
**NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE:
METHODOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS**

Bistra Mizova

Faculty of Education, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria

bistra_mizova@abv.bg

Dynamic global context in which today’s world evolves, presents more and more serious challenges in front of all social areas, including educational one. Within today’s European and global educational discourse, in recent decades the question about cultivation of key competencies is even more often raised, competencies which will support the successful functioning of people from different generations in a modern, quickly changing, network-oriented and filled with complex challenges world. Variety of approaches and points of view in this educational debate have recently set an important place and role for non-formal education in the development of these basic competencies.

There are several different and yet close perspectives about the essence and functions of non-formal education. Its several specifics can be defined such as: it being a specific approach, used to address individual educational needs and interests of learners; it being set upon principles of voluntary participation and variety of offered educational services in accordance with learners’ preferences and talents; it also supposes a direct involvement and a high level of activity on the learner’s side regarding their own development and learning. Today, the notion that practices and services in non-formal education practical fields as media, museum, library education, and outside-of-school activities support to a high degree the development and improvement of personal social and civic competencies, is widely spread.

The main aim of the present material is to offer some points of view about several methodology questions related to understanding of social competence as a key competence, as well as to analyze some practical models for its formation, which models can become a starting point for social competence development through non-formal educational activities.

Keywords: social competence, non-formal education, methodology issues

INTRODUCTION

Dynamic processes in modern global world set more and more challenges in front of all social reality areas, including education. What we see is an increasing complexity of educational issues, which emanate from imperatives like the urgent necessity for affirmation of education’s practical orientation and close relation with labor market; synchronization of education with tendencies like developing knowledge-based societies, extensive application of digital technologies, life-long learning and perfection; the need of overcoming educational inequalities, which create obstacles for successful inclusion of young people in social setting; increasing the inclusive role of education in order to prevent social exclusion and marginalization, etc.

In the meantime, this complexity of educational issues also states the necessity to strengthen and develop qualities, abilities, and skills in people from different generations which to support both their unique personalities and their belonging to human society.

In modern debate for education, within the context of a more fundamental understanding (influenced by views of Herder) of its essence as an activity aimed at “raising the humanity” (Tsoneva, 2017, pp.39), the problem for cultivation of key competencies is even more clearly visible, which competencies to support the successful functioning of people from different generations in a modern, quickly changing, network-oriented and filled with complex challenges world. Variety of approaches and points of view in this educational debate have recently set an important place and role for non-formal education in the development of these basic competencies.

There are several different and yet closely related perspectives about the nature and functions of non-formal education. Its several specifics can be defined such as: it being a specific modality, upgrading and complementing formal education and individual aformal learning, used to address individual educational needs and interests of learners (Nikolaeva, 2014, pp.239); it also supposes a direct involvement and a high level of activity on the learner’s side regarding their own development and learning (ibid.); it being set upon principles of voluntary participation and variety of offered educational services in accordance with learners’ preferences and talents (Harring, Rohlfs & Palentien, 2007, pp.9). Today the notion that practices and services in non-formal education practical fields as media, museum, library education, and outside-of-school activities support to a high degree the development and improvement of personal social and civic competencies is widely spread.

The focus in present article lies within the group of social competencies. The main aim of the author is to analyze and review several points of view regarding some methodological issues related to the understanding of social competence as a key competence, as well as to offer some practical directions as foundations for its development through non-formal educational activities.

ESSENCE AND RESEARCH OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE: METHODOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS

There are historical reasons and traditions in the affirmation of the idea that social competence is a key aspect of personal development and socialization. Research of social competence and social skills for educational and psychological purposes has its long history, starting in 20s and 30s of 20th century, mostly related to the movement for testing intellectual abilities, intelligence and school readiness in USA and Europe. Binet and Simone in 1916 spoke about ability for social judgement; E. Thorndike in 1920 introduced the term social intelligence, and E.A.Doll in 1935 made an attempt to rationalize the construct “social maturity” (Kanning 2002).

Modern educational and psychological studies for the past 10-15 years confirm that high social competence is a prerequisite for a successful social adaptation in peer group during childhood and within educational context. More specifically, well developed social skills during middle childhood are associated with lower levels of social anxiety and with higher levels of acceptance and trust by peers (Greco&Moris, 2005). Results from studies on specifics of adolescence show that social competence level is associated with higher academic achievements and is also a factor for higher and more satisfactory quality of relations with peers. It is a stable prerequisite for the ability to create and sustain friendships and social contacts in a broader context, as well as for creating and sustaining professional competence in adulthood as a whole (Reinders, 2008).

Today it is accepted almost axiomatically that social competence is one of the key competencies of 21st century, which competencies are main prerequisites for the development of full personal potential, participation in social life, expression of civic activity, involvement in labor market and a wholesome satisfying social functioning of individuals.

