RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL FACTORS LINKED TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN THE 1ST GRADE

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Abstract

The present study[1] was aimed at investigating the aspects of social functioning linked to academic achievement in the 1st grade. Subjects were 380 Lithuanian 1st graders, 211 girls and 169 boys. Social factors measured included students' social competence, student-teacher relationship, and popularity in class. Regression analysis revealed that learning-related social competence – ability to take directions – was the strongest predictor, accounting for 28.7% of variance in academic achievement.

Keywords: *academic achievement; elementary school; popularity; social competence; student-teacher relationship.*

Academic achievement represents one of the key aspects of school adjustment (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Patorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). While efforts have been made to downplay its importance in elementary school, it still remains one of the important targets for elementary school teachers, parents, and students alike. High academic achievement is linked to positive attitudes to school, well-achieving children experience less stress, have better mental health, are less likely to skip school or drop out of it in later years (Caprara et al., 2000; Malik & Shujja, 2013).

Though academic achievement is closely linked to intellectual ability as well as to family characteristics (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Hung & Marjoribanks, 2005), child's ability to operate effectively in a social environment is vital for making good use of intellectual potential. This becomes of particular importance at the time, when a child first enters a formal learning environment, where learning takes place in a large system of social relationships. Thus social factors playing role in academic achievement attract significant research attention. As Konold, Jamison, Stanton-Chapman, and Rimm-Kaufman (2010) point out, because learning is a social process, small children find it hard to master academic content, if they have difficulties in following directions, communicating with adults and peers, controlling negative emotions. McClelland, Acock, and Morrison (2006) state that teachers increasingly complain about children entering school being at different levels of social maturity, which makes a differential

influence on their learning results. Teachers note that the ability to understand and follow task requirements, self-control, attentiveness, cooperation skills, and self-confidence are among the key factors in achieving good learning results. This opinion has been substantiated by results of extensive body of research (Konold et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2000; McClelland & Morrison, 2003; McClelland et al., 2006; Ponitz, McClelland, Matthews, & Morrison, 2009; Valiente et al., 2013).

One of the significant psychosocial factors affecting academic achievement is social competence (Konold et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2000). We define social competence as a set of social skills, which are used effectively to achieve goals in a social situation. The skills constituting social competence vary depending on a number of factors. Most researchers agree that the content of social competence depends on a *situation*, in which social skills need to be applied (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986; Dodge, McClaskey, & Feldman, 1985; Monnier, 2015; Rose-Krasnor, 1997), as well as on an *evaluator* (Dirks et al., 2007; Kwon, Kim, & Sheridan, 2012; Lillvist, Sandberg, Björck-Åkesson, & Granlund, 2009; Warnes, Sheridan, Geske, & Warnes, 2005), *cultural environment* (Arnold & Lindner-Müller, 2012; Lim, Rodger, & Brown, 2013; Malik & Shujja, 2013; Uba, Hassan, Mofrad, Abdulla, & Yaacob, 2012) and *developmental stage* (Denham, 2005; McClelland et al., 2006; McClelland & Morrison, 2003). When social competence of children is being evaluated, such evaluations are often done by peers, teachers, or parents, who, depending on the context (home, class, free play), identify a bit different social skills constituting social competence (Dirks at al., 2007; Kwon et al., 2012; Lillvist et al., 2009; Warnes et al., 2005).

Researchers (e.g. Cooper & Farran, 1988; Lim et al., 2013, 2010, 2010a; McClelland & Morrison, 2003; McClelland et al., 2006) working in this field with samples of young school children identify two groups of social skills constituting key aspects of social competence in the school context. Cooper and Farran (1988) suggested a concept of social competence encompassing interpersonal skills and classroom work-related skills. Classroom work-related skills include the skills necessary for successful performance of academic work (e.g. ability to hear and follow directions, ability to participate in group activities). Interpersonal skills consist of skills necessary for successful functioning in a social group in which the learning activity takes place (e.g. positive interaction with peers, ability to share).

