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Study of the Relationship Between Professional and Socio-Emotional Competences in the Training of Future Social Work Professionals

Zhaneta Tsoneva¹ 

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0439-6361>

1) *Technical University of Gabrovo*, Bulgaria

Abstract

The issue of professional competences of social workers has been the subject of research of numerous studies focusing on factors related to the development of professional knowledge and skills. The article analyzes the main components of competence – knowledge, skills, and behavior (emotions, attitudes, values), as well as the interrelations between them. For the purposes of the study, a working definition of competence is proposed. The problem under consideration also includes a theoretical review of socio-emotional and professional competences. The significant role of socio-emotional competences in the training of future social work professionals has not yet been thoroughly researched. The article presents an exploratory pilot study examining the relationship between the socio-emotional and professional competences of future social work specialists in the context of professional activity requirements. The study was conducted among a limited sample of students in the specialty “Social Activities”. The results suggest a positive association between socio-emotional and professional competences; however, the findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size.

Keywords

Competences, socio-emotional competence, professional competence, students

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Corresponding author: Zhaneta Tsoneva

Contact address: janett_c@abv.bg

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Estudio de la Relación entre las Competencias Profesionales y Socioemocionales en la Formación de Futuros Profesionales del Trabajo Social

Zhaneta Tsoneva¹ 

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0439-6361>

1) *Universidad Técnica de Gabrovo, Bulgaria*

Resumen

La cuestión de las competencias profesionales de los trabajadores sociales ha sido objeto de investigaciones en numerosos estudios centrados en factores relacionados con el desarrollo de conocimientos y habilidades profesionales. El artículo analiza los componentes principales de la competencia: conocimientos, habilidades y comportamiento (emociones, actitudes, valores), así como las interrelaciones entre ellos. Para los fines del estudio, se propone una definición operativa de competencia. El problema en cuestión también incluye una revisión teórica de las competencias socioemocionales y profesionales. El papel significativo de las competencias socioemocionales en la formación de futuros profesionales del trabajo social aún no ha sido investigado a fondo. El artículo presenta un estudio piloto exploratorio que examina la relación entre las competencias socioemocionales y profesionales de futuros especialistas en trabajo social en el contexto de los requisitos de la actividad profesional. El estudio se llevó a cabo con una muestra limitada de estudiantes en la especialidad "Actividades Sociales". Los resultados sugieren una asociación positiva entre competencias socioemocionales y profesionales; Sin embargo, los resultados deben interpretarse con cautela debido a la naturaleza exploratoria del estudio y al pequeño tamaño de la muestra.

Palabras clave

Competencias, competencia socioemocional, competencia profesional, estudiantes

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Autor de correspondencia: Zhaneta Tsoneva

Dirección de contacto: janett_c@abv.bg

A number of studies in various aspects and professional fields investigate the professional competences of specialists. Globalization, technological progress, digitalization, and other significant contemporary circumstances place increasingly high demands on the training of specialists in various professional fields. In the field of social work, professional competences such as teamwork, empathy and communication, conflict resolution, ethical sensitivity, cultural diversity and equality, professional knowledge, and responsibilities are associated with the high quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the support and the services provided. In parallel with the professional competence of specialists, socio-emotional competences represent a valuable resource for improving relationships, understanding of oneself and others in different contexts of social practice.

There is still no in-depth research into the significant role and possible association of socio-emotional competencies with the training of future social work specialists, in accordance with the requirements for professional competence. In this context, the study aims to establish the relationship between the professional and socio-emotional competencies of learners in the field of social work in the context of the requirements of professional activity.

The object of the study is students studying in the specialty “Social Activities” at the Technical University of Gabrovo, Bulgaria.

The subject of research is the professional and socio-emotional competences of the trainees in the field of social work.

The tasks through which the aim of the study is achieved are as follows:

1. Based on an in-depth theoretical analysis, to investigate the essence of the socio-emotional and professional competencies of social work specialists.
2. To investigate the relationship between the socio-emotional and professional competences of learners in the field of social work.
3. To analyze and summarize the results of the empirical research.

The research questions on which the study is based are as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between the socio-emotional and professional competences of learners in the field of social work?
2. Is the level of socio-emotional intelligence associated with the development of learners' professional competences?
3. Is there a leading component in professional competences according to the target group studied?

For the purposes of the study, standard research methods were applied, including expert assessment of the tools used, one-factor correlation and regression analysis to establish the relationship between the socio-emotional and professional competencies of the trainees.

Theoretical Background

The competence of a professional is associated with the complex of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviour that he applies in his relationships with people, in the activities he performs. As Rychen and Salganik (2003) point out, competence is not just knowledge and skills, it uses psychosocial resources in context. A similar position is taken by McClelland (1973), which is considered by many researchers to be the main source of the study of competencies, which over the years has evolved as a concept and definition by his followers such as Spencer and Spencer (2008), Boyatzis (1991) and others (Arifin, 2021; Škrinyarić, 2022). According to McClelland (1973), a person's success is not determined only by their level of intelligence, as determined by specialized intelligence tests, but is a set of characteristics (competencies) such as values, interpersonal skills and leadership, necessary for various professional activities (p. 9).

