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THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF INTEGRATED NONVERBAL, BODY-AWARENESS METHODS TO IMPROVE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING SKILLS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper explores the theoretical framework of integrating nonverbal, body-awareness-based methods — specifically Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT) — into teacher education programs to improve Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills. Responding to increasing social and educational demands for socio-emotional skill development, the study connects insights from emotional intelligence theory, embodiment theory, positive psychology, and psychological capital. It proposes that body-based, experiential approaches can strengthen teachers' empathy, emotion regulation, self-awareness, and relational competence, thereby improving their psychological well-being and pedagogical effectiveness. Integrating DMT into higher education may thus foster resilience and reflective capacity in future educators, enabling them to create supportive, emotionally attuned classroom environments conducive to both academic and socio-emotional growth. The study contributes to the evolving discourse on holistic, well-being-oriented teacher education through embodied and arts-based pedagogical innovation.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT), teacher education, body awareness, emotional intelligence, psychological capital

Problem Statement and Research Focus

The growing emphasis on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in both educational policy and broader societal expectations underscores the necessity to strengthen these competences within teacher education. SEL has been defined as *“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.”* (CASEL, 2023). Despite their well-documented contribution to well-being, resilience, and professional effectiveness (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins et al., 2007), SEL skills remain underdeveloped among teachers, partly due to the persistence of traditional, content-oriented pedagogies that leave little space for experiential, relational learning (Zsolnai et al., 2015; Szabadi, 2016).

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the potential of Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT)—particularly its psychodynamic branch (PMT)—as an embodied, experiential approach to developing teachers' socio-emotional competences. DMT has been demonstrated to enhance emotional awareness, empathy, and interpersonal attunement through nonverbal, body-based communication (Wengrower, 2010;

Panagiotopoulou, 2018). As Betty (2013) observes, “*movement becomes both the language and the medium through which emotion and relationship are explored*” (p. 47). By integrating DMT principles into teacher education, this study aims to strengthen prospective teachers’ *self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation*—core components of SEL (Durlak et al., 2011; Zsolnai, 2022). It is hypothesized that such embodied development will not only promote teachers’ mental health and resilience (Jennings et al., 2017) but also foster emotionally safe and supportive classroom environments that encourage students’ holistic growth. As Durlak et al. (2011) emphasize, “*effective SEL instruction improves students’ social behavior and academic performance while reducing emotional distress and conduct problems*” (p. 410). Accordingly, the enhancement of teachers’ own socio-emotional competences may represent a fundamental prerequisite for cultivating emotionally intelligent, inclusive, and responsive educational practices.

In Hungary, research on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has expanded steadily over the past decade, though it has yet to achieve full systemic integration into teacher education and national curricula. Prominent Hungarian scholars in this field include Anikó Zsolnai, László Kasik, Krisztián Józsa, and Szilvia Hegedűs, whose studies have primarily focused on social competence, emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour, and their pedagogical implications (Zsolnai, 2022; Kasik, 2015; Józsa & Fejes, 2012). The Hungarian discourse on SEL is closely connected to the traditions of social competence research and cooperative learning developed at the University of Szeged, as well as to educational psychology research conducted at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and the University of Pécs. While several pilot programs and empirical studies have explored the integration of SEL into early childhood and primary education (Zsolnai et al., 2015; Hegedűs, 2019), comprehensive frameworks for teacher education are still limited. National policy documents such as the *National Core Curriculum* (2020) highlight the importance of social competence, yet implementation often remains fragmented (Szabadi, 2016). Recent studies have also examined links between SEL, well-being, emotional intelligence, and psychological capital, aligning Hungarian research with international paradigms (Józsa & Morgan, 2014; Zsolnai, 2022).

Research on the integration of Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT) into teacher training programs may provide novel pathways for examining and enriching Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives.

The Unfolding of the Theoretical Framework of this Study

The research topic exhibits a multidisciplinary character, situated at the intersection of various theoretical traditions. Its conceptual background is jointly shaped by the fields of educational science, psychology, sociology, and philosophy. The core theoretical foundations of this study are: the theory of *emotional intelligence* and the closely related and overlapping framework of *social and emotional learning (SEL)*; *embodiment theory*, and the theory of *psychological capital* from positive psychology.

