Revista **Educatio Siglo XXI**

ISSN edición impresa: 1699-2105. ISSN edición web (http://revistas.um.es/educatio): 1989-466X

¿Enseña el sistema educativo en habilidades sociales? Un antes y un después, con estudiantes de Educación Primaria[1]

Does the Educational System Teach Social Skills? A Before-and-After Analysis with Primary School Students

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Abstract:
During their studies, students engage not only in formal teaching processes but also in learning processes shaped by the interactions they establish with peers, teachers, and other actors within the academic community. Knowing how to communicate effectively affects career success and personal well-being, making social skills training (SST) programs a "must have". This study examines the implementation of a social skills training program within a university context. Over a four-month period, 82 pre-service teachers (90.2% women and 9.8% men), aged between 20 and 49 years (M = 22.33, SD = 3.48), participated in a longitudinal study designed

Resumen:
Durante sus estudios, aparte del proceso de enseñanza específica, el alumnado participa también en un proceso de aprendizaje derivado de las interacciones que establece con los compañeros, docentes y demás actores implicados en el mundo académico. Saber establecer comunicaciones adecuadas repercute posteriormente en el éxito profesional y en el bienestar personal, por lo que los programas de entrenamiento en habilidades sociales (EHS) se convierten en un *must-have*. Este estudio examina la implementación de un programa de formación en habilidades sociales en el contexto universitario. Durante cuatro meses, 82 estudiantes de

1 Como referenciar este artículo (How to reference this article): Scurtu-Tura, C. y García González, A. J. (2026). ¿Enseña el sistema educativo en habilidades sociales? Un antes y un después, con estudiantes de Educación Primaria. *Educatio Siglo XXI, 44*(2), 223-244. https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.635231

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to assess the effectiveness of the program. Social skills were addressed through participation in theoretical-practical classes on family, school, interpersonal relationships, and social change. The study followed a pre-test/post-test design aligned with the course teaching project. The post-test results revealed a significant overall improvement in social skills across all assessed factors. Initial differences associated with gender and age were reduced or eliminated following the intervention, suggesting that the program effectively enhanced students' social skills.

Key words:
Social skills; university students; age; interpersonal communication; gender; education programs.

magisterio (90.2% mujeres y 9.8% varones, con edad de entre 20 y 49 años (*M* = 22.33, *DT*= 3.48)) participaron en un estudio longitudinal diseñado para evaluar la eficacia del programa. Las habilidades sociales se abordaron mediante la participación en las clases teóricas-prácticas de la asignatura *Familia, escuela, relaciones interpersonales y cambio social*. El estudio sigue un diseño pretest/postest alineado con el proyecto docente de la asignatura. Los resultados del postest mostraron una mejora significativa en las habilidades sociales en todos los factores evaluados. Las diferencias iniciales por género y edad se redujeron o eliminaron tras la intervención, lo que indica que el programa mejoró eficazmente las habilidades sociales de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave:
Habilidades sociales; estudiantes universitarios; edad; comunicación interpersonal; género; programas de educación.

Résumé:
Au cours de leurs études, outre le processus d'enseignement spécifique, les étudiants participent également à un processus d'apprentissage découlant issu des interactions qu'ils établissent avec leurs camarades de classe, leurs enseignants et d'autres acteurs impliqués dans le monde universitaire. Savoir établir des compétences de communication appropriées aura plus tard un impact sur la réussite professionnelle et le bien-être personnel, c'est pourquoi les programmes d'entraînement aux compétences sociales (CS) sont un *must-have*. Cette étude examine la mise en œuvre d'un programme de formation aux compétences sociales dans un contexte universitaire. Pendant quatre mois, 82 enseignants en formation ont participé à une étude longitudinale (90,2 % de femmes et 9,8 % d'hommes, âgés de 20 à 49 ans (M = 22.33, SD= 3.48)) visant à évaluer l'efficacité du programme. Les compétences sociales ont été abordées à travers la participation aux cours théoriques-pratiques de la matière Famille, école, relations interpersonnelles et changement social. L'étude suit un modèle pré-test/post-test aligné sur le projet pédagogique de la matière. Les résultats du post-test ont montré une amélioration globale significative des compétences sociales pour tous les facteurs évalués. Les différences initiales liées au sexe et à l'âge ont été réduites ou éliminées après l'intervention, ce qui indique que le programme a efficacement amélioré les compétences sociales des étudiants.