The literature review allows us to distinguish two main approaches to the content of competence. The first approach, which is more limited, defines it as knowledge and skills (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Hsieh et al., 2012; Kiilakoski, 2015; Škrinjarić, 2022). The second approach broadens the understanding of competence to include attitudes (Hsieh et al., 2012) and behaviour (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). In the context of this more comprehensive understanding of competence, Vittelo et al. (2021) propose a synthesis model according to which, in addition to appropriate knowledge and people skills, are needed "psychosocial factors (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations) to perform successfully within a specified domain" (p.4). This approach emphasises the holistic and contextual nature of competence.

To achieve a clearer conceptual vision, the distinction between knowledge and skills is key. Considering the concept of competence from the point of view of the necessary knowledge, the authors point out that it is the ability of an individual or group to process, analyze, synthesize the necessary information using a set of data, facts, ideas, and theories (Savchak, 2023). Knowledge according to European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations "means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of fact, principles, theories, and practices that is related to a field of work or study" (European Commission).

The other significant attribute of competence that requires a more detailed presentation is skills. Skills can be seen as man-acquired ways to perform certain actions. As Savchak (2023) points out, skills are the ability to conduct certain processes or actions that are based on knowledge and that are aimed at achieving the set goals. Skills can be upgraded and improved to achieve the necessary specialization and meet the requirements of the profession. Knowledge and skills correspond closely to the behaviour that a specialist demonstrates in his relationships with people, in the attitude he has to the specific activity.

Behaviour is considered as the reaction of a living organism under the influence of external or internal stimuli. Behaviour is determined by values, attitudes, and emotions. Values are defined as the norms of behaviour, principles, customs, culture to which the individual belongs. The value system determines to a significant extent its behaviour and action. In this sense, behavior is a situationally determined and socially significant manifestation of competence.

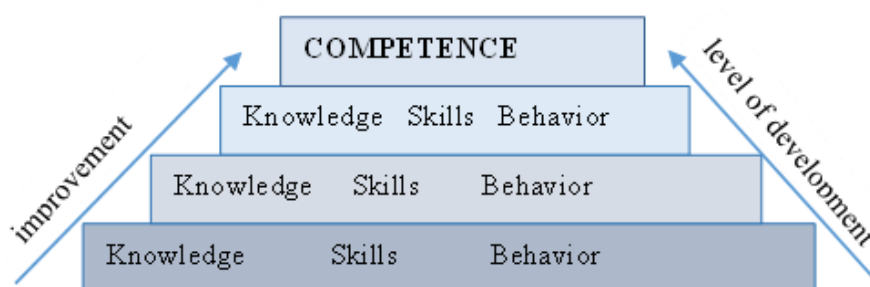
A person's reaction is often the way to defend themselves, to protect themselves from the feeling of failure, to be liked, valued, accepted. At the heart of this reaction is his individual,

most personal experience, namely emotion. Emotion, as Goleman (1995) notes, is an impulse to a certain action. It is determined by our individual experiences, value system, and culture. Frijda (2009) believes that emotions and emotional processes are related to thought, perception, and action. Emotional experience, as the author points out, depends on the degree of control of emotional processes over the thinking, attention, and action of the individual at a given moment. Sigel (2012), one of the leading researchers in the field of the study of emotional processes, adds that emotion is “links the internal and interpersonal worlds of the human mind” (p. 12), which is especially significant for professional interactions.

As part of the process of human development through skill improvement, knowledge building, achievement of goals, and more, motivation plays a key role in the development of competence. Several studies show that motivation is directly related to competence in terms of how much an individual will develop his competence (Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014; Horn, 2014; Eliot et al., 2002).

Of interest is the definition of competence connected with basic principles formulated by Vitello et al. (2021). As the authors point out, the principles focus on essential elements of the concept of “competence” (Vitello et al., 2021). According to the first principle, competence is associated with a specific area (profession, training, interest, etc.) and depends on the context. The second principal postulates that competence has a holistic nature, i.e., it emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the individual, the context, and the action. The third principle draws attention to the ability to consistently perform successfully in different situations. According to the fourth principle, competence requires the use and integration of knowledge and skills, according to the context in which competence is applied. According to the authors, psychosocial factors (behavioural, emotional, etc.) associated with learning and performance are important for competence. The latter principle draws attention to the requirement for a certain level of training or ability, which is determined depending on the requirements of the professional field and activities that the individual performs (Vitello et al., 2021, p.13-19). The proposed principles clearly construct the concept of “competence”: its contextual conditioning, holistic nature, orientation towards sustainable presentation and integration of knowledge, skills, and psychosocial factors. The principal setting offers a framework that allows both theoretical analysis and a basis for empirical research.

Proceeding from the terminological consideration of the basic concepts related to competence, the working definition, based on which we realize the further consideration of the problem under study, is as follows: Competence is the complex of the necessary knowledge, acquired skills, integrated into professional activity through behaviour that is determined by emotions, values, culture, attitudes, and motivated by the desire to upgrade and improve (see figure 1).

Figure 1*Definition of Competence*

Source. created by the author

Classification of Competencies

In the process of personal and professional development, a person acquires a variety of competencies, which the literature review allows to be categorized according to distinctive characteristics. In line with the 5 European Commission's Recommendation on Core Competences Needed for “Personal Fulfilment, Healthy and Sustainable Lifestyles, Employability, Active Citizenship and Social Inclusion”, the Council of the European Union is adopting a framework with eight key competences – “literacy; multilingual literacy; mathematical competence and competence in the field of exact sciences, technology and engineering; digital competence; personal competence; social competence and competence to acquire learning skills; civic competence, entrepreneurial competence, competence for cultural awareness and expression” (European Union, 2018, p. 7).