Researchers in the field are unanimous that social competence is closely related to feeling of individual well-being and a successful balancing in three important areas for people – personal, professional and social.

When question about the nature of social competence is being discussed, it should be considered that, traditionally, the term has been used as an “umbrella-term” to describe a spectrum of abilities, skills and dispositions, which help individual to sustain balance between feeling of social adequacy and managing particular activities and tasks in different social situations.

Various points of view about definition of social competence can be described, some of which have decades of history.

For Arendt (1958) and White (1959) social competence reflects the ability of individuals to live and interact together and in harmony with the world (Erpenbeck, 1996). According to Hinsch and Pfungsten (2002), social competence is not a unified construct. In this type of competence, the spectrum of behavior models, which enable people to find and apply acceptable compromises between the necessity of social adaptation and the satisfaction of personal needs, have a central place (Hinsch&Pfungsten, 2002). For Kanning (2003) social competence is a complex of knowledges, abilities and skills of a person, which raise the quality and effectiveness of their own behaviour in society, among other people (Kanning, 2003). Frey (2004) and Frey&Balzer, (2005) define social competence as the ability of a human being independently or in cooperation with others to achieve goals and tasks in a responsible, conscious, and creative way (Frey, 2004; Frey&Balzer, 2005). From the perspective of Erpenbeck & Rosenstiel (2003) social competence is an ability to create, sustain and develop satisfying interpersonal relationships (Erpenbeck & Rosenstiel, 2003).

As for now, there is a great variety of concepts and statements regarding social competence, resulting from numerous theoretical and empirical studies. What is actually missing is a satisfying consensus about the nature and structure of this psychological construct. There are several reasons for this. One of them is the fact that social competence lies within in the problem fields of numerous research traditions – psychological, linguistic, educational, and sociological, etc., each of which adds additional layers to the understanding of the term and makes it harder to reach precision of its definition.

Discussion-like situation, surrounding the clarification of the idea for social competence, also has a methodological nature and is defined under the influence of two main types of research approaches for the operationalization of the construct and its indicators. Broadly speaking, setting empirical-oriented definitions of research constructs during operationalization, reflect the relation between the construct itself and its indicators. This relation can be reflective or formative. Definitions focused on reflective indicators accept that the result, the effect of

the construct's impact is more important. Definitions with focus on formative indicators are set upon the notion that what is important is the reason which influences or makes an impact upon the construct (Shtetinski, 2005).

In the context of these considerations, when it comes to social competence (similarly to other psychological constructs like intelligence, for example) there is a dilemma that divides its researchers to those who define it through socially competent behavior and its results, which is a tendency to select reflective indicators of the construct, and those who define the construct as a personal disposition, determining expedient behavior and successful functioning in social context, which puts forward orientation toward formative indicators.

Author's position here is that, somewhat, the solution of the described dilemma can be sought within a co-existence of these two approaches, which means combining reflective and formative indicators when defining the scope of the construct. When it comes to the development of social competence among representatives of different age groups through formal and non-formal educational activities, such approach would mean integrating notions about learning (training of) social competence, comprising of both mastering, enriching, and stabilization of socially acceptable and effective behavior models, and cultivation, stimulation of personal qualities and dispositions, which facilitate mastering and manifestation of socially adequate behavior patterns.

Another reason for disagreement in concepts about the nature of social competence hides in the fact that its understanding is influenced by senses and interpretation resulting from its identification with social intelligence, emotional intelligence/ competence, social skills, etc. Making social competence equal or synonymous to those terms leads to simplification and schematization of its multi-aspect nature.

In a perspective, content and methodology discussions about the nature of the term social competence can be more constructive and beneficial toward reaching a consensus about its understanding and research, if two important points of the interpretation of this construct are considered. The first aspect is related to the idea that research of social competence should take into account its "interpersonal nature". This means that the very sense of the construct is absolutely associated with person's ability to create and sustain meaningful and valuable relationships with others, to function effectively within the context of interpersonal interactions while being satisfied with social exchange. The second aspect relates to multi-dimension nature of the construct. Social competence is a multi-dimensional construction, which unites cognitive, affective, motivational-behavioral components (knowledge, skills, attitudes, aptitudes, values, behavior models), all of which function in a unified entity and aim at full-value social functioning and reaching socially acceptable goals. It is this fact that should be kept in mind not only during social competence study, but in the context of educational (training) activities for its development as a key competence.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES FOR ENCOURAGING AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Criterion, used for the review of practical approaches, is related to the logic of change and succession of several big theoretical paradigms – behavioural, cognitive and humanistic – in social and behavioural science, which paradigms are often interested in problems of development of social competence. Within the framework of each afore mentioned traditions, main curricula directions have been set, along with practical reasoning, clear training models, methods and techniques for building and improving social competence and /or correction of deficits in its development.