The links between social competence and academic achievement are investigated in both cross-sectional (Malik & Shujja, 2013; Wentzel, 1991) and longitudinal (Konold et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2000, 2006; Valiente et al., 2013) studies. Particular research attention is attracted by learning-related aspects of social competence, including ability to listen to and to understand task requirements, behavioral self-control, cooperation skills, ability to move from one activity to another successfully. For example, McClelland et al. (2000) found that learning-related social competence predicted academic achievement at the end of the 1st and 2nd grade, even controlling for academic achievement in kindergarten and family environment characteristics. Subsequent studies by this team of researchers revealed that children who had poor learning-related social skills at the end of kindergarten, scored lower in both reading and mathematics in the 1st and 2nd grade (McClelland et al., 2006). It was also found that better skills of concentration, following task requirements, and self-control at the beginning of autumn was linked to higher academic achievement in spring in a sample of preschoolers (Ponitz et al., 2009).

The links between social competence and academic achievement may be explained in two ways. First, learning-related social competence is directly linked to academic achievement.

Children, who are able to fully complete their assignments, successfully move from one activity to another, hear and follow instructions given by their teachers, and control their behavior are more successful in learning and achieve higher learning results (Elias & Haynes, 2008; McClelland et al., 2006; Valiente et al., 2011). It is believed that learning-related social competence stimulate other cognitive and motivational processes, which in turn provide for higher academic achievement despite interferences from the environment, including trouble in the family or in class (Elias, Haynes, 2008; Barbarin et al., 2013; Valiente et al., 2011). Children possessing such skills are better equipped to participate in a structured class environment in ways, which are linked to long-term school success. Furthermore, these children have more favorable attitudes towards school (Konold, et al., 2010). On the other hand, when learning-related school competence is underdeveloped, learning becomes hard and unpleasant, as following instructions and concentration become a challenge creating tensions in relationships with peers and teachers alike (Valiente et al., 2011).

Thus, the other link between social competence and academic achievement is indirect, linked to interpersonal skills. Academic achievement of a child is in part determined by his/her ability to maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers (Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). In a face of learning difficulties, use of the skills constituting social competence allows the child to elicit assistance from more competent adults and peers. Socially competent children create a strong network of social support assisting in achieving higher academic results (Caprara et al., 2000). Furthermore, socially competent children are sensitive not only to their own needs, but also to those of their communication partners. Their interest in other people elicits similar response, which may be used for seeking academic assistance (Chen, Li, Li, & Liu, 2000). Thus, good relationships with peers may be beneficial in terms of peer assistance in case of academic difficulties, positive attitudes towards school, and increased interest in academic assignments as well as higher achievement motivation. Also, children, who get along with their teachers well, receive more positive and useful feedback about their performance on academic tasks and more assistance in case of difficult tasks. On the other hand, inadequate social behavior in class increases student-teacher conflict, which in turn causes stress for a child, resulting in negative effects on academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007).

Another important social factor in school environment is student-teacher relationship (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ping, 2009; Shavega, Brugman, & Tuijl, 2014; Vu, 2015). A study by Harkness et al. (2007) revealed that various social skills dominated the descriptions of an "ideal pupil" given by teachers. Blankemeyer, Flannery, and Vazsonyi (2002) concluded that socially competent children are more liked by teachers and have safer attachments to them. Other studies (Bustin, 2007; Magelinskaitė, 2011) found that socially competent children were more likely to create close relationships with their class teachers, which resulted in better academic achievement, more positive attitudes towards school and learning, and less school anxiety.

Good relationship with class teacher has been found to be closely linked with a range of other school adjustment indicators, including academic achievement (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Spilt & Koomen, 2009). Student-teacher relationships are particularly important in the transitional period of starting school (Buyse, Verschueeren, Verachtert, & Damme (2009).