Table 1 presents the main competencies according to the contemporary requirements for successful personal and professional realization, looking at more significant studies conducted in the last five years.

Table 1*Classification of Competencies*

Indication	Author(s)	Types
Lifelong learning	Savchak, 2023; Van den Broeck et al., 2024; Fidalgo & Thormann, 2024	adaptability and sustainability, efficient use of time, motivation, information literacy, personal and social competences, competence for continuous learning, initiative, and perseverance
Success at work	Readiness, 2024; Oberländer et al., 2020; Kim & Jung, 2022; Rachmad, 2025; Marr, 2022	cognitive competencies, communicative competence, adaptation, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, time management, organizational competencies

Indication	Author(s)	Types
Interpersonal relationships	Slemp et al., 2024	communication, teamwork, adaptation, problem solving, cultural awareness
Personal development	Lane & Smith, 2021 ; Roberts & Nickel, 2021 ; Thielmann & Burghart, 2025	emotional competence, social competences, motivational competences, self-development, self-knowledge

Source. created by the author based on scientific literature

The analysis of contemporary studies, presented in Table 1, shows a significant conceptual overlap between distinct groups of competences. This recurrence can be interpreted as evidence of the significant role of competences (for example, adaptability, motivation, communication – present in all areas such as professional success, personal development, interpersonal relationships). At the same time, the individualization of competence is also evident, which is noticeable in studies that focus on personal qualities, skills, and attitudes. This aspect also requires consideration of the role of the context (institutional environment, social structures, etc.) in shaping opportunities for development.

The presented classification of competences does not claim to be exhaustive on the issues under consideration but is the basis for the development of the thesis of the study and provides guidance on the essential competences that each person should strive to develop for the purposes of his professional and personal growth.

The Professional and Socio-Emotional Competence of Social Work Professionals

Professional competence is a complex of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the implementation of a profession. As [Sudarmathy & Sathyamurthi \(2024\)](#) point out, professional competence can be defined as „the capacity to produce sustained effective (worthy) performance (including problem-solving, achievement, and implementing change) in a certain learning domain, profession, role, organizational environment, and task circumstance” ([Sudarmathy & Sathyamurthi, 2024](#), p. 3).

The nature of the social work profession poses challenges for professionals that they face daily, and which evaluate their professional competences. The complex and highly relationship-oriented nature of social workplaces high demands on the professional competence of specialists to respond adequately to various social problems.

The necessary professional knowledge, skills and personal qualities of social work specialists are the subject of research by numerous researchers. Based on the global standards for training and training for the social work profession which the International Federation of Social Workers provides, the necessary professional competences of social work professionals can be clearly identified. The standards draw attention to competences such as critical understanding, self-reflection, multicultural knowledge and abilities, the ability to deal with complex aspects of power in accordance with the values and ethics of the profession ([IFSW, 2012](#)). The National Association of Social Worker (NASW) develops a set of practical standards and guidelines for practitioners and prospective social work professionals. The standards extract the basic professional competences of professionals necessary for the

different areas of social work. They provide guidance on the knowledge, skills and values that culturally competent professionals need to apply when working with people of different ethnicities, races, genders, sexual orientation, religion, etc. (NASW, 2017, p. 8).

In modern social practice, the complex nature of the problems requires the integration of competencies from different professional fields. In this regard, research emphasizes the importance of professional competencies such as communication, working with multiprofessional teams, professional collaboration and leadership for the provision of effective and quality social and health services (Kangasniemi et al., 2022, p. 408-410).

In support of the thesis that competence integrates multiple constructs, Poulin & Matis (2019) present a competency model of professional social work, including nine core competencies:

1. Demonstrating ethical and professional behaviour, which includes self-reflection, use of technology, ethical dilemmas, interprofessional cooperation, etc.
2. Inclusion of diversity and diversity in practice - forms of discrimination and oppression, personal values and prejudices, identity, impact at micro-, meso- and macro levels.
3. Promoting human rights and promoting social, environmental, and economic perspectives.
4. Participation in research studies and informed practice.
5. Participation in policy practice at micro-, meso- and macro level by developing, implementing, and evaluating policies regarding the provision of and access to social services.
6. Interact with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities by building interaction and interprofessional collaboration.
7. Evaluation of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities through critical thinking, interprofessional cooperation, effective decision-making, and selection of appropriate strategies.
8. Interventions with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities through knowledge and skills for effective communication, mediation, application of interprofessional cooperation.
9. Evaluation of practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities through knowledge and skills for critical analysis, monitoring, and evaluation of the results of applied methods and interventions (p. 18-23).

According to the authors, each of the nine competences in the presented model is interrelated and does not exist independently (Poulin & Matis, 2019, p. 25), which allows the integration of multiple competences to achieve the high quality and effectiveness of the support provided in the different social contexts of practice. The presented competence model emphasizes the systemic essence of the professional competence of social work, which unites ethical, interventional, analytical, and evaluative values of practice.

Social and emotional competences are important for a person's professional and personal development throughout his life. The study of social competences and the interest in their study stems from studies aimed primarily at how children interact with the social environment, exhibiting specific skills, and the relationship between poor interactions and maladaptive

behaviour patterns in adulthood (Gottman, 1975; Dodge et al., 1986; Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Blumberg et al., 2008). Singh et al. (2022) point out that the term “social competence” was originally designated by Thorndike (1920) as social intelligence and denotes the knowledge, skills, mastery required by each person in their social relationships with others in different situation.

