THE SOCIAL COMPETENCE CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article seeks to develop the concept of social competence in higher education based not only on theoretical background but also on the reflections of social competence in European Union (EU) and national (in this case – Lithuanian) regulations of higher education. Theoretical analysis revealed that social competence as a concept has many definitions. As a result it was recognized that the set of skills defining social competence differs depending on the context where they are exploredand the particular components of the social competence in education are revealed. They served as the base to identify how social competence reveals itself in higher education. In order to carry out this task the empirical research – relevant document analysis was performed.

Keywords: Social competence, higher education, learning environment

Introduction

It cannot be denied that human being is of social nature. In his life full of diversity, a human is directly linked to other humans from an early age till the end of life. Social interactions of each person develop in many different ways; therefore everyone needs certain social skills and abilities. The significance of these skills and abilities are reflected in scientific literature, where trend of their growing importance in personal and public life is clearly highlighted(Reitz, 2012;Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This is usually expressed as a „social competence" and this concept gains more and more attention also in academic research.

Higher education plays very important role in both personal life of individual and future development of the society. No doubt that many social interactions happen through the process of education.As a result, it is important to analyze how the concept of social competence appears in higher

education. Therefore the object of this article is social competence in higher education. The aim of the article is to develop the concept of social competence in higher education. To fulfill this aim the following tasks have been formulated:

- to define the concept of social competence;
- to determine the particular components of social competence in the process of learning
- toidentify how social competence reveals itself in higher education.

The basic theoretical methods of the research were description, systemic analysis, generalization and document analysis as the tool of empirical research.
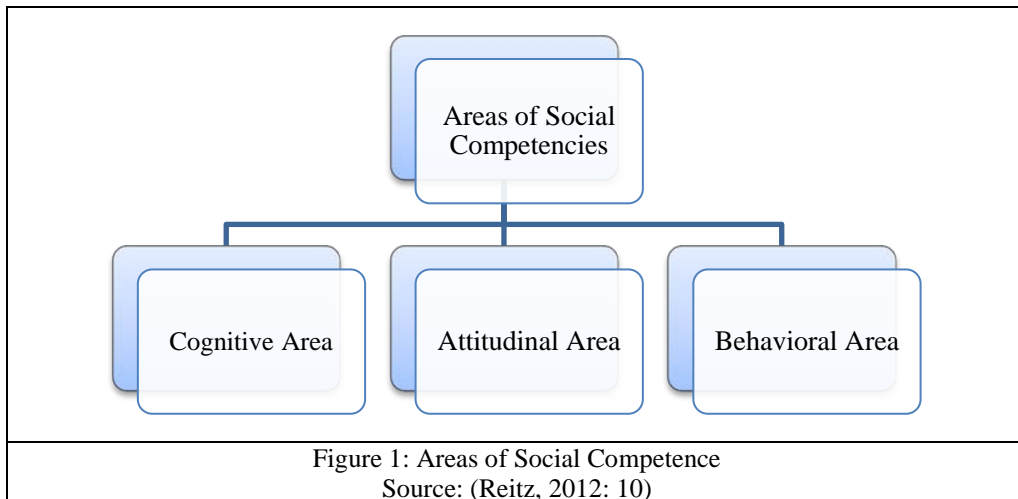
The concept of social competence

First of all the concept of social competence should be defined. Many authors (Arghode, 2013; Lang, 2010;Stump, Ratliff, Wu, & Hawley, 2009) notice that there is no universal definition of social competence. One of the reasons might be that social competence is the research object in different branches of social sciences. As N. C. Lang (2010: 14)points, "t]he fields of interest among basic social sciences include psychology, social psychology, child development, communication, sociolinguistics, and, in the applied social sciences, social work, education, psychiatry, speech pathology, clinical psychology, gerontology, and management." Notwithstanding, S. Reitz (2012:8)argues that some similarities in the definition could be seen. According to her suggestions, social competence "is the sum of knowledge and skills of a person that determines the quality of socially competent behavior". It could be seen that S. Reitz (2012: 7) stresses the importance to differentiate social competence and socially competent behavior, i.e. ": a person can be competent, even if their behavior in a certain situation does not show the desired results." But it is undeniable that a person, having highly developed social competence,is more prone to socially competent behavior. To sum up S. Reitz (2012) states that socially competent behavior can be defined as "the behavior of a person which leads in a specific situation to the achievement of the person's goals while at the same time guaranteeing the social acceptance of the behavior." N. C. Lang (2010: 14) additionally points that social and psychological perspective to social competence should be differed, where "psychological perspectives highlight qualities that enable people to communicate competently" while "[s]ocial perspectives, in contrast, draw attention away from individuals as the primary unit of analysis, posing questions about competent relationships, groups, and interactions."