Studies of student-teacher relationship often focus on two aspects of this relationship – relationship closeness and relationship conflict (e.g. Hamre Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Shavega et al., 2014; Zee, Koomen, & Van der Veen, 2013). It should be noted that such approach to student-teacher relationship may be traced back to J. Bowlby's attachment theory (Howes, 2000; Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) following which relationship

ridden with conflict reflects insecure attachment, while close relationship corresponds to secure attachment.

Close student-teacher relationship means positive interactions, open communication, and warm feelings between a child and a pedagogue (Buyse et al., 2009; Howes, 2000; Ladd et al., 2006; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Relationship closeness reflects how safe and comfortable a child feels when addressing a teacher, talking about his/her feelings and experiences and using a teacher as source of solace. Close relationship is characterized by emotional support (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Brock & Curby, 2014; Murray, Murray, & Wass, 2008). On the other hand, conflict ridden relationship may be described as dissonant, closed communication and manifesting itself in negative, maladaptive interactions (Buyse et al., 2009; Shavega, 2014). For a child perception of conflict with a teacher is a source of stress, which may negatively affect various aspects of school adjustment, including academic achievement (Buyse et al., 2009; Birch & Ladd, 1997).

In elementary school teachers are sources of overwhelming authority – they control class environment, provide knowledge and skills, form values. Along with child's social competence, teacher's favour is one of the factors contributing to peer group status of a child. Peer group status in school contexts is usually measured as popularity in class. Popularity is described by how much a child is liked and favoured by his peers (Choi & Kim, 2003; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). Popular children are those children, with whom most of their peers (e.g. classmates) interact eagerly. Meta-analysis of 41 sociometric status study involving 5-12 year old children conducted by Newcomb et al. (1993) revealed that popular children also have higher social competence, including such learning related skills as better self-control and ability to follow rules. On the other hand, children, who get along with their peers poorly have difficulties in benefiting from group work and those assignment, which require cooperation, even though such assignments are valued highly in a contemporary educational system (Konold, et al., 2010). Thus, it may be assumed that popularity in class may also be one of the social factors affecting academic achievement in elementary school.

The Present Study

While studies linking social-psychological factors to academic achievement are abundant, few studies tried to assess relative contribution of various social factors to academic achievement, especially among the 1st graders. Indeed, 1st grade represents a crucial transition period, when a child enters a school as a qualitatively new social environment. Longitudinal studies (McClelland et al., 2006; Oades-Sese et al., 2011) indicate that adjustment at the time of starting school has long-lasting implications. Insofar academic achievement is one of the most widely studied school adjustment indicators, it is important to investigate social factors contributing to academic achievement of lack thereof. Thus, **the aim** of the present paper is to assess the links between academic achievement and such social factors as student social competence, student-teacher relationship, and popularity in class in the 1st grade as well as relative importance of the social factors for academic achievement. **The research object** is academic achievement in the 1st grade.

Method
Subjects and Procedure
Data were collected in a course of a larger longitudinal study at the second semester of the 1st grade. The second semester was selected for several reasons. First, in the second half of

the year most children have moved past the initial adaptation to school. Second, children have better reading skills, which make understanding of survey questions easier. Third, teachers have come to know their students better, so information provided by teachers is more accurate than it would have been at the very beginning of the 1st grade.

In the present study data were collected from children and teachers. Children answered questions concerning popularity of their peers. Class teachers filled questionnaires assessing social competence, student-teacher relationships, and academic achievement of each participating child.

Data were collected in 14 schools of Kaunas, which is the second largest city of Lithuania. The schools accounted for 28 percent of all schools of Kaunas involved in elementary education. A total of 42 classes have participated in the study.

A total of 962 parent consent forms were distributed. Out of them 446 forms were signed. Thus, 46.3 percent of parents gave their consent concerning participation in the study by their children. This number accounted for 15.8 of 1st graders in Kaunas. Nine questionnaires were removed due to incompleteness. As the study involved a measure of popularity, for the present analysis we included only those children, who had a half of more children in their class participating in the present study. This way popularity scores were obtained for 380 subjects, 211 girls and 169 boys aged 7 and 8 years. Modal age for both genders at the time of data collection was 8 years.

