SOCIAL - EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE AMONG LOWER SECONDARY STUDENTS: EVIDENCE FROM DA NANG, VIETNAM

NĂNG LỰC CẢM XÚC XÃ HỘI CỦA HỌC SINH TRUNG HỌC CƠ SỞ: BẰNG CHỨNG TỪ ĐÀ NẴNG, VIỆT NAM

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Abstract - Social-emotional competence plays a crucial role in the holistic development of students, especially at the lower secondary school age – a period of significant psychophysiological changes. This study surveys the current state of social-emotional competence among 332 students at Le Do Secondary School, Da Nang. The study uses the Social-Emotional Competency Questionnaire which comprises five component competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social interaction, and responsible decision-making. Analysis using SPSS 30.0 software shows that students' social-emotional competence ranges from average to high. Social interaction and social awareness are the highest-ranking competencies, while self-management remains limited. The study also reveals significant differences in social-emotional competence based on gender, grade level, and academic achievement. These results provide educational stakeholders with a basis for developing appropriate educational strategies.

Key words - Competence; Social-emotional competence; Students; Secondary school

Tóm tắt - Năng lực cảm xúc xã hội có vai trò quan trọng trong sự phát triển toàn diện của học sinh, đặc biệt ở lứa tuổi trung học cơ sở – giai đoạn có nhiều biến đổi về tâm sinh lý. Nghiên cứu này khảo sát thực trạng năng lực cảm xúc xã hội của 332 học sinh Trường Trung học cơ sở Lê Độ, Đà Nẵng. Nghiên cứu sử dụng thang đo Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire gồm 5 năng lực thành phần: tự nhận thức, tự quản lý, nhận thức xã hội, quan hệ xã hội và ra quyết định có trách nhiệm. Kết quả phân tích bằng phần mềm SPSS 30.0 cho thấy, năng lực cảm xúc xã hội của học sinh đạt mức trung bình khá đến cao. Trong đó, năng lực quan hệ xã hội và nhận thức xã hội đạt mức cao nhất, năng lực tự quản lý còn hạn chế. Nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra sự khác biệt có ý nghĩa về năng lực cảm xúc xã hội theo giới tính, khối lớp, học lực. Kết quả này giúp các lực lượng giáo dục có cơ sở để xây dựng các biện pháp giáo dục phù hợp.

Từ khóa - Năng lực; cảm xúc xã hội; học sinh; trung học cơ sở

1. Introduction

In the context of the current fundamental and comprehensive reform of general education, the development of learners' qualities and competencies is identified as the central goal of the Vietnamese education system. The 2018 General Education Program emphasizes the role of general competencies, in which self-reliance and self-learning are considered the foundation to help students master emotions, regulate behavior and adapt positively to learning requirements as well as social life [1]. One of the core components of self-reliance is socio-emotional competence, manifested in the ability to recognize and regulate emotions, build positive relationships, make responsible decisions and behave appropriately in the school environment [2].

At the middle school age, students are undergoing a period of rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional development [3], [4]. These rapid changes make it difficult for them to control their emotions, manage their behavior, and establish healthy social relationships. School practice shows that many middle school students experience problems such as academic stress, peer conflicts, impulsive behavior, and difficulties in communication and group cooperation [5]. Limitations in socio-emotional competence, if not identified and supported in a timely manner, can negatively affect students' academic performance, mental health, and long-term personality development [6].

Le Do secondary School, Da Nang city, is an educational institution with a stable student population and is gradually paying attention to comprehensive education and school mental health care [7]. However, currently there is no systematic research conducted to assess the current state of students' socio-emotional competence at the school. Surveying and analyzing the level and structure of students' socio-emotional competence at Le Do secondary School will contribute to providing practical data, helping the school and educational forces have a scientific basis in building, adjusting and implementing life skills education and socio-emotional education activities suitable to students' characteristics [8].

