

Importance of social competence at the start of elementary school for adjustment indicators a year later

Visvaldas Legkauskas

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Šarūnė Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė

Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Lithuania

The present research investigated the importance of learning-related and interpersonal aspects of social competence as well as parent education in the first grade for school adjustment indicators. These included self-reported involvement in bullying, teacher-reported student-teacher relationships, and academic achievement – a year later. Social competence of children was assessed using the *Elementary School Social Competence Scale* (short version) completed by teachers. The sample consisted of 403 children attending 14 elementary schools in Lithuania. Results indicated that the learning-related aspect of social competence measured in the first grade was significantly related to all indicators measured in the second grade, while the interpersonal aspect of social competence was significantly related to student-teacher relationship quality. Taken together, both aspects of social competence assessed in the first grade explained some 34% of the variance in student-teacher conflict a year later. Interpersonal social competence explained 24% of the variance in student-teacher closeness. Furthermore, learning-related social competence and parent education significantly predicted academic achievement, accounting for 26% of the variance. Results of the present study highlight the lasting links of learning-related social competence and school adjustment indicators in elementary school.

Introduction

The elementary school represents a major transitional period in childhood and factors affecting adjustment during that transition continue to attract researchers' attention (Kiuru et al., 2016; Reuland & Mikami, 2014). Social competence is one of the psychological factors which tends to be linked to school adjustment indicators, both cross-sectionally (Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, Legkauskas & Kepalaitė, 2016) and longitudinally (McClelland, Morrison & Holmes, 2006). Previous research has suggested that a lack of social competence makes it difficult to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers in elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). These difficulties tend to develop into long-term adjustment problems, including lower academic achievement, skipping classes, substance abuse, delinquent behaviour and mental health issues in adolescence and beyond (McClelland et al., 2006). However, while a large volume of research on school adjustment has been conducted, most of it focuses on older and high-risk samples (e.g. minorities) and relatively few studies have been conducted on regular samples of elementary school students. In this age group, research into the links between social competence and school adjustment are still in the exploratory stage. Furthermore, relatively little research has been conducted in linguistic environments other than English and French.

Social competence may be defined as a set of social skills necessary for the achievement of goals in social interactions (Monnier, 2015; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). It has been suggested that some 25 to 50 percent of first-graders may lack the social competence necessary for positive adjustment in the novel environment of elementary school (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Stoolmiller, 2008). The constituent elements of social competence depend on a particular context, including such aspects as the *developmental stage* (Denham, 2005), the *evaluator* (Lillvist, Sandberg, Björck-Åkesson & Granlund, 2009) and the *situation* eliciting application of such skills (Monnier, 2015; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Social competence of children is mostly evaluated by parents, teachers and peers, who tend to identify different skills involved in social competence and the skills identified tend to be related to the context – home, peer activities or class – in which such assessment is conducted (Lillvist et al., 2009).

Results of previous studies conducted on pupils attending elementary schools (e.g. Cooper & Farran, 1988; Lim, Rodger & Brown, 2013) suggested that successful school adjustment required two distinct types of social competence: one encompassing learning-related skills, and another based on interpersonal skills. The first set includes skills conducive for learning activities, including self-regulation skills, listening skills, etc. On the other hand, interpersonal skills are those skills (e.g. sharing, cooperation, positive initiative) necessary for smooth operation in a social collective constituting the context of learning and instruction. McClelland et al. (2006) and Lim et al. (2013) also used a similar concept of social competence in studies conducted with pre-school and elementary school samples. Results of these studies suggested that learning-related social competence is a meaningful construct predictive of academic achievement, both in elementary school and in later years.

Importance of social competence for school adjustment

School adjustment is a multidimensional construct. Along with the academic aspect of adjustment, the importance of the social aspect is also often emphasised (Ratelle & Duchesne, 2014). The latter includes two key elements – student-teacher relationships and peer relationships, operationalised by means of a variety of concepts, from popularity in class to involvement in bullying.

Student-teacher relationship

A class teacher is a person who spends a lot of time with elementary school students. In some schools in Lithuania, it amounts to as many as 10 hours per day, which is much more than the waking time children spend with their parents. During that time, a class teacher is a person who controls, directs, and structures most of the activities of a child.