Mots clés:
Compétences sociales; étudiants universitaires; âge; communication interpersonnelle; sexe; programmes d'éducation.

Fecha de recepción: 29-10-2024
Fecha de aceptación: 10-03-2026

 https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.635231

Introducción

As bio-psycho-social beings, people interact with one another, whether family, friends, acquaintances, strangers, schoolmates, university peers, or workmates. It is widely known that we live in an increasingly digitized century, impacting all facets of life, with people tending to communicate more rapidly through modern technologies. However, from early childhood, we are immersed in an educational system where face-to-face interaction occurs within groups of classmates sharing the same physical space and learning experience. In such contexts, interpersonal social skills (SS) are a *must-have*, influencing both personal well-being and professional and social success. Since the beginning of the pandemic, many people have experienced a wide range of emotions, including anxiety, fear, sadness, and despair, due to the sudden imposition of physical distance. Strikingly, this has not led to social distancing; quite the contrary. Everyone communicated with their loved ones, and in some cases, social proximity even increased, albeit in virtual form. Once again, we were underscoring our intrinsic nature and the necessity of interacting with others, as these relationships constitute the wellspring of our well-being.

Theoretical framework

The concept of social competence has been defined in various ways, encompassing intelligence, personality, knowledge, skill, ability, motivation, and behaviour. Each of these concepts possesses distinctive characteristics, setting them apart from one another (Bashir y Peerzada, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022; Soto et al., 2021). Etymologically, 'ability' comes from the Latin *habilĭtas*, which denotes those people who have specific capabilities, while 'social' originates from the Latin *socii*, signifying allies. Research on SS dates back to the 1930s when several authors in the field of social psychology (Jack, 1934; Murphy et al., 1937; Page, 1936) began scrutinizing certain behaviours in children that would now fall under the umbrella of SS. Salter (1949) referred to SS as expressive skills, and Wolpe (1958) attempted to narrow the concept down to assertive behaviour. Combs and Slaby (1977) defined SS as the ability to interact with others in a given context and way that is socially accepted or valued

and simultaneously proving personally beneficial, mutually beneficial, or primarily beneficial to others.

> According to Caballo (1991), SS is "a set of behaviors performed by an individual in an interpersonal context that expresses feelings, attitudes, desires, opinions or rights in a way appropriate to the situation, respecting those behaviours in others, and that generally solves the immediate problems of the situation while reducing the probability of future problems appearing" (p. 407).

An approach to SS that, in addition to the previous definitions, encompasses the emotional component comes from Daniel Goleman, perhaps the most recognized psychologist and researcher in recent decades. He popularized the concept of *emotional intelligence,* referring to the set of competencies, skills, and abilities to manage emotions effectively, influencing success amidst environmental demands and pressure. According to Goleman (1995), SS represents one of the five components of emotional intelligence: emotional self-knowledge, emotional self-control or self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and interpersonal relationships or SS.

More recently, Heggestad et al. (2023) proposed a novel perspective on SS titled Social Skills Framework (SSF), built around two distinct but interrelated conceptualizations: Representation (the Actor's perspective, referring to someone's behaviours to achieve their social goals) and Reputation (the perspective of Others, indicating the extent to which others perceive that an Actor has social skills).

