Greek Teachers' Understandings and Constructions of What Constitutes Social and Emotional Learning

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ABSTRACT   This article presents the findings of a research initiative which explored Greek teachers' perceptions and understandings on what constitutes social and emotional competencies and how these competencies can best be enhanced within the classroom. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 elementary school teachers in two different geographical areas of Greece. The interviews were transcribed and analysed in light of existing literature on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Emotional Intelligence (EI). The teachers acknowledged a complex and interactive model of abilities, competencies and 'psychic virtues' and a dynamic interaction of the child and his or her context. The findings highlight the significant role the sociocultural context plays in understanding and conceptualizing social and emotional competencies.

KEY WORDS: emotional intelligence; perceptions; social and emotional learning; teachers

Background of the study

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a relatively new area of investigation, which, since its inception, has generated a great deal of interest, but also much controversy in the community of social scientists. On the one hand, EI represents a new trend in education, emphasizing the importance of social and emotional abilities and their enhancement within different settings. On the other hand, EI represents a vague concept, lacking a theoretical framework, valid assessment procedures and long term implementation outcomes (Matthews et al., 2002; Matthews and

Zeidner, 2003). Many definitions of the concept have proliferated in the literature and the term became a 'cultural trend' or 'zeitgeist' (Mayer et al., 2000b) representing a multitude of meanings. Hence, something of a schism was generated between the academic community, psychologists who tried to define and operationalize EI, and the professionals working in applied settings who adopted EI literature and programming quite readily.

The concept of EI was first introduced by Salovey and Mayer (1990), as a set of four classes of abilities: *perception of emotions*, which involves the attention and recognition of feelings, *integration of emotions in thought*, involving the expression of feelings in thought and communication, *understanding emotions*, which refers to the ability to reason using feelings and *management of emotions* (Mayer and Cobb, 2000; Mayer and Salovey, 1995; 1997). It was popularized by Goleman (1995; 1998) who argued for the importance of EI to life success. The basic emotional abilities described by Goleman (1995; 1998), i.e. expression of emotions in an appropriate manner, management of emotions, empathy with others' perspectives, motivation of oneself and others and social skills, were thereafter considered by professionals in many settings as crucial for healthy interactions and relationships.

Many researchers thereafter investigated the construct of EI, the domains which it encompasses and its relation to general intelligence. Engelberg and Sjoberg (2004) postulated that EI mainly involves perception of emotion, which is further related to how one responds to emotion laden environmental stimuli and concomitantly adjusts to them. Richburg and Fletcher (2002) discriminated between five domains of EI: (a) awareness of one's emotions; (b) management of emotions; (c) motivation of oneself; (d) recognition of emotions in others and (e) handling relationships. Warwick and Nettelbeck (2004) supported a distinction between two types of EI: trait EI, which was related to personality variables such as extraversion, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness and ability EI which was related to agreeableness, emotional knowledge and abstract reasoning. EI was also found to be related to self-esteem, empathy, extraversion and openness to feeling, life satisfaction, relationship quality and mood management (Ciarrochi et al., 2000), agreeableness (Shulte et al., 2004), to a more positive mood state and higher self-esteem (Schutte et al., 2002) and to attachment orientation (Kafetsios, 2004). Shulte et al. (2004) also found evidence of a relationship between general cognitive ability and EI, although Ciarrochi et al. (2000) on the other hand, revealed that EI was not related to IQ or performance IQ more precisely. Two different types of models of EI have emerged, those considered abilities models (Mayer et al., 2000a, b) and those termed mixed models (Bar-On, 1997; 2000; Goleman, 1995; 1998; Petrides and Furnham, 2001).

EI has received a great deal of media attention and many professionals equated it with the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) or 'adaptive competence' (Matthews et al., 2002). The SEL movement involves delineating what are social and emotional skills and the development of programmes intended to increase and bolster such skills (Cohen, 1998; Elias, 1997; Saarni, 1988; 1997; 1999; Zins et al., 2001). Elias et al. (2000) defined Social and Emotional Learning as:

> The process through which children enhance their capacity to recognise and manage their emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish pro-social goals and solve problems, and use a variety of interpersonal skills to effectively and ethically handle developmentally relevant tasks (p. 254).

Researchers (Elias, 1997; Saarni, 1988; 1997; 1999) and professionals (Sharp, 2001; Stone-McCown et al., 1998) in applied settings have asserted that social and emotional skills are deemed essential for positive relationships and functioning in a school environment. Advocates of SEL postulate that EI can be learned and that successful academic processes and learning depend upon children's emotions (Goleman, 1998). Since controversy remains regarding 'acquiring' or 'increasing' intelligence, SEL has become a more encompassing term and the preferred one in the literature (Mayer and Cobb, 2000).

Research questions and their significance

SEL in schools
Despite the problems in the conceptualization of EI (Matthews et al., 2002; Matthews and Zeidner, 2003; Van Rooy and Viswesvaran, 2004) the construct has turned out to be a significant concept in the thinking and planning processes of educators and policy makers.