Measures
Academic Achievement
In Lithuania academic performance of elementary school children is not graded. Formal feedback systems vary among different schools. For example, in some schools feedback on academic progress is given in the form of letters – E (excellent), VG (very good), G (good), ST (satisfactory), U (unsatisfactory) – while in other schools written feedback is given verbally describing performance on a particular task. In most schools academic achievement is assessed in terms of achievement levels: higher, medium, satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Taking into account different feedback systems used at school and seeking to compare academic achievement scores of children from different schools, teachers were asked to assess academic achievement of each participating child in mathematics and native language using a standard rating system from "weak" (1) to "very good" (5). Following previous studies (e.g. Valiente et al., 2011) these scores were further added up to obtain a total academic achievement score.

Native language and mathematics were selected following the established practice in assessment of academic achievement of elementary school children in similar studies (e.g., Barbarin et al., 2013; McCleland et al., 2006; Oades-Sese, Esquivel, Kaliski, & Maniatis, 2011), as such assessment reflect both verbal and non-verbal competences of children. Also, both native language and mathematics are taught by a regular class teacher, while other subjects (such as natural science) in some school are taught by specialist teachers.

Social Competence
Social competence was measured by a 7 item Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version) developed for the present study. Items for this instrument were selected based on their theoretical relevance and internal consistency from a larger pool of items used in a pilot study (Magelinskaite-Legkauskiene, Kepalaite, & Legkauskas, 2014). Three of the items

were aimed at measuring interpersonal social competence. These items were "Plays and works cooperatively with other children", "Tries to stop a quarrel or conflict between other children", and "When playing a game invites others to join in". This Interpersonal Social Competence Subscale proved to be very reliable, with a Cronbach's α=0.85. The remaining 4 other items measured learning-related social competence. These items were formulated as follows: "Is able to move from one activity to another without additional reminders by a teacher", "Listens attentively during a class", "Completes simple instructions without additional reminders", and "First listens to the task and then performs it". The Learning-Related Social Competence Subscale was also very reliable, with a Cronbach's α=0.91.

Popularity in Class

Popularity in class was measured by asking each participating child to indicate on a list 3 classmates, whom s/he would prefer as friends. Only children, who participated in the present study, were on the list and it was explained to children that they may also choose from the list any children, with whom they were actually friends at the time of the study. Popularity score of each child was calculated by counting the number of choices received and dividing it by the total number of participating children in a given class minus one (thus excluding the subject, for whom a popularity score was being calculated). Children, who could not yet read, were assisted by an investigator, who read the list of children's names and asked a subject to indicate the names of preferred friends.

Student-Teacher Relationship

Student-Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (Pianta, 2001) was used for assessment of student-teacher relationship. The scale was developed for children aged 3 to 12 years. This 15-item scale was completed by teachers in order to assess closeness and conflict with each child as perceived by teachers. The Relationship Closeness Subscale consisted of 7 items (sample item: "This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me"), while the Relationship Conflict Subscale consisted of 8 items (sample item: "This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined"). Responses were scored on a 4-point scale from "Very rarely/never" (1) to "very often/always" (4). The Relationship Conflict Subscale was reverse-scored so that a higher score on the subscale would mean lower conflict. Both subscales were reliable – Relationship Closeness Subscale Cronbach's α=0.781, Relationship Conflict Subscale Cronbach's α=0,846.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of study variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Interpersonal social competence	12.51	3.68	3	18
Learning-related social competence	18.58	4.42	4	24
Student-teacher relationship closeness	12.26	2.55	4	16
Student-teacher relationship conflict	14.58	2.02	5	16
Academic achievement	8.12	1.92	2	10
Popularity in class	0.23	0.17	0	0.9

Descriptive statistics is presented in Table 1. None of the variables have been distributed normally, thus Spearman coefficient was used to assess linear relationship among study variables. The correlations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations between academic achievement and social competence, student-teacher relationships, popularity in class

Variable	Academic achievement*
Interpersonal social competence	0.40
Learning-related social competence	0.60
Student-teacher relationship closeness	0.13
Student-teacher relationship conflict**	0.22
Popularity in class	0.28

Notes: *all correlations significant at p<0.01; ** - higher score means lower conflict.

