

# **Yourself. The Design, Structure and Content of the first Romanian Program on Social Emotional Competencies Development for Young Adults**

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Initial receipt: 30.01.2014 Final revision received: 16.06.2014 Accepted: 20.06.2014

**Abstract:** In this paper, we present the steps we took to design, then structure and build the content of the first Romanian program on social-emotional competencies development for young adults. We took into account both the recommendations of the leading experts in the field of psychology, as well as world renowned organizations, such as WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO. We began by defining the program on three levels, namely: competencies, social-emotional development and life skills. We then checked that the program we developed, called *Yourself*, meets all the criteria for a social-emotional development program. In the end, we presented, in table form, the structure of the program, with definitions of the main categories and subcategories involved and examples of activities. We concluded that the program we developed indeed meets all the criteria and can be used to develop the social-emotional competencies in young adults.

**Keywords:** program, social-emotional, development, competencies, yourself

## **Theoretical background**

Besides professional development, personal development is one of the most important aspects for a successful integration of young adults into society. The applications of this development range from finding the proper job to finding meaning in life, with clear benefits on: improving the positive behaviors and reducing the negative ones, improving health and well-being, preventing the use of alcohol, drugs and aggressiveness, lowering the level of emotional distress, improving communication, teamwork and leadership (Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010; Seal, Naumann, Scott & Royce-Davis, 2011). Educational organizations have successfully dealt with the professional development of young adults, but personal development, for one reason or another, is left aside, as if it were less important in a person's life. To contradict this faulty perception, there are already hundreds of studies (CASEL, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010; Elias, 2003) that have proven the importance of social-emotional development in living a fulfilling life.

Social-emotional development represents the process of improving the social and emotional competencies by offering the proper learning environment and experiences. The accent lays on active learning and

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developing the competencies that lead to the emotions, behaviors and thinking processes that help people become healthy and competent members of society (Elias, 2003). The concept of social-emotional competencies development is an integration of the theories on social intelligence (Thorndike, 1920; Gardner, 1993), emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995) and competencies development (Boyatzis, 1982) applied to education (Seal et al., 2011).

Unlike dimensions like general intelligence or personality, that are mainly developed in childhood and remain stable throughout adulthood, competences in general and social-emotional competences in particular, can be improved through a learning process (Kolb, 1984). This way, social-emotional competencies development is useful and necessary at any age and for any group target (Seal, Boyatzis & Bailey, 2006).

### **Rationale**

In perfect agreement to this point of view and to the need of such an initiative, we have developed, implemented and tested a social-emotional competencies development program designed for students and young adults (Vaida, 2012). From a theoretical point of view, this program is based on the principles of Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) (Ellis, 1979), which is one of the best scientifically documented educational approaches. This program is called Your-SELF (Your Social Emotional Learning Facilitator) and it is comprised of weekly trainings of 3-4 hours, with “hands-on”, very practical and useful activities.

### **The Design of Yourself Program**

In order to understand how a social-emotional competences development program functions, one must define it on three levels (Boyatzis, 2009): (1) on the competences level; (2) on the social-emotional development level and (3) on the life skills development level.

On the competences level, we based our design upon Waters & Sroufe's (1983) definition, which considers an individual to be competent in a certain field when he/she is capable of finding adaptive solutions to the problems that might appear and benefit from the opportunities that the environment can provide. On this approach, we made sure to teach the participants in the program to: (a) identify the problems in their environment; (b) find viable solutions to the problems; (c) apply and test these solutions and (d) identify and benefit from the opportunities that appear in their field(s) of interest.

One of the most important aspects concerning competences is that they can be developed at any age. Research done over the decades has proven that people can change their behavior, attitude and self-image for the

better (Boyatzis, 2009). Whether we regard things from the point of rational emotive behavior education (Barlow, 1988), training programs or “self-help” programs (Kanfer & Goldstein, 1991), the conclusion is the same – people are capable of change, and this is due to the development of competences that, eventually, leads to expertise in a certain area.

On the social-emotional level, Johnson & Johnson (in Zins et al., 2004) define the concept as being the expert when it comes to the correct use of group and interpersonal skills on one hand and the development of pro social skills that allow goals to be reached and solutions to be found. On this approach, we intended to offer the participants the proper framework needed to practice pro social behaviors and attitudes (becoming aware of other people’s needs, helping others, initiating projects or getting involved in social projects), identifying and solving problems and practicing social interaction abilities.