Emotional Intelligence Theory

There are now numerous models of emotional intelligence (EI), and the theory has gained increasing popularity in connection with performance enhancement among employees in various organizational contexts. Both theoretical considerations and empirical evidence indicate that individual performance is significantly influenced by emotional intelligence (Neale et al., 2009). It is therefore not surprising that, following human resource professionals and corporate leaders, actors and stakeholders within the educational sphere have also begun to show interest in the performance-enhancing role of emotional intelligence. In fact, the theory of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) later emerged from the transposition of the elements of emotional intelligence into the school curriculum. Consequently, a thorough engagement with the concept of emotional intelligence is indispensable for understanding SEL, which constitutes one of the central foci of my research. In order to understand the various models of emotional intelligence, it is essential to mention Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, introduced in the 1980s, in which he identified intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences as distinct domains (Bauer, 2018). Intrapersonal intelligence refers to the capacity to perceive and understand one's own internal states and to act accordingly, whereas interpersonal intelligence denotes the ability to perceive and understand what is taking place in others and to respond on the basis of that understanding (Sparrow & Maddocks, 2000). This bidirectional process is evident in all subsequent models of emotional intelligence. A comprehensive understanding of EI also requires insight into the functioning of the human brain. According to Paul MacLean's triune brain model (J.D. Newman et al., 2009), the most ancient part of the brain, the reptilian brain, regulates primary life functions and controls the body's basic operations, such as breathing, hunger, and sleep. The limbic system, which developed subsequently and is often referred to as the emotional brain, is the region where our values, beliefs, and attitudes are formed—that is, all those processes that give rise to emotional experiences. During the course of human evolution, the neocortex—the thinking brain—developed only third, which helps explain why our unconscious, emotional brain is far more active than our logical, reasoning brain. Moreover, considerably more neural pathways extend from the emotional brain to the thinking brain than in the opposite direction. Our emotional brain transmits a vast number of signals to the thinking brain and the body through these neural pathways within a given unit of time. Communication also occurs in the opposite direction, but with lower intensity and fewer available neural pathways. Consequently, the influence of the emotional brain on our behavior and functioning is substantial. However, the thinking brain can also be activated, and its influence strengthened—an effect that is closely associated with the development of emotional intelligence. When a message from the emotional brain does not reach conscious awareness in the thinking brain, it is processed unconsciously in a region of the brain known as the anterior cingulate cortex. In such cases, we are not fully aware of the mix of emotions within us, nor of the attitudes associated with them. Through the development of emotional intelligence, it is possible to strengthen the smooth communication and cooperation between the emotional brain, the thinking brain, and the body, as well as the capacity to attend to and respond to their

reciprocal messages (Neale et al., 2022). I will return to the role of bodily engagement in the section of my paper that elaborates on body awareness and embodiment theory. The Cartesian dictum “*I think, therefore I am*” has, in light of recent developments, increasingly been replaced in contemporary studies by the notion “*I feel, therefore I am*.” This perspective was explored in depth by the Portuguese neurobiologist Antonio Damasio in his work *Descartes’ Error* (Damasio, 2001). The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has since been articulated through numerous definitions. In their study *Applied EI*, Sparrow and Knight describe emotional intelligence as a set of habituated practices that involve utilizing emotional information derived from oneself and from others, integrating emotional data into one’s practical actions, and incorporating affective awareness into decision-making processes in order to achieve desired goals (Sparrow & Knight, 2006). From this standpoint, emotional intelligence can be understood as the capacity to think about our emotions (and to experience emotions about our thoughts) and to employ this reciprocal awareness in the regulation of behavior. This reflexive process enhances self-leadership and facilitates the development of more effective interpersonal relationships (S. Neale et al., 2022). The popular acceptance of Emotional Intelligence (EI) is largely attributed to Daniel Goleman’s influential work *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), which brought the concept to global recognition. However, the most widely accepted and empirically grounded model of emotional intelligence is associated with Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990, 2001, 2002). In their seminal article, which marked the birth of the construct, they defined emotional intelligence as “*the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions.*” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189).