Results of correlation analysis indicated that all of the social factors measured in the present study, including social competence, student-teacher relationship, and popularity, were statistically significantly linked to academic achievement. These correlations ranged from weak in case of student-teacher closeness to strong in case of learning-related social competence. In order to assess relative contribution of these factors to academic achievement, regression analysis was conducted, in which academic achievement was treated as a dependent variable, while social competence, student-teacher relationship, and popularity were entered as independent variables using a stepwise method.

Table 3. Regression Model Summary

Model	R	Adjusted R Square	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	0.539[a]	0.287	101.724	0.000
2	0.565[b]	0.314	10.579	0.001
3	0.575[c]	0.323	4.298	0.039

[a] Predictor: learning-related social competence.

[b] Predictors: learning-related social competence and interpersonal social competence.

[c] Predictors: learning-related social competence, interpersonal social competence, and student-teacher conflict.

Results of regression modeling presented in the Table 3 revealed that learning-related social competence was the most significant predictor accounting for almost 29 percent of variance in academic achievement. Interpersonal social competence and student-teacher conflict contributed further 3.6 percent.

Conclusions

Analysis of significance of social competence for academic achievement revealed that in the 1st grade both interpersonal social competence and learning-related social competence was statistically significantly linked to academic achievement. The link between learning-related social competence and academic achievement corroborates results of a number of previous studies (e.g., Barbarin et al., 2013; Konold et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2000; McClelland et al., 2006; McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Ponitz et al., 2009; Valiente et al., 2013).

In the 1st grade teachers pay particular attention to development of appropriate in-class behavior, as high quality teaching and learning is possible only after rules and routines of learning process are well-established. Ability to listen attentively to a teacher, to understand and follow simple instructions, move from one activity to another smoothly and independently make the process of learning easier and increases chances of academic success (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Konold et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2006; Valiente et al., 2011). It had been suggested by previous studies that learning-related social competence affects academic achievement by activating motivational and cognitive processes conducive to effective learning (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Barbarin et al., 2013; Valiente et al., 2011), including more positive attitudes to school and schooling (Konold, et al., 2010).

Previous studies had also suggested a link between interpersonal social competence and academic achievement, however, these studies were conducted with adolescent samples (Caprara et al., 2000; Chen et al., 2000; Wentzel, 1991). The present study extends the literature by evidencing this link with a sample of firstgraders. Schooling is a very social process and good interpersonal social competence makes it easier to obtain assistance from more competent adults and peers. Children scoring higher in interpersonal social competence were more popular with their peers and have larger communication networks, which may serve as a source of social support when facing difficulties in learning or may reinforce efforts of keeping up with high achieving classmates. Furthermore, children who have poorer communication skills, face difficulties in performing group tasks, which are particularly valued in a contemporary educational system (Konold, et al., 2010).

Results of the present study also confirmed the importance of student-teacher relationship for academic achievement of 1st graders. While the input of student-teacher conflict was not large, it was statistically significant. Though the link between student-teacher relationship and academic achievement was largely accounted for by learning-related social competence, results of the present study suggested that the level of student-teacher conflict as perceived by a teacher had certain independent impact on academic achievement.

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RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL FACTORS LINKED TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN THE 1ST GRADE

Summary

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Academic achievement represents one of the key aspects of school adjustment (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Patorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000). Though academic achievement is closely linked to intellectual ability as well as to family characteristics (Jacobs & Harvey, 2005; Hung & Marjoribanks, 2005), child's ability to operate effectively in a social environment is vital for making good use of intellectual potential. This becomes of particular importance at the time, when a child first enters a formal learning environment. *McClelland*, *Acock*, and *Morrison* (*2006*) state that teachers increasingly complain about children entering school being at different levels of social maturity, which makes a differential influence on their learning results.