On the other hand, the inclusion of SEL programming within the school curriculum challenges the current paradigm of school-based learning. The emphasis on the development of cognitive, emotional and social skills at a time when academic standards are being placed at higher levels undoubtedly poses a profound challenge to the educational community. Many teachers would argue that the responsibility for such learning lies with parents. But in the western world, less time is spent in the family than in school, and parents often find it difficult to deal with the emotional difficulties that their children encounter. The educational system offers the most efficient and systematic means of enhancing the positive development of large numbers of young people (Elias et al., 1994). It seems that intervention within school settings tends to be practical and promising of support for children. Schools could further enhance emotional, cognitive and social

competence by reinforcing such skills across subjects and by promoting extracurricular activities. Teaching these skills, however, requires that they are conceived, approached and implemented in a continuous and comprehensive manner.

Acknowledging the importance of developing SEL programming in schools, the question that arises next is which skills should be taught to students, how they should be prioritized and by which pedagogical methods should they be implemented. Braden et al. (2001) stated that there is a great range and breadth of skills that researchers have argued for, from tolerance for students with different lifestyles to skills for dealing with high-risk behaviours or skills for social interaction. A study of in-service Greek teachers' perceptions of the most important cognitive, emotional and social skills students should possess revealed that they mainly emphasize the importance of emotional skills, namely recognition and identification of emotions, expression of emotions and assessment of emotional intensity (Poulou, 2005).

There are a number of programmes aiming to enhance social, emotional and cognitive skills mainly for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, which have been implemented in schools by school psychologists (Dupper and Krishef, 1993; Eddy et al., 2000; Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2001; Hughes and Sullivan, 1988; Netolicky, 1998; Reed et al., 1998; Schloss et al., 1984; Schneider, 1992; Stone-McCown et al., 1998; Walker et al., 1998; Weissberg and Caplan, 1998; Zaragoza et al., 1991). Although these programmes are reported to have produced initial gains, there is not as yet sufficient evidence for their long-term gains and generalizations. This may be due to the lack of involvement by school personnel in the design and delivery of the programmes (Rose, 1982).

A review of studies on competence-based programmes revealed a lack of research on teachers' perceptions or understandings regarding the development or implementation of social and emotional skills programming within school settings. This is rather surprising since it is assumed that the active participation of school personnel, and especially teachers, is a prerequisite of the successful implementation of these programmes. At the same time, it is well documented that teachers' implicit theories and understandings have a significant impact on their approaches to teaching, how they interact with students' and children's achievement (Alvirez and Weinstein, 1999; Donahue et al., 2000; Perry et al., 1979). Hence teachers' attitudes towards the educational trend of implementing SEL in schools becomes crucial as it is the case in any programme implementation attempted within school limits. The current study advocates educators' active participation in SEL processes, and explores their attitudes towards the introduction of SEL in the context of a comprehensive curriculum.

Specifically, the study explored teachers' constructions and conceptual frameworks of: (1) what constitutes SEL; (2) how they construe the relationship between academic achievement, classroom management and social and emotional development and incorporate SEL within the curriculum and (3) how they perceive their role in teaching SEL.

Methods

Participants
The participants of the study were 24 elementary school teachers from two different geographical areas of Greece (Northern Greece and Crete). Eight of them were female and 16 were male, with between 5 and 26 years of teaching experience. Seventeen of the teachers were taking part in in-service programs and seven had not taken part in such programming.

Procedure
Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to serve the purpose of the study. The interviewers were the two researchers working in academic settings. The interviews ranged from one to one-and-a-half hours, took place in a quiet and familiar setting for the participants and were tape recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analysed with concordant agreements by the two researchers as to the categorization and analysis of the contents. The interviews explored teachers' perceptions of: (1) what skills, competencies or characteristics a child who fares well in social and emotional situations displays; (2) the social and emotional competencies schools should reinforce or help students develop; (3) the relationship and influence of social and emotional skills on academic achievement and behaviour within the classroom and (4) their role in promoting social and emotional competencies. The following section presents the results of the content analysis, using the teachers' language from the interview transcripts.

Approach to the analysis

Teachers' constructions of SEL
The teachers interviewed were not aware of the term 'Social and Emotional Learning', and since the aim of the study was the exploration of their implicit theories and understandings, no definition was given to them. In order to avoid jargon and the muddling of the teachers' understandings, the researchers initiated the topic by asking the teachers to

describe the skills, competencies or qualities a child who fares well in social and emotional situations displays.

Teachers' descriptions of competencies displayed in social and emotional situations

When teachers were asked to describe the skills and competencies displayed by children who fare well in social situations, they identified skills which facilitate interpersonal relationships, and a dynamic interaction with the person with his or her environment. They described social interactions emphasizing the maintenance of personal identity in the give and take process. They also described the cultivation of positive relationships in general and with peers in particular, social inclusion and social participation. From the teachers' perspective, social and emotional competencies include the ability to cooperate effectively with others, adaptation to unexpected or trying circumstances, problem solving and other competencies as described in Table 1. According to the teachers' descriptions these competencies are not distinct components but overlapping, interwoven and dynamic processes that are always at an interface with the child's context.

