



Research Paper

Identifying Strategies of Primary School Teachers in Developing Social Competencies



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Abstract

Social competence is the human ability to perform personal independence and social responsibility. This study aimed to identify the strategies used by female fifth-grade elementary school teachers in Khorramabad to foster students' social competencies during the 2023-2024 academic year. The research was qualitative and was conducted with a phenomenological approach. To select the participants with rich information in the present study, the researcher's diagnosis and teachers' readiness (available sampling) and semi-structured interviews were used to collect information. The interviews continued until the data saturation stage; Therefore, the final sample size consisted of 20 participants. The information obtained from the interviews was coded (open, axial and selective), categorized and analyzed using theme analysis method. The reliability of the research was obtained through agreement between the coders, which showed an agreement coefficient of 0.90. The validation of the extracted themes was done by obtaining the views of the participants and comparing them with the processes in the research background. Findings of this study included teaching strategies of 4 main components of social competence (cognitive; behavioral; emotional and motivational skills) based on the four-dimensional model of Flanner, Liz & philhps (1990). According to the result of the theme analysis; Strategies used to develop elementary students' social competence include an interactive learning model of social approach models; The model of social learning was one of the patterns of approach of behavioral systems and the model of learning through counseling was one of the models of individual approach. The result of this research showed that teachers use different teaching models to teach different components of social competence. Identifying these models is the starting point to examine the suitability of each model with different components in future researches.

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Introduction

Social competence is considered a complex system comprising social skills and motivations, cognitive and social abilities, as well as lived social experiences. It encompasses the ability to achieve personal goals (Anderman & Midgley, 1997), the capacity to organize and sustain individual and environmental resources (Faraji et al., 2015), effective interpersonal interaction (Correia & Viegas, 2022), and the ability to care for oneself while offering support and care to others (Babakhani & Parandin, 2023). In addition, social competence includes several core components: an awareness of one's own emotions and abilities; an understanding of others' emotions and, to some extent, their abilities; standards for self-regulation and internal control; a degree of self-direction; the ability to communicate effectively with others; achieving harmony and appropriateness in social interactions; the capacity for empathetic communication; and the ability to engage in collective actions. (Gedviliene, Gerviene, Pasvenskiene, & Ziziene, 2014) also emphasize this multidimensional structure in their approach to defining social competence.

According to (Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001) emotional social competence refers to the ability to effectively connect with one's own emotions, to accurately interpret and appropriately respond to others' emotional expressions, and to be aware of, accept, and regulate one's own emotional experiences.

social competence refers to the ability to effectively send and receive messages and to experience the outcomes of social interactions (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Similarly, (DuBois & Felner, 1996) conceptualize social competence as comprising four core components: cognitive skills, behavioral skills, emotional-affective skills, and motivational skills. Cognitive skills involve decision-making, judgment-related abilities, learning capacity, and the ability to acquire essential information. Behavioral skills include negotiation, role-playing, assertiveness, seeking support, conversational abilities for initiating and sustaining interactions, and emotional behavior skills in dealing with others. Emotional-affective skills involve emotional regulation and the ability to manage emotional arousal, as well as emotional capacities for establishing positive relationships—such as the ability to form constructive interpersonal bonds, build and maintain mutual trust, and develop supportive relationships. Motivational skills relate to one's value system, level of moral development, and the sense of self-efficacy and self-control.

Each of these four components plays a vital role in an individual's experience of being liked, accepted, and in the development of self-confidence. Social competence is a complex construct resulting from the integration of all four dimensions (DuBois & Felner, 1996) In this regard, some scholars argue that the instruction of social competence should be implemented through training in all four domains: cognitive,

behavioral, emotional, and motivational (Weisani & Shehniyelagh, 2019).

Accordingly, possessing cognitive skills is among the key factors that contribute to enhancing one's sense of social competence. In this regard, research findings indicate that training in cognitive and metacognitive self-regulation strategies has a significant impact on students' perceived competence and academic achievement (Yaareemoghadam, Ja'faree, Ya'ghoobee, & Mohagheghee, 2013). Another approach to improving and developing social competence involves psychological interventions, particularly those rooted in positive psychology. In this context, the findings of (Shahsavari & Esmaeili, 2018) demonstrated that Seligman's flourishing intervention led to an increase in social competence among girls with social anxiety disorder.