On the life skills level, we used the WHO (World Health Organization) definition of competences as being “*the ability to show positive and adaptive behavior that allows individuals to efficiently cope with daily challenges*”. For a better understanding, we also used the UNICEF’s (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) definition, which considers life skills to be “*psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, grouped in three categories of skills: cognitive skills for analyzing and using information, personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself and inter-personal skills for communicating and interacting effectively with others*”. Corroborating these two definitions with the UNESCO (United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization) approach, we depicted a number of ten essential life skills: problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, efficient communication, interpersonal relationship skills, (self) awareness skills, empathy and coping with stressful or emotional situations. WHO divides these life skills into three main categories: (1) critical thinking and decision making skills (including problem solving and information gathering); (2) interpersonal and communication skills (verbal and nonverbal communication, active listening, emotion expressing and feedback, negotiation and assertive behavior, empathy, teamwork); (3) adapting and self-management skills (skills that increase locus of control, self-esteem, self-awareness, goal setting, time and stress management, positive thinking and relaxation abilities). On this criteria alone, most of the skills were already included in the program structure, which helped shaped it.

From these three approaches (competence level, social-emotional skills and life skills), we can conclude that many of the abilities are almost

identical or highly overlapping, which added value to the program and helped structure it, because the activities have been built and arranged on clear categories and not repeated.

In 2007 and 2013, the Collaborative for Academics in Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL), the largest organization in the world studying the benefits of social-emotional programs, did a meta-analysis that evaluated dozens of social-emotional programs and offered a guide for structuring these types of programs. They organized these recommendations under the SAFE acronym: S for Sequential, A for Active, F for Focused, and E for Explicit (Durlak et al., 2010). The Sequential criteria mean that the program must contain and use a set of coordinated and interconnected activities, which can help reaching the objectives. The Active criteria condition the program to use active learning in order to develop new abilities. The Focused criteria mean that the program has at least one component dedicated to development of personal or social abilities. And last but not least, the explicit criteria mean that the program develops abilities specific to social-emotional development, not only general abilities.

We used this guide for best practices and checked that the program Yourself respects all four criteria mentioned by Durlak et al. (2010): sequential, active, focused and explicit.

- a) We concluded that the program had a sequential character, because all the activities and exercises are strongly interconnected and coordinated for reaching the research objectives. It is worth mentioning that the sequential character is not a limitation for the trainer's independence. On the contrary, the activities can be done in any order, according to the group specificity and the objectives set from the needs analysis.
- b) The active character was given by the majority of the activities used, from the presentation method to role plays and focus groups, icebreakers, teambuilding exercises, simulations, shame attacks, all the activities aim at the same objective – motivating and involving the participants so that learning is and active one.
- c) The focused character came from the majority of the program components, which aimed at the same thing – developing the social-emotional competences of the participants in the program, for a better adaption to reality. Specific activities like emotion recognition, identification of strengths and weaknesses, empathy and respect towards others, problem solving, stress management and setting new relationships, all lead to the same five major categories of general objectives that build the essence of social emotional development.

- d) The explicit character comes from all the information presented so far, information that focuses on the fact that Yourself as a program follows mainly to develop social emotional competences (self-awareness and social awareness, social skills, respect towards others, decision making and the drive for change).

Based on the same meta-analysis (Durlak et al., 2010), the researchers at CASEL compiled a guide that allows those interested in the field to check whether a program is a social-emotional learning/development program or not (Newman, 2011). Therefore, for a program to be considered in this category, it must comply with the following criteria, which were also followed and checked in our program:

- a) Prove that it is efficient, based on an experimental or quasi-experimental design.
- b) Must have at least one positive and significant result on one of the areas identified in the CASEL meta-analysis (Durlak et al., 2010): social-emotional competencies, performance in social-emotional skills (identifying problems, problem solving or solution finding), pro-social behaviors (teamwork, assertiveness, and conflict resolution), reducing behavioral problems (aggressiveness) or emotional distress, dysfunctional beliefs or improving academic results (grades, attitude towards school). For these two first requirements, we tested and proved the program efficiency on reducing the level of irrationality in a group of university students (Vaida, 2012).
- c) Must be structured in such a manner that it can be used with students like any other regular course and not require any special conditions. We tested and applied the activities of the program on a regular course within the university curricula: regular course rooms, weekly frequency, over a four hour span, with regular materials (video projector, black board, flipchart).
- d) Must be built so that the social-emotional development is promoted among other possible goals. The content of our program dedicates more than 80% of the activities and time to the development the social-emotional competencies of the participants, while in the remaining 20% we aimed at other connecting areas (promoting health, relaxation, time management, etc).