Although social-emotional competence has been widely examined in international contexts and several studies have been conducted in Vietnam, empirical evidence regarding lower secondary school students in Central Vietnam remains limited. Previous studies have mainly focused on validating social-emotional learning (SEL) instruments or examining general SEL outcomes across different educational levels. Moreover, there is a

lack of school-specific evidence that explores differences in socio-emotional competence based on demographic characteristics such as gender, grade level, and academic achievement [9]. In particular, no empirical study has systematically investigated the social-emotional competence of students at Le Do Secondary School, Da Nang City. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the current status of social-emotional competence among students and exploring variations across demographic groups.

Based on the reasons mentioned above, this study aims to survey and analyze the current state of students' socio-emotional competence, thereby proposing some appropriate educational directions to contribute to improving the effectiveness of comprehensive education and supporting the healthy development of students in the school environment.

2. Theoretical basis

2.1. Conceptual Framework

According to the general approach, socio-emotional competence is understood as the ability of an individual to identify, understand, and regulate their own emotions; at the same time, to recognize and understand the emotions of others, to establish and maintain positive social relationships, as well as to make appropriate and responsible decisions in different situations of life and learning [10]. This competence not only reflects temporary emotional states but also manifests in behavioral tendencies, behavioral capacity, and long-term adaptability of the individual in the social environment [11].

From a competency-based approach, socio-emotional competence is considered a multi-component structure, including a combination of knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and values related to emotions and social relationships [4]; [12]. This approach allows us to view Social-Emotional Competence as a relatively stable system of competencies that can be formed and developed through education, experience and social interaction, especially in the school environment [13], [14].

Many international research works have proposed core components of socio-emotional competence. Based on the synthesis of these viewpoints, socio-emotional competence is often described through main competence groups such as: self-awareness, emotional and behavioral management, social awareness, social relationship competence and responsible decision-making [4]; [15]. These competence groups are closely related to each other, contributing to the formation of the individual's ability to adapt and behave effectively in learning and social life situations [16]. Based on this general theory, socio-emotional competence of junior high school students is the individual's ability to recognize and master the inner world (emotions, thoughts, behaviors) in the face of age changes; Simultaneously demonstrating empathy, building and maintaining healthy social relationships with friends, teachers, and family, and making decisions that conform to ethical standards in practical situations at school and in life [17].

The socio-emotional capacity of junior high school students is expressed through specific manifestations in their awareness, emotions, behavior, and social interaction in the school environment. Specifically, this includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, the ability to maintain and establish social relationships, and the ability to make responsible decisions. These manifestations do not exist in isolation but are closely related, interacting with each other and strongly influenced by the psychophysiological development characteristics of their age group [18]. Fully identifying these manifestations is crucial in assessing the current state of students' socio-emotional competence, and also serves as a basis for analyzing research results and proposing appropriate educational directions to develop students' overall competencies.

This study adopts the CASEL framework and the SECQ model proposed by Zhou and Ee [19], conceptualizing social-emotional competence as a multidimensional construct consisting of five interrelated dimensions: Self-awareness; Self-management; Social awareness; Relationship skills; Responsible decision-making. These five dimensions collectively represent students' overall social-emotional competence and serve as the analytical framework for the present study.

2.2. Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1. What is the current level of social-emotional competence among students at Le Do Secondary School?

RQ2. To what extent does students' social-emotional competence differ across demographic characteristics, namely gender, grade level, and academic achievement?

H1. Students at Le Do Secondary School demonstrate a moderate to high level of social-emotional competence across the five dimensions of the SECQ framework.

H2. There are significant differences in students' social-emotional competence according to demographic characteristics, including gender, grade level, and academic achievement.