Furthermore, the results of research by (Badri Gargari, Ahrari, Fathi Azar, & Mirnasab, 2018) indicated that a social-emotional learning program can enhance students' social competencies and their satisfaction with school. Additionally, social competence is closely related to the improvement of both individual and social life skills. In this context, research findings demonstrate that life skills training has a positive impact on increasing students' social competence (Beirami, Hashemi, Mirnasab, & Kolyaei, 2018).

The acquisition of social competence requires not only individual characteristics but also social attributes. Findings from (Ma, 2012) study on students' acquisition of social

competence indicated that, in addition to moral development, the development of citizenship competencies and national identity is essential at both the primary and secondary school levels. In that study, social competence was defined in terms of interpersonal relationships, personal and group identity, and the development of civic capabilities. In several studies, the improvement of social skills—such as cooperation, assertiveness, and self-control—has been pursued within the framework of social competence education programs (Sheikhmohammadi & Hassanzadeh, 2014). The findings of (Common et al., 2019) showed that social skills training is associated with success both within and beyond the school environment. In fact, the development of social skills significantly influences individuals' success in various areas of life. In this regard, (Beirami et al., 2018) found that social competence education based on the Flanner model had a positive effect on increasing resilience and reducing victimization among students who had been subjected to bullying. It is important to note that teaching social competence to students is one of the key responsibilities of the school. The school serves as an effective channel for transmitting essential social skills, knowledge, values, and competencies. It must provide opportunities for learners to acquire social competencies as part of the socialization process (Ahmadpour Torki, Hakim Javadi, & Soltani Shal, 2018). Moreover, the development of emotional social competence in school is linked to academic achievement (Elias & Haynes, 2008). Mastery of social competence skills is

also a critical aspect of child development. These skills are even more significant in early childhood than in adulthood, as the early years serve as a foundation for lifelong development. Therefore, the transmission of social competence skills during the early years is essential for children's future success (Messo & Shukia, 2022). Conversely, deficiencies in social competence may negatively affect several fundamental domains, including academic performance, interpersonal relationships, behavior, mental health, and life outcomes in adulthood (Øzerk, Özerk, & Silveira-Zaldivar, 2021).

These skills, knowledge, and social values should be transferred to students within the framework of the curriculum. Given that teachers are considered the core and implementers of the curriculum, they must possess the necessary professional characteristics to foster social competence in students. In this regard, research findings have shown that teachers' competence in performing their professional duties (such as teaching, coaching, classroom management, curriculum planning, and professional development) is essential for the development of social competence in students (Parnawi & Taridi, 2018). Considering that previous research on social competence has primarily focused on teaching specific social skills, psychological interventions, and their impact on the development of social competence, the researcher was unable to find a study directly examining the strategies used by teachers to foster social competence. Therefore, the main issue in this study was to identify the strategies employed by fifth-grade primary

school teachers to develop social competence in students using a qualitative approach. The goal was to uncover which patterns these strategies focus on. To achieve this, the framework of (DuBois & Felner, 1996) which includes cognitive, behavioral, motivational, and emotional components, was used as the theoretical foundation in designing the interview questions.

Research Method

The present study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The purpose of phenomenological research is to explore the meaning of a particular phenomenon or concept as perceived by a group of individuals (Bazargan, 2013).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the resulting data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a data reduction and interpretation strategy through which qualitative data are categorized, classified, summarized, and reconstructed. Fundamentally, thematic analysis is a descriptive strategy that facilitates the identification of patterns and significant concepts within a qualitative data set. It is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, providing a process for transforming scattered and diverse data into rich and detailed findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research population consisted of female fifth-grade primary school teachers in Khorramabad. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling with criterion-based

selection. In accordance with the principle of data saturation, interviews were conducted with 20 female fifth-grade teachers, selected based on the researcher's judgment and their willingness to participate, and continued until no new data emerged. As a general rule of thumb, conducting a minimum of 20 to 30

interviews is recommended in the data collection process (Bazargan, 2013). The demographic characteristics of the participants, including years of teaching experience and educational level, are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Teaching Experience of the Sample in the Study

Years of Experience	Frequency	Percentage
0-10	10	50%
11-20	6	30%
21-30	4	20%

Based on the information in the above table, it was found that out of the 20 female fifth-grade primary school teachers, 10 (50%) had a work experience ranging from 0 to 10

years, 6 (30%) had work experience ranging from 11 to 20 years, and 4 (20%) had work experience ranging from 21 to 30 years

Table 2: Educational Level of the Sample in the Study

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Bachelor's Degree	12	60%
Master's Degree and Above	8	40%

Based on the information in the above table, out of the 20 female fifth-grade primary school teachers, 12 (60%) had a bachelor's degree, and 8 (40%) had a master's degree or higher.

