Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series VII: Social Sciences • Law • Vol. 14(63) No. 2 – 2021
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.ssl.2021.14.63.2.3

SOCIAL COMPETENCES THAT FOSTER ADAPTATION DURING THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

M. VOINEA[1] A. ȘIȚOIU[2]

Abstract: *For many students and teachers the Covid-19 pandemic was a transformative learning experience. They were forced to cope with many changes at different levels of life: personal, professional, social. For many, the soft skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, time management, being present, being empathetic or self-regulation were the main resource for effective adaptation. This is the reason why we need to adopt a new education vision, focused on developing soft skills for teachers and students, and finally for society. The aim of the present research was to analyse the respondents' perception of the soft skills which help them cope with the Covid-19 pandemic period. A questionnaire regarding teachers' skills was used. The research sample consists of 359 respondents. An important conclusion of the study was that the respondents' resilience was determined by the change in the perspective on the problems that arose during the pandemic.*

Key words: *pandemic period, adaptation, social skills, resilience, critical thinking.*

1. Introduction

In the digital age, people need to develop a lot of social competences (soft skills) to cope with the technological challenges. Social competence is one of the key competencies that ensures lifelong learning, referring to behaviours that allow the individual to act constructively and effectively from a social and professional point of view (Lavall & Aldeguer, 2016).

The interest for social competences such as communication (Seeber & Wittmann, 2016; Dagal, 2017), emotional intelligence (Taksic, 2002; Serrat, 2017), wellbeing (Howell et al., 2016; Ruggeri et al., 2020), positive thinking (Meng et al, 2020; Colvin et al., 2021) has risen in the last decade. We consider that this increase is a normal

[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov, mihaela.voinea@unitbv.ro, corresponding author
[2] *Transilvania* University of Braşov, andreea.sitoiu@unitbv.ro

human reaction to the technological and digitalized life. It isn`t a new idea. From the representatives of humanistic psychology (Maslow, Rogers), philosophers (Erich Fromm), sociologists or pedagogues to nowadays researchers (OECD, UNESCO), the need to develop human characteristic such as morality, equity, responsibility, creativity, as a solution for social adaptation must be underlined. For instance, human reaction was explained by Naisbitt in a reference work from the 80`s. After some time, Harari (2018) says the same thing in other words: we need people with strong moral values to use computers and robots.

But today, social competences are more than desirable (Weissberg et al., 2015). Social competences or social emotional learning (SEL) become part of national curriculum because they are important tools for adaptation to the future society, these competencies referring to: self-awareness, self-management, empathy, forward-thinking, cooperation (Zins et al., 2004). In fact, social competences are the foundation of sustainable society: "one of the most salient features of skill development is that skills beget skills" (OECD, 2015, p.76). A study based on adaptation in the field of activity as a result of the changes imposed by the pandemic demonstrates the need to adopt a flexible attitude (Cole & Kimble, 2021).

For instance, climate change is a complex and transdisciplinary problem which involves a holistic approach –technological, physical, medical and educational. Social competences as social responsibility, awareness ecology, collaboration and empathy for every being and positive thinking (optimism, self-confidence) become important for everyone.

The evolution of technology must be accompanied by human values such as empathy (Flecha et al., 2020), cooperation (Spector et al., 2008) human solidarity (Marino, 2020), responsibility (Jirotka & Stahl, 2020), citizenship (Sainz & Barry, 2020). For this we need to develop positive social skills.

As a result of online education, people who have teaching professions may face what is called technostress. An adaptation to post-pandemic life involves the inclusion of technology in the teaching activity to reduce the stress caused by it (Abilleira et al., 2021). Non-cognitive factors specific to education such as self-confidence, seriousness, and the ability to become aware of one's own abilities can lead to easier learning under stress conditions such as those imposed by the pandemic. At the same time, the use of digital tools in the educational field is facilitated by cognitive factors such as ease of use (Mălureanu et al., 2021). Teachers' adaptation to the stress caused by the pandemic was also achieved through the teaching methods used, but also through the maintenance of mental health (Navarro et al., 2020).

The education has an important role in human life, but even education must be restructured, given that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a widespread digital transformation, with traditional education taking the form of digital-based distance education (Iivary et al., 2020). A new model of ecological education model (Robinson & Aronica, 2015) based on four principles: health, ecology, correctness, and care can help students to develop a new mindset for a sustainable life.

