

Research Article

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Teaching Social Skills to Children with Special Educational Needs in A Greek Sample

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Abstract

Background/purpose. It has been established that students with special educational needs should have equal opportunities for learning with the rest of the formal developmental students in a common school, regardless of their characteristics or difficulties. In an environment that promotes normal physical and emotional well-being, mental development, and cognitive and social skills acquisition for all children. Inclusive education must prioritize social inclusion and ensure individuals' seamless integration into social processes to prevent social exclusion. This study aims to enhance social and emotional skills in students with special educational needs, regarding their personality traits, cognitive and psychological development.

Materials/methods. This quantitative study used a questionnaire conducted in the West Macedonia prefecture in Greece. The academic Teacher Report Scale for Children's 'Test of Psychosocial Adjustment' by Hatzichristou et al. (2011) was used. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed. After confirming acceptable internal consistency of the scales through Cronbach's reliability analyses, the study dimensions were calculated, and Pearson correlation coefficient tests were performed between them. The sample was recruited using a convenience/opportunity sampling method, where the participating teachers were available and suitable given the time and financial constraints.

Results. The teachers in both special and general education viewed students with mild special educational needs as often being friendly and having a lot of friends.

Conclusion. Teachers agreed that all teaching methods were effective or very effective. They had a strong agreement on the effectiveness of hypothetical social situation scenarios. They assist a student in dealing with a realistic scenario of everyday life where they need to choose a way to react.



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1. Introduction

Children with special educational needs can benefit from both early intervention and the development of appropriate social skills to build and maintain friendly relationships with their peers (Frederickson et al., 2007). Cooper (2011), respectively, explored the most effective student support strategies for social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, which are summarized in the following educational strategies:

- Reward systems include positive reinforcement for desired behaviour, material and verbal rewards and withdrawal of privilege in the appearance of undesirable behaviour.
- Techniques of relaxation, self-regulation and self-control.
- Role-playing, modelling.
- Personalized teaching by incorporating students' interests into the content of the lesson and modifying the curriculum.

It is certain that the crucial role of the student-teacher relationship in helping the child acquire the necessary competencies that will lead him to emotional and social competence should not be underestimated (Fox et al., 2003; Levine & Ducharme, 2013; Woolf, 2008). The outcome and effectiveness of education strategies around social difficulties experienced by children can be both decisive and influenced by teachers' perceptions (Woolf, 2008).

Specifically, Cooper (2011) examined the competencies of teachers that can make them more effective at teaching to enhance the social and academic benefits of students with special educational needs. These competencies began with positive teacher-student interaction, which consisted of a well-intentioned attitude, lack of negative reactions and bullying. His personal "warmth" is followed by positive emotions and support. The classroom's natural conditions should be appropriately managed by creating an environment that promotes comfort and intimacy among students. Concentrate on the proper use of teacher interaction between students in the classroom during the learning process.

This research aims to address the gap in understanding how teacher self-efficacy and teaching strategies can impact the social and academic outcomes of students with special educational needs (Kazanopoulos et al., 2022; Leyser et al., 2011). Specifically, it examines the competencies of teachers that can make them more effective at teaching in order to enhance the social and academic benefits of these students. The study explores how positive teacher-student interactions, classroom management, and tailored instructional approaches can improve social skills and academic performance for children with special needs. By investigating the connections between teacher self-efficacy, teaching strategies, and student outcomes, this research seeks to provide insights that can inform professional development and support for educators working with students who face social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (Day & Hong, 2016; Schwab, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between teacher self-efficacy, teaching strategies, and the social and academic outcomes of students with special educational needs. Specifically, the research aims to address the following questions:

RQ1. *What teacher competencies and instructional approaches are associated with more effective teaching of students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties?*

RQ2. *How do positive teacher-student interactions, classroom management techniques, and tailored instructional methods contribute to improved social skills and academic performance for children with special needs?*

RQ3. *What insights can this research provide to inform professional development and support for educators working with students who face social, emotional, and behavioral challenges?*

2. Literature Review

The school environment is the most suitable setting for teaching social skills through intervention programs. In reality, it is not always possible for teachers to carry out such programs. Specifically, the school environment is the natural environment in which the student is socially active and receives many opportunities for interaction with others. The area is well-staffed and has a specialized trained staff who are generally capable of teaching social skills. However, in practice, special education professionals are deprived of the necessary time and resources or lack adequate training. In order to take on and respond appropriately to the responsibility of teaching social skills (Bellini et al., 2007). Practical factors are not the only obstacle to teaching such skills. Often, teachers' own perceptions of the educational priorities of persons with mild or non-formal educational needs marginalize the teaching of social skills through pre-university and academic skills. By focusing on academic goals in order to bridge the cognitive deficits of these students, they are unaware that a lack of social skills can exacerbate their weaknesses in academic skills. Therefore, it is easy to see that an educational program of academic and social competence goals is needed to succeed in educational intervention for students with special educational needs (Scattone, 2007).