In this study, the researcher employed open-ended questions during the interviews, structured around the four dimensions of social competence as proposed by (DuBois & Felner, 1996) namely: behavioral, emotional-affective, cognitive, and motivational skills.

The validity of the interview questions was confirmed by ten experts in the field of educational sciences. To analyze the interview data, thematic analysis was used, including open, axial, and selective coding. To ensure the credibility of the findings, two methods were employed: participant validation (member checking) and expert review. In order to assess the reliability of the extracted open codes, inter-coder agreement was used. The overall agreement coefficient

for all dimensions of social competence was 0.85, indicating a high level of consistency. The reliability coefficients for each of the four

social competence skill domains were as follows:

Table 3 - Inter-coder Agreement Coefficients for Social Competence Skills

Social Competence Skills	Agreement Coefficient
Cognitive	91%
Behavioral	86%
Motivational	84%
Emotional	79%

Since the agreement coefficient for the overall skills as well as each individual skill exceeded 0.60, the reliability is considered acceptable.

Finding

Following the analysis of the interviews and the coding process, a total of 35 open

codes, 3 axial codes, and 3 selective codes were identified, reflecting the strategies used by teachers to foster social competence. Below is a presentation of the extracted open, axial, and selective codes, categorized according to the components of social competence.

Table 4 – Sample Open, Axial, and Selective Codes Extracted from Qualitative Data for the Cognitive Skills Component

Row	Component	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes (Chosen)
1	Cognitive Skills	Scientific workshops	Interactive model	Social approach
2		Social approach	Cooperation	Group discussion and inquiry
3		Cooperation		Grouping students (teamwork)
4		Inquiry and group discussion		

For example, Interviewee #1, in response to the question, "What strategies do you use to help students get acquainted quickly with new individuals?" states: "When a new student enters the class,

I introduce them to the other students and ask them to collaborate with the new student, helping them if they are falling behind in their studies, and explaining the classroom rules and information. This collaboration helps create a friendship between them." The open code assigned to this response is "Cooperation."

Based on the open codes obtained, a sample of which is presented in Table 4, the "Interactive Model" (from social approach patterns) is identified as an axial code. The interactive model emphasizes social experience. The fundamental principle of educational activities is the formation of collaborative relationships in the classroom. The interactive model emphasizes participatory learning and the learning community.

Table 5 - Sample Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Selective Codes Extracted from Qualitative Data (Behavioral Skills Componen

Row	Component	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Code (Optional)
1	Behavioral Skills	Self-control training (behavior management)	Social learning model	Behavioral systems approach
2		New behavioral models (modeling)		
3		Negative reinforcement		
4		Positive reinforcement		
5		Behavioral practice		

For example, Interviewee 6, in response to the question: "What strategies do you use to help others not recognize the student as a liar?" says: "As a role model, I never lie. If I have a student who lies, I don't label them as a liar, I talk to their family. When the child lies, I show a reaction to their lie so that the student understands their behavior is wrong. For example, I don't laugh in response to a lie, or I make a sad face when they lie." The open code assigned to this response is "negative reinforcement."

Based on the open codes provided in Table 5, it can be said that in these strategies, the desired behavior is reinforced by a reinforcer, and as a result of the reinforcement, the extent and likelihood of the behavior occurring increase. In fact, it is the reinforcers that cause the behavior to change and become stabilized. Therefore, the "social learning model" (from the behavioral approach models) has been suggested as the axial code

Table 6 - Sample of Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Selective Codes Extracted from Qualitative Data (Emotional-Affective Skills Component)

Row	Component	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes
1	Emotional-Affective Skills	Positive emotional atmosphere in the classroom	Non-directive model (learning through counseling), Social learning model	Individual teaching and learning approach, Behavioral systems approach
2		Addressing conditions that create dysfunctional behavior		
3		Self-awareness regarding dysfunctional behavior		
5		Self-control training		

For example, Interviewee #7, in response to the question: "What strategies do you use to help a student not become discouraged if they fail an exam?" states: "I ask the student to write down the reasons for their failure and analyze them, and to consider the paths they could have taken to succeed but didn't, and then plan again to reach their goal." The open code assigned to this response is "Self-awareness."

Based on the open codes obtained, some examples of which are provided in Table 6, we can suggest the non-directive or counseling teaching model (from individual approach models), which emphasizes friendly relationships between the teacher and the learner, and the social learning model (from behavioral approach models), which emphasizes behavior management by the learner, as the axial codes.