In summary, a socially competent individual knows how to express thoughts, feelings, needs, or wants, even when in disagreement with others, without experiencing guilt or discomfort. They act in a manner that respects both their own rights and those of others. These ways of interacting with others are not innate, but learned as social relationships mature (Salminem et al., 2022). No one is born socially skilled; rather, SS are acquired through practice or training, supported by the commitment, motivation, and will of the individual seeking to attain it. Being socially skilled (i.e., using an assertive communication style and managing emotions and impulses effectively), equips people with the tools needed to build more gratifying and beneficial social relationships. In the school setting, research has shown that children with high levels of cognitive control and social-emotional skills excel in attending to academic tasks, following teacher instructions, planning, exchanging knowledge with

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peers, modelling appropriate peer behaviour, and allocating resources to learning, relative to their less proficient peers (López-Jiménez et al., 2025; OECD, 2024). Studies have shown that developing social skills in students can enhance academic self-efficacy and goal attainment, foster peer support, reduce violent incidents, improve academic performance, strengthen self-esteem and promote positive relationships within the school environment (Huang et al., 2020; Kına et al., 2025; OECD, 2024; Orih et al., 2024; Ruffini et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Conversely, the lack of SS may impede individuals from enjoying healthy relationships, achieving personal goals, and could potentially contribute to the development of psychopathologies, as well as social and occupational deterioration (Curran y Elwood, 2024; Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Education is widely regarded as an art, and arousing students' interest in their learning is undeniably one of the most engaging and rewarding challenges for educators. Preparing students for their future professions, particularly master's students who will be tasked with teaching younger students with artistry and efficiency, is a magnificent and complex undertaking. It involves not only the transmission of knowledge but also the manner in which it is conveyed and how educators encourage active participation in the classroom. Possessing certain personal qualities, now commonly referred to as soft skills, including SS, renders candidates for the teaching profession well-suited for their roles and transforms them into more adaptable, proactive, resilient, and responsible professionals.

Training students in SS goes beyond merely honing behavioural skills (e.g., verbal/ non-verbal/ para-verbal communication and interaction skills). It also involves the development of social-cognitive skills (e.g., appropriate processing of social information and cognitions about oneself and others) and social-emotional skills (e.g., emotional regulation and expression of emotions) (Crous et al., 2024; OECD, 2024; Sanz et al., 2010).

A wide range of social skills training programmes have been developed and implemented over time, primarily for students. Recent research has demonstrated the effectiveness of these programmes in reducing social anxiety and risky behaviours, preventing bullying, enhancing self-esteem, improving academic performance, and fostering positive interpersonal relationships and cooperative learning in the classroom (Guerra-Santana et al., 2019; Lijster et al., 2018; Loáiciga Gutiérrez, 2020; Méndez et al., 2019; Mendo Lázaro, 2019; OECD, 2024; Ortiz-Ochoa et al., 2018;

Sánchez-Hernando et al., 2021; Valdivia-Bautista et al., 2020; Zhao y Sang, 2025). The benefits of these programmes have been demonstrated, including in an online format (Scurtu et al., 2023a). However, assessing SS is a complex challenge due to the multifaceted nature of the concept, which can makes it difficult to operationalise. In addition, various instruments have been developed based on self-reports and observation, aiming to collect measurements of this construct. Table 1 presents the main instruments for measuring SS in adults in Spain.

Table 1

Most used instruments to evaluate SS in Spain (own elaboration)

Author and year	Nº items/subscales	Instrument	Population
Goldstein (1980)	50 items 6 areas: 1) Early social skills, 2) Advanced social skills, 3) Feelings-related skills, 4) Alternative skills to aggression, 5) Stress coping skills, and 6) Planning skills.	Goldstein Social Skills Scale	Indicates social skills in deficit in children of the first cycle of education, being able to expand to older age groups
Caballo and Ortega (1989)	44 items 12 factors: 1) Fear of public expression and confrontation with superiors, 2) Fear of disapproval from others when expressing negative feelings and rejecting requests, 3) Making requests, 4) Making and receiving compliments, 5) Preoccupation with the expression of positive feelings and initiation of interactions with the opposite sex, 6) Fear of negative evaluation by others when expressing negative behaviours, 7) Fear of negative behaviour by others in the expression of positive behaviours, 8) Concern about the reaction of others in the expression of feelings, 9) Concern about the impression caused in others, 10) Fear of expressing positive feelings, 11) Defence of rights, and 12) Assumption of possible deficiencies.	The Multidimensional Scale of Social Expression-C	Adults

