

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNERS – THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

Arbresha ZENKI-DALIPI¹, Gëzim XHAMBAZI², Ardita CEKA³

University in Tetova -Tetovo, Republic of North Macedonia, arbresha.zenki@unite.edu.mk

University in Tetova -Tetovo, Republic of North Macedonia, gezim.xhambazi@unite.edu.mk

University in Tetova -Tetovo, Republic of North Macedonia, ardita.ceka@unite.edu.mk

Abstract

Teachers, including the subjects involved in the education process, are the key factors in the continuous implementation of socio-emotional learning, as well as responsible for promoting the learning and well-being of their students. Since teachers are on the front line of the battle as the main leaders in managing emotions and building a balance of these feelings, their competencies should also include promoting these skills in an organized way within the classroom. In the school year 2022/2023, a significant number of schools in RNM were involved in training where, in addition to being introduced to the concepts of socio-emotional learning, they were introduced to methods to recognize, understand, treat, express, and learn appropriately emotions. The study conducted among primary school teachers in North Macedonia aimed to examine and present the real situation regarding teachers' competencies. 110 teachers from the country participated in the study as a random sample, a sample which will be organized in the study to answer the research questions. Through the relevant statistical tests Levene's Test and Anova, the findings show statistically significant patterns for their attitude regarding socio-emotional learning, organized and voluntary involvement for the development of the necessary competence, self-initiative for improving the opportunities and conditions for improving their practice, as well as promoting the benefits of integrating this practice into classroom management. Negative attitudes turn out to be closely related to environmental and other associated factors. Our findings indicate the need for greater attention to social-emotional learning in both initial teacher preparation programs and continuing professional development initiatives.

Keywords: socio-emotional, socio-emotional competence, competence development

Introduction

SEL's well-deserved developmental popularity recently takes its rightful place as it is ranked as very important to children's development in all contexts. A range of scientific evidence and practice speak of the positive impact on the personal and professional development of a person. Various evidences from researches of different scientific disciplines emphasize that the development of socio-emotional competences are primarily related to human well-being and are directly related to academic achievements as well. They represent the key to children's success and achievements in their private and professional lives.

Building social-emotional skills for both children and adults means creating a safe, positive and helpful environment. All this includes the development of responsibility, self-esteem and respect for others, sensitivity and honesty, taking and accepting initiative, self-direction and independence, curiosity, attention and focus, endurance, perseverance, creativity in thinking, cooperation, developing tolerance, recognition and understanding of one's own and others' feelings, empathy, managing and expressing emotions, solving problems, and the like. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (Collaborative for Academic Social, 2020).

Failure to build these skills leads to long-term, often irreversible effects on educational attainment, general health and human productivity that later result in significant costs to both individuals and society. (Heckman, 2007).

Creating healthy overall brain architecture in children is influenced by a well-organized, multidisciplinary approach to learning that focuses on student well-being and academic achievement. To create such conditions, parents and teachers should be included. But, as reported by NESET, school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, local communities and beyond must be engaged (Cefai, 2021), to create equitable learning environments that actively engage all students in grades Pre-K through grade 12 in learning and practicing social, emotional, and academic competencies (Mahoney, 2020), and should be an inevitable focus in the education of all children (Mart et. al., 2017).

The noise created by the importance of training children in the creation of socio-emotional competencies, the importance of an organized approach to the development of these skills in early education and later, became an impetus for the organization of teacher trainings. This activity aimed to present the impact that this component has familiarity with the concepts of socio-emotional learning, the concept of self-awareness, methods to recognize, understand, treat, express and learn appropriately emotions, the concept of self-management, social interaction, management and communication skills and abilities during social interactions, namely socio-emotional management.

1. Teachers SE competencies and their impact on the development of students' socio-emotional competencies

Most educators believe that developing SE competencies are fundamental to student success and should be the primary goal of education (Hamilton, 2019). Meta-analyses conducted to study this impact have shown that SEL programs taught by classroom teachers can promote the development of SECs (Wigelsworth, 2016), a development that affects not only the development of skills, but also the prosocial behavior and academic performance of students in the future (Taylor, 2017).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defined core competencies with which students will develop socio-emotional skills so that they will face the challenges of life with lower rates of mental breakdowns, will have higher academic achievements including all their potential, will have self-confidence higher, they will create healthy and environmentally friendly relationships, they will be ready to take responsibility and healthy decisions, they will be able to reflect and improve their actions, and similar.