The analysis of scientific research and literature sources allows social competence to stand out as a dynamic system that brings together knowledge, social motives, abilities and behavioral flexibility that drive this system and improve social interactions (Zsolnai, 2015; Taborsky & Oliveira, 2012). In Bierman’s (2004) definition, social competence is defined as “capacity to coordinate adaptive responses flexibly to various interpersonal demands, and to organize social behavior in different social contexts in a manner beneficial to oneself and consistent with social conventions and morals” (p. 141). O’Malley (1977) considers social competence as interactions that are productive and mutually satisfying. According to the author, interactions are mutually satisfied when the goals of both parties in the process of interaction are desired and achieved, and accordingly the interactions are productive when personal goals are achieved (p. 29).

Starting from the concept that social competence integrates multiple building blocks such as behavioural skills, emotional processes, cognitive abilities, interpersonal relationships, Orpinas (2010) considers that social competence depends on additional characteristics. The author points out that social competence is determined by a person's age and cultural characteristics, as well as by the specific situation, in which a person may be socially more competent at different times and not so much at others.

Huitt and Dawson (2011) point out that Broderick & Blewitt differentiate four fundamental categories of social competences: affective processes, cognitive processes, social skills, and high social self-esteem (p. 124).

Cavell (1990) presents a three-component model of social competence that integrates the following main components into a hierarchical system: social adaptation, social functioning, and social skills (p. 117). According to the author, social adaptation is at the top of the hierarchy, reflecting the degree to which everyone in society has reached according to his socio-economic, professional, and psychological status. Social functioning is the second component of the model, which the author points out as the degree of reaction of the individual to certain social situations that meet specific socially justified criteria. As the author points out, social skills are the last component that represents the necessary specific abilities of a person to competently perform their social tasks (p. 118). The presented hierarchical model shows that social skills are a significant, but not sufficient prerequisite for social competence, which in its highest form manifests itself as social adaptation.

According to Kanning (2002), each of the competences which he describes is regarded as a dimension of competence. The author classifies competences into three areas: perceptual-cognitive area (locus of control, determination, knowledge, perception of personality), motivational-emotional area (prosociality, emotional stability, value pluralism) and behavioural area (assertiveness, extroversion, flexibility, communicativeness, conflict behaviour, self-control) (p. 158).

The literature review shows that most studies consider social competence as a broader concept that brings together various components, including an individual’s emotional capacity.

In this sense, emotional competence is an essential component of social competence. For the purposes of this study, emotional competence is initially considered as an independent term, after which it is presented as a collective concept of social and emotional competences in terms of their significance for building a professionally competent specialist.

It is conceptually necessary to distinguish the term emotional competence from the term “emotional intelligence,” since the first indicates the potential and the second – its real manifestation. Emotional intelligence and emotional competence are close concepts and are often used in literature and practice with the same meaning and purpose, but in fact there are small distinctive differences. Emotional intelligence is the ability of a person to perceive, understand, manage, and evaluate their own emotions and those of other people. Emotional intelligence includes three main components: the ability to recognize and identify emotions; the ability to associate and read emotions with reactions and behaviour; and managing emotions. Choudhury (2021) emphasizes that emotions are significant for human relationships, behaviours, and have an impact on productivity and decision-making on both a personal and professional level (p. 2933). Siegal (2012), one of the pioneers in the study of emotions, describes emotions as an integrating process. The author explains that, the way the mind establishes meaning is closely linked to social interactions and both meaning making and relationships are mediated via the same neural circuits responsible for initiating emotional processes (p. 12). Goleman (1995) notes that emotional intelligence is those “other skills”, such as self-motivation, showing perseverance in difficult situations, controlling impulses, regulating moods and anxiety, showing empathy and living with hope (p. 57).

As Vaida and Opre (2014) point out, emotional intelligence is the basis for the formation of the constructive components of emotional competence (p. 26). In this sense, emotional competence is seen as the practical manifestation of emotional intelligence and is realized through the effective management of emotions in different contexts and social interactions.

The relationship between the concepts of “social competence” and “emotional competence” is expressed in the ratio that is considered in the manifestation of emotional competence in different situations. That is, people with a higher level of emotional intelligence show better emotional competence in various personal, professional, or social situations.

The socio-emotional competence of the learners helps them to be more confident, concentrated, purposeful, to realize better results. This prepares them to improve their knowledge, skills, behaviour, attitudes for more successful coping with the social challenges of the profession: solving complex and complex problems, dealing with conflict situations, overcoming stress, and preventing burnout syndrome, effective communication, and cooperation.

Methodology

The study of the relationship between the socio-emotional and professional competencies of future social work specialists is based on the author’s review of the relevant literature on the subject. Several significant studies in this research field have examined the relationship between emotional competence and professional satisfaction (Ealias & George, 2012),

emotional intelligence and academic performance (ALmegewly et al., 2022), professional identity, and emotional intelligence (Geng & Zhou, 2011).

Based on the results of the cited studies on the indicating a relationship between emotional intelligence and professional competences, the aim of the present exploratory pilot study is to establish whether there is a positive relationship between socio-emotional competence and professional competence of students.