Table 7 - Examples of Open Codes, Axial Codes, and Selective Codes Extracted from Qualitative Data (Component of Motivational Skills)

Row	Component	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Codes
1	Motivational Skills	Encouraging student progress	Non-directive model (learning through counseling), Social learning model	Individual teaching and learning approach, Behavioral systems approach

2		Teaching communication skills		
3		Enhancing self-confidence		
4		Providing role models		

For example, Interviewee No. 3, in response to the question: "What strategies do you use to help a student feel acknowledged and happy due to their progress in lessons and school?" says: "Through individual encouragement from the teacher in class, or group praise for active students at the front of the class, or receiving a gift from their family, the student feels acknowledged. Additionally, I sometimes encourage the student by giving them roles such as becoming a teacher's assistant, representative, or group leader." The code assigned to this response is "Encouraging Student Progress."

Based on the open codes obtained, some of which are presented in Table 7, the axial codes that were deduced are the non-directive model or learning through counseling (from the behavioral approach models) and the social learning model (from the behavioral systems approach models).

The aim of this study was to identify the strategies employed by female fifth-grade teachers in elementary schools to foster students' social competence. Based on the framework of (DuBois & Felner, 1996) four components were considered for social competence: cognitive skills, behavioral skills, emotional-affective skills, and

motivational skills. The required data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The research method was qualitative, following a descriptive phenomenological approach, and the collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Regarding the strategies employed by teachers to foster the cognitive skills component, the results of the interview responses analysis indicated that acquiring cognitive skills related to social competence must occur through interaction in social activities. Achieving this requires the

Discussion & Conclusions

application of the interactive model, one of the models of the social approach. Social approach models in teaching utilize synergy through group formation. Social models, by incorporating social skills and synergy, increase social competencies in students and provide tools for participation in the higher forms of democratic engagement for students. Through collective participation, students learn knowledge construction and expand their social competencies (Nazari, Hejazi, Mohebi, & Hossein Pour, 2018).

This approach aims to assist learners in enhancing their cognitive and social capabilities through interaction with others. It emphasizes the social nature of education, with the goal of nurturing democratic, useful, and effective citizens capable of transforming their personal and social lives. Scholars of this approach view the individual within a social context. In this approach, cognitive skills are intertwined with social skills. Moreover, it is believed that life skills are strengthened through interactive experiences (Sha'bani, 2016). The interactive learning approach involves individuals sitting in small groups, engaging in conversation and dialogue, sharing their knowledge, participating enthusiastically in reciprocal conversations, and gaining a deep understanding of issues related to a subject (Ghaljaei, 2023).

The interactive model, also known as the collaborative-based method, views learning as a social process. This model pursues cognitive and social growth in an intertwined manner. This strategy requires positive interaction with students and a positive learning atmosphere in schools and classrooms. Teaching social competencies using the interactive model provides opportunities for elementary school students to learn social behaviors and apply them consistently and sustainably in real-life situations. The successful application and learning of these competencies in social situations lead to effective responses, such as initiating and sustaining social interactions, resolving social conflicts, negotiating, asserting oneself, self-regulation, influencing events and social conditions, feeling

responsible, experiencing life satisfaction, and other desirable social behaviors exhibited by students. Furthermore, students' perception of social support affects the quality of their social relationships and their ability to cope with the stresses of social participation. This leads to an increase in activities that contribute to the establishment of positive social relationships. It is evident that students who receive strong support from school, parents, friends, and other significant individuals in their lives develop higher social competencies. In this study, to foster the cognitive skills required for social competence, the interactive teaching and learning model (from social approach models) was inferred.

In this regard, the results of research by (Ahmadpour Torki et al., 2018; Kakabraee & Seidy, 2019) demonstrated that teaching cognitive and metacognitive skills significantly influences the development of social competence and its components.

Regarding the strategies used to cultivate the behavioral skills component, it can be stated that based on the findings of the study, which emphasized the increase of desirable behaviors through positive reinforcement, the reduction of undesirable behaviors through negative reinforcement, the creation of new behaviors, and the maintenance of desirable behaviors, the social learning model (from behavioral systems approach models) was inferred.

The behavioral systems approach models view humans as self-correcting communicative systems that adjust their

behavior in response to information indicating their success in performing tasks and duties (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 2008). Teaching social behaviors leads to an increase in social acceptance and competence on one hand, and a reduction in behavioral problems on the other (Alizadehfard, 2018). These behaviors are shaped through the interactions between students.