Student-teacher relationships are mostly measured in terms of the perception of the other party's behaviour (Buyse et al., 2009; Leung, 2015). Studies into student-teacher relationship measure its two defining aspects: conflict and closeness (e.g., Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Zee, Koomen & van der Veen, 2013). Student-teacher relationship closeness refers to the degree of openness in communication and positivity in interaction

(Buyse et al., 2009; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Relationship conflict refers to the degree of negativity of interactions and emotions in a student-teacher relationship (Buyse et al., 2009; Zee et al., 2013). Excessive conflict is stressful for a child and may also affect other aspects of functioning at school (Buyse et al., 2009). Student-teacher conflict seems to be linked to lower social competence (Garner & Mahatmya, 2015). Conversely, higher social competence tends to predict being liked by teachers more, and better student-teacher relationships in general (Brock & Curby, 2014; Leung, 2015).

There might be a couple of mechanisms linking social competence and student-teacher relationships. First, children higher in social competence may be both more assertive and better at initiating and sustaining communication with adults. Also, when faced with challenges arising in the process of learning, they display more adequate reactions and maintain positive behaviours toward teachers (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Konold & Pianta, 2005). Second, socially competent children make teachers' work easier by having less trouble with their classmates and being more constructive towards teachers (Lillvist et al., 2009). In doing so, they strengthen teachers' authority in the eyes of other classmates, which in turn make them even more likable to their teachers. However, less socially competent children may not only struggle in direct communication with their teachers but also may pose further trouble by having difficult peer relationships, not least including involvement in bullying.

Involvement in bullying

Children perceive bullying as the worst thing that may happen at school (Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana & Evans, 2010). Negative effects of bullying are experienced by both victims and perpetrators of bullying (Postigo, Gonzales, Mateu & Montoya, 2012). Previous research indicates that victimisation experiences result in increased anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012; Raskauskas, et al., 2010), difficulties in making friends, communicating with parents and school staff (e.g., Bouman et al., 2012), as well as academic underachievement (Raskauskas, et al., 2015).

Bullies also experience various adjustment difficulties including poorer relationships with teachers and lower academic achievement (Raskauskas, et al., 2010). Also, links between bullying behaviour and increased anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem have been found (Bouman et al., 2012).

Research results (e.g., Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Postigo et al., 2012) suggest that involvement in bullying is linked to social competence. Lack of social skills not only impedes formation and maintenance of peer-relationships, which may work as a protective net against bullying, but also prevent quick and effective defense against aggressive behaviour, which increases the likelihood of repeat bullying.

The link between bullying and social competence is not so straightforward. As Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) noted, there are two views on how social competence is linked to bullying behaviour. One maintains that bullies are skilled manipulators rather than socially inadequate individuals. At least some of them have well-developed social-cognitive and

theory-of-mind skills, which allow them to manipulate and dominate others. Another view holds that socially competent processing of information is not likely to result in aggression, as social competence involves understanding and taking into account not only minds of others but also social norms and thus deems bullying to be socially incompetent, as it is norm-breaking behaviour (Stan & Beldean, 2014). Evidence to support either of the views has been reported (Camodeca, Caravita, Coppola, 2015; Perren & Malti, 2008; Postigo et al., 2012).

Academic achievement

Various measures of academic achievement are often included into the assessment of school adjustment. Indeed, higher academic achievement had been linked to higher self-confidence and better interpersonal relationships at school (Malik & Shujja, 2013; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007) as well as to better overall mental health (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Patorelli, Bandura & Zimbardo, 2000).

While both family characteristics and cognitive ability affect academic achievement (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005), some level of social skills seems to be necessary for the cognitive potential to be realised. Recent years witnessed a significant amount of research concerning the importance of social competence for academic performance (e.g., McClelland, Tominey, Schmitt & Duncan, 2017; Konold, Jamison, Stanton-Chapman & Rimm-Kaufman, 2010). Those children, who have trouble following directions, controlling their negative emotions, and communicating with teachers and peers at elementary school are more likely to encounter academic difficulties (Konold et al., 2010). A study by McClelland et al. (2006) found that teachers considered the ability to follow task requirements, cooperation skills, attentiveness and self-control as important precursors for good academic achievement.

Academic achievement and social competence may be linked both directly and indirectly. The learning-related aspect of social competence is an important tool necessary for academic achievement. Success in learning requires children to control their behaviour, to attend to and follow teachers' instructions, as well as to complete assignments fully (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Valiente et al., 2011).

Furthermore, the interpersonal aspect of social competence may impact academic achievement indirectly (Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). When a child faces challenges in learning, interpersonal social competence is conducive for obtaining assistance from both teachers and peers. Children higher in social competence develop social support networks, which provide for higher academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2000). Thus, well-developed interpersonal social competence is conducive for more positive attitudes towards school in general, better relationships with peers, and higher motivation to learn and achieve.