The five SEL competencies are areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support the learning and development of students and adults (Exhibit 1.)

The schematic representation of SE competencies

•Self-awareness	Self-menagment	Responsible decision-making	Social awareness	Relationship skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Knowing yourself (personality, thoughts, actions, values, beliefs, capabilities and emotions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Managing emotions, goal setting, self-motivation, organization and discipline. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Analysis, evaluation and judgment of the situation, identification of solutions for personal and social problems, prediction and evaluation of the consequences of actions, ethical responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Taking the perspectives of others, showing empathy and compassion, recognizing and respecting weak points, awareness of diversity and respect for them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Effective and positive verbal and non-verbal communication , building relationships, working and solving problems in groups in an impartial and constructive way, social commitment and protection of the rights of others

Exhibit 1. Core SEL competencies

The educational community increasingly emphasizes the importance of the holistic development of students, where in order to create a connection between SEL and academic learning, it is necessary to involve more subjects to create a foundation for learning, behavior and future health (Ferreira, 2021). In this covalence, while educators have a role in creating the conditions for learning, leaders have a role in creating the working conditions that educators need to support the social and emotional development of students and educators (Yoder, 2018). By connecting their daily and emotional decisions, leaders develop a collective organizational vision that helps educators recognize their values and aspirations and build self-efficacy, thus linking effective leadership to educators' social and emotional competence (Belinda, 2023).

However, despite the awareness that the teacher has one of the most prominent roles in the development of students' skills for building a healthy identity, academic training to achieve personal and collective requirements, creating interpersonal relationships and training for making careful decisions, the question arises whether they possess the SEL competence to support their students in such expertise?

Such a question together with other factors that influence the development of these competencies is presented as the goal of the research. Such questions are accompanied to verify the level of knowledge and skills that link their modeling to the SEL standards of the students. Yoder shares 10 teacher practices that promote social and emotional development, as well as academic development, which if applied well, can align with culturally-responsive sustaining practices (Yoder et al., 2021).

The schematic representation of Educator Practices That Promote Academic, Social and Emotional Learning