1.1. Social competences as a tool for adaptation

A lot of recent research underline that social emotional competences are important (Schoon, 2021; Alzahrani et al., 2019; Housman, 2017), but we need a right balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills in order to succeed in future life/society.

One of the most required cognitive competences is critical thinking. Critical thinking determines problem-solving skills in an effective way (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Critical thinking skills are mental processes, strategies, and representations that an individual uses to solve problems, make decisions and learn new concepts (Sternberg, 1986; Lai, 2011), which can be structured from the cognitive point of view from simple to complex (Wolcott et al., 2002).

OECD (2015) in a study sustain the role of social and emotional skills in education (SEL allow students to persist through education), in people`s well-being and in improving behaviours and lifestyles. Conscientiousness, sociability, and emotional stability are among the key SES that matter across selected countries and cultures.

OECD, in Education 2030 project, has identified the following "Transformative Competencies":

- Creating new value,
- Reconciling tensions and dilemmas,
- Taking responsibility (OECD, 2018, p.5).

Social and emotional skills are individual characteristics that are rooted in biological predispositions and environmental factors. These skills are manifested in the form of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, which in turn take the form of formal and informal learning experiences, influencing the results of the individual throughout life (John & DeFruyt, 2015; Murano et al., 2020). Maintaining healthy relationships, the ability to cope with daily challenges, maintaining overall health and well-being are conditioned by social and emotional skills (West et al., 2016, 2020; Green et al., 2021).

Self-confidence consists in the positive attitude that an individual has towards himself, as well as in his ability to achieve the proposed objectives (Andriani & Listiadi, 2021), this becoming an essential aspect of the learning process (Listiadi et al., 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this study was to analyse the participant`s perceptions regarding the social competences which they used to cope pandemic period. This study used the indirect survey method, with its specific tool, the questionnaire.

This study addressed the following research questions:

Q1: Which are the social competences that helped participants cope during the pandemic period?

Q2: Does different categories of professionals in education experienced different the changes imposed by the pandemic?

Q3: What is the respondents' perspective on the changes that will occur in specific fields of activity such as the labour market, education, leisure?

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 359 participants (48 of which were males). In terms of the age range of the participants, the most representative range is 20-30 years for 146 respondents, representing 41% of the total sample, followed by the range of 30-40 years for 106 respondents. The 40-50 age range includes 71 respondents, and the age exceeding 50 years is represented by 36 respondents. In terms of the educational level of the participants, 80% have higher education (286 participants), while 20% of participants have high school education (71) and 1% of the total sample has gymnasium studies (2). From the perspective of the status of respondents, the predominant category belongs to the teaching professions, 43% of respondents (154 participants) working in the education system, while 32% of the total sample have non-teaching professions (113 participants). Along with the teaching and non-teaching professions, a third category of respondents was represented by students, 25%, meaning 90 respondents from the total sample. Of the 359 participants, 223 have parental status, , with a percent of 59% (132 participants) having only one child, followed by those respondents who have two children, representing 32% of the total sample.

Participants were recruited online, through social channels and virtual communication groups specific to teachers, parents, students, by accessing a link generated by the Google Forms application, which facilitated the data collection. Also, several participants are students in the study programs offered by the Transilvania University of Brașov (bachelor's, master's, continuing education). Subsequently, the data were processed using the Jamovi statistical program. The participants were informed about the confidentiality of the data, respectively their coding and processing in a scientific context, having the possibility to withdraw from the research at any time.

2.2. Measures

The data were collected between February and April 2021, the questionnaire, accompanied by informed consent, was self-applied, the respondents accessing the link on the Google Forms platform. The completion of the questionnaire lasted on average 7 minutes and the demographic data collected were: occupation, educational level, age, parental status of respondents (whether or not they have the role of parent), respectively the number of children. Incomplete questionnaires were removed so as not to affect data fidelity.

The questionnaire included 11 items. For 8 items the Likert scale was used, the intervals ranging from 1 (very easy) to 5 (very difficult), respectively from 1 (to a very

small extent) to 5 (to a very large extent), and for 3 items a Nominal scale was used. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section was dedicated to all respondents, while the second section focused only on those respondents who had a parental status.