A characteristic response of one of the teachers was:

> A child who fares well, interprets accurately whatever takes place in his/her relationships and responds in a friendly, cooperative and participatory manner to his/her peers … is included in a team, is not afraid of the team, freely functions within it, preserves his/her personality in the team, without compromising his or her unique identity by it, is included in social situations maintaining his/her characteristics at the same time.

Teachers also referred to interpersonal dispositions which further facilitate a child's social functioning, such as politeness, respect, helpfulness, acceptance of others and consistency.

> Social development involves teamwork, cooperation, helping each other, development of dialogue. Development of dialogue embraces being a good listener and speaker. It [social development] involves support, motivation, interest for other's needs and problems, appreciation for both self and others.

The teachers described social adaptability and functionality, using terms such as, 'sets limits to self and to others', 'embraces the moment and makes the best of it' and 'finds balance'. They also emphasized fitting into contexts, being receptive and processing the social and emotional stimuli within their surroundings, all the time maintaining their sense of personal identity.

Similarly, when the teachers described the emotional competencies, they identified certain skills and personal resourcefulness such as self-expression and emotional self-efficacy,

Table 1   *Social competencies as described by the teachers*

Social competencies	Teachers' descriptions
Forming and maintaining positive relationships	1. Are sensitive towards others and show understanding and acceptance 2. Are able to form and maintain good relationships with peers 3. Does not try to change or control peers
Social inclusion and participation	1. Are included in the 'parea' (group) 2. Are accepted by their peers and readily accept others 3. Participate and are involved, and know how to make others feel included
Cooperation	1. Know how to get along with others 2. Can work with others to finish tasks or to solve problems 3. Can share plans, information and ways of working with others

Cognitive competencies (ways of knowing)

Problem solving	1. Interprets accurately whatever takes place in his/her relationships and responds 2. Can communicate, receive others' messages and respond 3. Knows how to 'read' difficult situations and act accordingly (in a way that is beneficial for him/her)
Know thyself	1. Knows who s/he is 2. Are open to new ideas and different opinions without feeling threatened by them 3. Have a good sense of their personal strengths and weaknesses
Adaptability to unexpected or difficult circumstances	1. Embracing the moment to make the best of it 2. Sets limits, so that others do not supersede them 3. Recognizing what circumstances and contexts have to offer and doing what is correct for them 4. Using intuition, knowledge and practical skills to adapt or to even change things

Emotional adaptation

Self-regulation or self-control	1. Knows how to control him/herself 2. Handling difficult emotions such as anger, not letting things get out of hand 3. To shape one's 'me/ego' and make it 'us'

Virtues, reinforced by personal dispositions and sociocultural context

Philotimo (Greek word meaning giving of the self, honoring relationships or others), authenticity, finding balance (recognizing what the social world has to offer and using it successfully), democratic stance (valuing democracy and being a democratic citizen), helpfulness, respect, politeness, patience, tolerance, responsibility, courage and justice.

> A child who fares well in emotionally difficult situations is the sensitive child – I am not sure whether I make appropriate use of the term – to the others remarks or the child who does not hesitate to manifest his/her feelings, any time … and the way the child can face his/her emotional world, to put it differently to put an order to this world.

Teachers also referred to certain 'virtues of the psyche' such as, courage, fairness, justice and wisdom. This 'virtues' perspective may be a culturally reinforced construction arising from Aristotelian philosophy (Kristjansson, 2000). At the same time the teachers emphasized the interplay between a child's social and emotional competencies and his or her embeddedness in certain surroundings. In a sense, the teachers described development as a social process, socialization of cognitive, affective and social skills, including internalization of this processes (Vygotsky, 1978). One teacher described how things changed as the year progressed for one child, saying,

> she picked up the jargon of the other kids, began to express her needs without waiting for the other kids to guess them, and to problem solve without waiting for an adult to take care of things. Slowly she turned things around by doing and expressing herself and was more accepted and accepting.

In this manner, the teacher emphasized that as the vocabulary of self-expression is expanded, so is the potential repertoire of relationships and means of relating (Gergen, 1991). The teachers did not describe emotional skills and competencies in great detail and mentioned that it is very 'tricky' to introduce 'feelings' and 'emotional themes' into the classroom. Nevertheless, Table 2 depicts the categories of 'emotional competencies' that the teachers delineated and the words they used to describe such competencies.

Emotions facilitating coping and social adaptation and the good fit in the child-environment transaction were the primary theme of the teachers' descriptions. At the same time the teachers interviewed noted that students must be equipped with self-confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem skills and competencies which the teachers viewed as integral for positive social outcomes in their cultural milieu. The words of one of the teachers provide a poignant account of prevailing cultural values or local subjectivities. He defined a model toward emulation, that of a hero taken from Greek mythology, and named the virtues that hero possessed, as the basic social and emotional competencies that schools should develop to students:

> I believe that the best attribute is for someone to be patient and persistent until s/he achieves his/her goals. I want Greeks to be Odysseus. Odysseus, the shrewd, crafty and cunning problem solver and survivor, patient, active, intelligent, resourceful, the one who is going to reach his rock, Ithaca.