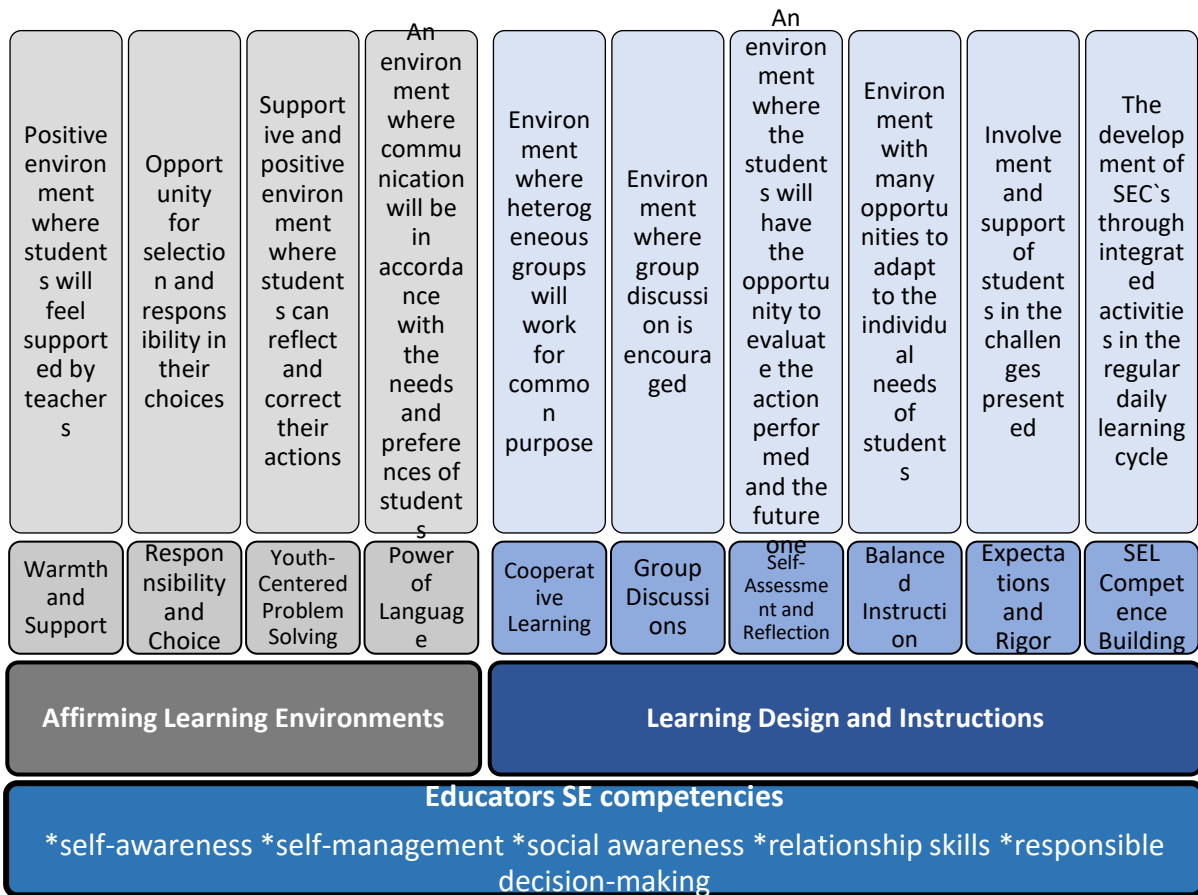


Exhibit.2. Modified appearance of (Yoder N. H., 2018) *Practices That Promote SEL in Learning Design and Instruction*

The development of SE competencies according to Berg (2017) in affirmative learning environments is compatible with Yoder's division, where in addition to them sub-competencies such as learning design and instructions are added.

While in the first the ramifications describe the environment where they will be able to cultivate and develop their competences, the ramifications related to the design and instruction of learning represent the creation of conditions and climate where students will build SE competencies.

Warmth and support practices refer to the academic, social, and emotional support students receive from their educators and peers, cultivating positive relationships in the learning environment (Christenson & Havsy, 2004; Hammond, 2015; Hawkins et al., 2004; Love, 2019; McCombs, 2004; Muhamed, 2020). If the teachers apply such practice, I don't think that the possibility is created that the students can build proper relationships with them and their peers, supported in a comfortable environment to express their values and academic opportunities. Educators' use of warmth and support strategies creates learning experiences and interactions in which students demonstrate their value and importance to the learning community, develop positive peer and educator relationships, feel a sense of comfort and security, and advocate for themselves (Yoder, 2022).

Although not always with appropriate and valid selection, students' competencies will tend to increase if they interact in an environment where their voices will be heard. Such an environment allows positive flexibility, an opportunity that would help to rework solutions with

assistance by offering them different structures. Responsibility and choice are more than having a classroom job or having an option or two, as choices are only motivational when they are meaningful; culturally relevant; age-appropriate; and personalized to students' interests, goals, and lives (Evans, 2015).

Youth-centered problem-solving practices entail the methods employed by educators to foster student agency and empowerment. In this center, students will have the opportunity to reflect on their actions, direct them, and feel a sense of influence in creating positive and supportive learning environments. Enabling students through strategies adopted in learning environments by teachers to self-reflect would allow them to review their decisions, self-manage, and eventually correct them. Such practice aims to treat students as equal and active partners in the learning, selection and decision-making process. The aim is to see students as partners in the learning process, rather than using exclusionary disciplinary practices that remove students from the learning environment (Yoder, 2022).