 https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.635231

Author and year	Nº items/subscales	Instrument	Population
Gismero (2000)	33 items 6 dimensions: 1) Self-expression in social situations, 2) Defence of one's rights, 3) Expression of disagreement/anger, 4) Saying No and cutting interactions, 5) Making requests, and 6) Initiating positive interactions with the opposite sex.	Social Skills Scale (SST)	Adolescents and adults
Caballo et al. (2017)	40 items 10 dimensions: 1) Interact with people I am attracted to, 2) Defend one's rights, 3) Public speaking/Interact with people in authority, 4) Stay calm in embarrassing situations, 5) Apologize, 6) Interact with strangers, 7) Express positive feelings, 8) Face ridiculous situations, 9) Reject requests, and 10) Face criticism.	Social Skills Questionnaire (CHASO)	Adults

For the purpose of this study, the definition of SS and the measurement instrument proposed by Gismero (2000) have been adopted:

> Social skills are defined as "a set of verbal and non-verbal responses, partially independent and situationally specific, through which an individual expresses in an interpersonal context his needs, feelings, preferences, opinions or rights without excessive anxiety and in a non-aversive way, respecting all this in others, which results in self-reinforcement and maximizes the probability of obtaining external reinforcement" (Gismero, 2000, p. 10).

Empirical framework

Design

The primary objective of this study was to determine if the education system effectively SS in future teachers and to evaluate participants` behaviour in specific situations. To achieve this, the Social Skills Scale (SSS) by Gismero (2000) was used, both in its global score and in its overall score and in the scores of its six factors. The research employed a longitudinal approach, based on a quasi-experimental test-retest, comparative, and retrospective descriptive design. As an intervention, students` participation in both the theoretical and practical classes of the subject

Family, school, interpersonal relationships, and social changes was considered. The initial measurement (pre-test) was conducted before classes commenced, and the follow-up measurement (post-test) was carried out after the completion of the scheduled classes in the subject.

Participants

On the first day of class, coinciding with the subject presentation, students were invited to voluntarily participate in a study on SS. Ninety-one students took part in the pre-test phase, and eighty-two responded to the post-test phase. The final sample comprised 82 students (those who did not participate in both phases of the study were excluded), with 90.2% being women and 9.8% men. The age range of the students was between 20 and 49 years old (M = 22.33; SD = 3.48), and all of them provided informed consent to be part of the research.

Instruments and variables

Sex (male or female) and age (the sample was divided into two groups according to the median age of 21 years) were considered sociodemographic variables. The Social Skills Scale (SSS) by Gismero (2000) was used to explore the subject's habitual behaviour in specific situations and to assess the extent to which SS modulated these attitudes. This is a self-perception scale consisting of 33 items, 5 of which are positive (i.e.: "If a friend to whom I have lent a certain amount of money seems to have forgotten, I remind him") and 28 items suggesting a lack of assertiveness or a deficit in SS (i.e.: "Sometimes I avoid asking questions for fear of looking stupid").

Responses were collected using a Likert scale with four alternative answers, from which only one option is selected: A - I do not identify myself at all; Most of the time it doesn't happen to me or I wouldn't; option B – rather it has nothing to do with me, even if it happens to me sometimes; option C - describes me roughly, although I don't always act or feel that way and option D - very much agree, and I would feel or act that way in most cases. The scale includes both a global index of the level of social competence (the higher the global score, the subject expresses more SS and assertion capacity in different contexts) and six other factorial indices, so that each person can identify the areas in which they have a deficit in SS. The six factors of the SSS are:

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1. *Self-expression in social situations* (items 1, 2, 10, 11, 19, 20, 28, 29) - refers to the ability to express oneself spontaneously and without anxiety in different contexts (job interviews, shops, social gatherings, etc.). A high score on this factor indicates ease in interacting in these contexts, expressing opinions and feelings, and asking questions.
2. *Defending one's rights* (items 3, 4, 12, 21, 30) - reflects the expression of assertive behaviour to defend one's rights in front of strangers, in common consumer situations, such as not letting someone sneak into a queue, telling someone who is talking in the cinema to shut up, asking for discounts, returning a defective item, etc.
3. *Expression of anger or disagreement* (items 13, 22, 31, 32) - involves the expression of justified negative feelings in situations of disagreement with others. A high score on this subscale indicates the ability to express anger or justified negative feelings and/or disagreement with other people, and a low score is interpreted as having difficulty expressing disagreement and preferring to keep quiet about what bothers you to avoid possible conflict with others (even if they are friends or family).
4. *Saying No and cutting off interactions* (items 5, 14, 15, 23, 24, 33) - refers to the ability to refuse to do something when we do not like it and to cut off interactions that we do not want to maintain, either in the short or long term.
5. *Making requests* (items 6, 7, 16, 25, 26) - involves being able to ask for a favour or something to be returned to us, or in consumer situations, such as, in a restaurant when something is brought to us that is not as we ordered it and we want to change it. A high score would indicate that the person can make such requests without undue difficulty, whereas a low score would indicate difficulty in expressing such requests.
6. *Initiating positive interactions with the opposite sex* (items 8, 9, 17, 18, 27) - refers to the ability to initiate interactions with the opposite sex (strike up a conversation, ask for a date, etc.) and spontaneously express a compliment, pay a compliment, and talk to someone you find attractive (positive exchanges). A high score indicates ease in taking the initiative and initiating interactions with the opposite sex and spontaneously expressing what we like about them, while a low score would indicate difficulty in performing such behaviours spontaneously and without anxiety.

The internal consistency of the SSS was .88 for the total score and .76, .73, .72, .80, .70, .76 for the factors.

Procedure

The first application of the SSS took place in January at the beginning of the first lesson dedicated to the presentation of the topic *Family, school, interpersonal relationships, and social change*, and the second was carried out in March, on the last day of class in the subject. As an intervention proposal, the students` participation in the theoretical and practical classes of the subject, throughout the course, was considered. From a pedagogical point of view, practical classes are designed as an educational intervention format to work on students' SS. This is an experiential process of both individual and group development of communication skills, focusing on the knowledge and experience of the following aspects: facilitators and communication barriers, feedback, unidirectional and bidirectional communication, the three communication styles (passive, aggressive, and assertive), steps towards assertiveness and assertion techniques appropriate to different circumstances: for handling criticism, of persistence, negotiation, positive communication, giving unpleasant news and management of negative emotions.

Data analysis

Data cleaning was carried out to detect any possible missing values or outliers. Basic descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated. The internal consistency of the SSS was estimated using Cronbach's alpha statistic (α). The assumption of normality of the sample distribution was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Student's *t*-test for paired samples was then used to assess differences in self-rating on the SSbefore and after the test.

Student's *t*-test for independent samples (gender and age) was used to assess whether socio-demographic variables produced differences or effects in the measurement of SS. In the case of the *age* variable, percentiles and medians were considered, and the sample was divided into two groups: up to 21 years (Group 1) and over 21 years (Group 2).

The reliability of the SSS has been verified and it has an acceptable internal consistency (α = .86). By analysing the assumption of normal

 https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.635231

distribution of the sample through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (there is no significant difference in the Z scores of the test) and applying the Levene's test (which yielded equality of variances between the analysis groups), we proceeded to analyse the data through parametric tests.

The statistical analyses were carried out using version 26 of IBM SPSS Statistics.

Results and discussion

Analysis of SSS scores, pre- and post-training program

Table 2 presents the comparative results before and after the training program. The Student's *t*-test was used for related samples, both for global SSS scores and for all six factors.

