension as a result of the possible relationship with the training accessed.

Finally, the variable initial training institution was addressed to assess its impact on the achievement of teachers' SEC. Teachers were classified into two categories: 1) graduated from a public teacher training institution; 2) graduated from another kind of higher education institution. The analysis yielded similar results to gender, insofar as there was no significant difference between these two groups, thus can be inferred that the development of teachers' SEC is not associated with the variable initial training institution.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

As stated in previous sections, teachers' SEC plays a relevant role in interactions established within a work context as well as a correct implementation of the **social and emotional** curriculum. However, only until very recently, there has been a growing interest in this variable and its peculiarities in compulsory education teachers. In this sense, the present study aimed to inquire about the level of development of social and emotional competencies in a sample of in-service elementary school teachers from Zacatecas, México, as well as to analyze the potential mediator effect of a set of sociodemographic variables in the achievement of those competencies.

In this regard, the evidence gathered in this study reveals that the socio-emotional dimension

of self-awareness displayed the highest level of development in participating teachers, while the socio-emotional dimension of empathy was the one with the lowest scores, which indicates a necessity in the area.

These results are relevant because they align with prior research, which indicates that the SEC with a higher level of development in teachers of different educative levels is the competence related to emotional awareness along with comprehension of capacities of a person's strengths and limitations (García, 2017; Llorent et al., 2020; Mikulic et al., 2017; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2012, 2019; Rendón, 2019).

In addition, the literature related to this object of study showed a higher development in the competence associated with emotional awareness than in the one related to emotional management processes (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; García, 2017; Mikulic et al., 2017, Torrijos et al., 2014; Torrijos et al., 2018), a finding that matches with the results of this research. This pronouncement could suggest that to develop the socio-emotional dimension of self-regulation, it is necessary first to intervene in the dimension of self-awareness. This is because there is no evidence indicating higher levels of development in self-regulation when compared to self-awareness. The findings described are supported by contributions from Mayer & Salovey (1997), who established, through their emotional intelligence theory, a hypothetic trajectory in the achievement of emotional capacities that are supported through this study, which highlights that emotional awareness is the first of the capacities that should be worked on.

In this sense, results are also similar to studies of teachers' SEC about the level of development of autonomy, outlined as one of the poorest competencies in several studied populations, either before or after an intervention if the study subscribed to quasi-experimental research, or at the time of data collection from non-experimental designs (García, 2017; Mikulic et al., 2017; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2019). On the other hand, empathy was the social and emotional competence with the lowest level of development in the present study. Results found in the literature about this last dimension are contradictory because most of them show it as the competence with the higher level of development (Cassullo & García, 2015; Rendón, 2019). For this reason, as well as the incorporation of empathy in other variables within the models analyzed, more research is needed about its evolution.

Furthermore, in the analysis of teachers' SEC regarding sociodemographic characteristics of the sample, it was found that teachers with bachelor's degrees obtained a higher level of development in the dimensions of autonomy and empathy compared to teachers with a graduate program. Regarding the dimension of autonomy, results are interesting because that competence is composed of specific skills such as self-efficacy, the ability to identify necessities and search for solutions or personal initiative (SEP, 2017), variables that could be enhanced when taking some graduate programs as a result of interactions that training fosters. However, findings show that this was not as expected.

Previous results could be a consequence of teachers with a graduate program taking into consideration a greater number of specific skills both in autonomy and empathy, that is, having a more developed awareness of variables that could impact their thinking than teachers with a bachelor's degree. Llorent et al. (2020) highlighted this situation about the skill of responsible

decision-making. On the other hand, the condition exposed can indicate the existence of other variables with higher influence in the development of teachers' SEC, as could be the implementation of an intervention for their achievement (Bisquerra & Chao, 2021; Bisquerra & García, 2018; Zych & Llorent, 2018).

Concerning the variable years as an in-service teacher, teachers with more than fifteen years in service obtained a higher level of development in the dimensions of self-regulation, autonomy, and collaboration than teachers with less than fifteen years of service. Within some possible factors, preceding findings indicate that this may be due to the process of maturation of the prefrontal cortex of the brain (Casafont, 2016; LeDoux, 1999; MacLean, 1993), a structure where processes such as thinking, prevision, and anticipation of future circumstances, making of judgments, behavioral inhibition, etc., take place. According to Casafont (2016), the prefrontal cortex does not finish its maturation process until approximately twenty-seven years old, for which it could be thought that a teacher with a few years of in-service would have a disadvantage over teachers with more experience. In the self-regulation dimension specifically, this phenomenon could lessen the ability to establish thinking strategies to manage emotions in the classroom appropriately.