Encouraging positive communication not only enhances student engagement but also promotes healthy behaviors both within and beyond the classroom. Although teacher-student relationships are integral aspects of any learning environment, establishing and sustaining a positive interpersonal relationship is a challenging endeavor, even for educators with considerable experience (Strachan, 2020). The teacher-student communication method allows the student to feel how safe he is emotionally and intellectually with his teacher. (Howard, 2019). The effective power of language avoids language that is humiliating or sarcastic as well as discipline by fear, intimidation, and indifference to students (Yoder, 2022). Likewise, by drawing on the positive psychology movement and the rhetorical and relational goal theory in instructional communication, we argue that positive teacher interpersonal communication behaviors are facilitators of a wide range of desirable student-related academic outcomes (Xie, 2021). All this influence is possible when the teacher instructs but also models it in real situations. Students often want to identify with the personality of teachers, therefore they often develop self-management abilities based on the language that teachers utilize. This interaction includes settling on choices lined up with understudies' self-resolved goals inside the learning climate.

Regarding the second group of subcompetencies, namely learning design and instruction, there are the branches that are related to cooperative learning, group discussions, self-assessment and reflection, balanced instruction, expectations and rigor and SEL competence building.

The first branching includes the possibility of organizing learning activities in often heterogeneous groups. Such an approach brings many educational benefits, but also such as the breaking of stereotypes to promote shared responsibility and ownership. Participation in cooperative learning experiences can enhance academic achievement and cognitive growth, motivation and positive attitudes toward learning, social competence, and interpersonal relations, benefits which have been reported for students from early elementary through college level, from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and having a wide range of ability levels (Clements, 1991). The attack towards achieving their academic, social, or emotional goals in cooperative learning groups is always stronger due to the diversity of experiences of the group members, as well as the mobilization of all skills, opportunities and tools in order to achieve the common task. How diversity affects the group should be the teacher's focus. The heterogeneous nature of the group should affect eventual divergence, decision-making, individual accountability, self-esteem, as well as the way they see themselves as well as other people.

Reflection is a personal process that can deepen one's understanding of self and can lead to significant discoveries or insights, while self-assessment is a process that involves establishing strengths, improvements, and insights based on predetermined performance criteria (Smith, 2017). In safe positive environments students will be able to develop their skills to reflect on

their actions, the variables that influenced success or the opposite. Teachers motivate and provide opportunities for students to promote reflective practice and self-monitoring skills, academic integrity through self-reporting of progress, help develop personal transferable skills, and allow opportunities for critical reflection on their metacognitive skills. The acquired skills allow students to review and improve their performance, omissions, or eventual mistakes during learning.

Given that students have different intelligences, they need multiple opportunities and approaches to learn and build their competencies. To ensure opportunities for all students in an equal environment, teachers use different modalities that would be accessible to them. The goal is to create a mix of direct, explicit, and active instruction focused on authentic learning experiences. It is reasonable to assume that we want to get students to apply their higher level and critical thinking capabilities. There are no polarized pedagogic attitudes when we think that we can only achieve this if the students learn in a student-centered environment, while the role of the teacher is to lead well-thought-out and structured activities where we will support the students in the goal (the knowledge they need to learn) by adapted to their abilities (what they are capable of). This balanced learning architecture allows the student to act motivated, to be cognitively involved in the learning until the construction of the understanding of the concepts. The model that integrates student-centered pedagogy allows their involvement in "tailored" activities that include individual work and social interaction.

Although the expectations are linked by the goals and standards that the curriculum brings with it, the goal of meeting them offers the building of SE competences in the students. Although it is admission in relation to what students can and cannot achieve, consciously or not, it is beliefs that direct the approach and interactions with students. The relationship created with the students allows the teachers to know the academic limits of the students, how they will react and their willing engagement in challenging tasks. Getting to know students and creating expectations coupled with supporting them to overcome the challenge helps students build confidence in the possibility of academic growth if they try. They develop the sense of freedom for selection on learning, the ability to use personal opportunities, the ability to manipulate different resources, and the competence of self-management of emotions.