Table 2 *Teachers' descriptions of emotional competencies*

Emotional competencies	Teachers' descriptions
Skill in using vocabulary of emotion, identifying inner emotional states and expression of self	1. Ability to say what they are feeling 2. Know how to describe what is happening to them inside
Emotional self-awareness	1. Know which feelings are hard for them to deal with 2. Know that their feelings impact upon their school performance and output and upon others
Self-regulation	1. Can handle difficult situations and difficult people 2. Are not impulsive 3. Do not let anger or jealousy get to them and their relationships
Emotional balance	1. Know how to calm themselves down and sooth themselves 2. Pick-up the cues from the environment and from their inner self and adapt 3. Emotions correspond to situations; contexts provide emotional cues, picking up on these cues and synchronizing expression and context
Cognitive and coping competencies (emotional understanding)	
Perceiving emotions and applying these understandings	1. Perceives the context where (s)he is, receives the emotional stimulus the context gives him/her and sends his/her own messages 2. Discriminates between different emotions and their intensity 3. Uses his/her intuition or felt-sense to gain what s/he wants 4. Evaluates things and circumstances using his/her feelings as a guide, successfully
Social competencies	
Forming relationships	1. Modulation of egocentrism and selfishness so (s)he can see, understand and accept others 2. Share feelings and has a sense of belonging 3. Creates emotional bonds 4. Take initiatives

Virtues, reinforced by personal dispositions and sociocultural context

Sophrosyne (Greek word meaning reason, restraint and sense; a reasonable-ness that reveals itself in people's actions and attitudes; soundness of mind that makes one feel free), wisdom, eudemonia (Aristotelian virtue meaning living well, doing well, flourishing and feeling worthwhile) and to have a psyche (meaning a soul, kindness in spirit and compassion).
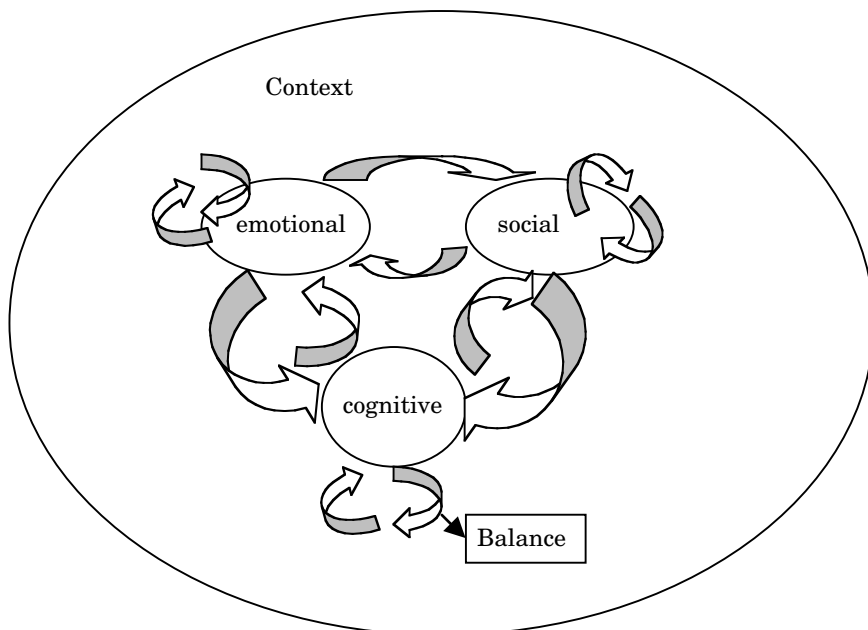
Figure 1   *Schematic representation of teachers' constructions and understandings of Social and Emotional Development and Learning*

   This teacher describes Odysseus who is pragmatically engaged in the environments he finds himself in, learns from his vicarious experiences and is determined to find his way 'home'.

   Other themes of the Greek sociocultural context were prominently represented in the teachers' responses. They discussed Aristotle's virtues as examples of wisdom, balance and 'living life well'. One teacher mentioned Aesop's tales as examples of how important it is to shape, select and capitalize on personal strengths and what the environment has to offer, and another mentioned the Greek Revolution of 1821 as an example of the value of democracy and the making of 'democratic' citizens a strength of both the context and a virtue for the individual. Hence, the issue of sociocultural context and how it contributes to what is SEL was very important for the teachers. Figure 1 is an attempt at capturing schematically the dynamic interaction of social and emotional competencies as they are embedded within the Greek context that the teachers described. Extrapolating from the teachers' accounts, *context* includes the broader culture, community, educational and other institutions, family and peer networks, one's

personal experiential and developmental background and the narratives and discourses of the culture. *Balance* is the finding of equilibrium or harmony between the overlapping, interwoven and dynamic processes involved in social, emotional and cognitive competencies and one's context; the dynamic weighing, regulating and equilibrating that wisdom requires.