### **Program Content and Structure**

The content of the program covers all five major areas recommended by the CASEL experts: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Besides these five, we included other areas, such as those recommended by Seal et al. (2011): self-

respect/ respect towards others and leadership, as well as other categories considered essential for a good life adjustment: communication, teamwork as well as promoting mental and physical health.

In table 1, there is a brief summary and exemplification of the program we designed for the social-emotional competencies development of young adults, showing the main concepts we mentioned before, split into categories, subcategories, definitions and examples of activities.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition / Subcategories</b>
<i>Self-Awareness</i>	“knowing and understanding your own emotions, evaluating your strengths and limitations and knowing your preferences” Emotional self-awareness; proper self-evaluation; identification of strengths in self & others;
<i>Examples of activities</i>	“My Emotions” / “SWOT Analysis” / “My Values” / “How Do I Feel?”
<i>Self-Management</i>	“emotions and behavior control through cognitions, in order to reach the objectives” Emotions and behavior management; stress management; motivation
<i>Examples of activities</i>	“Rational versus Irrational Thoughts” / “Functional versus Dysfunctional Emotions & Behaviors” / “Procrastination” / “Motivation Strategies”
<i>Respect towards self and others</i>	“concern for others, with the purpose of not hurting anyone”
<i>Social Awareness</i>	Empathy and respect towards others; constructive and ethical choices in personal and social behavior
<i>Responsible Decision Making</i>	
<i>Examples of activities</i>	“Emotional and Cognitive Empathy” / “What Makes You & Me Valuable?” / “Ethical and Moral Choices” / “First Step - Awareness”
<i>Connection to Others</i>	“ease or difficulty in developing quality relationships with others, through ideas and emotion exchange”
<i>Relationship Skills</i>	Positive relations; preventing and/or solving interpersonal conflicts; communication
<i>Examples of activities</i>	“Efficient Communication” / “Assertive Training” / “Conflict Management” / “Teamwork”
<i>Drive for Change</i>	„leadership opportunities and motivation for change”
<i>Examples of activities</i>	“Leadership Principles” / “Be the Leader Everyone Will Follow!”

Table 1. Your-SELF Program Structure

## **Conclusion**

The need and utility of continuous training and personal/professional development for young adults is obvious, as proven by the theory of human capital (Lucas, 1993). In general, human capital can be defined as a type of formal education, and training in social-emotional development certainly fits this category. Beyond productivity, the efficiency of training can be measured based on four criteria, according to Kirkpatrick's model (1987), and a fifth criteria, the transferability of knowledge and skills (Kraiger, Ford & Salas, 1983). The first criteria in this model are the reaction, namely the way participants react to the training (in terms of information, activities, and trainers). The purpose is to make the participants feel that they had a valuable experience, because the trainers had been well prepared, and they want to repeat that experience. The second criteria concerns learning, more precisely how much have participants learnt, which can be measured with learning objectives. The third criteria are about emotions and behaviors or the way participants use the information they acquired and how way is applied. It is important to remember that certain behavioral changes appear only in the right conditions and if sometimes they don't show up, it could be due to the fact that they haven't been rewarded, not because they haven't been learned. The fourth and last criteria of the model are about the results, which can be set by trainers or other social actors. Generally, those results that count can be beneficial for everyone involved.

We believe that we have checked these four criteria as well, since the participants from the first social-emotional development group we worked with are still involved and interested in the program (criteria no 1), have applied the knowledge they accumulated and developed themselves new projects (criteria no 2), are becoming trainers, mentors or coaches for other young adults (criteria no 3) and have set themselves objectives and began reaching those objectives (criteria no 4).

We can conclude that the program we designed, Yourself, is indeed the first complex and long-term program designed for the development of the social-emotional competencies of young adults in Romania. We have already implemented this program with three groups of young adults, ranging from a dedicated time of several weeks for the newest group to three years for the first group. We have already tested the efficiency of the program on changing the thinking pattern of the participants and making it more adaptive. We are now testing the program on several other levels, comprising the social-emotional development, the academic results, the improvement in the thinking pattern, solving problems, developing pro social behaviors and many other aspects. We are confident that this program will have positive results in the future as well, measured both with quantitative and qualitative methods and instruments.

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