The 8 items on the Likert scale focused on: respondents' opinion about the changes produced by the pandemic, the adaptation to the pandemic, the opinion on the changes produced in different areas of activity such as the labour market, education, leisure. In the section dedicated to parents, the items on the Likert scale referred to the skills that the parent acquired during the pandemic, the parent's concerns about the child's future in a post-pandemic period, the benefits of the pandemic from the parent's perspective, the perspective on the role of parent in the pandemic period, as well as the adaptation of parental principles as a result of the pandemic. Some of the items on the Likert scale were divided into several items, respecting the values of the scale.

The items on the Nominal scale focused on: skills that facilitated adaptation during the pandemic, the evolution of society in the future, skills needed to be educated / developed for the challenges of the future.

The questionnaire also included a series of sociodemographic data that covered: gender, age range, educational level, occupation, number of children, respectively age of children, the last two aspects being specific to respondents with parental status.

All the answers obtained were analysed from a quantitative perspective.

2.3. Statistical Analyses

All statistical operations were performed using the Jamovi program. The answers were coded, and frequency analysis, distributions, correlations, multiple linear regressions were computed.

3. Results

In order to identify the social competencies that facilitated the adaptation to the pandemic, a frequency analysis was performed on the main social competencies included in the questionnaire: 1 - Self-confidence; 2 – Time management abilities; 3 - Effective communication; 4 - The ability to solve problems, to find the most creative solutions to a series of problems; 5 - Optimism; 6 - Regulation of emotions; 7 - Hobbies; 8 - Ability to see the problem from several perspectives. The results show that 20% of the respondents consider that adaptation to the pandemic was due to the ability to solve problems, followed by the ability to see problems from several perspectives, a skill appreciated by 18% of respondents (66). Another skill considered useful for adapting to the changes caused by the pandemic was the respondents' optimism, with 15% of respondents (53) opting for this skill (Table 1).

Frequency of social competences Table 1

Competencies	Frequency	% of Total	Cumulative %
1. Self-confidence	44	12 %	12 %
2. Time management	46	13 %	25 %
3. Effective communication	13	4 %	29 %
4. Problem - solving	72	20 %	49 %
5. Optimism	53	15 %	64 %
6. Emotion regulation	21	6 %	69 %
7. Hobbies	44	12 %	82 %
8. Divergent thinking	66	18 %	100 %

The participants stated that the pandemic produced a series of changes, 99 participants (28%) considering that the changes occurred to a very large extent (option 5), while 85 respondents (24%) estimated that the changes occurred to a large extent (option 4) (Figure 1). It was found that the respondents who deeply felt the changes during the pandemic were mostly teaching professionals.

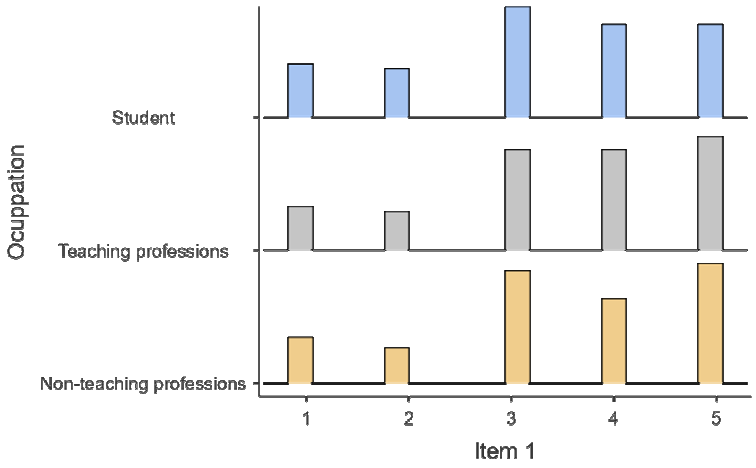

Fig. 1. *Frequency of perception of personal changes in participants` lives on the pandemic (1 = changes occurred to a very small extent; 5 = changes occurred to a very large extent)*

The adaptation to the changes caused by the pandemic was perceived as being easy by respondents working in education, 121 of them assessing the adaptation as being “very easy” (option 1), “easy” (option 2), or “moderate” (option 3) (Figure 2).