Thus, with regard to the importance of teaching social skills, Uysal and Ergenekon (2010) examined the perspectives of 14 special education teachers in a private school. They found that 50% of their research sample acknowledged the value of teaching social skills in children's social acceptance, independence and social integration. It appears that this recognition is still theoretical because no systematic design for corresponding teaching has been found in practice. The existing literature confirms the distinction between views and educational practice, which registers the apparent need to teach social skills, but in practice, it is not integrated into the curriculum. In particular, it is highly contradictory to the fact that in the Uysal & Ergenekon (2010) study, a number of participants believed that the teacher should not be responsible for teaching social skills. In contrast, in a study conducted by Battalio & Stephens (2005), over half of participating teachers, 74 in total, of children with emotional and behavioural problems, have recognized their responsibility and role in teaching social skills. In this survey, 94% of the sample considered social skills teaching to be an essential and crucial component of education.

The teachers who participated in Uysal and Ergenekon's (2010) research recommend adding a social skills lesson to the University Education curriculum. Providing prospective teachers with internships in the development of intervention programs and participating in exemplary social skills education during their undergraduate studies are highly valued. Teachers find the development of in-school training extremely useful in terms of the need for continuous training. Also, it is possible to acquire a personal sense of competence or host conferences on social skills training. In line with Battalio & Stephens's (2005) research, all participating teachers acknowledged their inadequate training and skills in social skills teaching. They suggested lab workshops, classroom tutoring, peer-to-peer, interdisciplinary, and peer-to-peer counselling as ways to fill that specific cognitive gap. In general, teachers seem to favour learning that is more interactive and offers opportunities for collaboration with other teacher colleagues in terms of improving the quality of teaching. The teachers involved in the research of Uysal & Ergenekon (2010) suggested the design and planning in order to implement the generalisation of the social skills acquired. Furthermore, they recommend utilizing multiple teaching methods at both the group and individual levels, as well as teaching within the community. The social skills curriculum can be successfully crowned with high levels of generalization through the development of a cooperative relationship between school and family.

Social-emotional skills development is dependent on teachers' views on social-emotional skills and perspectives on social-emotional learning programs, but they are not always provided. Esen-Aygun and Sahin-Taskin (2017) examined the opinions of primary teachers in Turkey. Their objective was to comprehend how teachers describe social-emotional learning, its role in the learning-teaching

process, and ways to enhance awareness. The findings showed that the majority of teachers were unable to provide a detailed explanation of the concept of socioemotional learning. It is revealing that they said that they had heard about the concept but that they had no other information about its true meaning.

Nevertheless, teachers were present to describe the social-emotional development of the students, and they were capable of describing specific social skills, such as communication, anger control, empathy, or respect. Although they have not included responsible decision-making in the behaviours of children related to socio-emotional learning. The results indicate that teachers require additional training and development. In order that they are competent to recognise socio-emotional skills, but also to develop practices to enable students to develop these skills.

Kourkoutas et al. (2017) examined the perceptions and understandings of Greek teachers on two issues. First, what are social and emotional competencies? Second, how can they be developed within the classroom environment. In modern Western societies, schools can provide efficient and systematic enhancement of social and emotional learning, which is supported. It's probable that children spend more time with their teachers than with their parents at this place. Incorporating social and emotional learning activities in the school environment can be both practical and beneficial. However, deciding on the subjects to be taught and the methods to be used is also important. Kourkoutas et al. (2017) conducted interviews with 30 elementary school teachers based on this framework. The first intriguing outcome was that teachers were not familiar with the term "Social and Emotional Learning". It was revealed that social skills are defined as the ability to develop interpersonal relationships and create dynamic interactions with others in an environment. Furthermore, the development of positive peer relations and the ability to cooperate, adapt and solve problems have been included in the social competencies described by the teachers. In addition, social functioning is facilitated by politeness, acceptance, and consistency. The teachers believe that social skills are essential in the classroom environment. Reinforcing pupils helps them control themselves and follow rules. They also teach them how to listen, when to speak, and wait for their turn. Developing social skills can aid students in being creative, solving problems, and achieving their goals.

According to Kourkoutas et al. (2017), the existing curriculum should incorporate social skills development practices, as proposed by teachers to reinforce social and emotional learning. Their proposal was to stimulate discussion and strive to improve pupils' social and emotional skills through this method. Teachers also suggested an experiential approach to teaching where students will form groups and be encouraged to interact. Through this method, they will have fun, increase their self-esteem, learn how to respect others, and become a part of a team. Regarding the role of teachers in teaching social and emotional skills, they stated that it is their own responsibility to improve these skills. Furthermore, they asserted that teachers should have social and emotional competence as they serve as role models for their students. Their statements indicated that they need to love and be willing to listen to students and also have a good understanding of the local and broader environment. In general, the teachers supported inclusive education and emphasized the need for additional training for Greek teachers. In order to be able to respond effectively to their tasks in inclusive classrooms.

Adams et al. (2017) examined teachers' perceptions of how social skills can be improved for children with SEN. They examined how students' friendships, interactions, and acceptance are better realized within the school environment. Based on teacher responses, during school holidays, students with SNEs interact effectively with their peers, while all children develop cooperative behaviours during class activities. Teachers prefer the inclusive approach because they see in the practice that it is effective and that it leads to the development of social skills for pupils with a SNEs. They also make a very important point that there is a difference between integration and real inclusion, an issue that decision-makers need to look at in more depth. However, socialization and peer acceptance occur in

the ordinary school environment. Students with a SEN develop a sense of belonging that strengthens their self-esteem and motivates them to achieve further accomplishments. Their competence increases as they adjust to larger classrooms and new educational levels and respond to new demands by developing new behaviours. As a result, teachers are implementing methods to improve pupils' co-operation with SEN and their peers. The inclusive educational approach is supported by educators as it allows students to develop the social skills they need for their present and future life. Furthermore, teachers argue that inclusion offers a chance for all students to improve social skills and accept individuality. While also encouraging participation, comprehending that everyone has differences, and developing greater sensitivity towards other's needs. Policymakers need to listen to the voices of teachers, who are directly involved in the educational process, implement strategies, and evaluate results.