The subject of the study is students studying in the specialty “Social Activities” at the Technical University of Gabrovo, Bulgaria. The education of students according to the Bulgarian educational system in higher education in a bachelor’s degree lasts four years. The participants were bachelor’s degree students in the third and fourth years. The selection of these participants is based on the premise that the last two years of training include specialized courses aimed at developing specific knowledge, practical skills, and professional competencies within the field of social work.

The purpose of the study implies the formulation of the following hypotheses:

H0. There is no linear dependence between the variable “socio-emotional competence” and the variable “professional competence.”

H1. There is a linear dependence between the variable “socio-emotional competence” and the variable “professional competence.”

H2. The higher the level of socio-emotional competence, the higher the overall level of professional competence.

H3. It is expected to have a leading component in professional competences.

Two questionnaires were used to collect the information necessary to verify the formulated hypotheses:

Q1. Schutte Emotional Intelligence Self-Assessment Questionnaire, which measures emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationships, and soft skills (Schutte et al., 1998). The questionnaire consists of 33 items referring to various aspects of socio-emotional competence. A 5-point Likert scale is used to record responses, by which each respondent determines the extent to which each statement applies to them. The author of the questionnaire indicates that the average scores are around 124 with a standard deviation of 13.

Q2. Questionnaire on the self-assessment of professional competence, developed by the author for the purposes of the study. The questionnaire is a self-assessment tool and consists of 6 main components, including a total of 36 statements. The main components are:

- Empathy and communicativeness,
- Teamwork skills.
- Conflict resolution skills.
- Responsibility and professional knowledge.
- Ethical sensitivity and responsibility.
- Cultural diversity and equality.

The components are tailored to the specifics of the formation and development of the necessary professional competencies of social work specialists. A 5-point Likert scale was used for self-assessment from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The type of instruments used are consistent to the maximum extent with the specifics of the problems studied.

The verification of the validity of the research hypotheses is conducted through one-factor correlation and regression analysis to establish a relationship between the studied variables and to study the strength and direction of the relationship.

The empirical research was conducted in three stages. The first stage covers the development of the toolbox and the expert evaluation of the questionnaire for self-assessment of professional competences. The second stage involves conducting a survey with the two questionnaires among students. The third stage includes an analysis of the results obtained and drawing main conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

All participants in the study took part in the research completely voluntarily. The data from the survey is completely anonymized.

Results and Discussion

To provide methodological justification for the study, at the first stage, an analysis of the internal consistency of the questionnaire for self-assessment of professional competencies was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which provides information about the degree of consistency between the individual items.

The internal consistency of the self-assessment questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with the resulting value ($\alpha = 0.9503$) suggest excellent internal consistency of the scale. The "alpha if the item is removed" analysis did not indicate an increase in the coefficient when following the exclusion of any item, which indicates an equal contribution of all items to the measurement of the studied construct (Table 2).

Table 2
Scale Consistency Data

Item №	Correlation with the overall score	Alpha when removing the item	Item №	Correlation with the overall score	Alpha when removing the item
1	0,50	0,948	19	0,73	0,947
2	0,65	0,947	20	0,74	0,946
3	0,64	0,947	21	0,68	0,947
4	0,68	0,947	22	0,58	0,948
5	0,69	0,947	23	0,73	0,946
6	0,67	0,947	24	0,55	0,948
7	0,67	0,947	25	0,50	0,948
8	0,68	0,947	26	0,60	0,947

Item №	Correlation with the overall score	Alpha when removing the item	Item №	Correlation with the overall score	Alpha when removing the item
9	0,62	0,947	27	0,49	0,948
10	0,67	0,947	28	0,31	0,949
11	0,48	0,948	29	0,47	0,949
12	0,63	0,947	30	0,52	0,948
13	0,61	0,947	31	0,43	0,949
14	0,67	0,945	32	0,39	0,949
15	0,55	0,948	33	0,30	0,950
16	0,64	0,947	34	0,39	0,949
17	0,66	0,947	35	0,60	0,948
18	0,46	0,949	36	0,40	0,949

Source. Own calculations

Additionally, alpha-total correlations were calculated, with most values falling into the range of moderate to high correlations ($r > 0.40$), which confirms good internal consistency of the individual elements. Several items showed lower values (≈ 0.30), which did not indicate the need for exclusion, as they were not associated with a substantial reduction in the overall reliability of the scale. The results obtained suggest that the instrument demonstrates an adequate degree of consistency and appears suitable for measuring the construction studied within the framework of this exploratory study.

At the next stage, an expert assessment of the questionnaire was conducted, aimed at assessing the substantive validity of the instrument. Six independent experts conducted an expert assessment of the questionnaire. The expert assessment examines whether the questionnaire is appropriate, applicable to the target group, whether it is consistent with the subject of the study, whether it covers the necessary components for the professional competence of social work professionals. A 5-point Likert scale was used for evaluation. The profile of the experts includes 2 psychologists and 4 social workers who have the necessary professional experience and qualifications. The summary assessments of the experts are presented in Table 3, where the designations are E1÷E6 - expert, Y1÷Y5 - evaluation criteria, Σ - overall assessment of the expert. The main criteria by which the questionnaire is evaluated are the following:

1. Relevance of the studied issues.
2. Applicability, according to the target group.
3. Coverage of significant competences.
4. Complexity about knowledge, skills, behaviour, attitudes.
5. Objectivity using a standardized rating scale and clear indicators.