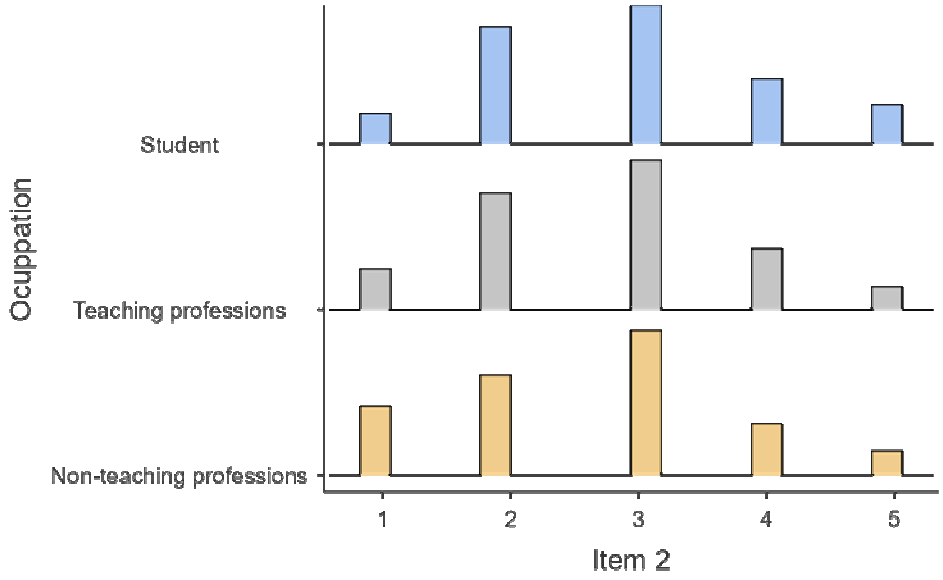

Fig. 1. *Frequency of participant`s perception of the difficulty of adaptation to the changes imposed by the pandemic (1 = adaptation was very easy; 5 = adaptation was very difficult)*

Regarding the perception of future changes in three different life domains, the labour market, education, and leisure, it was found that 299 respondents believe that there will be significant changes in the labour market after the pandemic, 277 respondents estimate that there will be changes in the field of education, while 218 respondents believe that there will be changes from the perspective of free time (1 - to a very small extent, 5 - to a very large extent) (Table 2). It was also noted that the perceived changes in the three areas of activity were expected primarily by respondents working in the education system, followed by respondents working in different domains and by students.

Table 2

Frequency of perceived changes in the labour market, education, and leisure

Occupation			
Changes in the labour market will occur …	**Students (N)**	**Teaching professions (N)**	**Non-teaching professions (N)**
1 = to a very small extent	1	0	1
2 = to a small extent	2	2	7
3 = to a moderate extent	8	23	14
4 = to a large extent	38	63	47
5 = to a very large extent	41	66	44

Occupation			
Changes in education will occur …	**Students (N)**	**Teaching professions (N)**	**Non-teaching professions (N)**
1 = to a very small extent	1	1	3
2 = to a small extent	1	12	12
3 = to a moderate extent	13	24	13
4 = to a large extent	32	65	42
5 = to a very large extent	43	52	43
Occupation			
Changes in leisure will occur …	**Students (N)**	**Teaching professions (N)**	**Non-teaching professions (N)**
1 = to a very small extent	3	3	4
2 = to a small extent	8	12	10
3 = to a moderate extent	24	47	28
4 = to a large extent	31	49	40
5 = to a very large extent	24	43	31

Regarding the skills that the respondents consider necessary to be trained/ developed to face the future challenges imposed by the pandemic, 37% of the participants chose critical thinking as a critical skill that needs to be developed. The second most important skill that needs to be developed was considered self-determination (19% of participants choosing this option) (Table 3).

Perception of skills that need to be developed for a better adaptation Table 3

Skills to be developed	**Frequency**	**%**
Self-determination	70	19 %
Self-confidence	64	18 %
Optimism	24	7 %
Effective communication	13	4 %
Critical thinking	134	37 %
Time management	12	3 %
Working efficiently in activities that take place at the same time	42	12 %

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The main aim of this research was to highlight how respondents from three different occupational domains, students, teachers, and non-teachers, perceive adaptation to the changes introduces by the pandemic in their personal lives. The specific aim of this study was to identify respondents' perspectives on the competences they consider necessary in the future to meet the challenges imposed by the post-pandemic period, as well as perspectives on the changes that would take place in areas such as labour market, education, leisure. The data were collected during the period when the pandemic determined people to establish a new way of

life, a period conducive to expressing opinions about the changes felt in the pandemic period.