On the other hand, troublesome behaviour in class provokes a backlash from teachers and peers which is stressful for a child, may complicate involvement in collaborative tasks, and may impede his/her academic performance (Duncan et al., 2007).

The present study

While there is a wealth of research documenting links between social competence and school adjustment, few studies to date have examined how the learning-related aspect and the interpersonal aspect of social competence predict different dimensions of school adjustment in elementary school over a period of time. In this sense our study is exploratory – we sought to examine whether learning-related and interpersonal aspects of social competence at the beginning of the school may be used to predict academic achievement, involvement in bullying, and student-teacher relationships a year later. Furthermore, no such studies have been conducted in Lithuania before. The present study is also confirmatory in the sense that we seek to confirm the existence in elementary school of the predictive links between learning-related and interpersonal social competence on one hand and school adjustment on the other, which previous studies have found mostly in adolescent populations.

In order to enhance the statistical modelling of predicted links, we also included parental education as an additional variable. Parental education is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and a key component of socioeconomic status, which previous studies have demonstrated to be positively linked to both social competence (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar & Stollak, 2007) and school adjustment (Zafiriadis et al., 2005).

The school aims to provide both opportunities and motivation for the development of social competence, thus it is supposed to stimulate its development and reduce any initial differences in social competence, which might impact school adjustment. On the other hand, early differences in social competence may be robust, persisting through the first years of school and retaining the initial effect in relation to school adjustment. Thus, identification of significant predictive links may assist in pointing out maladjustment risks for those who start school with poorly developed social competence. Seeking to test the different predictions, we are reporting here data from an ongoing longitudinal study, during which we follow children through the first years of elementary school.

Method

Subjects and procedure

The present study is based on analysis of data gathered as a part of a larger longitudinal study. Some of the initial results of that study have been reported elsewhere (Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, Legkauskas & Kepalaitė, 2018). Assessment of social competence conducted during the second semester of the first grade. School adjustment of the same subjects was measured in the second semester of the second grade. We chose to assess social competence in the second semester of the first grade for two reasons. First, it was assumed that by the second half of the first grade the new pupils would have become settled in their new environment and their behaviour would reflect their actual social competence rather than initial adjustment difficulties. Second, it was expected that

children and their teacher would have moved past their first impressions about each other, allowing for better measurement of social competence.

The study was conducted in Kaunas, which was the second city in Lithuania in terms of population size. Data were collected in 14 schools, i.e. 28 percent of institutions providing elementary education services in the city.

Data were collected from 42 teachers and the same number of classes. At the beginning of the study, 962 parents received consent forms and some 446 (46.3 percent) forms were received back containing written consent, which accounted for 15.8 percent of children who started school that year. Out of that number 38 forms were missing a significant amount of data. As a result, we obtained a convenience sample of 408 subjects (183 boys and 225 girls, modal age 8 years). A year after 5 children (1 boy and 4 girls) were no longer participating in the study due to long-term sick leaves, moving to another school or parents refusing to continue participation. The final data analysis included information concerning 403 subjects.

Measures

Information for the present study was collected from multiple sources. Teachers completed the *Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version)* and *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form* scales as well as providing information about academic achievement for each pupil participating in the study. Children completed the *Bully* and *Victim* scales of the *Peer Relations Questionnaire*. Parents provided information concerning their highest educational level attained.

Social competence

Social competence was measured by the *Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version)* (ESSCS) containing 7 items and developed for the present study (see Magelinskaitė -Legkauskienė, Legkauskas & Kepalaitė, 2018). The ESSCS included 4 items designed to measure learning-related social competence (e.g. 'Listens attentively during a class') and 3 items to measure interpersonal social competence (e.g. 'Plays and works cooperatively with other children'). All items were scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'very rarely' to 'very often'.

Elementary school adjustment

Three school adjustment variables have been assessed in the second grade – academic achievement, involvement in bullying, and student-teacher relationships.

Academic achievement

As the country has no country-wide formal feedback system at the elementary school level, the systems used by individual schools are not uniform. Thus, for purposes of the present study, it was decided to design a standard system of measurement of academic achievement. Class teachers were requested to rate academic achievement of each child in the native language (which in all cases was Lithuanian) and mathematics on a 5-point scale, where 1 meant 'poor' and 5 meant 'very good'. The ratings of language and

mathematics were then summed up to obtain a single academic achievement indicator. We chose native language and mathematics not only because they are usually included in academic performance measures used with elementary school samples, but also, because in Lithuania class teachers always teach these subjects, even though certain schools may employ specialist subject teachers to teach other subjects such as natural sciences, arts, etc.