3. Sample and research methods

3.1. Sample research

The study sample consisted of students from Le Do Secondary School in Da Nang City. The sample size was determined using Slovin's sample size formula. The sample was selected randomly, on a voluntary basis, and was mentally and physically healthy. Exclusion criteria included students who had been clinically diagnosed by medical or psychological professionals with developmental and mental disorders, and students suffering from acute or chronic physical illnesses causing prolonged pain or fatigue. Based on the above data, the sample size was 350 students. After excluding invalid questionnaires and some students who withdrew from the study, the remaining sample size was 332 with the characteristics presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Characteristics of the study participants*

Characteristics		Quantity	Percentage
Grade level	Grade 6	84	25.0%
	Grade 7	90	27.0%
	Grade 8	86	26.0%
	Grade 9	72	22.0%
Sex	Female	173	52.1%
	Male	159	47.9%
Academic P performance	Good	178	54.0%
	Fair	97	29.0%
	Satisfactory	48	14.3%
	Unsatisfactory	9	2.7%

3.2. Research methods

The results of the current situation regarding students' social-emotional competence were conducted based on the following methods: (1) theoretical research including analysis and synthesis of documents on social-emotional competence; (2) practical research including survey methods using questionnaires; testing and interviews. Testing was the main method; (3) mathematical statistics, data was analyzed using SPSS 30.0 software to analyze the reliability of the scale, determine the average score of the variables, and the percentage of choices.

The tool used was the Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) scale, developed by Zhou and Ee [19]. The SECQ scale includes 25 questions, divided equally into 5 subscales corresponding to 5 component competencies (each competency has 5 questions): Self-awareness; Self-management; Social awareness; Relationship skills; Responsible decision-making. Students self-assessed their performance using a 6-point Likert scale, corresponding to scores from 1 to 6. The score for each component competency is the average of the corresponding 5 questions. The overall SEL score is the average of all 25 questions. To assess students' competency levels, the study based its assessment on the average score ranges presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Quantification of students' social-emotional competence levels*

Range of points	**Level of competence**	**Describe behavioral characteristics**
1.00 - 2.67	Low	Students lacking SEL skills face significant challenges in self-management and social interaction.
2.68 - 4.34	Medium	Students are aware of SEL but their implementation is inconsistent or situational.
4.35 - 6.00	High	Students possess strong SEL skills, knowing how to manage their emotions and build positive relationships.

In Vietnam, the SECQ scale has been translated and adapted in studies by Tran Van Cong and colleagues [3]. In this study, the reliability of the scale reached 0.799.

Table 3. *Cronbach's Alpha of students' socio-emotional competence levels*

Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Self-awareness	.779
Self-management	.755
Social awareness	.740
Establishing and maintaining social relationships	.773
Responsible decision-making	.756
Total	.799

3.3. Research ethics

The study was conducted with the approval of The University of Danang - University of Science and Education. Simultaneously, the study was conducted with the permission of the Principal of Le Do Secondary School, Da Nang. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, benefits, and potential risks of the study. Voluntary participation was ensured through the signing of a consent form containing information or confirmation of participation. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without academic disadvantage, assessment, or grading. All participant information is kept confidential.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The current state of students' social-emotional competence

Table 4. *Students' social-emotional competence*

The components	**Mean**	**SD**	**p**
Self-awareness	4.48	0.813	.429
Self-management	3.81	0.806	.736
Social awareness	4.50	0.804	.841
Establishing and maintaining social relationships	4.30	0.802	.124
Responsible decision-making	4.55	0.813	.870

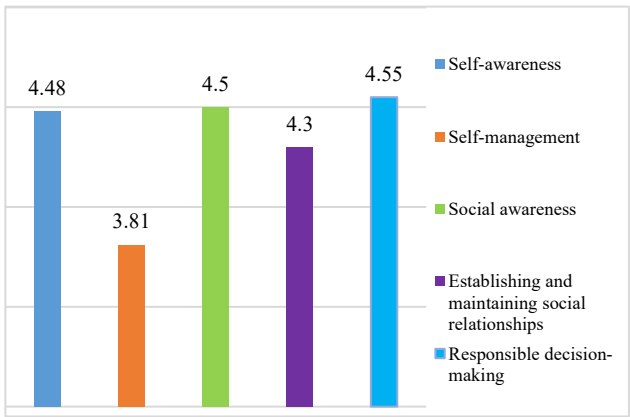


Figure 1. *Social-emotional competence of students at Le Do Secondary School*

Figure 1 show a clear differentiation between the component competency groups within the socio-emotional competence of students at Le Do Secondary School. Among them, the competency of establishing and maintaining social relationships has the highest average