The teachers emphasized the skills which facilitate human relationships, such as cooperation, social participation, acceptance of others, justice, rights and responsibilities, listening and cooperating:

> … cooperation, the child must understand that (s)he interacts with others, that his/her behaviour towards someone comes back to him/her again, that there is interaction among people, team coherence, and that cooperation does not harm or impede individuality. Cooperation, coherence, and interaction through individuality, or … [the child] must learn to cooperate, to learn to accept the other members of the team, to accept them as they are, without trying to change them forcefully.

They acknowledged the complex interplay of affective components, social skills and social outcomes in a culturally acceptable or appropriate manner according to the community's social norms. The teachers expressed their firm belief that it is within school's role to cultivate skills such as responsibility, reflexivity, helpfulness, consistency, persistency, patience, politeness, fairness, respect for others and openness. They described this complex synthesis of competencies, skills and 'virtues of the psyche' by saying such things as,

> a balance between the virtues of character and the ability to understand and solve problems … openness to new experience and understanding what is going on around you, … a person's ability to understand his or her environment, to experience the relationships around him/her deeply, the level of judgment s/he develops, and how capable s/he is in placing him/herself in the social world … acquiring wisdom.

The narratives of the culture, its norms, values, expectations and practices figure prominently in the teachers' constructions and understandings of what constitutes social and emotional learning.

Teachers' constructions of the relationship between academic achievement, classroom management and Social and Emotional development, and the incorporation of SEL into the curriculum

SEL and academic achievement. According to ten of the teachers interviewed the reinforcement and further development of SEL competencies has long term affects, since it further promotes students' academic success: 'There is no real success or eudemonia, as the Greeks call it, unless there is a balance between one's psychic world, the way s/he evaluates him/herself as standing within their community, and

their economic, academic or other successes', whereas the skills acquired through the reinforcement of SEL competencies can be generalized to other areas of life, according to all teachers. Furthermore, the teachers acknowledged that a relationship exists between social and emotional development and cognitive development

> … they are related and they interact with one another … Being well with his/her emotional world effects to the way a child can be assimilated within the classroom, and the more a child is socially included, cognitive tasks become easier for him or her.

SEL and classroom management. The enhancement of SEL competencies was perceived by all teachers to have immediate consequences in classroom management, since it is a prerequisite for teaching,

> when students have well-developed social skills and the classroom environment suits and reinforces them, they can behave differently. They can control themselves and follow the rules, and this in turn, facilitates the teaching-learning process. A student who knows how to behave, knows how to listen, knows when to raise his/her hand, when to speak, has self-control and can wait for his/her turn. These things facilitate teaching remarkably.

Another teacher mentioned, 'Students that can manage their impulses and emotions in the classroom most of the time, use their energy to be creative, reflective, and to pursue what they want'.

Didactics of reinforcing SEL competencies. Given the unanimous teachers' acceptance of reinforcing SEL competencies in schools, the question which then arose was regarding the didactics or processes involved in such an endeavour, and more particularly, its inclusion within the curriculum corpus. The majority of the teachers (23/24) suggested the use of the subject areas already formed in the curriculum, especially language, arts, history and social studies, to stimulate discussion and to further extend students' knowledge on social and emotional learning. There was only one teacher who supported the formation of an additional course or program that focuses on SEL competencies. In their words,

> … By using language arts texts, through Greek mythology you can reinforce emotional development in any thematic session alongside with cognitive development or it is not that important for children to learn the dates of birth and death of Palamas.[1] They will never remember them. The thing is to study Palama's poem and discuss what he was thinking and what we think …

In this way, emphasizing how the narratives of the culture shape and structure how children experience themselves, their identities, and their relationships.

In terms of the teaching activities employed in promoting the SEL competencies of students, teachers (15/24) mainly suggested an experiential way of teaching,

> it must be experiential, to be done in teams, with no grades, or without 'come to the board and tell the lesson' like in history for instance … it is to be implemented through a game so that children will connect with each other, and have fun. This (activity) should raise children's self-esteem and ability to reflect. Thereafter, they can gain a lot of things. They will learn that they are worthy beings, have a unique identity within the society, that they count as persons. If they experience these feelings, they will try to obtain more skills on their own … that is to concentrate, to analyse and reflect upon things, to respect the opinion of others, and to be responsible.

In essence these teachers did not embrace the development and implementation of SEL programmes and appeared to want to have total freedom as to how they reinforce social and emotional competencies within their classrooms. Furthermore, teachers view the 'system' as inflexible (time pressures, programming) in promoting SEL and discussed the differences inherent in the implementation of SEL programming as compared to the national curriculum, 'SEL requires experiential approaches to the teaching-learning process …', '… students need to create new experiential references and habits'.

Teachers' perceptions of their role in teaching SEL

All teachers admitted that it is their responsibility to reinforce the social and emotional competencies of their students. In fact, five teachers confessed that it is even more crucial than teaching academic subject areas.