Table 3*Expert Assessments of a Questionnaire for self-Assessment of Professional Competences*

Expert	Expert assessment on a 5-point scale						$\bar{x}$
	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Σ	
E1	5	5	4	5	5	24	4,8
E2	4	4	5	5	5	23	4,6
E3	3	4	5	5	4	21	4,2
E4	5	5	5	4	5	24	4,8
E5	4	5	5	4	5	23	4,6
E6	4	5	5	5	5	24	4,8
						$[\bar{x}]$	4,6

Source. Own calculations

The result of the average score (1) is $[\bar{x}] = 4,6$ where x_i is the score of the i -th expert, $I=1$

$$\bar{x} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N x_i}{N} \quad (1)$$

Consistency in the assessments of individual experts is determined by a coefficient of variation (2).

$$v = \frac{\sigma}{[\bar{x}]} \quad \text{the variance } \sigma = \bar{x} - [\bar{x}] \quad (2)$$

The summarized results are presented in Table 4, where $[\bar{x}]$ – mean overall score, $\bar{v}$ – mean variation, σ – variance.

Table 4*Summary Results to Present the Degree of Coherence of Experts*

Expert	$\bar{x}$	Σ	V
Y1	4,8	0,17	0,035
Y2	4,6	1	0,217
Y3	4,2	-0,4	-0,095
Y4	4,8	0,17	0,035
Y5	4,6	1	0,217
Y6	4,8	0,17	0,035
$[\bar{x}]$	4,6		$\bar{v}$ 0,074

Source. Own calculations

According to the value occupied by the coefficient of variation, the degree of consistency is determined. The results show that there is consistency among experts because the coefficient of variation $V \leq 0,1$.

The second stage of the study involved administering questionnaires to the target group. 39 students participated in the study, which is 76% of the total number of students in the specialty during the current academic year. The average age of respondents was 28 years. The profile of respondents is predominantly represented by women ($n = 35 / 89.7\%$) and men ($n = 4 / 10.3\%$). Students are third- and fourth-year students with a bachelor's degree. To comply with the methodological requirements for processing and interpreting the results of the Schutte questionnaire, a data filtering procedure was applied. In accordance with the established criteria, those respondents whose general indicators fell outside the permissible range (below 111 and above 137 points) are excluded. The selection of this range is justified by the need to ensure the validity and reliability of the results obtained. Values outside these limits are interpreted as potentially indicative of random or inconsistent completion of the questionnaire, the presence of extreme response patterns or deviations that may distort the overall picture of the phenomenon under study. The application of this type of restriction is established practice when working with standardized psychometric instruments to limit the presence of atypical data and enhance the internal consistency of the sample. As a result of the applied exclusion procedure, 19 participants from the initially formed target group were included finally, which should be considered in light the exploratory pilot nature of the study and its limited effective sample size.

To establish the initial relationship between the studied variables “socio-emotional competences” (independent variable) and “professional competences” (dependent variable), a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated. As can be seen in Table 5, the resulting value $r = 0.999$ indicates an extremely strong positive linear relationship between socio-emotional competences and professional competences. The results obtained suggest that higher levels of socio-emotional competences are associates of professional competence within the sample studied.

Table 5

Correlation Matrix Between Socio-Emotional and Professional Competences

Variable	Socio-emotional competences	Professional competences
Socio-emotional competences	1	0,999883
Professional competences	0,999883	1

Source. Own calculations

To describe the relationship, various regression models, including linear and transformed models, were evaluated more accurately. The comparison between the models was made based on the F-criterion, the coefficient of determination (R^2) and the standard error of estimation. Of all the models considered presented in Table 6, the linear regression model demonstrated the highest explanatory capacity and the lowest estimation error and was therefore considered the most appropriate for the purposes of the study.

Table 6*Comparison of Different Regression Models*

Regression equation	R	R2	Std. Error	F-stat	Sign. F
1	2	3	4	5	6
$y = 0,8873x + 22,797$	0,386	0,149	13,620	2,991	0,101
$y = 246,65x + 5158$	0,999	0,999	48,757	18039,21	3,61E-27
$y = 45734x - 4E + 06$	0,998	0,996	19094,18	4503,587	4,69E-22
$y = -7E - 05x + 0,0163$	0,998	0,996	2,6E-9	4566,01	4,17E-22
$y = 0,0451x + 5,5428$	0,999	0,999	0,0044	72491,222	2,76E-32

