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Developing emotional intelligence among students participating in the Polish-German cross-border cooperation project

The concept of emotional intelligence and its importance in dealing with crisis situations

The notion of emotional intelligence is captured in a variety of ways by authors of concepts functioning in the field of modern psychology (Szczepaniak, Jabłkowska, 2007, pp. 227-232). It was introduced into the scientific terminology in 1990 by Peter Salovey and John Meyer, who defined it as an aptitude for proper perception, assessment and expression of emotions by humans, associated with accessibility to experienced, one's own feelings, as well as the ability to generate thereof in situations in which they can facilitate the process of thinking, understanding emotions and regulating them in a way that supports psychosocial development (Salovey, Sluyter, 1999). Thus, the structure of the proposed model includes such components as:

- the ability to perceive and express emotions,
- emotional abilities that support thinking,
- the ability to understand, analyse and use emotions in action,
- the ability to arouse, strengthen and calm down emotions for effective social functioning (Mayer et al., 2004, pp. 197–215).

It is worth noting now that the listed components of emotional intelligence are both cognitive and regulatory in nature, which entails that it can be viewed either as a type of knowledge derived from experience, or as a set of qualities, or even as a special type of social competence (Martowska, 2012, pp. 38–46). In one of a better-known study, emotional intelligence is understood as a set of cognitive abilities on which the effectiveness of the emotional information procession and using it for adaptive purposes depends. They include: the ability to perceive one's own and other people's emotions along with an understanding of their impact on the regulation of various types of behaviour, the ability to express emotions and their application in thinking and acting, as well as the ability to regulate one's own emotional states and to influence exerted on emotional states of other people (Matczak, Knopp, 2013, pp. 22–25).

The research results confirm that emotional intelligence has a strong impact on psychosocial conduct of man in many dimensions (Matczak, Knopp, 2013). It also applies to its influence on the specific strategies selected by people to cope with crisis situations, which was the main goal of the Polish-German project described later, executed within the framework of cross-border cooperation. One of the intermediate goals was to develop emotional intelligence among students, contributing to a reduction of the intensity of stress experienced as a result of information overload. It is so because

in a situation where stressful factors are at work, the ability to understand emotions can facilitate the process of recognising the causes of stress and the sources of emotions triggered by it, whereas clarifying and understanding the situation makes it possible to direct attention to the search for ways to cope (Matczak, Knopp, 2013, p. 166).

As the quoted authoresses further write in their document, the research conducted indicates that people with high emotional intelligence are more likely to choose task-based strategies in dealing with stress, based on overcoming difficulties. In turn, people with low emotional management ability tend to use the strategy of focusing on negative emotions, which not only does not make it easier for them to solve problems, but can contribute to increased tension that makes it even more difficult for them to do so. People with low levels of emotional capacity are also more likely to use the strategy of avoiding any confrontation with the problem by performing substitute activities. It is interesting to note that they also show a tendency to seek social contact, which may increase the possibility of obtaining social support in coping with the crisis situation (Matczak, Knopp, 2013, p. 171).

Numerous studies have confirmed the impact of emotional intelligence on mental well-being, including feelings of happiness and satisfaction with life. The research results obtained prove that greater satisfaction with life is demonstrated by people who are featured by high levels of acceptance, understanding and regulation of their own emotions (Matczak, Knopp, 2013, pp. 144-148). Additionally, the aforementioned emotional capabilities play a significant role in coping with loneliness, with the lockdown situation, or social isolation enforced by the pandemic. The ability to cope with difficult emotions emerging in a crisis situation of the indicated type helps to overcome feelings of loneliness. Thus, in the light of the results obtained, it can be assumed that people with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less likely to experience loneliness, and if they experience it (for example, as a result of forced isolation), they cope with it in a better manner (Matczak, Knopp, 2013, pp. 149-158).

The ability to identify one's own and those of other people's emotions, to understand them and regulate them safely, and to apply them to one's thinking and actions, constitute resources that increase the level of resilience, i.e. the ability to function properly in situations of danger, experiencing adversity or trauma. That is why:

a resilient person in a difficult situation is able to control his or her emotions, does not unload tension on others, and when coping with stress is more likely to use task-based rather than emotion-based strategies (Rutkowska, 2015, p. 39).