Salovey and Mayer’s model places strong emphasis on the integration of affective and cognitive processes, proposing that the perception, appraisal, and expression of emotions form the foundational mechanisms through which emotional information contributes to higher-order cognitive functioning and social behavior (Kun, 2011). Goleman’s approach originates from the definition proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990). However, while Salovey and Mayer conceptualize emotional intelligence strictly as a set of cognitive–affective abilities, Goleman broadens the construct to include personality traits, motivational factors, and attitudinal dispositions. Consequently, his framework is classified among the mixed models of emotional intelligence, integrating both ability-based and trait-oriented components. According to Goleman’s original model, emotional intelligence comprises five core dimensions: 1) awareness of one’s own emotions; 2) regulation and management of emotions; 3) self-motivation; 4) recognition of others’ emotions; and 5) the management of interpersonal relationships. Each of these components encompasses a range of associated qualities and personality traits. Under the domain of emotional awareness, Goleman includes self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-esteem. The dimension of emotion regulation comprises self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, and innovativeness. Finally, self-motivation is understood as an umbrella category that integrates such dispositions and traits as achievement orientation, commitment, initiative, and optimism. The component

recognition of others' emotions encompasses empathy, understanding of others, the ability to recognize and develop potential in others, service orientation, the appreciation of diversity, and political awareness. Finally, relationship management involves a wide range of social and interpersonal competencies, including influence, communication, conflict management, facilitation of change, relationship building, collaboration, cooperation, and team capabilities (Goleman, 1995, 2002). Goleman later refined his model, ultimately organizing emotional intelligence into four principal dimensions, each representing a core component of emotional competence: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) social awareness, and (4) relationship management or regulation. Goleman and his colleagues argue that the effectiveness of workplace performance is determined by the dynamic interaction of these four domains (Kun, 2011). It is important to recognize that the conceptual diversity of emotional intelligence is closely intertwined with the challenges surrounding its measurement and operationalization as a psychological construct.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

A number of empirical studies (Greene, Hariton, Robins & Flye, 2011; Kasik, 2010, 2015; Zsolnai, 2013) have demonstrated that the effectiveness of social behavior is largely dependent on the richness of an individual's repertoire of social and emotional skills and abilities. These competencies play a crucial role in shaping adaptive and effective social behavior that corresponds to situational and contextual demands, facilitates successful participation in community life, and supports orientation within interpersonal relationships. Social skills thus encompass specific verbal and nonverbal patterns of behavior that regulate interaction and communication in social contexts.

Social skills determine specific verbal and nonverbal patterns of behavior that govern interpersonal interaction. Moreover, the development of social skills can be inferred from the functioning of emotional competencies, as emotional and social domains are deeply interrelated. Within social interactions, the ability to express, regulate, and recognize emotions—as well as to interpret the messages they convey—is of fundamental importance for effective communication, empathy, and relational attunement. Empirical research (Halberstadt, Denham & Dunsmore, 2001; Saarni, 1997, 1999) has shown that individuals who are able to understand their own emotions as well as those of others tend to be more successful in their interpersonal relationships than those who possess weaker emotional understanding (Zsolnai & Rácz, 2015). Consequently, social and emotional competencies are closely interrelated, and the presence and effective use of both exert a significant influence on social behavior and the formation of interpersonal relationships. In contemporary scholarship, these domains are increasingly discussed together under the integrated concept of *socio-emotional competence* ("socio-emotional competencies"). In the United States, a comprehensive pedagogical methodology and educational framework has been developed to foster social and emotional skills. The concept of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emerged as a multidisciplinary initiative, created collaboratively by educators, researchers, practicing teachers, and psychologists, including Elias, Zins, Weissberg, Frey, Greenberg, Haynes, Kessler, Schwab-Stone, and