Stavrou & Kourkoutas (2017), state that a collaborative approach is necessary to promote resiliency within schools for students with and without SEN. They point out that teachers and parents, as well as other psycho-educational professionals, must work together. Considering that this multidisciplinary approach can reduce school drop-out rates and also improve students' social, emotional and educational skills. Moreover, academic and social skills are interconnected. When pupils engage in social interactions, they develop better decision-making and behavioral skills, but also develop aggressive and disruptive behaviors.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The academic Teacher Report Scale for Children's 'Test of Psychosocial Adjustment' for students aged 7-12, by Hatzichristou et al. (2011), was used. The researchers intentionally selected and adapted questions to align with the study's research objectives. The purpose of intentionally selecting questions was to serve specific educational, instructional, and assessment goals. This approach allows for more targeted and relevant assessments that align with instructional objectives. The reasons for intentionally selecting questions from Hatzichristou et al. (2011)'s academic scale were:

1. Focused Assessment: When instructors intentionally select questions, they can ensure that the assessment directly aligns with the specific content, skills, or learning objectives they want to evaluate. This focused approach allows for a precise measurement of what was taught and learned.

2. Targeted Evaluation: Intentional question selection enables educators to target specific areas of student knowledge or skills. They can pinpoint areas where students may need additional support or challenge based on a clear understanding of student needs.

3. Personalized Learning: In personalized or adaptive learning environments, instructors may intentionally select questions that match a student's proficiency level, allowing for a tailored learning experience. This approach can help students progress at their own pace.

4. Customization: Instructors can tailor assessments to match their teaching style, instructional materials, or curriculum. This customization ensures that the assessment complements the broader educational context.

5. Authentic Assessment: Some educational approaches emphasize authentic assessment, where students are evaluated based on real-world tasks or situations. Intentional question selection may be necessary to replicate these authentic scenarios accurately.

6. Depth of Understanding: Researchers and educators can use intentional selection to assess the depth of a student's understanding. By crafting questions that require critical thinking, analysis, or application, they can gauge higher-order cognitive skills.

7. Performance Assessment: In performance-based assessments, such as presentations or projects, instructors may intentionally select tasks or projects that allow students to demonstrate specific skills or competencies.

8. Diagnostic Assessment: Intentional question selection is valuable for diagnostic assessments that aim to identify individual learning challenges. By carefully choosing questions, educators can gather targeted information about a student's strengths and weaknesses.

9. Formative Assessment: In formative assessment, where the primary goal is to provide ongoing feedback for improvement, instructors may intentionally select questions that align with specific learning goals for a particular instructional phase.

10. Quality Control: In some situations, instructors may choose questions to ensure quality control or to guarantee that the assessment meets certain standards or guidelines.

11. Specialized Knowledge: In academic fields with highly specialized knowledge, such as professional training or advanced scientific research, instructors may need to intentionally select questions to evaluate specialized expertise.

In summary, intentional question selection allows researchers and educators to have more control over the assessment process, ensuring that it serves their instructional goals and the unique needs of their students. This approach can lead to more effective teaching and learning outcomes by providing targeted and relevant assessments.

3.2. Research procedure

The researchers utilized the Google Forms platform to electronically distribute the questionnaire to potential participants. As a result of employing an opportunity sampling approach, the researcher disseminated the questionnaire through school email addresses and professional contacts in academic, work, and personal networks. The teachers who consented to participate in the survey completed and electronically returned the questionnaire to the researcher. The participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and anonymous, and they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without providing an explanation. The present study did not involve any deception and did not pose a risk to the physical or psychological well-being of the participants.

3.3. Sample characteristics

The sample consisted of N = 350 participating teachers, 48% men and 52% women. Teachers' ages varied, with most being over 33 years old (81%). Almost all teachers were university graduates (95%), 53% had undertaken training, 48% had a master's degree and 8% had a PhD/doctoral degree. Their years of service varied, with 29% having up to 10 years of experience and 39% having 11 to 20 years of experience. Most participants were general education teachers (88%), while almost one in two were special education teachers (47%); in particular, 12% worked only in special education, and 53% were employed only in general education.