Additional difficulties defining the concept of social competence are that the concept itself is defined by various different expressions. For

example N. C. Lang (2010: 13) states that term social competence is used interchangeably with terms as "interactional competence," "communicative competence," "interpersonal competence," "relational competence," "emotional competence," "communication competence," or "social skills," thus "reflecting varied levels of conceptual and operational descriptions." Other authors (Arghode, 2013: 67;Oberst, Gallifa, Farriols, &Vilaregut, 2009) also admit that such concepts as emotional competence and emotional intelligence are closely related but note the importance to distinguish them.These authors use the K. Topping and others definition of social competence, i.e. "the possession and use of the ability to integrate thinking, feeling, and behavior to achieve social tasks and outcomes valued in the host context and culture". Thus social competence is differentiated from the concepts of emotional intelligence and emotional competence, where emotional intelligence is defined as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions"(Arghode, 2013: 67). It is important to note, that the said authors hold that emotional intelligence and emotional competence are highly interrelated and emotional competences should be understood as competences that are developed on the base of emotional intelligence.It is interesting to note that the previously mentioned definition of the social competence by K. Topping and others is somehow similar to what S. Reitz calls as socially competent behavior. In the light of this, we can firmly state that social competence addresses various forms and ways of interactions between persons and certain overlap between these different concepts of social competence, emotional competence and emotional intelligence could be seen.

Coming back to the previously mentioned various approachesin the research of social competence in different social sciences, one should recognize that set of skills defining social competence differs depending on the context where they are explored. According to N. C. Lang (2010: 19), "social competence is the outcome of a series of social learnings accomplished at each age-stage." AsK.N. Stump et al. (2009) state, researchers first identify behaviors and components of relationship functioning that they believe to be 'socially competent' in specific practices.Therefore S. Reitz (2012) invites to talk about social competencies as social competence itself comprehend components from different areas which she suggest to group as provided in figure 1.

Figure 1: Areas of Social Competence
Source: (Reitz, 2012: 10)

It is also worth noting that while S. Reitz tries to separate different areas of social competencies, at the same time she recognizes the interdependence of each area and the difference of sub-components of social competence in each context.Notwithstanding, N. C. Lang (2010: 19-20) states that certaincritical components of social competence could be established. They are:

- a sense of self and some knowledge of one's capabilities;
- a sense of others and some recognition of their capabilities;
- a measure of self-management and internalized control;
- a degree of self-directedness;
- an ability to engage relationally with others, to achieve synchrony and appropriateness in social interaction with others;
- awareness of norms of interaction and some recognition of cuesand patterns in interaction;
- an ability to relate to others empathically, sensitively;
- an ability to join with others as a participant in and contributor to a collective enterprise.

To sum up one should say that social competence as a concept has many definitions or no agreed definition. These differences usually are caused by different approach to the phenomenon of social competence, i.e. from different perspectives or branches of social sciences. Although it is possible to establish certain common features defining social competence, one still needs to look for the specific definition in the different fields depending on the research object.

Social competence in education: learning skills and learning environment

Having in mind what was afore mentioned, we still need to look to the social competence as it is understood and explored in education. Education, as a process, is inseparable from various interactions between persons and group activities, so the importance of social competence and various forms of its development could not be denied. As Joseph E. Zins et al. (2007: 3) state "schools are social places and learning is a social process" and "[s]tudents do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the support of their families".J. Justman(1943: 105) even suggested that social competence should be "as a practical goal of education for our society and in our time". Despite the distance of the idea to current times it still retains relevance in current developments of education.The importance of development of social competence is recognized from primary (Han &Kemple, 2006) to higher education (Oberst et al., 2009).