Although prefrontal cortex maturation may occur according to age, this does not imply that it will have a favorable development as a result of environmental conditions to which teachers have been exposed. Casafont (2016) emphasizes this does not depend only on the valence of the environment but a set of knowledge and attitudes that should be implemented intentionally, so it is expected to implement SEL programs in the teacher professional and personal development to foster new neural networks in the areas of the brain involved in the development of this type of abilities (Bueno, 2021). The same reasoning may be applied to the variable of experience in the implementations of SEL programs. Even this variable showed to be related to the development of self-awareness and self-regulation, this could be a consequence of topics addressed in SEL programs implemented, but cannot be expected through their implementation in students, teachers acquire social and emotional competencies. This could lead to poor achievement in teachers' SEC and wrong implementation of SEL programs in compulsory education.

Additionally, teachers that have participated in socio-emotional training obtained a higher score in self-regulation than teachers who have not had access to it. It is possible that SEL programs taken by teachers were oriented towards the development of self-regulation skills, which would explain its progress compared to other dimensions. Even though the above is relevant to analyze their achievement, inquiring about specific teacher training programs characteristics was not considered in this study, whence it still needs further research in this variable.

Finally, results showed that neither gender nor initial training institutions were related to teachers' SEC improvement. Regarding the first variable, results are not entirely clear if it is contrasted with what the literature indicates, insomuch as it has been identified a set of studies where teachers' SEC is linked to gender (Kotsou et al., 2019; Llorent et al., 2020). It must be highlighted that Kotsou et al. (2019) research considered not only teachers but women of several ages and professions, which could be relevant for the data found here.

Results of the present study show multiple implications in the social and emotional training of compulsory education teachers in the Mexican context. For example, the need to strengthen SEC related to dimensions of autonomy and empathy is highlighted. Data analysis on the variable experience in the implementations of SEL programs reinforces these findings by indicating that the dimensions stated as well as collaboration show a lower level of development compared to self-awareness and self-regulation dimensions, which could indicate that has not been a similar approach to these last two, possibly as a result of the lack of knowledge of the teacher to address them.

Furthermore, it becomes evident that variables such as years as an in-service teacher, experience in the implementations of SEL programs, and training background in SEL programs are related to the development of social and emotional competencies. Results on the last variable are added to the body of evidence that exhibits the efficacy of this educational proposal and that has an impact not only on SEC, but also on variables such as academic performance, social behavior, or fewer conduct problems. Regarding teacher preparation, this finding emphasizes the necessity of inclusion of SEL training programs, prioritizing them in pre-service and novice teachers.

This study was not without limitations. The first one has to do with methodological implications, specifically about the sample used. Due to the contextual conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on which the study was developed, it was decided to implement a convenience sampling. According to Cohen et al. (2007), the selection of a non-probabilistic sample as the one enunciated prevents generalizing the findings beyond the sample itself because it is not representative of the population. Even when it was possible to corroborate that some characteristics of the teacher population were adequately represented, such as the proportion of teachers working in rural schools or the percentage of teachers according to gender, the selection and use of a probabilistic sample would have been ideal to look for making generalizations more reliably.

On the other hand, it is recommended to do a triangulation process of information to validate results obtained, this is due to limitations pointed out by some researchers focused on the analysis of information in self-inform instruments (Assessment Work Group [AWG], 2019; Bisquerra & López-Cassa, 2021). For last, it is suggested to implement longitudinal studies to discover causal correlations between the development of teachers' SEC and some sociodemographic variables such as years as an in-service teacher or teacher preparation, which will let to confirm such relationships.

Even when more research is needed in this field to inquire about the effect of teachers' behavior and particular characteristics on the development of these capacities, there is no doubt that implementing SEL programs in teacher training is relevant. This may have an impact on limitations identified in the literature, for example, avoiding that teachers' integral training can be influenced by unknown factors, or reducing the risk of having unfounded classroom practices that lead to the apprehension of a contrary approach to the one proposed to this kind of educational proposal.

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