Behavioural approach toward social competence

This approach's orientation lays in correction and modification of socially unacceptable (incompetent) behaviour, especially at childhood. Accent is placed in building and training of particular motor and verbal skills, which to provide opportunity for overcoming social problems (like self-isolation, discipline problems, and opportunistic behaviour) of children and adolescents. Focus of planning and implementation of behavioural trainings of social competence, in the light of classic and operational behaviourism, is placed upon change of ineffective social skills, not upon change of perception, cognitions, and emotional-motivational base of an individual (Elliott&Gresham, 1993, In: Cory, 2015). This leads to a serious limitation of such conceptual framework, which lays in a too narrow understanding about deficit-shaped social competence, more like a set of wrongly learned skills, rather like a result of factors like mistakes in attributive processes in emotion regulation.

Some of main methods, strategies, and techniques, part of behavioral trainings based upon conditioning, use positive and negative stimulus for control of socially unacceptable behavior; application of natural and logical consequences; implementation of guiding instructions aimed at preventing socially unacceptable behavior; programs for token conditioning; peer-conditioning; "Time Out" technique, etc.

Interpretations and concepts for developing social competence in the perspective of social learning keep the focus upon modification of socially incompatible behavior, but the foundation of techniques consists of symbol modeling and learning through imitation. Most often media products are used (video, movies, etc.) with a content/curricula aimed at shaping socially acceptable behavior patterns, role plays, and coaching techniques. Training models founded upon symbol learning are characterized with high level of effectiveness (Schneider&Birne, 1985 In Zeller, 2007).

Cognitive-oriented approaches for development of social competence

Development of cognitive approaches for encouraging social competence, especially at childhood and with adolescents, can be seen as two orientation, mutually upgrading and complementing each other. Since mid- 50s till 80s of 20th century, social-cognitive orientation dominated and it accepted that approach for education in problem solving is a basic tool for handling specific social and emotional failures of kids.

In trainings with such orientation, focus is placed upon processes (for example, identifying problem, generation of alternative solutions of problems, etc.) rather than learning specific models, associated with socially competent behavior. Besides creating process-oriented skills, such trainings also include other key goals like learning some basic cognitive and linguistic concepts used for identifying a problem situation; identification of personal feelings within a problem; creation of skills for expression of sensitivity toward social issues; building a skills for understanding others' needs and behavior; developing skills for seeking solutions of problems; guided (by a significant adult) reflection for application of skills for problem solving in everyday life, etc. (Hightower & Braden, 1991 In: Zeller, 2007; Cory, 2015).

Role plays, discussions, group reflections, solving real cases from everyday life and situation of communication with peers, using games and dramatization with dolls for focusing upon primary emotions (applicable for children in pre-school age) are among favored methods and techniques for developing social competence within the framework of social-cognitive orientation modeling.

Second orientation in the framework of cognitive approach aims at building skills for accepting perspectives of others and showing empathy, and started in the middle 80s of previous century. The term "ability to accept social perspective" is introduced in order to define both cognitive processes, needed for understanding others' point of view, and the affective foundation, needed for the emergence of emotional experience and empathy toward others (Beelmann et al., 1994 In: Zeller, 2007). Main goals of training programs within such framework of this cognitive orientation can be as follows:

- Reaching understanding of one's feelings and feelings of others in a problematic situation;
- Mastering pro-social models of behavior in critical situations;
- Building skills for communication that reflects feelings of others and for demonstration of respectful attitude;
- Cultivation of abilities to make distinction between emotions and reason they derive from;
- Deconstruction of rigid cognitive schemes like "reading other's minds", preliminary stereotyping, etc. (Cory, 2015);

Main inventory of methods and techniques for building and improving social competence include discussions of stories and dramatizations with dolls, during which there is a discussion of how key figures feel; modeling through role plays, simulations of pro-social, altruistic behavior, of skills for understanding others' point of view, skills for expression of empathy and empathic reaction; application of drawing methods for identifying and relating emotions to stories and cases from everyday life; self-instruction; coaching techniques; techniques for inter- and supervision.

Positive aspects at the approaches, described above, comes from more extensive and rich understanding of social competence as a construct with behavior, cognitive and affective facets. Ability to see and understand perspective of others, to reach affective self-regulation and emotional response to other person's experience, create the foundation for mastering and encouraging social competence. Development of this ability, and, as a consequence – development of social competence, is made through education, which, in its organizational and curricula dimensions, aims at subjective construction and reconstruction of situations from everyday experience of learners, in which situations social interactions take a central place.