Involvement in bullying

Involvement in bullying was assessed using the *Bully* and *Victim* scales of the *Peer Relations Questionnaire* (PRQ) developed by Rigby and Slee (1993). In the original PRQ, the *Bully* scale consisted of 6 items (e.g. 'I am part of a group that goes around teasing others'), while the *Victim* scale consisted of 5 items (e.g. 'I get picked on by others'). Items were scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 'never' (1) to 'very often' (4), higher scores meaning higher involvement in bullying in roles of a bully and a victim, respectively. However, a pilot study conducted prior to the present study revealed that one item of the *Victim* scale – 'Others leave me out of things on purpose' – was difficult for children to understand and consequently, the overwhelming majority of children answered 'never'. Thus, in the present study, we excluded this item as non-differentiating.

Student-teacher relationship

Relationships between teachers and children were assessed using the *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form* created by Pianta (2001). The scale had a total of 15 items and was completed by teachers, who assessed their perceived conflict (8 items; e.g. 'This child easily becomes angry with me') and closeness (7 items; e.g. 'If upset, this child will seek comfort from me') with each child on the 4-point Likert scale from 'very rarely/never' (1) to 'very often' (4). A higher score meant higher closeness, while the conflict scale was re-coded so that higher score meant lower conflict (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

| Variable | M | SD | Cronbach α | Range |
|--|-------|------|-------------------|---------|
| Social competence: learning-related | 18.58 | 4.42 | 0.91 | 4 - 24 |
| Social competence: interpersonal | 12.51 | 3.68 | 0.85 | 3 - 18 |
| Academic achievement | 7.92 | 1.89 | n/a | 2 - 10 |
| Bully scale | 7.11 | 2.19 | 0.78 | 6 - 24 |
| Bullying victim scale | 6.67 | 2.61 | 0.83 | 4 - 16 |
| Student-teacher relationship conflict | 29.37 | 3.71 | 0.94 | 10 - 32 |
| Student-teacher relationship closeness | 22.33 | 3.84 | 0.87 | 9 - 28 |

Results

First, we conducted correlational analyses to establish any links between social competence in the first and school adjustment indicators in the second grade. Distributions of all variables were significantly different from normal, so Spearman correlations were used (see Table 2).

Table 2: Spearman correlations between social competence in the first grade and school adjustment indicators in the second grade

| | Social competence | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | Learning-related | Interpersonal |
| Academic achievement | 0.48** | 0.31** |
| Relationship conflict*** | 0.51** | 0.40** |
| Relationship closeness | 0.17** | 0.42** |
| Bully scale | -0.13* | -0.02 |
| Victim scale | -0.10* | -0.06 |

Notes: * Spearman correlations significant at $p < .05$;

** Spearman correlations significant at $p < .01$;

*** higher score means lower conflict.

To establish the relative contribution of learning-related social competence and interpersonal social competence measured during the first year in school to the prediction of academic achievement, involvement in bullying and student-teacher relationship a year later, structural equation modelling was used. Using *Mplus 5.1* software we constructed a structural equation model in which both aspects of social competence were entered as latent variables. Also, parent education was included in the model, as we found it to be linked to both predictor and outcome variables. The structural model (Figure 1) demonstrated a good fit – $\chi^2/df = 1.91$; CFI = 0.983; TLI = .963; RMSEA = .047; SRMR = 0.023.

Results of structural equation modelling indicated that social competence had made a significant contribution towards the variances of each school adjustment indicator assessed in the present study, including academic achievement, involvement in bullying, and student-teacher relationship. Yet, interpersonal and learning-related aspects of social competence demonstrated different patterns of links to school adjustment indicators. The learning-related aspect of social competence moderately predicted student-teacher conflict and academic achievement. Furthermore, learning-related social competence mediated a link between parent education and academic achievement. Interpersonal aspects of social competence strongly predicted student-teacher closeness and had a weak link to student-teacher conflict. Also, children scoring higher in learning-related social competence scored significantly lower on involvement in bullying in both bully and victim roles.