As Ingrid Schoon(2009) states, within pedagogy [social competence] refers to lifelong, intercultural and social learning. Therefore concept of social and emotional learning (SEL) could be met in academic literature. According to Joseph E. Zins et al.(2007), social emotional learning "is the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors." This process is very important as SEL "has a critical role in improving children's academic performance and lifelong learning"(Zins et al., 2007: 3).At the same time at the level of higher education social competence is still viewed as playing important role in education because "the educational function of the university<…> can be summarized as: the transmission of knowledge, the transmission of procedures and techniques, and the transmission of attitudes," i.e. "[m]ore schematically: to know, to do, and "to be"(Oberst et al., 2009: 24). According to U. Oberts et al.(2009) social (or interpersonal) competences are placed in the fields of "to do" and "to be". This clearly indicates that social competence is key element of successful learning process.

In this context the importance should be given to the learning abilities and environment. The phenomenographic investigators, focusing on student differences in learning and ways of experiencing, perceive education as the learner's ability to exchange, interact, experiencing environmental effects (Marton, F. and Pang, M. F. 1999). They argue that the phenomena of the learning environment and perception of learning curriculum is extremely important to understand how learning develops. According to their suggestions G. Gedvilienė (2012) has developed a model of skillsthat are

significant to promote safe and supportive learning environment. These skills should be reflected in certain teacher's activitiesbecause learning environment is the environment that is mutually created during the learning process by teacher and students highly depending on various forms of interaction between all participants. Notwithstanding special attention should be given to the activities of teacher as these activities ensure comprehensibility and meaningfulness of the learning process.

C. Rogers, H. J. Frieberg (1994), N. Grendstad (1996), A. Maslow (1970) do not doubt that the essential requirement for revealling student's self-confidence, self-assessment and other internal social opportunities is a safe, supportive environment. If students are feeling psychologically safe, they are able to express their ideas, views and share experiences more frequently.Safeness provides a freedom, ensures more efficient learning process and also contributes to the development of social competence. When the environment is not safe, educational behavior is determined by fear. As a result people are not open to all the possibilities, they dissociate, latch, blocking the expression of sociability. There has been noticed that unsafe environment can be promoted either by friends' or teachers' behavior, but the teacher's behavior plays crucial role for environmental safety. In this respect everything is important – reaction to the students' behavior, manner of forming mutual relations, trustworthiness of teachers. Notwithstanding, it must be recognized that in a safe psychological medium, particularly in adult audience, not all members actively participate in learning.

Another way to perceive learning environment is suggested in R. A. Schmuck, P. A. Schmuck (1988) and other authors' theories. These theories emphasize that psycho-social processes, that take place in teachers' and students' minds, are significant in creating certain learning environment. Based on theoretical analysis of these authors, G. Gedvilienė(2012) suggests that there are four aspects of learning environment, i.e. atmosphere, properties, process, and structure (Figure 2). One of learning environmental aspects - the atmosphere – is characterized by the students with their emotions, interactions and their behavior. Usually in the learning environment there are personalities with individual needs and self-motivation. Such psychological state is known as the learning environment personal plane.