Of those employed in primary education (total N = 213), 54.5% did so in general class, 22% in parallel support, 15% in integration classes and 8.5% in special schools. Of those who worked in secondary education (total N = 161), 61% did so in general class, 15.5% in special Gymnasiums, 10% in integration classes and 6% in special vocational education and training laboratories (Greek E.E.E.K.). Only 4% of the sample of teachers worked in educational and counseling support centers (KESY) (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of teachers

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Males	168	48.0
	Females	182	52.0
Age	18-25	13	3.7
	26-33	53	15.1
	34-41	113	32.3
	42-49	90	25.7
	50 and over	81	23.1
Educational level	University	334	95.4
	Training/Seminars	185	52.9
	Master's degree	169	48.3
	PhD/Doctorate degree	27	7.7
Years of service	1-10	100	28.6
	11-20	137	39.1
	21-30	69	19.7
	31 and over	44	12.6
Teacher specialty	General education teacher	309	88.3
	Special education teacher	163	46.6
Workplace: Primary education (N = 213)	Special school	18	8.5
	Integration class	32	15.0
	Parallel support	47	22.1
	General class	116	54.5
Workplace: Secondary education (N = 161)	EEEEK	10	6.2
	TEE of special education	5	3.1
	Special Gymnasium	25	15.5
	Special High school	6	3.7
	General class	98	60.9
	Integration class	16	9.9
	Parallel support	1	.6
Workplace: KESY (N = 344)	Yes	15	4.4

Six per cent of teachers had up to 5 students in the classroom (6%), 23% had 6 to 10 students, 19% had 11 to 15 students, 30% had 16 to 20 students, and 21% had more than 20 students in the classroom. The number of children with mild special educational needs in the classroom was 1 to 2 in 30% of cases, 3 to 4 children in 34% of cases, 5 to 6 children in 26% of cases, 7 to 8 children in 6%

of cases and more than 8 children in 3% of cases. Most teachers reported that they had children with diagnoses of mild special educational needs in the classroom (68%).

Most teachers reported that they had children diagnosed with special learning difficulties in their class (72%), 43% reported that they had children with attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and 27% replied that they had children with speech and communication disorders in class. In addition, 23% of teachers had children with mild mental disability in their class, 21% had children with emotional disorders and behavioral problems, 16% had children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and only one teacher reported that there were no children with formal diagnoses of mild special educational needs in the classroom (Table 2).

Table 2. Children with mild special educational needs in the class

		Frequency	Percent
Number of children in class	1-5	21	6.0
	6-10	82	23.4
	11-15	68	19.4
	16-20	106	30.3
	21 and over	73	20.9
Number of children with mild special educational needs in class	1-2	105	30.0
	3-4	119	34.0
	5-6	92	26.3
	7-8	22	6.3
	9 and over	12	3.4
Diagnosis of mild special educational needs in class	Yes	238	68.0
	No	112	32.0
Diagnosis categories of children with mild special educational needs in class*	Special learning difficulties	251	71.7
	Attention deficit-hyperactivity (ADHD)	149	42.6
	Speech and communication disorders	94	26.6
	Mild mental disability	80	22.9
	Emotional disorders/behavioural problems	75	21.4
	Autism spectrum	56	16.0
	None	1	.3

*Teachers could provide more than one answer

4. Results

4.1. Findings for the main items

Teacher readiness in teaching social skills

The following were found for the main questionnaire items. Regarding readiness for teaching of social skills, on average the teachers agreed “very much” that they would like to improve their skills

in social skills teaching (mean score $M = 4.73$), while they agreed “much” that they were familiar with the concept of “social skills” ($M = 4.18$), that they were able to identify and recognize the social difficulties of their students ($M = 4.18$), and that they were capable of teaching social skills effectively ($M = 3.80$). Table 3 presents the relevant results.

Table 3. Teacher readiness in teaching social skills

	M	SD
I feel familiar with the content of the concept of “social skills”	4.18	.653
I am able to identify and recognize the social difficulties of my students	4.18	.737
I feel capable of teaching social skills effectively	3.80	.686
I would like to improve my skills in teaching social skills	4.73	.493

Factors that affect teacher competence to teach social skills

Regarding the factors that can affect competence in social skills teaching (Table 4), the teachers agreed “very much” that such factors include teacher participation in training programs ($M = 4.71$), teacher cooperation with mental health professionals ($M = 4.64$), teachers’ personal views on their role in teaching social skills ($M = 4.54$) and teaching experience ($M = 4.53$). Teachers agreed “much” that other factors that can affect their competence in teaching social skills are collaboration with other teachers ($M = 4.48$), studying scientific material (books, articles, etc.) ($M = 4.25$), as well as a university education ($M = 3.83$).

Table 4. Factors that affect teacher competence to teach social skills

	M	SD
Studies	3.83	.773
Teaching experience	4.53	.554
Collaboration with other teachers	4.48	.539
Collaboration with mental health professionals	4.64	.520
Attending training programs	4.71	.519
The study of scientific material (books, articles, etc.)	4.25	.698
The personal point of view regarding the role of the teacher in the teaching of social skills	4.54	.574

The role of teachers in teaching social skills

Regarding the role that teachers have in social skills teaching (Table 5), participants “very much” that social skills teaching is more effective when carried out collaboratively by class teachers and mental health professionals ($M = 4.69$), and that the school’s role for the psychosocial development of the students is important ($M = 4.67$). Teachers on average agreed “much” that the family has a great responsibility for teaching social skills ($M = 4.37$), that mental health professionals, such as psychologists, have the greatest responsibility for teaching social skills ($M = 4.24$), that teachers have a primary role in the teaching of social skills ($M = 4.00$), and that the teaching of social skills is more effective when it is carried out exclusively by the class teacher ($M = 3.75$).