Discussion

The present results suggest social competence of a child at the time of starting school represents an important predictor of school adjustment a year later. We found learning-related social competence at the time of school entry to be a stronger predictor of second-grade school adjustment than interpersonal social competence. While previous studies had found links between interpersonal social competence and academic achievement (Caprara et al., 2000), in our study this correlation disappeared once learning-related social competence was entered into the overall structural equation model. Indeed, the relationship of learning-related social competence and academic achievement has been

well documented by previous studies (e.g., Barbarin et al., 2013; McClelland et al., 2000; Valiente et al., 2011). Also, our model indicated that parent education had both a direct effect on academic achievement and an indirect one via learning-related social competence.

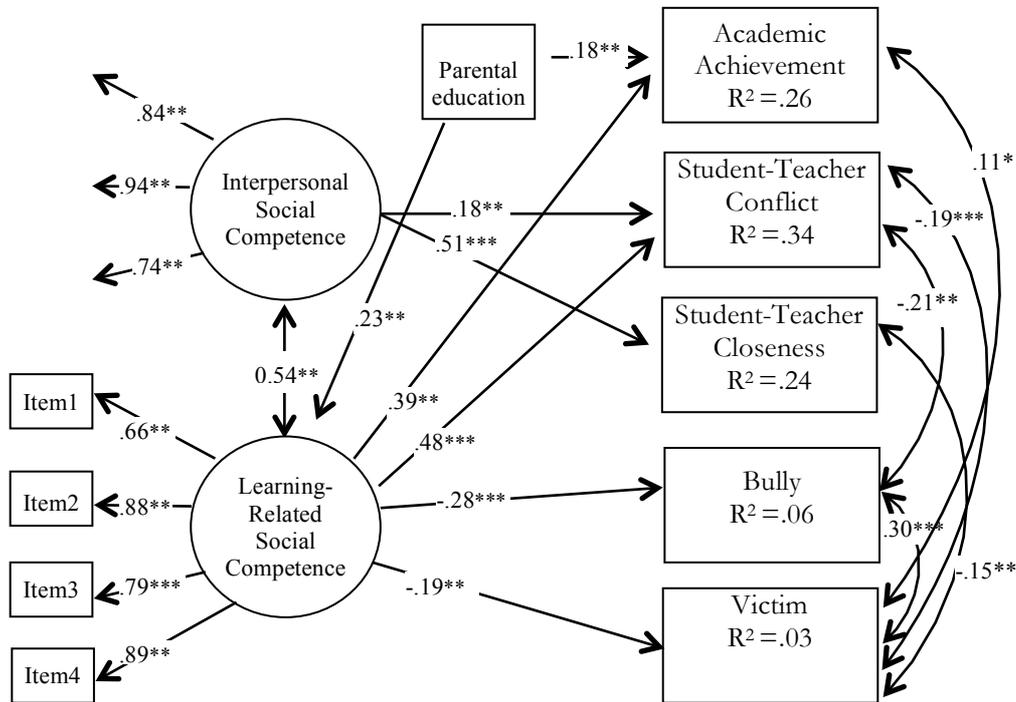


Figure 1: Structural equation modelling for social competence in the first grade and school adjustment indicators in the second grade
Standardised solution, only significant links are shown.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Ability to pay good attention to what the teacher says, implement instructions, and exercise behavioural self-control is conducive for a smoother learning process, and improves chances of academic success (McClelland et al., 2017). Other researchers have asserted that learning-related social competence is linked to more positive attitudes towards school and learning (Konold et al., 2010), and stimulates those cognitive and motivational processes that help to manage internal and external distractions in ways which facilitate academic progress (Elias, Haynes, 2008).

Children who had better developed learning-related social competence had significantly lower levels of student-teacher conflict. Somewhat surprisingly, with regard to student-teacher conflict, learning-related social competence was more important than interpersonal social competence. While interpersonal social competence was highly conducive for the development of student-teacher closeness, it seemed to be much less

effective in the prevention of conflicts. These results supplement other studies, identifying linkages between student-teacher relationships and social competence (e.g., Zhang, 2011).

More socially competent children may display more adequate classroom behaviours, and teachers find it easier and less stressful to teach such children (Lillvist et al., 2009). Also, understanding and following class rules willingly, these children contribute towards teacher's authority and that further contributed to lower student-teacher conflict. Furthermore, children scoring higher in interpersonal skills of cooperation, sharing and contact initiation may display more confidence in communication with adults, which in class may provide for a more trusting and closer relationship with their teachers. Such children tend to have more positive beliefs about school, which make it easier for them to maintain good relationships with teachers (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Konold & Pianta, 2005). As these children feel more secure, they are able to use teacher's feedback constructively and avoid counterproductive defensive reactions to such feedback (Konold & Pianta, 2005).