In this model, whenever a desirable or new behavior is strengthened, either through reinforcement or the creation of new behaviors, it is necessary for the teacher or trainer to gradually reduce the reinforcement, as continuous reinforcement of a behavior is neither acceptable nor feasible in the learning process. On the other hand, if a behavior is not reinforced for a period of time, it will decrease or be extinguished. The method used to prevent extinction or maintain the desired behavior is intermittent reinforcement, which is applied in two forms: relative reinforcement and spaced reinforcement. Each of these can be further divided into fixed and variable categories. Typically, variable relative and spaced reinforcement is more effective in maintaining behavior than fixed relative and spaced reinforcement. However, to reduce or eliminate undesirable behaviors, methods such as extinction, reinforcement of incompatible behaviors, satiation or saturation, deprivation, punishment, and penalty have been suggested.

The results of this part of the study align with the findings of (Jalali & Nazari, 2009), which demonstrated that teaching social skills using the social learning model positively impacts students' self-esteem, confidence,

self-expression behaviors, and academic progress. Additionally, the results are consistent with the study by (Common et al., 2019), which emphasized teaching and reinforcing social skills related to success both inside and outside the school environment through the social learning model. Regarding the strategies used in fostering emotional-affective skills, the open codes extracted from the interviews highlighted key elements such as: creating a positive classroom atmosphere, eliminating conditions that lead to disruptive behaviors, self-awareness regarding inappropriate behavior, and teaching self-control. Based on these findings, the social learning model (from the behavioral systems approach) and the non-directive model or learning through counseling (from the individual teaching and learning approach) were inferred.

In this context, the social learning model emphasizes the creation of a conducive environment to enhance positive emotional-affective behaviors, which is considered a prerequisite for social competence. The social learning model focuses on promoting new emotional-affective behaviors, eliminating destructive emotional behaviors, and teaching self-control. However, achieving these goals is possible through student participation in a counseling-based learning process. The goal of the counseling model is to build capacity for personal growth, self-awareness, independence, and self-esteem. In this model, the teacher plays the role of a counselor. The counseling model emphasizes cooperative relationships between the teacher and students. This model unfolds within the

teaching and learning process and can be applied alongside other teaching methods. It focuses on the mental and emotional well-being of the student, which cannot be achieved without creating a positive emotional environment in the classroom and learning new emotional behaviors, which requires the use of the social learning model.

The results of this study regarding the teaching of emotional and affective skills are consistent with the findings of (Badri Gargari et al., 2018), which demonstrated that the social-emotional learning program can enhance students' competencies and satisfaction. Additionally, these findings align with the research by (Shahsavari & Esmaeili, 2018), which showed that the Seligman flourishing intervention led to an increase in social competence among girls with social anxiety disorder.

Regarding the strategies used to foster motivational skills, it can be said that, based on the open codes extracted from the interview results, including: encouraging student progress, boosting self-confidence, teaching communication skills, and providing exemplary role models, the application of the counseling model from individual teaching and learning approaches was inferred for strengthening self-confidence, increasing self-awareness, and improving interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the use of the social learning model from behavioral systems approaches was inferred for encouraging students and role modeling from outstanding examples. The counseling model helps integrate emotional and rational dimensions, aiding in the selection of

desirable learning goals and fostering motivation in this context. In this regard, the teacher should strive to provide students with successful experiences in the classroom. The outcome of this is the creation of a positive self-concept and motivation for further learning.

The teacher's interest and mastery of the subject matter and teaching play an important role in this context, attracting students to the classroom and encouraging more social interactions with peers. As the research results of (Parnawi & Taridi, 2018) showed, the competence of teachers in performing their duties is essential for continuing and developing life values, expanding knowledge and technology, and fostering the development of skills and a sense of social competence in students. Therefore, the learning environment and the teacher's characteristics play a significant role in creating motivation and goal-setting in students.

By synthesizing the results of the interview responses to questions related to teaching strategies for social competence components, different developmental models were inferred. Regarding cognitive skills, the interactive teaching and learning model from social approaches was inferred. Regarding behavioral skills, the social learning model from behavioral systems approaches was inferred. In terms of emotional-affective and motivational skills, the non-directive model (learning through counseling) from individual teaching and learning approaches and the social learning model from behavioral systems approaches were inferred. Therefore,

for the effectiveness of their developmental activities, the teacher must identify the specific behavior for each component of social competence and apply the appropriate strategy for each.

Acknowledgments

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- #### Conflict of Interest
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