Table 5. The role of teachers in teaching social skills

	M	SD
The role of the school for the psychosocial development of students is important	4.67	.472
Teachers have a key role to play in teaching social skills	4.00	.610
The family has the sole responsibility for teaching social skills	4.37	.550
Mental health professionals (e.g., psychologists) have the greatest responsibility for teaching social skills	4.24	.503
Teaching social skills becomes more effective when done exclusively by the class teacher	3.75	.516
Teaching social skills proves more effective when done collaboratively by class teachers and mental health professionals	4.69	.469

Barriers to the implementation of social skills teaching programs

Regarding the barriers to the implementation of social skills teaching programs (Table 6), the teachers on average agreed “very much” that such factors include the priority placed on achieving cognitive goals (M = 4.85), the lack of knowledge in social skills teaching (M = 4.83), the lack of cooperation with the family (M = 4.81), a feeling of incompetence in social skills teaching (M = 4.74), as well as the limited time available for teaching (M = 4.54). The teachers also agreed “much” that other barriers are the absence of mental health professionals in education (M = 4.48), the depreciation of social skills teaching in the school curriculum (M = 4.31), the absence of the principal’s support (M = 4.08), and the limited access to training materials and resources (M = 4.08).

Table 6. Barriers to the implementation of social skills teaching programs

	M	SD
The feeling of incompetence in teaching social skills	4.74	.469
Incomplete knowledge regarding the teaching of social skills	4.83	.382
The limited time during the educational act	4.54	.579
The priority given to achieving cognitive goals	4.85	.392
Limited access to educational materials and resources	4.08	.679
The degradation of the teaching of social skills in the curricula	4.31	.667
The absence of mental health professionals from the education system	4.48	.585
Inadequate cooperation with the family	4.81	.403
The absence of support from the Director	4.08	.803

Factors that affect the selection of social skills taught to children with mild SEN

Regarding the factors that influence the choice of social skills taught to children with mild educational needs (Table 7), on average the teachers agreed “very much” on the type and extent of the problem that each child has (M = 4.80), on their personal evaluation, as teachers, regarding the needs of the children (M = 4.75), on children’s needs within their current educational context (M = 4.68), and on the children’s daily life requirements (M = 4.66). On average, teachers agreed “much” that other factors influencing the selection of social skills to be taught to children with mild special

educational needs are the child's age ($M = 4.42$), previous educational evaluation ($M = 4.42$) and cognitive level ($M = 4.42$). Teachers also agreed "much" that factors that affect the choice of social skills taught include the curriculum for children with mild special educational needs ($M = 4.40$), the social skills of same-aged children with typical development ($M = 4.23$), the allotted time in the school curriculum ($M = 4.14$), parents' expectations ($M = 4.03$), the educational framework that the child will join in the future ($M = 3.81$), and the views of colleagues at school ($M = 3.72$).

Table 7. Factors that affect the selection of social skills taught to children with mild special educational needs

	M	SD
The child's age	4.42	.565
The child's cognitive level	4.42	.599
The type and extent of problem each child has	4.80	.408
The child's needs in the educational context he is in at the moment	4.68	.552
The demands of a child's everyday life	4.66	.553
The educational context the child will be in in the future	3.81	.728
Prior educational assessment in the child's life	4.42	.580
Your personal evaluation about the child's needs	4.75	.452
The colleagues' views at school	3.72	.652
The parents' expectations	4.03	.575
The analytical programme for children with mild special educational needs	4.40	.624
The time available in the school curriculum	4.14	.611
The social skills of children with typical development at this age	4.23	.655

Educational practices frequently used to teach social skills to children with mild SEN

On average, the teachers agreed "very much" that the educational practices frequently used for teaching social skills to children with mild special educational needs (Table 8) include oral praise ($M = 4.83$), social stories ($M = 4.78$), visual guidance ($M = 4.66$) and oral/verbal guidance ($M = 4.58$). Participants, on average, agreed "much" that utilizing classmates as assistants ($M = 4.40$), role-playing ($M = 4.23$), and direct instruction ($M = 3.99$) are other frequently used practices. Finally, teachers expressed a "moderate" level of agreement for the frequency of use of material rewards ($M = 3.49$) and physical guidance ($M = 3.35$).

Table 8. Educational practices frequently used to teach social skills to children with mild special educational needs

	M	SD
Direct instruction	3.99	.751
Physical guidance	3.35	.896
Oral guidance	4.58	.517
Visual guidance (use of pictures, illustrations, videos)	4.66	.612
Social stories	4.78	.572
Role play	4.23	.787
Peers as assistants	4.40	.746
Oral praise	4.83	.387
Material rewards	3.49	.856

Location where social skills teaching takes place for children with mild SEN

Regarding the location of social skills teaching for children with mild special educational needs (Table 9), on average teachers agreed “much” that teaching takes place in the classroom (M = 4,18) and in the schoolyard (M = 4.07), however they only agreed “a little” that teaching takes place in areas outside the school (M = 2.07).

Table 9. Location where social skills teaching takes place for children with mild special educational needs

	M	SD
In the classroom	4.18	.584
In the school yard	4.07	.844
In areas outside the school	2.07	.985

Frequency of social skills teaching for children with mild SEN

Concerning the frequency of social skills teaching for children with mild special educational needs (Table 10), on average the teachers agreed “very much” that the teaching takes place during non-specified times (M = 4.08), while they only agreed “a little” that teaching takes place at a specified time in the daily schedule (M = 2.80).