score. This result indicates that Le Do students possess a very good foundation in communication skills; they are always willing to help and listen to their friends. Next, the competency of social awareness and self-awareness also achieved very high scores. This demonstrates that students not only understand themselves but also have a high degree of sensitivity and empathy towards the social relationships around them. These indicators reflect the effectiveness of the school's educational environment in building a united and highly connected student community. However, the data table also shows a significant gap between the above competencies and self-management competency, ranking last with the lowest score. This is the only component with an average score below 4.0, indicating that students' self-management abilities are somewhat more limited compared to the other components of socio-emotional competence in this study. Similarly, the study by Duckworth on "Self-discipline" showed that this component often has the most fluctuating scores among high school students. The authors assert that even students with good communication skills may still have significant difficulties in time management and controlling negative emotions.

The findings indicate that students at Le Do Secondary School generally demonstrated a moderate-to-high level of social-emotional competence. Among the five dimensions, relationship skills obtained the highest mean score, whereas self-management recorded the lowest score. This suggests that students are relatively effective in maintaining positive interpersonal relationships but experience greater challenges in regulating emotions and behavior.

This pattern can be explained by developmental characteristics of early adolescence. During this stage, students tend to prioritize peer relationships and social belonging, while emotional regulation skills are still developing. The findings are consistent with the CASEL framework, which highlights self-management as one of the most challenging competencies to develop during adolescence.

The results also support previous studies conducted in Vietnam and internationally showing that students often report stronger interpersonal competencies than intrapersonal regulation skills.

Practically, these findings suggest that schools should prioritize intervention programs that strengthen emotional regulation, stress management, and self-control strategies. An unexpected finding is that relationship skills were considerably higher than self-management skills despite their conceptual interdependence. This may indicate that students are socially adaptive in external interactions but less capable of managing internal emotional experiences.

This disparity reflects the reality that students at Le Do School may be capable of building and resolving external conflicts and adhering to collective values, but are quite hesitant when it comes to facing and managing personal emotional fluctuations on their own. They know how to please others and follow rules, but they haven't truly mastered concentration and impulse control when faced with unpleasant situations or academic pressure. To illustrate these results, we used an interview method. An 8th-grade student stated, "I often don't know how to handle my emotions in situations of anger or stress. I usually remain silent, react negatively, or go into my room and slam the door". Similarly, teachers at the school also noted that "many students at the adolescent age cannot control their emotions. Some even show signs of early puberty, becoming impulsive and lacking mature thinking in handling emotions." This is entirely consistent with the psychological characteristics of middle school students. The survey results are also consistent with the findings of Tran Thi Le Thu when studying Vietnamese students [20].

4.2. Differences in socio-emotional competence according to demographic characteristics

4.2.1. Differences in socio-emotional competence from a gender perspective

Table 5 shows that there are gender differences in social cognitive ability ($p < 0.05$). In which, the average score of female students is higher than that of male students. This indicates that female students at Le Do school tend to be more sensitive than male students in empathizing and recognizing other people's emotions. This result is also consistent with research on emotional intelligence, in which the author emphasizes the characteristic in teenagers that confirms that females often outperform males in scales of empathy and emotion recognition [4]. This is explained by the "Gender Socialization Hypothesis" [12] – girls are encouraged from a young age to pay attention to relationships, connections and emotional expression, while boys are often oriented towards independence and emotional suppression. The results at Le Do school reflect this rule. The remaining competencies showed no significant differences between genders ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5. *Students' socio-emotional competence from a gender perspective*