The results showed that the respondents' perspective on the changes was a key element in resilience and adaptation to the pandemic, independently of their occupation. At the same time, participants reported that the pandemic introduced to a large or very large extent changes in their personal life; there was a strong trend in this direction in the case of respondents working in education. A possible cause of this trend may be the reconsideration of the way in which the teaching activities were carried out, this taking place in an online or hybrid system.

It was also found respondents working in education self-reported higher levels of adaptation to the pandemics. A possible explanation for this phenomenon may be the fact that teachers faced the need to develop adaptive abilities starting with the beginning of their teaching career, an adaptation which facilitated the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. From the point of view of adaptation, it was observed that the respondents having non-teaching occupations also experienced an increased ability for adaptation, being followed by the students.

Different activity domains such as labour market, education, and leisure were also perceived as being strongly affected by changes imposed by the pandemic. This suggests an objective and pragmatic attitude, maybe even constructive on how future activities specific to the areas of activity mentioned above will be carried out.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic caused multiple changes in personal and professional life, our research addressing the perception of changes in the personal life. The changes required prompt action by the people, therefore problem-solving skills, approaching new perspectives on problems or optimism, facilitated resilience during the pandemic.

References

Abilleira, P. M., Rodicio-Garcia, M. L., Rios-de-Deus, M. P., & Mosquera-Garcia, M. L. (2021). Technostress in Spanish University teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.617650

Alzahrani, M., Alharbi, M., & Alodwani, A. (2019). The effect of social-emotional competence on children academic achievement and behavioral development. *International Education Studies, 12*(12), 141-149. doi:10.5539/ies.v12n12p141

Andriani, J., & Listiadi, A. (2021). Self-confidence moderates the effect of basic accounting, mathematics learning outcomes, and learning behaviour on accounting understanding. *Economic Education Analysis Journal, 10*(1), 93-100. DOI: 10.15294/eeaj.v10i1.39165

Cole, C. L., & Kimble, A. (2021). Maintaining professional standards in early childhood teacher preparation: Evaluating adaptations to filedwork-based experiences during COVID-19. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 49*(5), 841-853.

Colvin, E., Gardner, B., Labelle, P. R., & Santor, D. (2021). The Automaticity of Positive and Negative Thinking: A Scoping Review of Mental Habits. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 1-27.

Dagal, A. B. (2017). Investigation of the relationship between communication skills, social competence and emotion regulation skills of preschool children in Turkey. *Educational Research and Reviews, 12*(4), 164-171. DOI: 10.5897/ERR2017.3139

Flecha, R., Pulido, C., Villarejo, B., Racionero, S., Redondo, G., & Torras, E. (2020). Effects of the Use of Digital Technology on Children's Empathy and Attention Capacity. Analytical Report. *European Commission*.

Green, A. L., Ferrante, S., Boaz, T. L., Kutash, K., & Reece, B. W. (2021). Social and emotional learning during early adolescence: Effectiveness of a classroom-based SEL program for middle school students. *Psychology in the Schools, 58*(6), 1056-1069. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22487

Harari, Y. N. (2018). *21 de lecții pentru secolul XXI* [21 Lessons for the XXI Century]. Iași: Polirom.

Housman, D. K. (2017). The importance of emotional competence and self-regulation from birth: a case for the evidence-based emotional cognitive social early learning approach. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy, 11*(13). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-017-0038-6

Howell, K. H., Coffey, J. K., Fosco, G. M., Kracke, K., Nelson, S. K., Rothman, E. F., & Grych, J. H. (2016). Seven reasons to invest in well-being. *Psychology of Violence, 6*(1), 8-14. https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000019

Iivari, N., Sharma, S., & Ventä-Olkkonen, L. (2020). Digital transformation of everyday life–How COVID-19 pandemic transformed the basic education of the young generation and why information management research should care?. *International Journal of Information Management, 55,* 102183. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102183

Jirotka, M., & Stahl, B. C. (2020). The need for responsible technology. *Journal of Responsible Techonology, 1.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrt.2020.100002

John, O. P., & DeFruyt, F. (2015). *Education and social progress: Framework for the longitudinal study of social and emotional skills in cities.* Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (EDU/CERI/CD(2015)13).