Figure 2. Environmental aspects of learning
Source: (Gedvilienė, 2012)
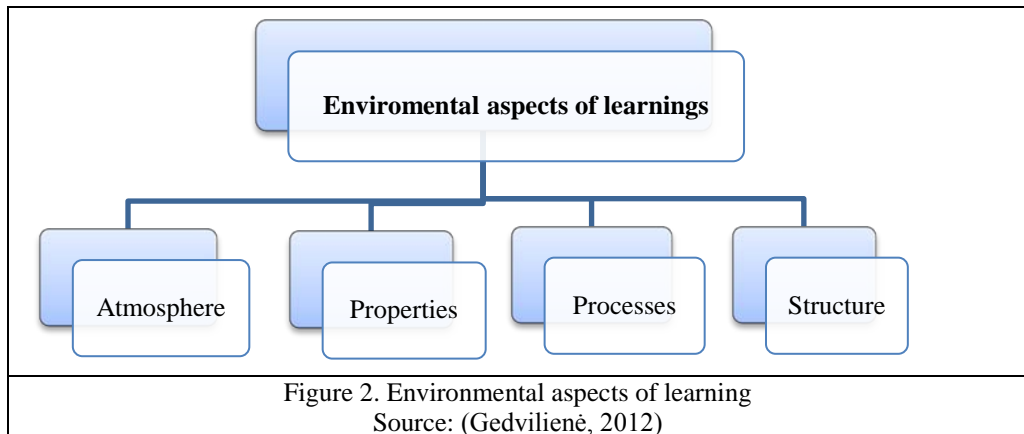
The perception of learning environment as an ecological system also could be useful to understand the complexity of learning environment.W. Doyle (2011) notes, thatthe idea to analyze learning environment as an ecological system emerged in late 1960's because various interdependent activities proceed and different people participate in learning environment. Based on this idea W. Doyle (2011) distinguished certain important features or dimensions of classrooms that are also significant features of learning environment, i.e. multidimensionality, simultaneity, immediacy, unpredictability. Multidimensionality and simultaneity is used to describe such features of learning environment as large quantity of events and task happening at the same time. Immediacy defines the rapid pace of events happening in the learning environment that also leads to difficulties while predicting how various activities will go on a particular time and with particular people interacting in the learning environment. That is why we need to talk about unpredictability of learning environment.

In the context of ecological approach to learning environment, the importance of relationships between students and a teacher and their behavior should be stressed. It should be noted that students gather with different capacities, attitudes, interests, which sometimes lead to competition with each other. In the learning environment students spend a considerable amount of their lifetime, so there exists self- created rules, standards of behavior. The teacher must be able to navigate at the same time: to look after students, to refuse to interfere with their work, observe behavior, listen to the debate, and see if everyone understands the tasks. The teacher must be ready for anythingnot only to respond to all those previously mentioned features of the learning environment as an ecological system but also to be able to manage the learning environment in such a way that the soundness of this ecological system could be preserved.According to G. Gedvilienė (2012: 36) "[s]uccessful learning requires social environment that promotes social

competence in the fundamental phenomena: communication and cooperation".

In addition to what already has been said, the societal task of education should not be forgotten. According to Geert Ten Dam and Monique Volman (2007: 293) two approaches can be identified to social competence in education: "an 'educating for adulthood' perspective and an 'educating for citizenship' perspective." The later perspective is based on the demands made by ademocratic society on its citizens. "It concerns a society that is heterogeneous in thesense of encompassing different socio-cultural groups and that aspires to havingcitizens who are able to function in diverse contexts." As a result, Geert Ten Dam and Monique Volman (2007) state that education should stimulate social competence as it is a tool to prepare a responsible and civic member of society.

To sum up, social competence in education should be viewed both in psychological and in social perspectives. During learning process, a human not only learns socially competent behavior, but these skills also help to create positive learning environment which enriches all participants of the learning process. Social competence in education reveals itself through the process ofcommunication and cooperation.In this context it is clear that special attention to social competence should be given from primary to higher education and especially to the latter as higher education guaranties the required background for successful future personal and professional development in the fast changing social and economic conditions and for active participation in diverse community.

Empirical research and the results. Research methodology

The theoretical part of the article revealed that the overall concept of social competence can be recognized with the help of constructivist approach. Declaring social competence as competence shaping all learning process, including the process in higher education, it is very important to understand how social competence is reflected in documents regulating higher education. For this reason the analysis of relevant documents, addressing the issue of social competence, was conducted in order to find out how social competence in higher education is reflected at European Union (EU) and national (in our case – Lithuanian) level. The goal of the empirical research was to analyze European and Lithuanian legal acts on higher education seeking to indicate the concept, content and semantic characteristics of social competence. The analysis encompassed 3 EU level documents, coded with letter E and a number provided and 2 national level documents, coded with letter A and a number provided.The analysis was made using themethodof document analysis which enabled to highlight the role of social competence in the regulations of higher education.

