Learning Outcomes and Social Emotional Competences: A Cross-Feeding Relationship to Promote Meaningful Learning Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the employment of Learning Outcomes (LO), the educational field has been marked by significant changes. This approach, by being deliberately learner-oriented, influenced several knowledge fields to promote relevant shifts in different levels of educational programs offered by prominent institutions. Parallelly, the last decades have been characterized by an increasing concern with the development of Social Emotional Competences (SEC) in educational contexts. In this complex scenario, the main aim of this article is to reflect on the relevance of teachers' social emotional competences in the construction of a healthy learning environment that equally embraces students with different social and cultural backgrounds. Thereby, the current work presents two specific aims: 1) to review the literature that discusses the connections between education and social emotional learning; and 2) to discuss the relevance of cultural identities and SEC for LO in an increasingly intercultural world. To achieve these objectives, the Qualitative Document Analysis' methodology was employed to identify, examine and select the scientific sources to support the knowledge development which background the proposed discussions. Considering the intrinsic link between cultural identity and learning outcomes, this article defends the development of educators' social emotional competences as a pathway to provide not only the best educational experiences for students with different cultural backgrounds but also to contribute to the construction of equitable societies by fostering the development of students' intercultural competences.

keywords: cultural heritage, education, intercultural competences, Qualitative Document Analysis, social emotional competences

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the employment of Learning Outcomes (LO), the educational field has been marked by significant changes. This approach, by dedicating more attention to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that need to be developed by the students instead of the content that needs to be delivered by the educators, influenced several knowledge fields to promote relevant shifts on different levels of educational programs offered by prominent institutions. In the European Union (EU), for example, the member states are recommended to restructure their educational systems and develop their National Quality Frameworks (NQF) based on the

European Quality Framework[1] (European Commission, 2018a; European Council, 2009; Halász, 2019). According to the European Commission (2018a, p. 4), within the European Union context "systems focus on learning outcomes (defined as 'statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do at the end of a learning process'). Learning outcomes are intended to ensure qualifications are transparent, and to support accountability".

Despite the general focus on European Union documents to provide the background for understanding the Learning Outcomes concept, it is possible to notice that this initiative has been also influencing and driving the reformulation of "progressive student-oriented" educational systems (Halász, 2017) in different parts of the world, such as North America, Asia, Africa and South America (Do & Pereira, 2022; European Commission, 2012; Hess, 2015; Nyamkhuu et al., 2021; Pereira, Konopleva, Dung, et al., 2022). As stated by Halász (2017, p. 2) "since the turn of the century, the process described as 'shift to learning outcomes' (Cedefop, 2009a) has been one of the most spectacular and influential phenomena in the development of education systems in Europe and also globally".

On the other hand, parallelly with the increasing popularity of applying learning outcomes as a guide for the development of educational programs, the last decades have been characterized by an increasing concern with the development of Social Emotional Competences (SEC) in teaching and learning contexts (Küpana, 2015; Melo et al., 2021; Motta & Romani, 2019; Pellitteri, 2006; Varner, 2020; Villodre, 2017). As asserted by Elias et al. (1997, p. 2) Social Emotional Competences can be comprehended as the capacity to "understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development". Concomitantly, as maintained by Dung & Zsolnai (2021, p. 3), every single educational project that aims to contribute to the development of students' Social Emotional Competences through the application of features connected to Social Emotional Learning (SEL), should be constructed and implemented based on the necessity of "building a supportive learning environment where students find learning as a challenging and meaningful activity".

In this complex scenario, by developing this paper the authors intend to shed light on the discussion about the impact of educators' social emotional competences on the construction of the desired students learning outcomes inserted in intercultural learning processes. Following this trail, the main aim of this article is to reflect on the relevance of teachers' social emotional competences in the construction of a healthy learning environment that equally embraces students with different social and cultural backgrounds. To support the comprehension and to enrich the discussions promoted by deep reflections connected to the general topic, the current work presents two specific aims: 1) to review the literature that discusses the connections between education and social emotional learning; and 2) to discuss the relevance of teachers' cultural identities and SEC in the process of developing and ensuring students' Learning Outcomes in an increasingly intercultural and interconnected world. To achieve these goals, the Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) methodology was employed to identify, examine, select and apply the scientific sources that could support the knowledge development which backgrounds the proposed discussions. Considering the intrinsic link between cultural identity and educational learning outcomes, this article defends the development of educators' SEC as a pathway to provide not only the best educational experiences for students with different

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[1] Different terms have been used in official documents developed by European Union institutions (e.g. competence framework, quality framework, qualification framework). Even though each aforementioned expression carries its own peculiarities and implications, the current article will employ the term Quality Framework as a general term to refer to different documents that aim to guide the development of educational systems.

cultural backgrounds but also to contribute to the construction of equitable societies by fostering the development of students' intercultural competences.