The arguments cited to justify the need to develop emotional intelligence among students of pedagogy should also include the argument that points to the great importance of emotional intelligence in the creation of an emotional climate by teachers and educators facilitating the way in which difficulties are overcome in the group or school class they teach. These are teachers who, due to a high level of this competence, are sensitive to the students' needs which are not always directly articulated, and are able to respond to them appropriately, as well as limit disciplinary actions in their conduct to the necessary minimum (Brackett et al. 2011, p. 28).

The emotional intelligence develops from early childhood as long as there are favourable conditions for it in the child-rearing environment. It has been proven that it is fostered by the parents' use of a democratic and liberal parenting style, combined with empathy and showing love to the child, and that it inhibits an authoritarian and liberal style, accompanied by showing emotional distance (Martowska, 2009, pp. 55–69). Emotional abilities can also be developed through programmes specially designed for this purpose, such as: *Social and Emotional Learning*, SEL, or *Social Development Program K-12* or *Self Science*, which have so far been implemented in the Up. These are oriented towards the development of individual components of emotional intelligence (Matczak, Knopp, 2013 pp. 75-78). Another noteworthy example of a programme designed to strengthen educators' and then alumni's ability to identify and safely regulate emotions is the programme *Foundations of Learning Model (FOL)*. At first, the structure of the training involves teachers practicing particular components of emotional intelligence with young people at workshops and then conducting a supervision session with each of them on the subject (Kwiatkowski, 2015, pp. 99–100).

Aims and forms of student work in the Polish-German cross-border cooperation project

From 30th November 2020 to 29th October 2021, a group of twelve students from the Institute of Pedagogy and twelve students from the University of Greifswald participated in the Polish-German didactic project entitled: 'Crisis as a challenge – training strategies for coping in cross-border teacher education as a contribution to stabilising the situation in the Region'. The project was financed with funds from the 'INTER-REG' *Cross-border Cooperation Programme Mecklenburg-Vorpommern/Brandenburg/Poland*.

The underlying assumption of the implemented project was that in order to prepare students for their future role as teachers or educators (according to the selected field

of study), due to the risk of further waves of pandemics, it is necessary to equip them with the ability to teach young people how to cope with crisis situations. In order to make them capable of it, they have to learn it themselves, which was the main goal of the project. Meanwhile, according to the theoretical concepts reviewed, the ability to take care of mental well-being in a crisis situation is largely dependent on the degree of emotional intelligence development, and thus the enhancement of such intelligence fosters the use of optimal coping strategies in a crisis situation, such as the one linked to the Covid-19 pandemic occurring at that time. Hence, the following activities were scheduled for students taking part in the programme:

1. Creative thinking workshops conducted remotely via the MS Teams platform by a professional artist from Berlin Matthias Schönijahn entitled: „*Listening in a Forest of Crisis*”. Over the period of 8 days, the participants, inspired by discussions on texts tackling the crisis issues, prepared short films in which they expressed their reflections and emotions associated with experiencing the pandemic.
2. They participated in an international online conference entitled *Crisis as a Challenge. Challenge of a Crisis*, during which they had an opportunity to share their experiences with other participants as regards overcoming crisis situations in an online learning environment forced by lockdown.
3. Students from the University of Szczecin were given an opportunity, under a sanitary regime, to participate directly in art therapy workshops using photography and art techniques, as well as in hippo therapy classes at the ‘Wierzbowy Las’ [Eng.: Willow Forest] social cooperative in Stary Czarnów.
4. In addition, the Polish students participated in 60 hours of classes developing social competencies and emotional intelligence. A 10-hour workshop on body work and a 20-hour class focused on building constructive coping strategies in crisis situations also served the indicated purpose. Moreover, 15 hours of classes were devoted to the development of skills necessary to animate constructive leisure activities. (*They were carried out in a hybrid manner – partly stationary and partly in a remote form*). The meetings with the group of the Polish students were held weekly for 9 months and were conducted by four teachers from the Institute of Pedagogy.

Methodological assumptions and evaluation research results in the implemented project

The conducted research aimed at examining the differences in the level of emotional intelligence of students before and after the Polish-German project in which they participated. Accordingly, the following research problems were framed.