Humanistic approach toward development of social competence

Orientation of this approach regarding development of social competence falls within clarification and stimulation of internal motivation factors of individual to behave in a socially adequate and acceptable way. Education about or training of different skills, part of social competence group, has a priority focus toward reaching

a reflection about one's personal emotional state and motivation. In addition, no educational activities can reach success if the role of emotions is ignored or if directive strategies of teaching are applied. Main principles, which should serve as a foundation for construction of education in social competence, should be sensitivity to learners' emotions, interpretation of these emotions as a sign of certain individual needs, which should be studied in a suitable way (Schultz, 2004). Another contribution of humanistic approach for encouraging social competence is related to the idea that a person is in a perpetual and active relation with both oneself and with their surroundings. When planning and creating training programs in formal and non-formal educational context, this idea should be considered by the educators, as they have to build a trust relations with learners and to respond to their behavior, cognitive and affective specifics and needs.

Some methods and techniques, often used as part of humanistic-oriented approaches toward social competence, come from the area of therapeutic and educational drama, psychodrama, gestalt-therapy, drama-techniques with dolls, aiming at lowering tension (ice breaking) and expression of certain cognitive and emotional conditions, demonstration of respect, empathy and authenticity by the educator, which actually stimulates learners (adolescent or adult) toward personal growth and reaching social maturity (Cory, 2015).

In conclusion, the review of some key approaches for development of social competence, made above, does not pretend to be absolutely thorough, but rather represents an attempt to enrich the area of non-formal educational activities (ateliers and activities in different interests, media and museum educational programs, library and club lecture courses, art and creative activities with educational perspective, etc.) with some practical guidance for planning, building, and implementation of educational segments, aiming at creating and improving social competence.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cory, G. (2015). *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Psychotherapy*. East-West Press, Sofia. [In Bulgarian]
- [2] Erpenbeck, J. (1996). *Kompetenz und keine Ende? QUEM-Bulletin*, 1, S. 9–12
- [3] Erpenbeck, J., von Rosenstiel, L. (2003): *Handbuch Kompetenzmessung*. Stuttgart: Schäffer Poeschel Verlag
- [4] Frey, A. & Balzer, L. (2005). *Der Beurteilungsbogen SMK: ein Messinstrument für die Diagnose von sozialen und methodischen Fähigkeitkompetenzen*. In A. Frey, R.S. Jäger, V. Renold (Hrsg.), *Kompetenzdiagnostik – Theorien und Methoden zur Erfassung und Bewertung von beruflichen Kompetenzen*, 31-56. Verlag Empirische Pädagogik, Landau.
- [5] Frey, A. (2004). *Die Kompetenzstruktur von Studierenden der Lehrerberufs. Eine internationale Studie*. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 50 (6), 903-925
- [6] Greco, L.A. and T. L. Moris., (2005). *Factors influencing the link between social anxiety and peer acceptance: contributions of social skills and close friendship during middle childhood*. *Behavior Therapy*, 36, 197-205
- [7] Harring, M, Rohlf, C., Ch. Palentien (2007). *Perspektiven der Bildung. Kinder und Jugendliche in formellen, nicht-formellen und informellen Bildungsprozessen*. Springer Verlag.
- [8] Hinsch, R., U. Pflingsten, (2002) *Gruppentraining sozialer Kompetenzen. Grundlagen, Gruppenführung, Materialien*. Weinheim.
- [9] Kanning, U. P. (2002: Kanning). *Soziale Kompetenz: Definition, Strukturen und Prozesse*. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, 210, 154-163
- [10] Kanning, U. P. (2003). *Diagnostik sozialer Kompetenzen*. Göttingen: Hogrefe
- [11] Nikolaeva, S. (2014). *Network-based Design of Practice Training in the Master Programm of Management of Services and Organizations for Non-Formal Education*. In: *Annual of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"*, Faculty of Education; Education, Vol.107, pp.228-263, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press [In Bulgarian]
- [12] Reinders, H. (2008). *Erfassung sozialer und selbstregulatorischer Kompetenzen bei Kindern und Jugendlichen – Forschungsstand*. In: Jude, N. et al. (Hrsg.) *Kompetenzerfassung in pädagogischen Handlungsfeldern. Theorien, Konzepte und Methoden*. Bonn, 27-45.
- [13] Schultz, D. (2004). *Growth Psychology*. Science and Art Press, Sofia [In Bulgarian]
- [14] Shtetinski, D. (2005). *Assessment and Analyze in Behavioral and Social Sciences*. "Marin Drinov" Academic Press, Sofia. [In Bulgarian]
- [15] Tsoneva, P. (2017). *Trends in the Development of Library Education in Bulgaria 1878-1944*. In: *Annual of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"*, Faculty of Education; Education, Vol.110, pp.39-89, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press [In Bulgarian]
- [16] Zeller, B. (2007). *Förderung der sozialen Kompetenz von Kindergartenkinder*. VDM Verlag.