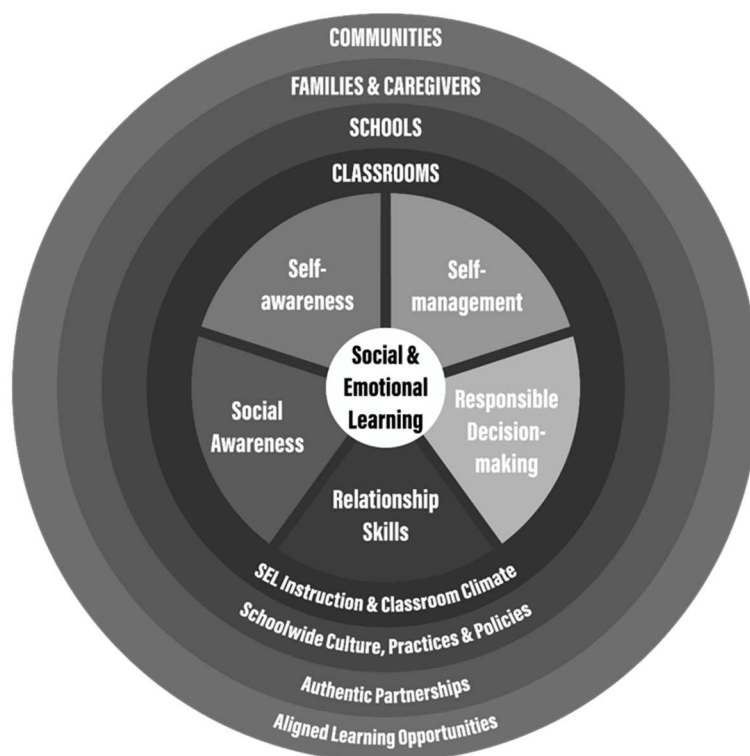
Shriver (Elias et al., 1997). These scholars recognized that, in order to achieve interventions at the societal level—aimed at cultivating communities composed of more empathetic, calm, and mentally healthy individuals—the educational system, and specifically schools, must serve as the primary site for implementation. Specifically, this pertains to *education for life*, or social and emotional learning. Researchers identified that, beyond the teaching of thematic subjects, it is essential to introduce curricula specifically aimed at life skills and social-emotional development. The goal was to design SEL programs that could be integrated into school curricula, grounded in the principle that every member of society has a right to learning and personal development. Consequently, socio-emotional development programs should be made universally accessible within the educational system. Daniel Goleman also became a significant advocate and disseminator of the SEL concept, as previously discussed in the context of emotional intelligence. With his book *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1995) and his extensive research and lecturing activities, Daniel Goleman popularized the concept of emotional intelligence and, later, social and emotional learning. To coordinate SEL research and programs, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established in 1994 at the University of Chicago. Its mission is to explore effective methods for developing social and emotional skills, to promote the concept of social and emotional learning, and to design and evaluate related training programs. SEL programs have embedded the development of emotional intelligence components—such as self-awareness, emotion regulation, empathy, and relationship management—into school curricula. These EI components support students in effectively managing both themselves and their interpersonal relationships. Research has demonstrated that more advanced emotional competencies are associated with better academic and workplace performance, as well as more effective leadership styles (Petrides et al., 2004; van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004). Beyond academic and professional success, emotional and social competencies are positively correlated with broader indicators of life adjustment and well-being. Higher levels of socio-emotional competence are linked to elevated self-esteem, more adaptive coping strategies, greater life satisfaction, and improved psychological well-being (Bastian et al., 2005; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Ciarrochi et al., 2000; Palmer et al., 2002; Salovey et al., 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that individuals with more advanced social and emotional competencies exhibit lower levels of stress and fatigue, as well as reduced burnout (Brown & Schutte, 2006; Saklofske et al., 2007; Slaski & Cartwright, 2002). Meta-analyses examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and physical, psychosomatic, and mental health (Schutte et al., 2007; Martins et al., 2010) report that the positive correlation between health and emotional intelligence indicates that higher social and emotional abilities are associated with better physical, psychosomatic, and mental well-being. Conversely, various personality disorders and depression are more prevalent in individuals with lower levels of emotional intelligence, according to Salovey and Schutte and their colleagues (Salovey et al., 1995; Schutte et al., 1998; Kun, 2011). These findings provide a clear rationale for the focus of the present research on the development of EI and SEL among pedagogy students. In brief, social and emotional learning helps children and young people acquire

and develop a range of attitudes, skills, and behavioral patterns that enable them to become competent individuals socially, emotionally, and academically. Social and emotional competencies, among other benefits, support the formation of quality interpersonal relationships, facilitate effective social problem-solving, aid in navigating challenging social situations, and enable the appropriate expression and interpretation of both negative and positive emotions (Frey, Fisher & Smith, 2022). All of these factors contribute to and influence an individual's mental and physical health. The wheel model developed by CASEL staff provides the most widely used overview of the primary domains encompassed by socio-emotional competencies. Based on the wheel model and CASEL's framework, SEL programs aim to develop the following areas:

- 1) Self-Awareness: The ability to recognize and accurately perceive one's own emotions, understand personal strengths, and cultivate self-confidence.
- 2) Self-Management: Skills related to stress management, self-discipline, self-control, emotion regulation, and intrinsic motivation.
- 3) Social Awareness: Empathy, the ability to understand others, acceptance of perspectives from diverse backgrounds, and openness to valuing diversity.
- 4) Relationship Skills: Communication competence, the ability to engage socially, skills in building relationships, and teamwork.
- 5) Responsible Decision-Making: The ability to interpret, assess, and evaluate different situations and choices, make ethical decisions, and anticipate their potential consequences.