One of the significant psychosocial factors affecting academic achievement is social competence (Konold et al., 2010; McClelland et al., 2000). We define social competence as a set of social skills, which are used effectively to achieve goals in social situation. Cooper and Farran (1988) suggested a concept of social competence encompassing interpersonal skills and classroom work-related skills. Classroom work-related skills include the skills necessary for successful performance of academic work (e.g. ability to hear and follow directions, ability to participate in group activities). Interpersonal skills consist of skills necessary for successful functioning in a social group in which the learning activity takes place (e.g. positive interaction with peers, ability to share).

Another important social factor in school environment is student-teacher relationship (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ping, 2009; Shavega, Brugman, & Tuijl, 2014; Vu, 2015). A study by Harkness et al. (2007) revealed that various social skills dominated the descriptions of an "ideal pupil" given by teachers. Good relationship with class teacher has been found to be closely linked with a range of other school adjustment indicators, including academic achievement (Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Spilt, Koomen, 2009). Studies of student-teacher relationship often focus on two aspects of this relationship – relationship closeness and relationship conflict (e.g. Hamre Pianta, 2001; Howes, 2000).

Along with child's social competence, teacher's favour is one of the factors contributing to peer group status of a child. Peer group status in school contexts is usually measured as popularity in class. Meta-analysis of 41 sociometric status study involving 5-12 year old children conducted by Newcomb et al. (1993) revealed that popular children also have higher social competence, including such learning related skills as better self-control and ability to follow rules. On the other hand, children, who get along with their peers poorly have difficulties in benefiting from group work and those assignments, which require cooperation, even though such assignments are valued highly in a contemporary educational system (Konold, et al., 2010). Thus, it may be assumed that popularity in class may also be one of the social factors affecting academic achievement in elementary school.

While studies linking social-psychological factors to academic achievement are abundant, few studies tried to assess relative contribution of various social factors to academic achievement, especially among the 1st graders. Indeed, 1st grade represents a crucial transition period, when a child enters a school as a qualitatively new social environment. Longitudinal studies (McClelland et al., 2006; Oades-Sese et al., 2011) indicate that adjustment at the time of starting school has long-lasting implications. Insofar academic achievement is one of the most widely studied school adjustment indicators, it is important to investigate social factors contributing to academic achievement of lack thereof. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to assess the links between academic achievement and such social factors as student social competence, student-teacher relationship, and popularity in class in the 1st grade as well as the relative importance of the social factors for academic achievement. The research object is academic achievement in the 1st grade.

Data were collected in 14 schools of Kaunas, which is the second largest city of Lithuania. Subjects were 251 first-graders, 146 girls and 105 boys aged 7 and 8 years. Modal age for both genders at the time of data collection was 8 years.

Academic achievement was measured by asking teachers to assess academic achievement in native language (Lithuanian) and mathematics on a 5-point scale. These two scores were then added up to obtain a total academic achievement score. Social competence was measured by a 7 item Elementary School Social Competence Scale (Short Version) developed for the present study. Three of the items were aimed at measuring interpersonal social competence. The remaining 4 other items measured learning-related social competence. Popularity in class was measured by asking each participating child to indicate on a list 3 classmates, whom s/he would prefer as friends. Student-Teacher Relationship Scale – Short Form (Pianta, 2001) was used for assessment of student-teacher relationship.

Results of correlation analysis indicated that all of the social factors measured in the present study, including social competence, student-teacher relationship, and popularity, were statistically significantly linked to academic achievement. In order to assess relative contribution of these factors to academic achievement, regression analysis was conducted. Results of regression modelling revealed that learning-related social competence was the most significant predictor accounting for almost 29 percent of variance in academic achievement. Interpersonal social competence and student-teacher conflict contributed further 3.6 percent.