Results of the present study support findings of previous studies (e.g. Camodeca et al., 2015; Postigo et al., 2012), that involvement in bullying as either a bully or a victim is linked to lower social competence. However, we obtained a curious result that learning-related social competence was linked to involvement in bullying, while interpersonal social competence was not. It is possible that children with lower learning-related social competence have more conflicts with the class teacher, which in turn contributes to poorer relationships with peers, which may result in bullying victimisation. On the other hand, a child may choose to bully as a way of challenging the class teacher. Indeed, learning-related social competence was strongly related to student-teacher conflict, which in turn was linked to involvement in bullying.

The finding that only learning-related social competence, but not interpersonal social competence, was significantly related to involvement in bullying may indicate that teachers, as a source of information about social competence, were better able to assess those aspects of social competence (i.e. learning-related social competence) which were more readily apparent in class. The components of social competence assessed by teachers in the present study may be less relevant to involvement in bullying than certain other components, for which peers may serve as better sources of information. This result supports the theoretical notion that the concept of social competence as a set of social skills depends on both the source and the context of assessment (Lillvist et al., 2009).

Limitations

The present study has certain limitations. The key limitation is that it relied significantly on information collected from teachers. Insofar as teachers assessed social competence, academic achievement, and student-teacher relationship, there was a possibility that such assessments might be subjected to a halo effect and hence to an under-differentiating.

Nevertheless, we do believe that it was meaningful to select teachers as providers of data concerning both school adjustment indicators and social competence. Teachers' opinions about children tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies in many aspects of school functioning, including both academic achievement and student-teacher relationships. Indeed, we believe that child's social competence is an important source of teacher's attitudes towards a child and hence it is both meaningful and important to collect information from teachers about both social competence and child's functioning at school.

Another limitation is that data on children's bullying behaviour was collected from children themselves and was susceptible to self-report bias. In particular, children may over-report victimisation and under-report their own bullying behaviour. While it is impossible to control the self-report bias completely, we believe that assurances of anonymity from the researcher helped to reduce this bias and elicit more honest answers from children.

Implications for practice

The main finding that initial differences in social competence at the first grade are linked to significant differences in school adjustment a year later suggests that, at least in the context of elementary education in Lithuania, school is not a sufficiently powerful socialisation agent to sufficiently reduce differences in social competence at the time of school entry. This finding has a number of significant policy implications. First, it points out the importance of preschool experiences, lending support to the idea of compulsory preschool education, which has been adopted in a number of countries, including Lithuania. Second, it suggests that inclusion of specific social competence training into both preschool and elementary school curricula merits serious consideration in countries which have not done so to date. Currently, international practices in this regard vary widely. Third, it underscores the importance of learning-related social competence or learning skills, which turn out to be important not only for academic success, but also to child's social well-being at school.

The significance of learning-related social competence in relation to elementary school adjustment as demonstrated in the present study has important implications for both teachers and school psychologists. These findings indicate that it is important to educate children early in basic skills necessary for successful learning – to listen, to follow instructions, to move from one activity to another. A lack of such skills is often observed in cases of ADHD and has a negative effect on the child-teacher relationship. However, when faced with disruptive in-class behaviour, school psychologists should be careful in making sure that they differentiate between a mere lack of learning-related social competence, which would require training intervention, and ADHD, which would require a different kind of approach.

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Visvaldas Legkauskas (corresponding author) is an associate professor at the Department of Psychology of Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania. He received a PhD in psychology from Vytautas Magnus University. His research interests include development social competence and identity, as well as effects of screen time on children and adolescents.

Email: visvaldas.legkauskas@vdu.lt

Šarūnė Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė is a lecturer at the Department of Health Psychology of Lithuanian University of Health Sciences in Kaunas, Lithuania and also works as a school psychologists at Prano Mašiotė Elementary School in Kaunas. She received a PhD in psychology from Vytautas Magnus University. Her research interests include school adjustment and development of social competence.

Email: sarune.magelinskaite@ismuni.lt

Please cite as: Legkauskas, V. & Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, Š. (2019). Importance of social competence at the start of elementary school for adjustment indicators a year later. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(4), 1262-1276.
<http://www.iier.org.au/iier29/legkauskas.pdf>