Table 2
Paired sample statistics

	M	SD	Correlation	t	gl	*p*
SST-pre	92.73	101.813	.710	-5.737	81	.000**
SST-post	99.183					
Factor 1 pre-test	23.21	3.243	.690	-5.449	81	.000**
Factor 1 post-test	25.16					
Factor 2 pre-test	13.74	2.775	.608	-2.706	81	.008**
Factor 2 post-test	14.57					
Factor 3 pre-test	12.07	2.340	.391	-2.360	81	.021*
Factor 3 post-test	12.68					
Factor 4 pre-test	16.05	3.362	.583	-4.829	81	.000**
Factor 4 post-test	17.84					
Factor 5 pre-test	14.44	2.865	.459	-2.043	81	.044*

	M	SD	Correlation	t	gl	*p*
Factor 5 post-test	15.09					
Factor 6 pre-test	13.22	2.463	.672	-2.287	81	.025*
Factor 6 post-test	13.84					

Note: * p<.05; ** p<.01; N = 82
SST (social skills training)

At the level of the overall score in the SSS, it was observed that in the post-test phase, the scores were significantly higher than in the pre-test phase ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 92.73; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 99.183; t(81) = -5.737; p<.01). Breaking down the scale by factors, the same dynamics were observed in Factor 1 ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 23.21; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 25.16; t(81) = -5.449; p<.01), Factor 2 ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 13.74; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 14.57; t(81) = -2.706; p<.01), and Factor 4 ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 16.05; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 17.84; t(81) = -4.829; p<.01). The pre-test and post-test comparisons for the other three factors yielded the same sense of variation in favor of the post-test, with the difference that the statistical significance has a value less than .05 instead of .01. These three factors are: Factor 3 ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 12.07; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 12.68; t(81) = -2.36; p = .02), Factor 5 ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 14.44; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 15.09; t(81) = -2.043; p = .04), and Factor 6 ($M_{pre\text{-}test}$ = 13.22; $M_{post\text{-}test}$ = 13.84; t(81) = -2.287; p = .02).

Analysis of SSS scores based on gender.

Table 3 shows the comparative results pre and post-SST program, using the Student's *t*-test for independent samples, both for the overall SSS scores and by factors depending on the independent variable gender, in the pre-test and post-test phase. In the pre-test phase, data analyses showed that men score higher than women on SSS (M_{Female} = 91.72; M_{Male} = 102.13; t(81) = -2.414; p = .03) and also Factor 1 (M_{Female} = 22.84; M_{Male} = 26.63; t(81) = -2.646; p = .02), and Factor 6 (M_{Female} = 12.93; M_{Male} = 15.18; t(81) = -2.714; p = .02). However, in the post-test phase this dynamic of men scoring higher than women is maintained only for Factor 1 (M_{Female} = 24.95; M_{Male} = 27.13; t(81) = -2.151; p = .05), and Factor 6 (M_{Female} = 13.68; M_{Male} = 15.38; t(81) = -2.225; p = .04).

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Table 3
Statistics for independent samples according to the variable Gender

	Gender	Nº	M	F	t	gl	*p*
SST-pre	F	74	91.72	.716	-2.414	81	.038*
	M	8	102.13				
Factor 1 pre-test	F	74	22.84	.002	-2.646	81	.027*
	M	8	26.63				
Factor 2 pre-test	F	74	13.58	.085	-1.473	81	.175
	M	8	15.25				
Factor 3 pre-test	F	74	12.12	.224	.528	81	.612
	M	8	11.63				
Factor 4 pre-test	F	74	15.93	.089	-.869	81	.408
	M	8	17.13				
Factor 5 pre-test	F	74	14.31	.456	-1.363	81	.206
	M	8	15.63				
Factor 6 pre-test	F	74	12.93	.140	-2.714	81	.024*
	M	8	15.88				
SST-post	F	74	98.878	.415	-.807	81	.439
	M	8	102.000				
Factor 1 post-test	F	74	24.95	3.806	-2.151	81	.054*
	M	8	27.13				
Factor 2 post-test	F	74	14.53	1.237	-.585	81	.571
	M	8	15.00				
Factor 3 post-test	F	74	12.78	.473	1.561	81	.152
	M	8	11.75				
Factor 4 post-test	F	74	17.84	.635	-.031	81	.976
	M	8	17.88				
Factor 5 post-test	F	74	15.11	.189	.241	81	.815
	M	8	14.88				
Factor 6 post-test	F	74	13.68	1.470	-2.225	81	.048*
	M	8	15.38				