1. What are the differences in the overall level of emotional intelligence of the Polish students before and after their participation in the educational project?

2. What are the differences in the use of emotions in thinking and acting by the Polish students before and after the educational project?
3. What are the differences in the Polish students' ability to identify emotions before and after the educational project?

Basing on the reviewed literature on the subject, it was assumed that there would be a noticeable increase in emotional intelligence in all its dimensions – general, identifying emotions and using them in one's thinking and actions – as a result of students' participation in the activities provided by the project. To verify the hypothesis formulated in this way, a standardised tool was used in the form of the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (INTE) by Nicola p. Schutte and associates in the Polish adaptation by Aleksandra Jaworowska and Anna Matczak. It is self-descriptive in nature, as it contains 33 statements about specific emotional skills and strategies used in various situations. The respondent is tasked with selecting on a five-point scale how much a given statement applies to him/her. The internal concordance of the INTE questionnaire is high (Cronbach's alpha coefficients are 0.83–0.87), the coefficients of absolute stability (r-Pearson's) are also high ($r = 0.81$ for women and $r = 0.88$ for men – after two tests at an interval of 3–4 weeks). The test was taken by the Polish students before the start of the project activities (PRE test) and one week after the end of the project activities (POST test), and the raw scores obtained were converted into units on a standard ten scale.

The recorded differences in the level of emotional intelligence of the students before and after the project work are pictured in Chart 1.

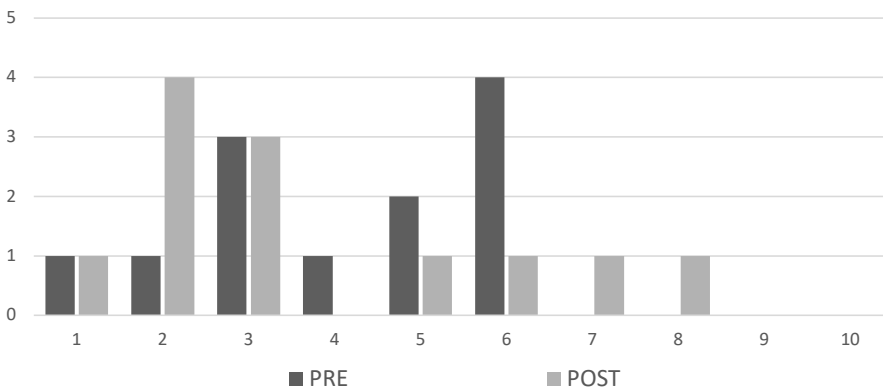


Chart 1. Level of emotional intelligence of Polish students before and after the project

Source: own study.

It is important to note that before the project, none of the tested students' level of emotional intelligence exceeded the value of 6 sten, that is, it was at a low or average

level. On the other hand, after the termination of the project, it increased in case of two individuals to 8 sten, that is, to a high level, and in the case of three others, it decreased to a value of 2 sten, that is, to a low level. More detailed statistical analysis indicates that the differences across the group are not statistically significant (Wilcoxon signed-rank test $Z = -1.13$; $p = 0.26$). This means that after the end of the project, the level of emotional intelligence in the group of the Polish participants is comparable to the level they had before joining the project.

Chart 2 shows the distribution of the awareness of the importance of emotions in thinking and acting among the Polish students before and after joining the project.

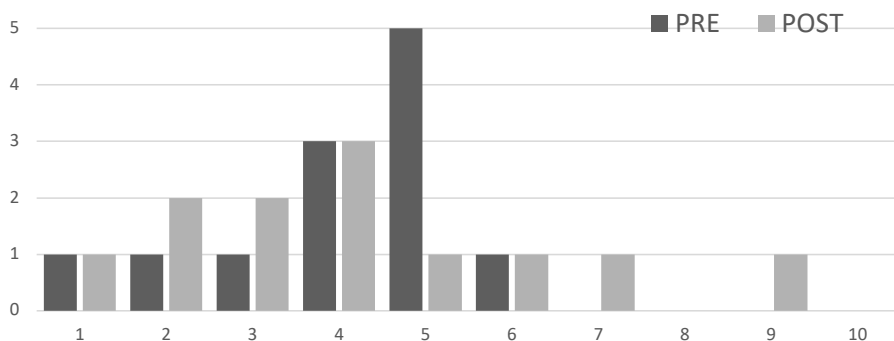


Chart 2. Emotions in the thinking and acting of Polish students before and after the project

Source: own study.