2. Methodology

As noted above, the current study applies the Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) as its methodology to investigate materials that can contribute to building the knowledge that is able to foster the proposed discussions. Bowen (2009) defines the QDA as an approach to systematically analyze files with a series of procedures that assess documents from several digital or non-digital sources. The author stress, among an array of other possibilities, five main potential benefits of adopting document analysis' procedures in a research scenario:

> first, […] documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate – a case of text providing context […] second, information contained in documents can suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed as part of the research […] third, documents provide supplementary research data. Information and insights derived from documents can be valuable additions to a knowledge base […] fourth, documents provide a means of tracking change and development […] fifth, documents can be analyzed as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources (Bowen, 2009, pp. 29–30).

Therefore, the Qualitative Document Analysis can be comprehended as a sequence of actions for searching, examining and systematizing information included in different forms of materials (Bowen, 2009; Pereira et al., 2021; Pereira, Konopleva, Alghneimin, et al., 2022; Wach & Ward, 2013).

Based on QDA processes, the following article exploited two main scientific searching mechanisms to find the relevant academic sources that could be used in the construction of the necessary knowledge to guide the discussions: Google Scholar and BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine). In these tools, the defined search terms were: "Social Emotional Competences", "Social Emotional Education", "Social Emotional Learning", "Intercultural Education", "Intercultural Competences", "Cultural Identity", "Cultural Heritage", and "Teacher Education". To simultaneously ensure a rich background for the construction of a proper writings' theoretical and historical perspective and assure the current relevance of the literature review, the proposed timeframe for the search was set for the last 22 years, starting in 2000 and finishing in 2022. Later, the review applied content analysis mechanisms to examine the most relevant literature about the topic and to develop the aforementioned general and specific aims. In this way, supported by these scholarly searching mechanisms, it was possible to track relevant articles, books and documents that not only deal with important concepts related to the discussed topic but also to assure the distinguished and influential role of the sources in the scientific community.

It is important to mention that to enable remote teamwork, the content analysis of this inquiry was supported by a qualitative data analysis software called ATLAS.ti. The online version of the application was chosen due to the functionalities (e.g. organizing text and visual files alongside memos and codes; search, finding and comparison tools) and the possibility of interconnection, communication and data exchanging with other widely used software such as Microsoft Excel (Friese, 2019).

Among a myriad of relevant studies used for this paper development, it is possible to mention: 1) Dung & Zsolnai (2021) who, focusing a the educator's perspective, review the literature related to the relevance of Social Emotional Competences and Social Emotional Learning for teaching and learning scenarios; 2) Halász (2017) that cope with the spread of learning-

outcomes-oriented initiatives in different structures, levels and sub-levels of educational systems; 3) Candau (2012), who connects and reflects on the relevance of considering social and cultural backgrounds to promote the most effective learning experience for students; and 4) Barrett et al. (2014) that promote an intense reflection toward the necessity of incorporate intercultural competences' development in different sectors and phases of educational processes, especially considering the increasingly connected and globalized world.

In order to achieve the proposed aims, after the examination of the chosen scientific document, the data was analyzed following three practical general steps that commonly provide guidance for qualitative analysis methodologies: coding and memoing, categorizing and thematizing (Birks et al., 2008; Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). As maintained by Creswell (2013) the coding process is the "heart of qualitative data analysis" (Creswell, 2013). Saldana (2013, p. 3) affirms that "code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data". Coding, on the other hand, is the process of arranging "things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification […] a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or 'families' because they share some characteristic – the beginning of a pattern" (Saldana, 2013, p. 9). Furthermore, according to Birks et al. (2008, p. 69), memoing "can help to clarify thinking on a research topic, provide a mechanism for the articulation of assumptions and subjective perspectives about the area of research, and facilitate the development of the study design". The memoing process will be mainly based on key elements that will arise from the meticulous examination of the gathered data. This systematic process of "data reduction" (Cohen et al., 2007; Krippendorff, 2013) aim to develop brief notes that can contribute with the development of the next stages.