Source. Own calculations

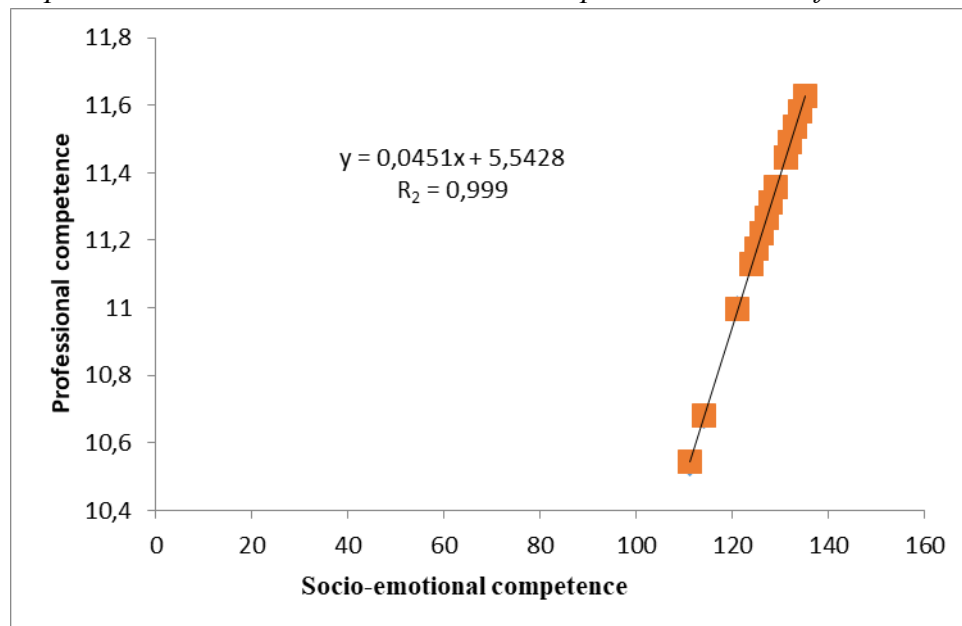
In this case, the most appropriate analytic expression of the form of the dependence has one of the models (Figure 2) – a linear equation, the expression of which is as follows:

$$y = 0,0451x + 5,5428 + \varepsilon, \text{ where}$$

y – professional competences

x – socio-emotional competences

ε - other factors not included in the model

Figure 2*Dependence Between 'Socio-Emotional Competences' and 'Professional Competences'**Source.* Own calculations

The resulting regression model describes the relationship between the variables as follows: when socio-emotional competences are estimated to increase by one-unit, professional competences increase by an average of 0.0451 units. The intercept of the equation (5.5428) shows an expected level of professional competence at zero value of the independent variable.

The correlation coefficient ($R=0.999$) indicates an exceptionally strong positive relationship between observed and forecast values and should be interpreted with caution considering the exploratory pilot nature of study. The coefficient of determination ($R^2=0.999$) shows that

99.9% of the variation of the dependent variable is associated with the model. The standard error of the estimate *Standard Error* = 0.004 is extremely low, which indicates high degree of correspondence between the observed and predicted values within the sample studied. The variation analysis (ANOVA) presented in Table 7 shows an *F-criterion value* = 72491.22, which is significantly higher than the critical values and suggests a statistically significant model fit. The *Significance value* $F = 2.6663E-32$ indicates that the model is statistically significant at all standard significance levels ($p < 0.05$).

Table 7

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of a Regression Model

<i>Source</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	1	1,431640	1,431640	72491,22	2,67E-32
Residual	17	0,000336	0,0000197		
Total	18	1,431975			

Source. Own calculations

Table 8 shows that the model coefficients are statistically significant. The free term is significant at $p < 0.05$, and the coefficient over the dependent variable ($b = 0.0451$) is also statistically significant ($t = 269.24$, $p < 0.05$). These results suggest a possible association between socio-emotional competences and professional competences.

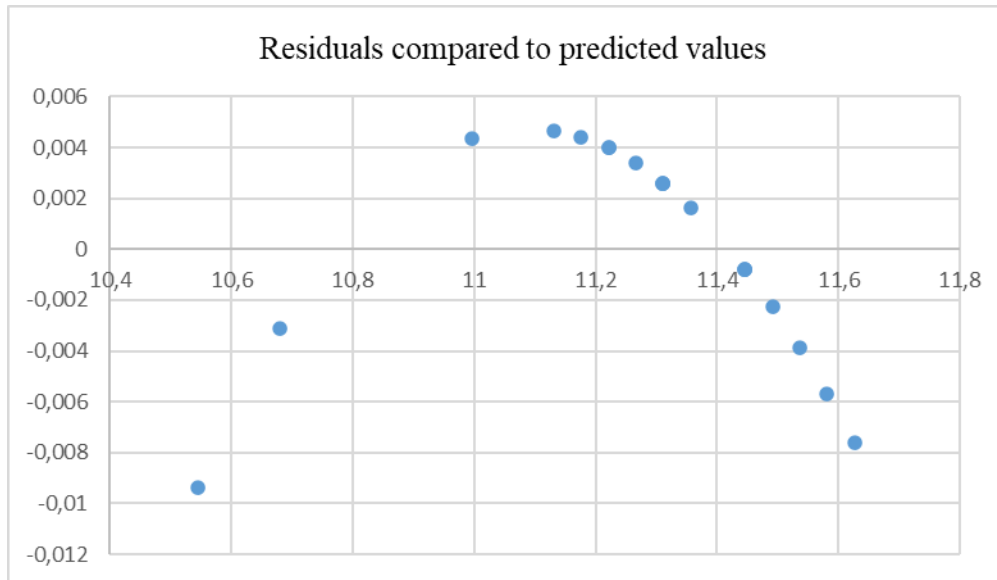
Table 8

Coefficients of the Linear Regression Model and their Statistical Significance

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>
Intercept (a)	5,542803	0,021290	260,346	4,72E-32	5,497885	5,587722
Socio-emotional competences (b)	0,045065	0,000167	269,241	2,67E-32	0,044712	0,045418

Source. Own calculations

Verification of the basic assumptions of the linear regression model has been performed. Figure 3 presents the distribution of residuals relative to the estimated values of the dependent variable. In general, a random distribution of points around the zero line is observed, which suggests the assumption of homoscedasticity. In addition, there is a slight trend in the distribution of residues, which may be associated with the limited sample size ($n = 19$). In small samples, it is possible to observe apparent patterns that do not reflect the actual structural dependence on the population. Thus, the deviations found cannot be regarded as a material breach of the assumptions of the linear regression model and cannot be considered a substantial violation of the assumptions of the linear regression model within the framework of this exploratory pilot study.