> I think it is important to teach social and emotional skills, some times even more important than teaching language arts or maths. I see people who are not interested in teaching such skills, and they say 'leave it, we will teach geometry, it is the priest's, mother's father's, uncle's, friend's responsibility to teach kids about good character'. I think it is the biggest pity that we teachers participate in, not to teach such life skills, not to teach social skills. This is important for two reasons: first, we are supposed to be the people closer to children, and second and most basic reason is that we have seen that families are no longer capable of handling the emotional worlds of their children, alone.

Furthermore, seven teachers talked about the teacher as a model which students actually reproduce and emulate, stressing the importance of being socially and emotionally competent themselves.

> I think that any teacher's example is significant, without saying 'look what I do, I read you must read'. Children perceive you [the teacher] as a model. They perceive more things that we can think of. If they perceive you as being

socially awkward, insecure, or emotionally immature and you are not emotionally capable on your own, then how can you persuade them to do this?

Another teacher described how an educator has to be fully embedded and knowledgeable of the cultural and local contexts, 'A teacher has to be receptive and open to the problems of the context and the epoch, to live inside a social system and to be a live cell within it'. Many of the teachers stressed the importance of creating a classroom space or atmosphere where there is 'room to be oneself', that is 'flexible and open', and where diverse possibilities and ways of being exist. One teacher explained, 'Children are given freedom to explore new ways of looking at the world when their environment is flexible and open to new ideas and behaviours, a teacher can shape the atmosphere of the class to allow for such openness'. Yet again, the emphasis is on context and how it can be transformed and be transforming by affirming different points of view and exposing children to the multitude of alternative understandings and ways of being that exist.

Teachers' competencies in promoting SEL development within their classrooms. In the discussion regarding the teachers' role in teaching SEL one question that arose was teachers' conceptions of the competencies they should possess as well as their efficiency for teaching SEL. Generally, teachers did not refer to certain skills or competencies they should be equipped with. Instead, they referred to the level of motivation and dedication to their profession, which ultimately allows them to reinforce social and emotional skills in their students. Eight teachers stressed their motivation and desire to give the most of themselves to students, 'a teacher must be sensitive, not to view teaching as a profession, to love teaching, not just as a source of income'. Six teachers pointed to the love of children as the precondition for helping students develop social and emotional skills, 'my principle is that with love and benevolence as guides one always finds ways to teach social skills'. Many of the teachers (18/24) admitted that teachers should be socially and emotionally competent themselves as a prerequisite to reinforcing and enhancing the skills and competencies of their students,

> you have to be self-controlled, that is not subject to erratic mood swings, be calm without anxiety, cool, creative, prepared to cope with whatever comes out … to know how to manage your emotions. When you are about to explode because of a child's attitude, handle yourself with patience and an appropriate manner for all involved. How will I convey this to children if I cannot handle it myself?

There were also 18 out of 24 teachers who named the capacity of perceiving and using the cues given by their class, in an appropriate manner, as a tool for reinforcing and developing social and emotional skills '… to grab an event and try through discussion with the class to

give examples … examples can be taken from almost every lesson taught within the classroom'. Finally, all the teachers maintained the need for additional training in how to reinforce the social competencies of their students; they mentioned learning to identify the personal profile of skills, competencies and 'psychic virtues' of each student and his or her context, and emphasized the need for a flexible curriculum, and the cooperation and involvement of parents.

Significance of the findings

The primary aim of the study was to investigate Greek teachers' constructions and understandings on what constitutes SEL. The content analysis of the interviews conducted revealed two key findings regarding teachers' understandings and conceptualizations: (1) teachers described a complex and interactive model of abilities, competencies and 'psychic virtues' and (2) they placed a great emphasis on the dynamic interaction of the child and his or her context, hence reflecting the thorny issue of definitional ambiguity and complexity that exists in literature, considering EI as an ability (Ciarrochi et al., 2000), a personality trait (Schutte et al., 1998) and a construct that is often synonymous with concepts such as 'emotional and social competence' (Topping et al., 2000; Zirkel, 2000).

The teachers described characteristics of either the self, as a set of competencies and attributes which reinforce a person's stance when interacting with the environment or context, as a set of social and emotional competencies which mediate a person's dynamic interrelationship with the environment, how s/he acts within it, learns from it and is transformed by it. Hence, the self contributes significantly to emotional competence and skill, acting as a coordinator and mediator, adapting to the environment by deriving meaning from all that is transpiring within a specific cultural milieu.

In essence, teachers described a complex conceptual framework of what constitutes social competence in the current literature on the subject of social and emotional competencies (Saarni, 2000; Topping et al., 2000) and stressed the complex interaction between the child and his or her environment, be it the classroom or the wider social world. The integral connections between emotion, cognition and action have been highlighted by other work that focuses on the emotional components of the teaching-learning process (Hargreaves, 2000) and have been called 'emotional practices' (Denzin, 1984).