The results obtained indicate that before joining the project there were no people in the study group with a high level of such skill. However, two people displayed the high level of the indicated ability after the end of the clas. Unfortunately, two people observed a decline in this ability also after the project’s termination, while it remained at the same level in case of the otherp. The Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed that the differences noted, however, are statistically insignificant ($Z = -0.05$; $p = 0.96$) and allow us to assume that the level of ability to integrate knowledge of emotions into one’s thinking and actions in the group of the Polish students before and after the project is comparable.

Chart 3 displays the data on the ability to recognise emotions in the group of the Polish students before and after the project. It clearly shows that this skill reaches a slightly higher level among the surveyed students (3 people in the group with a high score) than the other components of emotional intelligence already discussed. (5 PRE i 6 POST). However, it does not change the fact that the group was dominated by people with a low level of mastery over this skill (5 PRE and 6 POST).

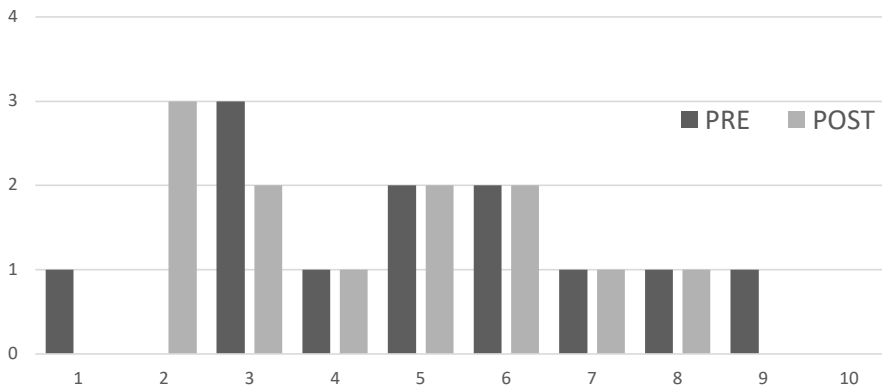


Chart 3. Recognising emotions by the Polish students before and after the project

Source: own study.

The result of the non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that the pre- and post-project differences in the study group were statistically insignificant ($Z = -1.23$; $p = 0.22$). It means that the ability to recognise emotions by the group of the Polish students after the project was similar to the level before joining the project, and therefore, basically did not change in any significant way.

Summing up

The outcomes of the conducted research indicate the need to develop emotional intelligence in a group of the Polish students. This is supported by the fact that this variable reaches a low level of development for most of them both before and after their participation in the described project. It is primarily linked to a low awareness of the impact that the emotions experienced by the respondents have on the way they think and act. On the other hand, the ability to cognise emotions is slightly better, but still most of the respondents had it at a low or average level of development, both before and after their participation in the project.

Thus, it can be assumed that despite the justified need to develop in students under analysis the skills of recognising, understanding and regulating emotions, helpful in overcoming crisis situations, it was not possible to influence their development during the training in the Polish-German educational project, organised, among other things, for this purpose. Probably the limited possibility of 'transfer' of the acquired skills, i.e., practicing them in interpersonal contacts established in the social space, caused by lockdown, contributed to it. The results may also have been influenced by the motivational and instrumental dispositions of the students under analysis, on which the

effectiveness of the use of social experiences depends (Maczak, 2007). Therefore, while organising this type of projects it is worth paying attention to greater adaptation of the applied work methods to the individual personality traits of students.

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Abstract

The article presents the effects of developing emotional intelligence among the Polish students who participated in a Polish-German didactic project implemented within the framework of the cross-border cooperation program 'INTERREG':Mecklenburg-Vorpommern /Brandenburg/Poland]. The results of the evaluation study indicate that despite the use of various forms of activation, aimed at, inter alia, the development of emotional intelligence, no statistically significant difference was found between the levels of this variable within the group of 12 Polish students after 9 months of weekly classes. Instead, the dominance of low and average levels of emotional intelligence was observed amongst the participants.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, student education