Table 10. Frequency of social skills teaching for children with mild special educational needs

	M	SD
At a specified time of the daily schedule	2.80	.899
At non-specified times (accidental teaching)	4.08	.672

Effectiveness of social skills teaching methods

Regarding the effectiveness of the methods of social skills teaching (Table 11), the teachers of the study on average agreed “very much” that hypothetical scenarios of social situations (M = 4.89), use of prompts (M = 4.45), use of technology like internet, educational software and multimedia (M = 4.44), and task analysis (M = 4.34) are effective methods. The teachers agreed “much” that role-

playing ($M = 4.33$), modelling behaviours ($M = 4.12$), shaping ($M = 3.88$) and chaining ($M = 3.62$) are also effective methods of social skills teaching. Respondents, on average, expressed "moderate" agreement on the effectiveness of time delay ($M = 3.39$).

Table 11. Effectiveness of social skills teaching methods

	M	SD
Role play	4.33	.601
Modelling	4.12	.694
Prompting	4.45	.612
Shaping	3.88	.706
Task analysis	4.34	.694
Hypothetical scenarios of social conditions	4.89	.336
Use of technology	4.44	.616
Chaining	3.62	.727
Time delay	3.39	.680

Adjustment behaviours of children with mild SEN

Finally, regarding the adjustment of children with mild special educational needs in the classroom (Table 12), teachers on average agreed that students with mild special educational needs "often" sought the company of others ($M = 4.34$), were friendly ($M = 4.33$), offered help and support to other children gladly ($M = 4.13$), were liked by their classmates ($M = 4.10$), had many friends ($M = 3, 98$), expressed their opinions without hesitation ($M = 3.97$), completed their work ($M = 3.74$), listened carefully to teacher's instructions ($M = 3.69$), and showed an understanding of classmates' feelings ($M = 3.67$). Teachers also agreed that children with mild special educational needs "often" learned as much as they could ($M = 3.65$), were focused ($M = 3.63$), worked hard ($M = 3.56$), as well as maintained their attention on the subject they worked on ($M = 3.51$).

The teachers of the study, on average, replied that students with mild special educational needs "sometimes" paid attention in the lesson ($M = 3.45$), showed others how they felt or talked about their feelings ($M = 3.40$), were angry when they were teased by classmates ($M = 3.38$) and were easily distracted ($M = 3.12$), participants also felt that children with mild special educational needs "sometimes" calmly tried to find the cause of the problem faced ($M = 3.06$), teased their classmates ($M = 3, 03$), reacted strongly when they were reprimanded ($M = 2.70$), annoyed others ($M = 2.70$), quarrelled with others ($M = 2.66$), were afraid of making a mistake ($M = 2.66$), violated rules ($M = 2.62$), or gave up easily ($M = 2.51$).

Finally, the teachers of the study reported that students with special needs "rarely" shouted at others ($M = 2.33$), lied ($M = 2.26$) or did not get along with others ($M = 2.09$), while they were "rarely" rejected by their classmates ($M = 1.97$) and rarely caused damage to objects that did not belong to them ($M = 1.92$).

Table 12. Adjustment behaviours of children with mild special educational needs

	M	SD
1. Concentrates	3.63	.589
2. Is friendly	4.33	.663
3. Pays attention	3.45	.607
4. Breaks rules	2.62	.660
5. Is liked by classmates	4.10	.626
6. Doesn't get along with others	2.09	.556
7. Works hard	3.56	.572
8. Harms other	2.70	.696
9. Shows empathy and compassion for others' feelings	3.67	.638
10. Gets angry when provoked by other children	3.38	.739
11. Stays on task	3.51	.575
12. Yells at others	2.33	.649
13. Is easily distracted	3.12	.545
14. Is rejected by classmates	1.97	.659
15. Fights	2.66	.657
16. Lies	2.26	.728
17. Has many friends	3.98	.610
18. Harms property	1.92	.671
19. Completes assignments	3.74	.644
20. Teases classmates	3.03	.663
21. Learns up to ability	3.65	.561
22. Shows others how he feels - Talks about his feelings	3.40	.873
23. Tries calmly to find the cause of the problem he/she is facing	3.06	.699
24. Seeks the company of others	4.34	.690
25. Expresses his/her opinion without hesitation	3.97	.719
26. Listen carefully to the teacher's instructions	3.69	.602
27. He/she is happy to offer his/her help and support to other children	4.13	.696
28. He /she is afraid of making mistakes	2.66	.702
29. He/she reacts strongly when they argue with him/ her	2.70	.835
30. He/she gives up the effort	2.51	.821

Reliability

Next, Cronbach reliability coefficients were calculated for the eight main item groups of the questionnaire. Results showed that seven out of eight scales had high and acceptable reliability, with

values ranging from $\alpha = 0.70$ to $\alpha = 0.90$. The “role of teachers in the teaching of social skills” scale had low reliability with $\alpha = 0.59$ (6 items). After removing one item (“14.3. The family has the sole responsibility for teaching social skills”), the reliability level increased to acceptable levels, with $\alpha = 0.67$. This suggests that one of the original items in this scale was potentially problematic or not well-aligned with the overall construct being measured. Removing this item helped improve the internal consistency of the scale, indicating the remaining items were more coherently measuring the same underlying concept.