Results

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (hereinafter – Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning) establishes eight key competences for life-long learning, among them the sixth competence is described as social and civic competence, which is fundamental for each individual in a knowledge based society. Since none of the further legal acts establishes any additional competences and has no purpose of giving the descriptions or the precise meanings of those competencies mostly civic and social competences are not separated, on the contrary - they are interconnected. For this reason empirical analysis tries to set social and civic competences as separate categories and divides them into subcategories in accordance of semantic meaning of the legal acts and illustrates the content of each subcategory.

Empirical analysis showed that some legal documents stress the importance of social and civic competences, indicating the significance of these competencies in the goals of education and not giving any detailed description of the competencies. The most precise definitions of both social and civic competences are given in the Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning.The Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning indicates that "social competence includes personal, interpersonal and intercultural competence and cover all forms of behavior that equip individuals to participate in an effective and constructive way in social and working life, and particularly in increasingly diverse societies, and to resolve conflict where necessary"(2006/962/EC). Civic competence "equips individuals to fully participate in civic life, based on knowledge of social and political concepts and structures and a commitment to active and democratic participation"(2006/962/EC).Other documents use general term of key competences formed in the previously mentioned Recommendation.

Social competence as one of the categories of transversal competencies equips individuals with abilities to understand the cultural and personal differences, have the capacity to feel empathy,collaborate, compromiseand be able to adapt own behavior in different situations of everyday practices in personal, work and study environments. Social competence is divided into subcategories of communication and cooperation, which are essential for effective interaction in the different environments.The communication skills equip individuals with abilities to understand inter cultural differences in increasingly diverse societies and adopt their own behavior in order to communicate constructively.The cooperation skills assure effective and constructive participation in social life by ability to interact, take responsibility and construct study and work process working together with others from diverse backgrounds.

Table 1 Category "Social competence"

Category	Subcategory	Semantic characteristics
Social competence	Communication	Ability to communicate constructively in different environments, to show tolerance, express and understand different viewpoints, to negotiate with the ability to create confidence, and to feel empathy (E1).
		Social cohesion; inter cultural dialogue (E2).
		Adapt own behavior to circumstances in solving problems (Level 3 in the European Qualifications Framework) (E3).
		Ability to take ethical responsibility in different contexts of professional and learning activities (A1).
		Cultivated communicational skills important in modern life in conformity to contemporary culture (A2).
	Cooperation	Attitude of collaboration, assertiveness and integrity, ability to overcome prejudices and to compromise (E1).
		Ability to interact positively with others from diverse backgrounds (E2).
		Work or study under directs supervision in a structured context (Level 1 in the European Qualifications Framework (8 Levels in the European Qualifications Framework are defined by a set of descriptors indicating the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications at that level in any system of qualifications)); work or study under supervision with some autonomy (Level 2 in the European Qualifications Framework); take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study (Level 3 in the European Qualifications Framework); supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities (Level 4 in the European Qualifications Framework); review and develop performance of self and others (Level 5 in the European Qualifications Framework); take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups (Level 6 in the European Qualifications Framework); take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams (Level 7 in the European Qualifications Framework); demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy at the forefront of work or study contexts including research (Level 8 in the European Qualifications Framework) (E3).
		Sharing your skills with others (A1).

Another category of transversal competencies is civic competence. The category of civic competence refers to broader spheres of life and equips individuals with abilities essential for taking responsibilities as active citizens of society. The category of civic competence is divided into subcategories of knowledge of social and political concepts and structures and participation in civic life. Knowledge of social and political concepts and

structures is essential to act in the light of concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights. Participation in civic life might be seen in different contexts including taking civic responsibility in professional and learning activities and being an active citizen in local and wider community.