In this manner social and emotional competencies were constructed as an outcome and interplay of negotiations between the child and his or her environment. The teachers interviewed used cultural representations to describe and embellish their understandings on what

constitutes social and emotional development within the confines of Greek culture. They described Odysseus as a model of adaptation to a complex and challenging world. Odysseus, who grasped all the possibilities given to him by fortuitous events and was transformed and transforming, therefore emphasizing and representing the pragmatics of adaptation, interpersonal relationships, wisdom and emotional balance.

Among the two dimensions of social and emotional development, teachers were more familiar with social development, and mentioned the traits and abilities which facilitate the promotion of relationships. They referred to emotional propensities related to person-situation interaction as opposed to intrapersonal emotional competencies or processes. These findings may imply: first, teachers are less familiar with the intrapersonal emotional domain of functioning and development than the social aspects of functioning and behaviour; second, teachers perceive emotional competence in terms of social development; third, the influence of the more 'collective' (Triandis, 1997) Greek cultural milieu, where the self and consequently one's emotional world is inextricably intertwined with one's family and community and finally, the social-constructionist and contextualized perspective of emotion.

The latter hypothesis corresponds to Mayer and Cobb's (2000) notion of social intelligence, in parallel to EI, which refers to both the 'emotional and non-emotional understanding of group dynamics, social status, political relationships, interpersonal activities and impact, and leadership' (p. 172). It also fits with Hargreaves' (2000) view which seeks to understand and explain how emotions exist between people, as part of the self, and is definitely embedded in social contexts. Hargreaves called the patterns of distance and closeness in interactions of people 'emotional geographies', stating

> they consist of experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions and relationships that help create, configure and colour the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our forms of emotionality, and that embeds emotion in the politically contested interactions of organizational life (p. 818).

Another interesting finding was that teachers did not make any reference to school-related behavioural competencies, namely to learn the rules and norms of the classroom and play yard, understand the responsibilities of being a student and knowing how to handle failures and frustration, as one would expect by teachers in line with Juvonen and Keogh's (1992) study. Instead, they focused on skills or attributes which facilitate social relationships in the wider community and civic roles, i.e. respect of others, cooperation or social participation and their

personal well-being, that is expression of feelings, emotional self-awareness and self-confidence. The same patterns of responses were found in teachers' conceptualizations of the social and emotional competencies which students should be taught in schools, providing evidence for the consistency of the findings.

The teachers described social and emotional competencies as a dynamic process of social skills, cognitive competencies (knowledge and semantic processing of social and emotional stimuli), emotional competencies, and virtues which arise from personal dispositions and one's interaction with his/her sociocultural context (Figure 1). They described finding 'balance', developing 'wisdom', and achieving 'eudemonia' by feeling valued and being successful in life. From their perspectives such attainments are 'by-products of relatedness' (McNamee and Gergen, 1999), with one teacher saying, 'To feel valued, effective and effectual, all this happens in a context and within relationships with those around us'.

When teachers were asked to relate SEL with potential academic success, the majority suggested that children who are emotionally and socially competent are more likely to achieve in the academic domain, in congruence with Parker and colleagues (2004) study, which indicated that EI is a significant predictor of academic success. For Bencivenga and Elias (2003) academic development cannot stand as a value itself, not even as a predominate one. It is a part of the necessary balance for healthy functioning not only for students, but for educators and parents as well. For these authors learning is perceived as a process of promoting cooperation, mutuality, freedom, flexibility in adaptation and a reflective stance. The learner becomes skilled at balancing competing meanings and understandings and at filtering so that s/he can change their repertoire of behavioural and emotional responses. In this fashion, the ultimate goal of any kind of learning is greater personal and communal accomplishment in school and life.

Social and emotional competencies were found to be the prerequisites for effective classroom management, since they further promote healthy relationships between students, between students and teachers and therefore set a positive and sturdy base for teaching and learning. Norris (2003) similarly supported that classroom management is the most logical domain in the educational process for reinforcing social and emotional skills. For schools looking for remediation programmes to bullying or conflict resolution the solution actually lies in having a culture and climate that supports civility and respect. When children are given opportunities to exercise their social and emotional skills and competencies, a constructive environment for learning is generated.

Kristjansson (2000) came up against a number of objections expressed by teachers and parents with respect to incorporation of emotional

education into the school curriculum. In contrast, the reinforcement of social and emotional competencies was not perceived by the teachers of our study as too cumbersome. All the teachers interviewed indicated that they either make use of the stimuli given by texts or other activities to teach students skills and establish procedures so that everyone feels cared for and respected. Similar to Kristjansson's (2000) findings, however, they did not approve of specific SEL programming, adhering instead to competency promotion initiatives that are the natural part of the children's' lives. Since this may have great implications for how social and emotional skills can be enhanced and developed in schools in Greece, it is a finding that needs to be researched in a more systematic and comprehensive manner.