The components	Sex	Mean	SD	t	P	N^2
Self-awareness	Male	4.53	0.75		0.17	.004
	Female	4.43	0.85			
Self-management	Male	3.89	0.82		0.26	.009
	Female	3.73	0.78			
Social awareness	Male	4.36	0.84	3.15	.002	.029
	Female	4.63	0.74			
Establishing and maintaining social relationships	Male	4.28	0.81		0.05	.001
	Female	4.31	0.79			
Responsible decision-making	Male	4.49	0.84		0.27	.004
	Female	4.60	0.78			

4.2.2. Differences in socio-emotional competence across grade levels

Table 6 shows statistically significant differences in Self-Awareness competence among students of different grade levels ($F = 2.042$, $p = .049 < .05$). Specifically, the

average score for this competence was highest in grade 7 and lowest in grade 9. This decline reflects the psychological pressure and shift in cognitive priorities of graduating students facing the entrance exam, limiting their ability to connect and understand their inner selves. This finding is highly consistent with previous empirical evidence by Le Thi Phuong Thanh, Do Thi Xuan Hien, and Vo Viet Tien [21], who reported significant levels of academic anxiety and emotional stress among 9th-grade students in Da Nang during this transitional phase.

Table 6. *Students' social-emotional competence by grade level*

The components	Grade	Mean	SD	F	p	N^2
Self-awareness	6	4.49	.495	2.042	.049	.026
	7	4.66	.502			
	8	4.30	.528			
	9	4.47	.612			
Self-management	6	3.88	.501	611	.747	.003
	7	3.83	.515			
	8	3.79	.534			
	9	3.74	.598			
Social awareness	6	4.48	.512	424	.887	.003
	7	4.53	.498			
	8	4.55	.540			
	9	4.44	.625			
Establishing and maintaining social relationships	6	4.48	.508	1.268	.266	.018
	7	4.21	.511			
	8	4.26	.521			
	9	4.26	.603			
Responsible decision-making	6	4.59	.492	.690	.681	.002
	7	4.49	.505			
	8	4.58	.537			
	9	4.55	.618			

For the remaining competence components, no statistically significant differences were observed (p >.05). However, a noteworthy trend is that grade 9 students had the lowest average scores in most skills (Self-Management, Social Awareness, Establishing and Maintaining Social Relationships) but achieved the highest score in Responsible Decision-Making competence. This shows that despite facing difficulties in regulating emotions, the graduating students at Le Do School have developed rational thinking and a high sense of responsibility in making important decisions for themselves.

4.2.3. Differences in socio-emotional competence from an academic perspective

The results from Table 7 show a clear differentiation in socio-emotional competence according to students' academic performance. There are statistically significant differences in 3 aspects: Self-awareness ($p < 0.05$), self-management ($p < 0.05$), and social awareness ($p < 0.05$). Students with good and fair academic performance consistently outperformed in socio-emotional competence scores. In particular, the self-management competence of the good and fair academic performance groups was significantly higher than that of the underperforming group. Durlak's study confirmed that self-management competence is the strongest predictor of academic achievement. Students who know how to manage time and control distractions often have superior academic results [4]. Conversely, the group of students with underperforming academic performance showed the most significant weakness in social awareness competence.This shows that students who struggle with learning tend to withdraw or lack sensitivity in empathizing with their surroundings, leading to a cycle of low self-confidence [14]. When comparing the differences between average values according to academic performance, the results show a clear differentiation in intrinsic competencies. Specifically, self-management competency shows a statistically significant difference (p =.033) between the good academic group and the unsatisfactory group. This proves Durlak's theory [4] on the role of impulse control ability in academic achievement. However, the homogeneity of relationship skills among academic groups shows that the values of cohesion and compassion at Le Do School are evenly distributed, creating an educational environment without discrimination based on achievement.