Figure 3*Distribution of Residuals Relative to the Estimated Values of the Dependent Variable*

Source. Own calculations

The calculated 95 % confidence intervals for the regression coefficients do not include zero, which further suggests their statistical significance.

A comparison of the results of the study was conducted by analyzing the average values of the individual components of professional competence. For clarity, the relative share (in %) reflects the weight of each component in relation to the total of all components examined. As shown in Table 9, the results obtained show close values between the individual components, suggesting a comparatively balanced perception of professional competence within the sample studied.

Table 9*Distribution of Components of Professional Competence (Average Values and Relative Share)*

Component	Average results	
	N	%
Empathy and communication	23,421	13,01
Teamwork skills	22,158	12,31
Conflict resolution skills	24,158	13,42
Responsibility and professional knowledge	25,105	13,95
Ethical sensitivity and responsibility	21,000	11,66
Cultural diversity and equality	19,684	10,94

Source. Own calculations

The results reflect students' attitude towards the key characteristics of a professionally competent professional, placing an emphasis on responsibility and expert knowledge (n=25.105/13.95%). At the same time, the lower score of the cultural diversity component (n=19.684/10.94%) highlights the need for deeper development of learners' knowledge, skills, and sensitivity regarding working with different social groups and the acceptance of diversity as an essential element of professional social work practice.

The results of the analysis allow the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) that there is no relationship between the studied variables and to accept the alternative hypothesis (H_1) for the presence of a statistically significant linear relationship. The findings also suggest a possible association between higher levels of socio-emotional competence and higher levels of professional competence (H_2). In addition, hypothesis H_3 is partially supported, indicated the presence of a leading component in professional competences.

The results obtained from this study are in line with several previous scientific studies, which establish a significant relationship between socio-emotional and professional competences. For example, a study among prospective teachers found that higher levels of social and emotional competence were associated with higher self-esteem of professional competences (Twardowska-Staszek et al., 2024). Related results have been reported in social work students, where emotional intelligence, empathy and reflexivity are seen as key factors for professional development (Stanley & G, M., 2021). In similar professional fields, such as medical education, a positive relationship has also been established between socio-emotional competences and academic and professional performance, albeit with a more moderate strength (Kim & Shin, 2021). This places the current study in the context of a broader scientific trend that highlights the importance of socio-emotional skills as an essential component of professional competence.

It should be noted that the extremely high correlation ($R=0.999$) found in this exploratory pilot study is atypical for research in the field of behavioural and educational sciences and requires a cautious interpretation. Along with the possible relationship between the constructions studied, the result obtained could partially reflect specifics of the research design, including the limited effective sample size, the use of self-assessment tools, the possibility of variance of the general method, partial overlap.

Despite the high values of the correlation and determination coefficients, the results should be interpreted with caution considering the exploratory pilot nature of the study and the following limitations:

Firstly, the final analysis involves a small effective sample ($n = 19$), which represents a significant limitation of the current exploratory pilot study. This limits the statistical power of the analysis, the stability of the resulting dependencies, and the ability to summarize the results to a wider population.

Second, the data were collected by one institution, which places restrictions on the external validity of the study. The results obtained may reflect specific organizational characteristics and cannot be automatically generalized to other contexts.

It should be noted that there may be a variance of the common method since data for the two variables were collected from the same respondents and at the same point through self-assessment questionnaires. Although different measurement tools have been used, this fact does not completely exclude the possibility of a methodologically determined overestimation of the relationship between the two variables.

The results obtained, which show a strong positive relationship between socio-emotional and professional competences, have essential applications for social work training. They support the need to integrate socio-emotional learning as a key component in curricula. A holistic approach to the preparation of future social workers should be encouraged, in which

professional competences are not considered in isolation, but in close connection with the socio-emotional abilities of the individual.

The results of the study can be interpreted in the context of modern European competence frameworks, which place an emphasis on transversal skills. In specificity, the established relationship between socio-emotional and professional competences is in line with the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO), where social interpersonal competences are a key element of professional realization. Also, the results correspond to DigCom 2.2 (Vuorikari et al., 2022) and LifeComp (Sala et al., 2020), which emphasize the importance of personal and social competences as a basis for effective learning and professional development.

Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal design, to increase the reliability and generalization of the results. Finally, future research could look at the role of additional factors, such as organizational environment, work experience, and training, which could mediate or model the established relationship.

Conclusion

The professional competence of a social work specialist is a complex of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, behaviors that may be related to several factors, among which socio-emotional competencies are of particular importance. This continuum of basic building blocks is the necessary resource for professional development and self-improvement.

This exploratory pilot study shows a positive relationship between the requirements for professional competence in the field of social work and the development of socio-emotional competences such as empathy and communicativeness, teamwork, conflict resolution, professional responsibility and knowledge, ethical sensitivity, cultural diversity, and equality.

The results of the study highlight the need for a more targeted development of socio-emotional skills in social work training, especially in the field of intercultural sensitivity. In this context, future studies should broaden the scope of the analysis to include various factors associated with development of academic and professional competences of specialists.

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Author Contributions

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