The development of socio-emotional competences is a long process that begins historically before the birth of the child, continues institutionally in nurseries, schools and universities, the path of which has no end. When we talk about the deliberate construction of SE competences in institutions that should be models and the biggest promoters of these principles, without a doubt they should consist of practices that support strategically extended to every cell of the learning cycle. Each part of the instructional cycle can promote targeted social and emotional competencies as long as the educator purposefully integrates them into the lesson—either as stand-alone lessons, mini-lessons, or integration with academic content (Yoder, 2021). The development of targeted competencies will be orientation for students as they use them in their daily life to achieve their life goals.

Methodology

The starting point of this research was exactly the navigation on the literature which deals with this rather complex phenomenon. Before examining the instruments applied in the research, relevant data were synthesized that describe what are actually the competencies that teachers should have and the possibility to transfer these skills to students, exactly what are the practices of teachers that promote social development emotional, and at the same time academic of the students. Since 10 well-known practices in the identified existing literature were elaborated, this research was added to the curiosity of how in our region the competence of teachers is

related to the models examined in practice, and whether other characteristics are presented as factors in the application of this practice.

This research also lies on the findings gathered from the questionnaire. This instrument was applied with a random sample that included 110 teachers with different characteristics. The instrument was completed by teachers who attended and did not attend SE trainings, of different genders and experiences, etc. This sample allows us to make further classifications to analyze the effects of the heterogeneous sample, ie it enables us to answer the research questions.

Data analysis

The large population was presented with a randomly selected sample. The heterogeneous sample includes 46.4% of teachers who work in the city compared to 53.6% who work in the countryside. As expected, the female gender of the sample presented to us dominates with 76.4%, compared to 22.7% males and 0.9% of teachers who have refused to declare their gender. The vast majority, 40% of the sample is aged 40-49 years, compared to the age of more than 60 years which is represented by only 3.6%. The representative group with the largest percentage, namely 34.5%, has work experience between 11-20 years. The approximate percentages (34.5%) are those with up to 10 years of experience, while 9.1% of them have 21-30 years of experience.

Questionnaires were coded and data entered into the SPSS data system. All data were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, where a value of 1 indicated high competence of using SEL learning, while a value of 5 indicated low competence of social-emotional learning skills.

Variables that measure socio-emotional learning competencies were used to construct the socio-emotional learning competency scale. The descriptive statistics of the competence scale revealed that the surveyed teachers rated their competence on average (SD = 0.99) with a value of 2.5 which is moderately competent.

Table 1. Assessment for "Teachers' perception of their competence for socio-emotional learning"
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Competence	110	1.00	5.00	2.5045	.99827
Valid N (listwise)	110				

2. INFERENCE STATISTICS

Hypothesis 1- The perception of competence for socio-emotional learning will be different in teachers who have attended training and those who have not attended training.

To test the proposed assumption and to see if there are differences in the perception of competences based on the attendance of socio-emotional learning trainings, we used the Levene statistical method. Thus, the T-test was applied to see the average of both groups of the independent variable, which in our case is the follow-up of treatments.

In the comparison of the arithmetic averages in the first part of the table, it can be seen that the teachers who attended trainings (N=30) rate themselves as highly competent with an arithmetic average of 1.3. While, on the other hand (N=80), teachers who have not attended training rate themselves with low competence for socio-emotional learning with an arithmetic mean of approximately 3. From these data, we can see that the averages are different that indicates that the perception of competence for socio-emotional learning is different among teachers who have and have not attended training.

In the second part of the table, the Levene test data are shown where the T-test value is .000, a value which is less than 0.05, a statistically significant indicator that shows that there are

statistically significant differences between the two groups. All this allows us to conclude that the differences between those who attended and those who did not attend training in relation to the perception of competences are important.

Table 2 Perception of competence for SEL learning according to teachers' participation in training.

Have you attended training(s) about social-emotional learning?		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Competencies	YES	30	1.3167	.21709	.03963
	NO	80	2.9500	.78796	.08810

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Competencies	Equal variances assumed	36.291	.000	-11.166	108	.000	-1.63333	.14627	-1.92327	-1.34339
	Equal variances not assumed			-16.908	102.749	.000	-1.63333	.09660	-1.82493	-1.44174

Hypothesis 2- The perception of competence for socio-emotional learning will be different among teachers of different genders.