Lai, E. R. (2011). *Critical thinking: A literature review.* Retrieved from: https://images.pearsonassessments.com/images/tmrs/CriticalThinkingReviewFINAL.pdf

Lavall, E. N. L., & Aldeguer, S. P. (2016). Social competence in higher education questionnaire (CCSES): Revision and Psychometric Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01484

Marino, S. (2020). Technologies of solidarity. *Mediating the Refugee Crisis, 123-170*. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-53563-6_5

Mălureanu, A., Pânișoară, G., & Lazăr, I. (2021). The relationship between self-confidence, self-efficacy, grit, usefulness, and ease of use of eLearning platforms in corporate training during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sustainability, 13*(2). https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126633

Meng, Q., Jia, J., & Zhang, Z. (2020). A framework of smart pedagogy based on the facilitating of high order thinking skills. *Interactive Techonolgy and Smart Education, 17*(3), 251-266. https://doi.org/10.1108/ITSE-11-2019-0076

Murano, D., Lipnevich, A., Walton, K. E., Burrus, J., Way, J. D., & Carrasco, C. A. (2020). Measuring social and emotional skills in elementary students: Development of self-report Likert, situational judgment test, and forced choice items. *Personality and Individual Differences, 169* (1). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110012

Navarro, E. R., Arellano, E. G. R., Galan, D. B. R., & Diaz, R. E. B. (2020). Adapting educational teachers in the Covid-19 context: A systematic review. *Revista Conrado, 16*(77), 141-149

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD. (2018). *Future of education and skills 2030. Conceptual learning framework. Transformative competencies for 2030.* Retrieved from: https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/transformative-competencies/Transformative_Competencies_for_2030_concept_note.pdf

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD. (2015). *Skills for social progress. The power of social and emotional skills.* Retrieved from: https://nicspaull.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/oecd-2015-skills-for-social-progress-social-emotional-skills.pdf

Ruggeri, K., Garcia-Garzon, E., Maguire, A., Matz, S., & Huppert, F. (2020). Well-being is more than happiness and life satisfaction: a multidimensional analysis of 21 countries. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 18*(192). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12955-020-01423-y

Sainz, G. M., & Barry, M. (2020). Digital technologies to advance global citizenship education in schools. Retrieved from: https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/chrce/digitial_technologies_to_advance_gce_in_schools.pdf

Schoon, I. (2021). Towards an integrative taxonomy of social-emotional competence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.515313

Seeber, S., & Wittmann, E. (2016). Social competence research: A review. *Competence-based Vocational and Professional Education, 23,* 1029-1050. DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-41713-4_51

Serrat, O. (2017). Understanding and developing emotional intelligence. In *Knowledge solutions* (pp. 329-339). Springer, Singapore.

Snyder, L. G., & Snyder, M. J. (2008). Teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills. *The Journal of Research in Business Education, 50*(2), 90.

Spector, J. M., Merrill, M. D., Merrienboer, J., & Driscoll, M. P. (2008). *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology.* New York: Routledge.

Sternberg, R. J. (1986). *Critical thinking: Its nature, measurement, and improvement.* National Institute of Education. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED272882.pdf

Taksic, V. (2002). The importance of emotional intelligence (competence) in positive psychology. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273776183

West, M. R., Kraft, M. A., Finn, A. S., Martin, R. E., Duckworth, A. L., Gabrieli, C. F. O., & Gabrieli, J. D. E. (2016). Promise and paradox: Measuring non-cognitive traits of students and the impact of schooling. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *38*(1), 148– 170. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715597298

West, M. R., Pier, L., Fricke, H., Hough, H., Loeb, S., Meyer, R. H., & Rice, A. B. (2020). Trends in students social-emotional learning: Evidence from the first large-scale panel student survey. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *42*(2), 279– 303. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720912236

Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, A. J., Domitrovich, C. E., & Gullotta, T. P. (2015). Social and emotional learning: Past, present, and future. In J. A. Durlak, A. J. Domitrovich, R. P. Weissberg, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Handbook of social and emotional learning. Research and practice* (pp.33-19). New York: The Guilford Press.

Wolcott, S. K., Baril. C. P., Cunningham, B. M., Fordham, D. R., & St. Pierre, K. (2002). Critical thought on critical thinking research. *Journal of Accounting Education, 20*, 85-103

Zins, E. J., Weissberg, R. P., Wang, M. C., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning. What does the research say?* New York: Teachers College Press.