Following this vein, the grouping state – that can be understood as the process in which the coded data are converted into categories (and lately themes) – the construction of categories can be comprehended as the process of clustering attribute-shared codes to form and extract codes' central ideas; the process of "labeling" codes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Thereby, the nineteen codes that were created after the free coding procedures were grouped into four categories using ATLAS.ti functionalities. Lastly, after the conduction of procedures related to reanalyzing the coded texts and renaming, deleting and rearranging codes, the four categories were grouped into two themes. These chosen themes (1 – Education and Social Emotional Competences; and 2 – Cultural Identities and Social Emotional Learning) and their inherent categories/codes were the basis for establishing and addressing the two aforementioned specific aims: 1) to review the literature that discusses the connections between education and social emotional learning; and 2) to discuss the relevance of cultural identities and SEC for LO in an increasingly intercultural world.

After the establishment of the themes, this inquiry investigated the meaning of the gathered data. According to Creswell (2013, p. 187), the interpretation stage "involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data", it implies "the formation of themes from the codes, and then the organization of themes into larger units of abstraction to make sense of the data". According to Creswell (2012), the last stage of a research initiative is the "representing and visualizing" phase, in which the reports, theses and/or articles are written and published. In this paper, the report is presented in the narrative discussion format. As stated by Creswell (2012, p. 254), "a narrative discussion is a written passage in a qualitative study in which authors summarize, in detail, the findings from their data analysis".

3. Discussion

In order to promote a proper understanding of the concepts and to promote a fruitful discussion within the framework of academia, this article's authors opted to not dedicate a separated section for the Literature review. Likewise, the literature review will be incorporated into the discussion section in a manner that the necessary expressions will be presented and briefly explained every time that they are necessary to encourage discussions and reflections or for the development of authors' thoughts. It is expected that, due to the range of concepts necessary for the successful construction of this discussion, this procedure can contribute to the promotion of a fluid reading and an enriching experience for the audience.

Thereby, the first element that needs to be properly presented is the conceptualization of Learning Outcomes (LOs) as a guide for educational processes. As previously mentioned, the LO mindset has been promoting a significant impact in different levels of education-oriented scenarios (European Commission, 2013; Halász, 2017; Souto-Otero, 2012). The "Learning Outcomes Concept" (Souto-Otero, 2012) is frequently employed to re-organize, develop, implement and manage structural changes to nourish "student-centered learning" (Adam, 2006). By understanding that the desirable outcomes of educational systems should be the competences developed by the learners, the LO mindset exchanges the focus from "what the educators should teach" to "what learners should learn". Halász (2017) affirms that the Learning Outcomes approach can be considered more than an innovation per se: it is a meta-innovation that has the potential to encourage, produce, develop and implement other innovations. As stated by the author, "in most education systems, especially in those where the penetration of progressive student-centered pedagogies has historically been low, the shift to LOs in the daily practice of educational institutions and practitioners is a major curriculum innovation" (Halász, 2017, p. 3).

It is important to note that, by putting light on the student's outcomes, educational systems and curricula can become more flexible regarding the proposed and presented content. In general terms, by ensuring that the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes are developed by the students, the teachers, professors, coordinators, school leaders and directors can propose, develop, apply and evaluate different pedagogical initiatives. Doubtless, considering that developing and testing new methodologies can eventually not achieve the expected and desired results, depending on the pathway in which it is employed, the flexibility offered by the rationalization of the Learning Outcomes concept can lead educational programs to improvements but also to degradation. The assumed freedom can guide educational systems into innovative and successful initiatives but can also lead to disorganization, disconnection and division (Pereira, Nyamkhuu, et al., 2022).

In this context, different policy-oriented documents, educational researches and academic studies have been describing the quality of teachers as an extremely relevant feature in the promotion of students' learning outcomes (European Commission, 2013, 2017, 2018b; Halász, 2017, 2019; IALEI, 2008). As an illustration of the significance attributed to this feature, it is possible to mention the document entitled "Supporting Teacher Competence Development for Better Learning Outcomes", published by the European Commission in 2013 as one of the results of the ET2010 thematic working group.