Note: * p<.05
F = female; M = male

Analysis of SSS scores based on age

Depending on the median age of the sample, two groups were constituted: Group 1 (consisting of 42 participants aged between 20-21) and Group 2 (consisting of 40 participants aged between 22-49). The Student's *t*-test was used for independent samples to analyse if there are significant differences between the global SSS scores and by factors according to the age of the

participants, both in the pre-test and post-test stages (Table 4). Statistical analyses showed significant differences in scores only in the pre-test stage and in Factor 1 and Factor 3. Both differences are in favour of Group 2, in Factor 1 (M_{Group1} = 22.19; M_{Group2} = 24.28; t(81) = -2,309; p = .02) as in Factor 3 (M_{Group1} = 11.60; M_{Group2} = 12.58; t(81) = -2,049; p = .04).

Table 4
Statistics for independent samples according to the independent variable Age

	Group	M	SD	F	t	gl	*p*
SST-pre	Gr 1	91.10	14.867	.001	-1.087	79.501	.280
	Gr 2	94.45	13.068				
Factor 1 pre-test	Gr 1	22.19	4.571	3.352	-2.309	77.065	.024*
	Gr 2	24.28	3.566				
Factor 2 pre-test	Gr 1	13.38	3.320	.150	-1.013	79.782	.314
	Gr 2	14.13	3.330				
Factor 3 pre-test	Gr 1	11.60	2.557	9.063	-2.049	71.836	.044*
	Gr 2	12.58	1.708				
Factor 4 pre-test	Gr 1	15.83	4.054	.204	-.492	79.773	.624
	Gr 2	16.27	4.070				
Factor 5 pre-test	Gr 1	14.76	2.870	.145	1.054	79.923	.295
	Gr 2	14.10	2.818				
Factor 6 pre-test	Gr 1	13.33	3.009	.086	.335	78.566	.738
	Gr 2	13.10	3.280				
SST-post	Gr 1	98.214	124.186	.278	-.721	79.743	.473
	Gr 2	100.200	125.109				
Factor 1 post-test	Gr 1	24.60	4.231	1.886	-1.319	79.404	.191
	Gr 2	25.75	3.692				
Factor 2 post-test	Gr 1	14.24	2.739	.034	-1.081	78.471	.283
	Gr 2	14.93	2.999				
Factor 3 post-test	Gr 1	12.74	2.001	.200	.255	79.716	.800
	Gr 2	12.63	2.022				
Factor 4 post-test	Gr 1	17.90	2.766	1.033	.189	75.145	.851
	Gr 2	17.77	3.408				
Factor 5 post-test	Gr 1	15.00	2.585	.187	-.296	79.001	.768
	Gr 2	15.18	2.754				
Factor 6 post-test	Gr 1	13.74	2.785	.614	-.323	77.882	.747
	Gr 2	13.95	3.129				

Note: * p<.05; Gr1 (age ≤ 21 years); Gr2 (age > 21 years)

 https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.635231

Discussion

A statistically significant increase was observed in the overall SSS scores post-training. Similar significant improvements were found across all six factors post-training. Thus, participating in the theoretical and practical classes on *Family, school, interpersonal relationships, and social change*, and following the objectives as they are included in the program and teaching project objectives, benefits the teaching students as it improves their SS. Positive results were obtained by Bueno-Moreno et al. (2013), Scurtu et al. (2023a), and Rosa et al. (2014) in their studies of the participation of primary education students in Spain in the SST programme, and of students of Social Education and Social Work.

In the pre-test phase, men scored higher than women in the overall SSS scores and in Factors 1 and 6. However, in the post-test phase, these differences in global SSS scores according to gender disappear. The same dynamic in favour of the male participants in the study was also obtained in the pre-test and post-test phases in Factor 1 and Factor 6.