Below are presented the processed data from the sample of 84 women and 26 men to examine the dependence of the independent variable, gender, and the dependent variable, competence. The mean competence score is 1.2800, with a SD of 0.22032 and a standard error of the mean (SEM) of 0.04406 for female respondents, and the mean competence score is 2.8393, with a standard deviation of 0.80906 and SEM of 0.08828 for male respondents.

In order to evaluate the equality of the variances of the two groups, Levene's test for Equality of Variance was applied. The F statistic is 32.852, and the associated p value is < 0.001, indicating that the variances are not equal. According to the T-test to compare the equality of the averages of the two groups, t = -9.504 with a degree of freedom of 107 and a value where p = < 0.001 appear. The mean difference (Female - Male) is -1.55929, with a standard error of the difference of 0.16407. The 95% confidence interval for the difference in means ranges from -1.88454 to -1.23403.

The analysis suggests a significant difference in competency scores between the "Female" and "Male" groups. The t-test shows that the mean competence score for females is significantly higher than that for males. The significant p value (< 0.001) in both cases indicates strong statistical evidence for this difference. The mean difference of about -1.56 suggests that, on average, women scored 1.56 higher units of competence compared to men. The 95% confidence interval for the difference shows the range within which the true difference in the mean is likely to fall.

Based on this analysis, with a significance value of .000 there is strong evidence that there is a significant difference in competency scores between the two gender groups, with males having on average lower competency scores compared to females.

Table 3 Perception of competence for socio-emotional learning according to teachers' gender
Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Competence	Equal variances assumed	32.852	.000	-9.504	107	.000	-1.55929	.16407	-1.88454	-1.23403
	Equal variances not assumed			-15.804	106.622	.000	-1.55929	.09866	-1.75488	-1.36369

Hypothesis 3 – The perception of teachers' competence for socio-emotional learning is also influenced by the teachers' experience

Based on the Anova test with an F ratio value (243.915), degrees of freedom (df): 3 and significance: 0.000 with ($p < 0.05$) suggesting a highly significant difference in competency scores between at least one of the groups of shared in experience. According to the data in the table, it is clear that the group of teachers (N=38) with average competence with 1.4737 shows higher competence, compared to those with 31-40 years of experience (N=10) who show low competence with a value of 4.4750. The results of the ANOVA test clearly highlighted a significant statistical difference between the heterogeneous groups, which allows us to conclude that the competence for socio-emotional learning is influenced by the experience of teachers, which is in agreement with the literature that says that professional burnout is related to the desire to express socio-emotional skills in the classroom.

Table 4 Perception of competence for socio-emotional learning according to teachers' experience

Competencies	ANOVA					Competencies			
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Experience:	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Between Groups	94.879	3	31.626	243.915	.000	Up to 10 years	1.4737	38	.37122
Within Groups	13.744	106	.130			11-20 years	2.5476	42	.39524
Total	108.623	109				21-30 years	3.3875	20	.22176
						21-30 years	4.4750	10	.38097
						Total	2.5045	110	.99827

Key findings

- 30% of the surveyed teachers attended training related to socio-emotional learning.
- The surveyed teachers rated their competence on average.
- The differences between teachers who attended and did not attend training in relation to the perception of competences are statistically significant.
- There is strong evidence that there is a significant difference in competency scores between the two gender groups, with males having on average lower competency scores compared to females.
- The results clearly highlighted a significant statistical difference between the heterogeneous groups, which allows us to conclude that the competence for socio-emotional learning is influenced by the experience of the teachers.

Recommendations

- Necessary involvement of all teachers in SE learning training and building their competencies.
- Raising awareness by highlighting the positive benefits of social-emotional learning (SEL) on well-being and academic achievement.
- Promotion and support of young people in the creation of inclusive culture and promotion of positive social relations.
- Creation of educational policies, provision of conditions and actions at the state level for building personal and professional capacities for the development of SE competences.
- Curriculum review with a focus on improving current programs based on scientific findings and proven practices.

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