Harmonically, as mentioned by IALEI (2008, p. 39), several studies have demonstrated that "teachers of the same ethnic and cultural heritage more successfully connect school knowledge to the cultural lives of their students. They are more likely to empower students as learners and agents of change, and increase community connections to the school". The mentioned "ethnic and cultural heritage" has been a research topic in different academic fields (e.g. sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, etc.) and has received different names such as

collective identity, groups identity, social identity and cultural identity (Pereira et al., 2021). Despite possible differences between the definitions, applications and implications of the different terms in their respective study fields, in the realm of the current article, the expression "collective identity" will be generically employed to address the cultural, ethnical, collective and group forms of the individual's identification. In this direction, Polletta & Jasper (2001, p. 3), define collective identity as "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly". Thus, characteristics like profession, religion, neighborhood, nationality and sexual orientation may be significant elements for the creation and engagement in collective identities. As stated by Stekelenburg (2013, p. 3), "individuals come to see themselves as part of a group when some shared characteristic becomes salient and is defined as important". A common cultural background or group identification gives teachers more sensibility to understand the strengths and challenges that pupils usually go through. This characteristic is particularly necessary when educational systems need to cope with individuals of minority groups.

Especially considering the world's current globalizing characteristic, the increasing movements of emigration and immigration and the consequential formation of intercultural classroom settings, it would be unpractical to expect that teachers hold the same cultural heritage as their students to ensure desirable learning outcomes. In this scenario, investment in the development of teachers' Social Emotional Competences can be considered a tool to increase the social and cultural sensibility that is necessary to promote meaningful and fruitful pedagogical approaches that encompass the needs and expectations of learners from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds (Do et al., 2022; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Varner, 2020). Concomitantly, Dung & Zsolnai (2021) assert that teachers with high levels of Social Emotional Competences, by possessing higher levels of self-awareness, can create and develop mechanisms to identify how they can employ their emotional and social skills to motivate and nurture the students' learning-oriented behavior. As stated by the authors:

> When teachers are able to understand their students' emotional expressions and the respective appraisals, they have more feelings of their meaningful roles by their students' sides, likely to get closer to students' circumstances, understand them more and find the best way to support students overcoming their daily difficulties either physical and psychological ones. As such, teachers become the reliable and effectively supportive sources for students. As a result, both teachers' and students' well-being are ensured and it warrants the significantly healthy relationship of them (Dung & Zsolnai, 2021, p. 5).

4. Conclusion

The rapid spread of learning-outcomes-oriented educational programs has promoted significant changes in modern educational systems. As an approach that is consciously designed to focus on the students, it tends to imply a "more active and mindful" participation of the educators, especially considering that the teachers should also be focused on how their pedagogical approaches affect their students. In order to be effective, this concern on how the chosen methodology and methods impact the students' learning processes needs to be followed by a series of procedures that involve cycles of selecting, testing, developing, analyzing, applying and assessing the approaches and results of proposed initiatives (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

On one hand, by demanding a mindful set of procedures that needs to be constantly reevaluated and updated in different classroom settings, SEC-culturally-oriented methodologies can put

more pressure on the work or teachers. However, it may provide a unique opportunity to develop a meaningful and efficient work that not only promotes the best possible educational experience for the learners but also has the power to promote social justice by truthfully integrating and embracing students from different social and cultural backgrounds into educational systems, especially considering intercultural scenarios.

This paper defends that to be efficient in the promotion of democratic and intercultural societies by genuinely incorporating students and citizens with different cultural and ethnic heritages, the teachers need to possess a high level of cultural sensitivity and self-awareness and these features are particularly relevant in the development of teachers' Social Emotional Competences. It is believed that a Social Emotional Competent educator is able to create strategies to ensure a harmonic environment that, at the same time, considers and deals with the strengths and challenges of different students and provides meaningful educational experiences by integrating the needs and expatiations of the different student groups.

Additionally, Socio Emotional Competent teachers should be aware of the necessity of considering the development of students' intercultural competences as a valuable learning outcome for the current increasingly globalized world. Intercultural competences can be comprehended as the necessary qualities to understand that there are multiple correct ways to interpret the same facts (Barrett et al., 2014; Galante, 2015; Lázár, 2015; UNESCO, 2013). Intercultural competent students have the ability to discuss "critical topics as values, beliefs and attitudes among members of multiple cultural groups in a way that does not lead to conflict" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 16). Concomitantly, according to Candau (2012, p. 242)[2], the development of intercultural competences infers "mutual respect, the pursuit of consensus, the recognition and acceptance of dissent, […] and the construction of new modes of social relationships".

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[2] Here and ahead: authors' translation

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