The experiential model of teaching SEL through the use of the school curriculum or children's experiences that the teachers in this study proposed is supported by the literature as well. Elias and Weissberg (2000) contend that when SEL activities are coordinated with and integrated into the regular curriculum, they are more likely to have lasting effects. A student who is discussing what a character in a story feels or what emotion a piece of music or art conveys is actively using and further developing emotional understanding (Mayer and Cobb, 2000). At the same time, activities such as reading and discussing stories, where the characters have to confront dilemmas or a wide range of emotions or having students deal with emotions through role-plays, can provide them with a repertoire of alternative responses to real-life situations (Norris, 2003). The question remains, however, whether taking advantage of such opportunities that do not arise on a daily basis and that are not structured can be an effective means of reinforcing and developing the complex array of competencies that the teachers and the literature describe.

Before discussing the implications of the current study certain limitations should be mentioned. By using semi-structured interviews the study shares the weaknesses of all self-report studies following the qualitative paradigm. The voluntarily participation of teachers further limits the generalizations of these findings. Nevertheless, the in-depth nature of the interviews and the fact that they attend to the contextual specificity of the subject matter may balance these limitations.

By exploring teachers' understandings of the concept of SEL in educational settings, the current study attempted to bridge the schism that exists in the literature, i.e. the great deal of attention that has been given to what constitutes EI and its correlates, on the one hand, and the many publications on programming intending to reinforce and develop social and emotional skills on the other.

Much of the research on EI attempts to provide evidence that EI is a distinct construct. The current study, however, questions this clear-cut

distinction and reveals that teachers' perceptions of emotional and social intelligence overlap with cognitive intelligence or better yet, practical problem solving and social competence (Sternberg, 2003). In their descriptions the teachers did not adhere to conventional approaches to intelligence (measuring abilities that are static and distinct) but focused on children's abilities to cope and adapt and select and transform the environments they are embedded in. They focused on emotional and social competencies and avoided the use of the word intelligence equating it with measurements, quantifications and dichotomous thinking. For the teachers in this study social and emotional competency is a collection of mainly pro-social behavioural skills, such as showing respect, cooperating with others, being determined; and dispositions of the self, a self whose role is to mediate and make sense of the environment and one's interpersonal milieu. Moreover, the teachers did not adhere to a model of a hierarchy of abilities or attributes that a child either possess or does not.

These findings appear to go counter to the definitions of EI (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Salovey and Mayer, 1990), which focus on EI as a concept which encompasses specific domains such as knowledge and management of emotions, and abilities to motivate oneself, recognize emotions, and handle relationships that one has or does not have (Brackett et al., 2004). The findings appear to substantiate Kristjansson's (2000), Boler's (1999) and Saarni's (2000) work which argues that the Mayer and Salovey definition is too ambitious, since it entails all kinds of psychological abilities and life skills needed for people to manage their life in general, placing an emphasis on consistent qualities that characterize a person without including the context which encompasses emotional competence.

Definitions of EI, Boler (1999) argues, place the self in highly individualistic terms, universalize abilities as a set of skills that need to be mastered, and in this way limit how emotions are understood and how they can be enhanced and developed. In a similar analysis, Saarni (2000) focuses on emotional competence and conceptualizes it as a 'transaction' with the environment and as 'skills' emphasizing learning and development and including the opportunities and exposure that a child has in his or her environment to learn about 'emotion-related processes and scripts' (p. 84).

The emphasis on the broader environment and the transactions within it appear to be very important for school based social and emotional skill development and prevention programming. The strengths and limitations of the multitude of systems involved play a crucial role in programming (Bond and Carmola Hauf, 2004). There is consensus in the EI research and the SEL literature that schools serve as the most important contexts for learning and teaching of social and emotional

competencies. Moreover, the social and emotional skills acquired create a spill-over effect, and teaching one skill improves other competencies (Elksnin and Elksnin, 2003). Following these assertions, the role of teachers becomes even more crucial and needs further attention.

Elias and Weissberg (2000) suggested for teacher educators that 'the magic combination of inspiration, belief and perspiration is essential for those committed to improving students' achievement and their well-being. We know the way; what we need now is the will' (p. 192). An addition to this line of argument comes from the primary prevention literature which recommends that interventions in health promotion and skill development need input from those that are its users, sensitivity to the effects of culture and input from broader social systems if they are to be successful (Saleebey, 2001). Teachers in our study confessed that they have the will by saying '… education does not rise through the curriculum or books written by bright people, but from the heart, that everyday the teacher poses during the lesson. That's why we say that we teach social and emotional skills to children everyday'. It is important not to over-idealize this statement, however, in that a great deal more research is necessary in order to further enhance understandings of teachers', parents' and students' conceptions of social and emotional competencies, their interface with different socio-cultural contexts and, most importantly, how they are enhanced or reinforced within classrooms in a systematic and developmentally appropriate manner. It is important that such research efforts are interdisciplinary and that the voices of all involved are heard.

Notes

1. Kostis Palamas (1859–1943) was the national poet of Greece. His work impacted upon Greek literature and culture for half a century and popularized and reinforced the ideals, values, and customs of the Greek cultural traditions and language.

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