Based on the results of the reliability analysis, the dimensions of the study were calculated by summing the responses for each group of items and then dividing their sum by the number of items per group. The results are presented in Table 13.

Table 13. Scale reliability and calculation of dimensions of the study

	Reliability	N of items	M	SD
Readiness in teaching social skills	.812	4	4.22	.519
Factors that affect teacher competence to teach social skills	.771	7	4.43	.392
The role of teachers in teaching social skills	.668	5*	4.27	.339
Barriers in the implementation of social skills teaching programs	.700	9	4.53	.308
Factors that affect the selection of social skills taught	.807	13	4.35	.322
Educational practices frequently used to teach social skills	.722	9	4.26	.389
Effectiveness of social skills teaching methods	.780	9	4.16	.385
Adjustment behaviours of children with mild special educational needs	.897	30	3.61	.335

Cronbach's alpha, a widely used reliability measure, was selected to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the data collected in this study. This statistical procedure evaluates how closely related a set of items are as a group, providing an indication of the scale's overall reliability. By calculating Cronbach's alpha, the researchers could determine the extent to which the various teaching methods and competencies measured in the study were consistently captured, ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

Correlation between the dimensions of the study

Finally, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the eight dimensions of the study. The results, presented in Table 14, showed that most of the dimensions had a statistically significant and positive relationship with all other dimensions, with the relationships being mainly small to medium in size. For example, the dimension of “Readiness to teach social skills” had a statistically significant and strong positive relationship with the dimension “Factors that affect the teacher’s competence in teaching” ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$), as well as weak positive relationships with all other variables (from $r = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$ to $r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the dimension “Factors that affect teacher competence to teach social skills”, also had a statistically significant and weak to moderately positive relationships with the other dimensions (from $r = 0.20$ to $r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$).

The results were similar for the other dimensions, with the only exception of the dimension “Adjustment behaviours of children with mild special educational needs”, which was the only dimension that had non-statistically significant relationships, specifically with four of out of the seven

other dimensions. These were the dimensions “The role of teachers in teaching social skills”, “Barriers in the implementation of social skills teaching programs”, “Factors that affect the selection of social skills taught”, and “Effectiveness of social skills teaching methods” (all $p > 0.05$).

The correlations between the different dimensions of the study were calculated to examine the relationships among these key aspects of teacher perceptions and practices related to teaching social skills to students with mild special educational needs. Analyzing the associations between factors like readiness to teach social skills, competence, barriers, and teaching methods can provide insights into how these dimensions are interconnected and how they may influence each other.

Table 14. Pearson correlations between the dimensions of the study

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 ^a
Readiness in teaching social skills	.569**	.319**	.208**	.309**	.387**	.211**	.136*
Factors that affect teacher competence to teach social skills		.423**	.332**	.397**	.390**	.298**	.200**
The role of teachers in teaching social skills			.315**	.507**	.265**	.395**	.005
Barriers in the implementation of social skills teaching programs				.409**	.220**	.167**	.054
Factors that affect the selection of social skills taught					.363**	.412**	.046
Educational practices frequently used to teach social skills						.354**	.129*
Effectiveness of social skills teaching methods							.026

a. “Adjustment behaviours of children with mild special educational needs”. **. $p < 0.01$. *. $p < 0.05$.

5. Discussion

According to the teachers, some of the factors that can greatly affect their competence in teaching social skills, were participating in training programs, collaboration with mental health professionals, personal views on their role in teaching social skills and teaching experience. Moreover, other factors deemed able to influence competence in social skills teaching were collaborating with other teachers, having a university education, and studying scientific material such as books and scientific articles.

The implementation of social skills teaching programs was impeded by obstacles. In accordance with the teachers and in line with their significance, the priority was given to achieving cognitive goals, overcoming a lack of knowledge, lacking cooperation with the student's family, teacher incompetence, and limited time allocated for teaching. The lack of mental health professionals in education was another factor that made it difficult to implement social skills teaching programs. Additionally, the curriculum lacks social skills education, the school's principal lacks support, and there is a decrease in access to resources and training materials.

According to the teachers, the selection of social skills for children with mild special educational needs was greatly affected by certain factors. More precisely, determined the type and extent of each student's problem, the teacher's personal assessment of students' needs, the current educational needs of students, as well as their daily life needs and requirements for them. Other factors perceived as affecting the choice of social skills taught were age, prior educational assessment, and cognitive level of children. Lastly, the curriculum for students with mild special educational needs, the social skills of same-aged typically-developing children, the time allotted in the school curriculum, parents' expectations, the educational environment in which students will be incorporated in the future, and ultimately, the attitudes and perceptions of other teachers in school.

The teachers were in agreement that teaching is more effective when teachers collaborate with mental health professionals, and that the school's role in the psychosocial development of students is significant. The participants agreed that teachers have the primary role in teaching social skills, the family has a significant responsibility, and psychologists and mental health professionals have an even greater responsibility. Moreover, teachers agreed that teaching social skills is more effective when they are conducted exclusively by the class teacher. In terms of their ability to teach social skills, teachers were highly motivated to improve their teaching skills. The concept of social skills was familiar to them. They were able to comprehend the social difficulties of their students, and they felt confident in their ability to teach social skills effectively.