Table 7. *Students' social-emotional competence from an academic performance perspective*

The components	Academic performance	Mean	SD	F	P	N^2
Self-awareness	Good	4.57	.76	3.22	.01	.038
	Fair	4.52	.78			
	Satisfactory	4.14	.96			
	Unsatisfactory	4.12	.92			
Self-management	Good	3.87	.81	2.65	.03	.031
	Fair	3.88	.76			
	Satisfactory	3.54	.85			
	Unsatisfactory	3.30	.62			
Social awareness	Good	4.60	.8	2.9	.02	.034
	Fair	4.45	.8			
	Satisfactory	4.38	.78			
	Unsatisfactory	3.75	.68			
Establishing and maintaining social relationships	Good	4.30	.81	.69	.60	.008
	Fair	4.33	.79			
	Satisfactory	4.29	.82			
	Unsatisfactory	3.87	.5			
Responsible decision-making	Good	4.56	.83	1.01	.4	.012
	Fair	4.59	.78			
	Satisfactory	4.53	.79			
	Unsatisfactory	4.00	.9			

Thus, the socio-emotional competence of students at Le Do Secondary School differs from grade level, gender, and academic performance. However, differences were found in some manifestations of the component competencies.

5. Conclusion, Practical Implications, and Limitations

5.1. Conclusion

Social-emotional competence plays a fundamental role in the holistic development of students, helping them identify and regulate emotions, build positive relationships, and effectively adapt to the demands of learning and school life. Especially at the middle school level, this competence plays a crucial role in preventing psychological difficulties, deviant behavior, and improving academic performance.

Theoretically, social-emotional competence is considered a multi-component structure, encompassing a combination of cognition, emotion, attitude, and behavior in social interaction. According to the CASEL approach, this competence is not innate but can be formed and developed through education, experiences, and relationships within the school environment. Research results from Le Do Junior High School show that students' socio-emotional competence is generally at an average to high level, reflecting positive changes in the school's comprehensive education process. Among the component competencies, the ability to establish and maintain social relationships, social awareness, and self-awareness scored high average points, indicating that students have a relatively good ability to empathize, communicate, and build relationships in the school environment. However, self-management competence scored the lowest, suggesting that students still face difficulties in controlling emotions and behavior, managing stress, and maintaining concentration under academic pressure and the psychological demands of their age group. This characteristic is consistent with the psychophysiological development of secondary school students. The study also noted statistically significant differences in socio-emotional competence by gender, grade level, and academic performance. Female students showed an advantage in socio-cognitive competence; students with above-average and excellent academic performance demonstrated higher self-awareness and self-management skills than students with below-average academic performance. These results suggest a strong link between socio-emotional competence and students' learning and personality development. Based on research findings, it can be affirmed that developing socio-emotional competence for junior high school students is a necessary and urgent task in the context of current educational reforms. Schools need to focus on integrating socio-emotional education into teaching activities, experiential learning, and school psychological counseling, especially focusing on improving students' self-management skills. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen coordination between schools, families, and educational forces to create a comprehensive supportive environment for the sustainable socio-emotional development of students.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several practical implications for schools, teachers, parents, and educational policymakers. First, schools should integrate SEL into both curricular and extracurricular activities to foster students' socio-emotional development. Particular attention should be given to self-management skills, as this dimension received the lowest mean score among the five SEL competencies. Programs focusing on emotional regulation, stress management, self-discipline, and coping strategies may help students better manage academic and interpersonal challenges. Second, teachers should receive professional training on SEL-oriented instructional practices so that social-emotional competencies can be embedded across learning activities and classroom management. Third, school counseling services should be strengthened to provide timely psychological support for students experiencing emotional difficulties and academic stress. Finally, collaboration among schools, families, and communities should be enhanced to create a supportive environment that promotes students' social-emotional well-being and holistic development.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a single secondary school in Da Nang City, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the cross-sectional design only provides a snapshot of students' social-emotional competence and does not allow conclusions about developmental changes over time. Third, the study relied exclusively on students' self-reported responses, which may be influenced by social desirability and response bias. Finally, the study focused primarily on demographic differences and did not examine other factors that may influence social-emotional competence, such as family environment, parenting styles, peer relationships, teacher support, or socioeconomic status. Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples, include multiple data sources, and investigate additional predictors of students' social-emotional competence.

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