Factor 1, *Self-expression in social situations*, includes eight items referring to knowing how to ask questions, expressing opinions in general or in a group, and expressing feelings of fear or making a fool of oneself, among others. When interacting with others, men seem to be more socially competent in expressing themselves and less concerned with how they are perceived by others in social situations. Even so, Caballo et al. (2017) noted that the generic name of the factor could include any skill, in addition to the fact that most of the items are formulated negatively, which would cause a lot of confusion when answered using a Likert scale. However, Factor 6, *Initiating positive interactions with the opposite sex*, refers to more specific behaviours linked to interactions with the opposite sex. Four of them are negative (not knowing what to say to an attractive person of the opposite sex, making a compliment, a compliment, asking for a date), and one a positive sense (being able to strike up a conversation with an attractive person). All these skills are more akin to a sexual affective approach, and the men in our study seem to be better at them than the women, both pre- and post-test.

In other words, compared to women, men are more skilled in self-expression in social situations and in initiating positive interactions with the opposite sex, both before and after participating in the SST program. More recent research on university population and SS with males scoring

higher than females in SS was conducted by Holst-Morales et al. (2017) and Vogel et al. (2018). Other studies reported that women score more in SS (Salavera et al, 2019; Sánchez et al., 2019) or even that there are no differences between men and women regarding the SS (Claudel y García González, 2024; González Pérez y Sosa Díaz, 2021; Scurtu et al., 2023b).

Comparisons between global scores in pre-test and post-test SST did not produce significant differences according to the age of the participants, which implies an equally positive influence on the development of the participants' SS, regardless of their age. In the pre-test phase, Group 2 (aged 22-49) scored significantly higher in Factor 1 and 3 compared to Group 1 (aged 20-21), while in the post-test phase, no significant differences were found between the two age groups. Thus, participants aged between 22-49 years before starting the SST program were more skilled in Factor 3, *Expression of anger or dissatisfaction*, which includes four items. Three of these relate to keeping quiet instead of expressing what you think in situations of disagreement, hiding anger, or giving in to avoid problems with others in social situations, and in expressing anger or dissatisfaction. This could be explained by the simple fact that they have had more experience with different social interactions, which require them to know how to express themselves in general, and how to express disagreement in particular.

Although the SST program is beneficial for students and the study appears to be robust, some limitations may include sample size and potential bias due to a self-report instrument. In the absence of a control group, we cannot say with certainty that the results obtained are solely and exclusively due to the SST program. Future research could explore the long-term effects of the training program and look at specific components that contribute to the observed improvements.

Conclusions

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature emphasising the importance of social skills, such as cooperation, responsibility, assertiveness, empathy and self-control, in promoting students' academic success and overall well-being. This reinforces the role of higher education in fostering intellectual and personal development. The fin-

 https://doi.org/10.6018/educatio.635231

dings demonstrate significant improvements in overall social skills and across all assessed factors following the implementation of the SST programme, thereby supporting its effectiveness within a university context. Factors 1, 2 and 4 exhibited the greatest gains in particular, suggesting that the programme had a stronger impact on specific dimensions of social competence.

Regarding gender differences, men initially scored higher than women in certain social skill domains; however, these differences were reduced after the intervention. While Factors 1 and 6 continued to demonstrate statistically significant gender differences in the post-test phase, the overall pattern indicates that the SST programme contributed to the balanced development of social skills among both men and women.

Prior to the intervention, age-related differences were also observed, with older students obtaining higher scores in Factors 1 and 3. Notably, however, these differences disappeared after the training, indicating that the programme was effective in supporting the development of social skills regardless of participants' age.

Despite these positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relied on a relatively small and predominantly female sample, which may limit the generalisability of the results. Additionally, the absence of a control group and the use of self-report measures may introduce bias and restrict causal interpretations. Future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, include control or comparison groups and use mixed methods designs to gain a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of, and differences in the impact of, social skills training programmes in university settings.

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