One of the most important documents on education in European Union is the Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ('ET 2020'). The document notes that the primary goal of European cooperation should be to support the development of education and training systems in the Member States which are aimed at ensuring the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens and sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue. One of the four strategic objectives of ET 2020 indicates the importance of a possibility for all citizens to update and develop over a lifetime the key competences needed for their employability and to foster further learning, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue. ET 2020 stresses the significance of social and civic competence by promoting intercultural competences, democratic values and respect for fundamental rights and the environment, as well as combating all forms of discrimination, equipping all young people to interact positively with their peers from diverse backgrounds.

Table 2 Category "Civic competence"

Category	Subcategory	Semantic characteristics
Civic competence	Knowledge of social and political concepts and structures	Knowledge of the concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship, and civil rights and their application by various institutions at the local, regional, national, European and international levels. It includes knowledge of contemporary events, as well as the main events and trends in national, European and world history (E1).
		Understanding democratic values (E2).
		Knowledge of basics of national and ethnic culture, the traditions and values of the humanistic culture of Europe and of the world (A1).
		Knowledge of the basics of civic and political culture that embody democratic traditions (A2).
	Participation in civic life	Ability to engage effectively with others in the public domain, and to display solidarity and interest in solving problems affecting the local and wider community (E1). Critical and creative reflection and constructive participation in community or neighborhood activities as well as decision-making at all levels (E1).
		Active citizenship (E2).
		Ability to take civic responsibility in different contexts of professional and learning activities (A1).
		Being a competent citizen of the Republic of Lithuania, a member of the European and global community as well as of a multi-cultural society (A2).

The importance of the key competences is also underlined by using them as a method of effective communication between the employers and the employees. For example, the ESCO Europe 2020 initiativespecifies all the job-specific and transversal skills and competencies which are important for person's future or present career. It is set in ESCO base that social competence is combined from the ability to work with others and the ability to lead others.

In the European level European Parliament and the Council made recommendation on establishment of the European Qualifications Framework which indicates that competences and skills are different depending on the levels (stages) of studies. Referring to the fact that in the context of the European Qualifications Framework competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy the subcategory of social competence – cooperation is different depending on the level of studies. According to these European Recommendations regulations are the same in national level.

Conclusion

1.Social competence as a concept has many definitions. These differences usually are caused by different approach to the phenomenon of social competence, i.e. from different perspectives or branches of social sciences. Although it is possible to establish certain common features defining social competence, one still needs to look for the specific definition in the different fields depending on the research object because it should recognized that the set of skills defining social competence differs depending on the context where they are explored. As a result the particular components of social competence in the process of learning must be determined.

2.Social competence in education can be viewed both in psychological and in social perspectives. In psychological perspective, the importance of learning environment should not be overlooked as it is the environment defined by the various relationships between students and a teacher. So it can be stated that social competence in education reveals itself through the process of communication and cooperation.Notwithstanding, the importance of social perspective also must be stressed as social skills developed in thelearning process may contribute significantly to the development of the citizenship of society.In this context it is clear that special attention to social competence should be given from primary to higher education and especially to the latter as higher education guaranties the required background for successful future personal and professional development in the fast changing social and economic conditions and for active participation in diverse community.

3.The empirical research showed that in all European and national documents on higher education social competence is accentuated as the key competence fundamental for each individual in a knowledge based and diverse society. One of categories of this key competence – social competence is divided into subcategories of communication and cooperation. The communication skills equip individuals with abilities to understand inter cultural differences in increasingly diverse societies and adopt their own behavior in order to communicate constructively. The cooperation skills assure effective and constructive participation in social life by ability to interact, take responsibility and construct study and work process working together with others from diverse backgrounds. The category of civic competence refers to broader spheres of life and equips individuals with abilities essential for taking responsibilities as active citizens of society. The category of civic competence is divided into subcategories of knowledge of social and political concepts and structures and participation in civic life. Knowledge of social and political concepts and structures is essential to act in the light of concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights. Participation in civic life might be seen in different contexts including taking civic responsibility in professional and learning activities and being an active citizen in local and wider community.

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