Last but not least, the educational methods used by participants to teach social skills to children with mild special educational needs included verbal praise, social stories, visual guidance, and oral/verbal guidance. The teachers of the study employed role play, direct instruction, and the use of "classmates as assistants" to teach social skills. Members of the sample only used material rewards and physical guidance moderately as teaching practices. The current results also indicate that researchers should adjust to the demographic characteristics of students. It is essential to consider gender, age, and grade level when analysing the effects of intervention programs or the onset and development of behaviour problems.

6. Conclusion

The results indicated that teachers in both special and general education viewed students with mild special educational needs as often friendly and having a lot of friends. As well, seek the company of others and to help and support others, to be liked by their peers, to be able to express their opinions without hesitation, to listen to the teacher's instructions, to concentrate and pay attention to the tasks at hand, to complete their work, to understand other students' feelings, to exert effort, and to learn as much as they could.

According to RQ1, the current study examined teacher competencies and instructional approaches associated with more effective teaching of students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. Key findings suggest that teachers who are highly motivated to improve their social skills teaching skills, who can comprehend their students' social difficulties, and who feel confident in their ability to teach social skills effectively are more likely to use effective teaching methods such as verbal praise, social stories, visual guidance, role play, and direct instruction. Additionally, researchers should consider the demographic characteristics of students, including

gender, age, and grade level, when analyzing the effects of intervention programs or the onset and development of behavior problems.

According to RQ2, positive teacher-student interactions, effective classroom management techniques, and tailored instructional methods can all contribute to improved social skills and academic performance for children with special needs. Positive relationships between teachers and students, along with clear behavioral expectations and support structures, create an environment conducive to social-emotional learning and academic growth. When teachers differentiate instruction and utilize evidence-based practices, they are better able to address the unique needs of students with disabilities and help them develop the skills needed for success in school and beyond.

According to RQ3, the research provides several important insights to inform professional development and support for educators working with students who face social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. First, it suggests that teachers who are highly motivated to improve their social skills teaching skills, have a strong understanding of their students' social difficulties, and feel confident in their ability to teach social skills effectively are more likely to use a variety of effective teaching methods such as verbal praise, social stories, visual guidance, role play, and direct instruction. Second, the findings indicate that researchers should consider the demographic characteristics of students, including gender, age, and grade level, when analyzing the effects of intervention programs or the onset and development of behavior problems. This underscores the need for tailored, student-centered approaches to supporting students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. Overall, this research highlights the importance of providing educators with the knowledge, skills, and resources to create positive classroom environments and effectively address the diverse needs of their students.

The teachers reported that students with mild special educational needs sometimes paid attention to the lesson. Furthermore, they displayed their emotions to others, teased or annoyed other students, and became irritated when teased by others. Students with mild special educational needs were often distracted, seeking to understand the causes of their problems, and reacting strongly when they were criticized. Also, their needs have a tendency to quarrel, frighten, fail to follow school rules, and give up trying easily. However, according to the teachers, children with mild special educational needs rarely shouted or lied. Their relationships with others are typically good, they are rarely rejected by classmates, and they rarely abuse or damage belongings they don't own.

Teachers generally agreed that all teaching methods were effective or very effective. In particular, they had a strong agreement on the effectiveness of hypothetical social situation scenarios. The teacher assists a student in dealing with a realistic scenario of everyday life where they need to choose a way to react. Participants strongly agreed with the use of prompting, where the teacher offers systematic verbal, visual or physical assistance to the student immediately after the presentation of the teaching materials and prior to the student providing his/her answer. In addition, teachers strongly agreed with the effectiveness of the use of technology, such as the internet, educational software and multimedia. Furthermore, they agreed on the effectiveness of task analysis, which evaluates a skill in small steps to gradually achieve it.

Teachers agreed that role-play is an effective teaching method for social skills development, where the student assumes a role through which he/she has the opportunity to practice problem-solving techniques in a safe and supportive environment. Participants also agreed with the effectiveness of modelling, in which an adult or peer has a desired type of reaction that students imitate, with the effectiveness of shaping, where the teacher praises the behavioural variations he/she teaches so that the desired behavioural goals can be gradually achieved. According to teachers, the chain link method is effective because it breaks down skill acquisition into small steps and the student performs the first or last step or a number of steps to obtain the desired behaviour.

On average, respondents agreed with the effectiveness of time delay at a moderate level. The teacher's delayed prompting after the teaching material or instruction is presented is the basis for this.

7. Suggestion

This research is necessary to provide insights to inform professional development and support for educators working with students facing social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. By examining the teacher competencies and instructional approaches associated with more effective teaching in this area, the findings can help guide the training and resources provided to teachers to better address the diverse needs of their students. Last but not least, the educational methods used by participants to teach social skills to children with mild special educational needs included verbal praise, social stories, visual guidance, and oral/verbal guidance. The teachers of the study employed role play, direct instruction, and the use of "classmates as assistants" to teach social skills. Members of the sample only used material rewards and physical guidance moderately as teaching practices. The current results also indicate that researchers should adjust to the demographic characteristics of students. It is essential to consider gender, age, and grade level when analysing the effects of intervention programs or the onset and development of behaviour problems.

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