Programs that target the development of any of these socio-emotional competencies are referred to internationally as *Social and Emotional Learning* (SEL) programs. By now, numerous studies have confirmed that these skills are not only teachable but can also be developed for any student by teachers working within school settings. According to CASEL, SEL is defined as *"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"* (CASEL, 2023). CASEL experts have also developed a ten-principle assessment framework and place strong emphasis on measuring the quality and effectiveness of SEL programs. Since then, numerous studies, evaluations, publications, and reports have been produced under CASEL's guidance. Subsequently, CASEL staff have conducted training for SEL specialists and school representatives and developed a variety of manuals, tools, activity collections, and policy guidelines, making them widely accessible. They also designed the first statewide socio-emotional development program and framework in the United States, covering grades from kindergarten through 12th grade. In 2004, this program was officially approved for implementation in Illinois schools. It is important to note that within the CASEL framework, SEL encompasses far more than the mere development of students' socio-emotional competencies.

Figure 1: The SEL framework



Source: Black and white version by the author

<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/> (Last retrieved: 15.10.2025)

SEL also functions as a school-wide development framework. The teaching of SEL skills supports the entire school in creating a mindful and attentive learning environment. The development of socio-emotional competencies is not solely directed at students, as these skills are applied beyond an isolated classroom setting. According to the CASEL framework, SEL supports interactions at the classroom level, the whole school, with families, and within broader community contexts. Consequently, the development of teachers, school leaders, and parents is also essential. SEL thus comprises a set of skills that students use across multiple contexts, and, when considering the educational system as a whole, also involves the adults who interact with them (Frey, Fisher & Smith, 2022). Based on the introduction and implementation of SEL programs over the past decade, CASEL has concluded that adult socio-emotional learning is an essential prerequisite for the systemic sustainability of SEL in the United States. If the SEL approach is integrated into all adult interactions, it would not remain limited to a few schools but could become a cultural norm across a broader societal context (CASEL, 2023).

Positive Psychology

In light of the above, the present research is also connected to the theory of positive psychology. Given that SEL skills have been shown to contribute to and influence an individual's mental and physical health, SEL can be regarded as a preventive approach. It may be considered a tool for the prevention of physical and mental illnesses, psychological blocks, and the relational disturbances that often underlie them. From a

preventive perspective, SEL is closely connected to the theory of positive psychology, which emphasizes prevention rather than remediation in the context of mental health challenges. With the rise of positive psychology, interventions increasingly focus on promoting both individual and community-level development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The development of social and emotional skills, and their integration into the school curriculum, can clearly be regarded as an interventionist approach, as it is intended to prevent psychological blocks and mental health problems. SEL programs not only offer solutions for addressing and managing existing issues (e.g., behavioral disorders, autism, antisocial disorders, ADD, ADHD, etc.), but also serve as tools for effective prevention. Research indicates that the level of socio-emotional competence has a direct impact on individuals' emotional and social lives, and consequently on their physical and mental health. The promotion of students' well-being and the development of their relationships are elements closely linked to positive psychology. Positive pedagogy emphasizes the importance of positive emotions, constructive human relationships, and enriching experiences within educational contexts, enabling teachers to create supportive and encouraging learning environments. SEL can be understood as a methodology that serves this purpose, as it specifically assists students in understanding, expressing, and regulating their emotions. In this way, SEL helps develop strengths, personality traits, and key psychological skills that, based on positive psychology research, contribute to an individual's mental and physical health, overall well-being, and the prevention of mental health problems.

Psychological Capital Theory

From the perspective of the sociology of education, my research is most closely connected to psychological capital theory. As outlined above, the practice of social and emotional education constitutes an investment in students' long-term mental well-being and health. Thanks to the "spillover effect" characteristic of forms of capital, these benefits extend beyond the educational context, producing positive effects in other areas of life as well. The spillover effect refers to the process by which an investment or integration in one economic sector (typically positive) produces ripple effects in other sectors of the economy. In the context of psychological capital developed through SEL, it can be argued that the enhancement of social and emotional competencies enriches the individual with psychological resources that also contribute to the accumulation of social capital, as conceptualized by Coleman. Social capital, after all, is realized in interpersonal relationships (Pusztai, 2015). Through social and emotional learning, individuals gain the opportunity to establish broader and deeper social connections (Kun, 2011). Their relational networks expand and strengthen, potentially spanning across social classes, which, according to Coleman's theory, represents a significant factor in compensating for social disadvantages. It can also be argued that the benefits of developing individual psychological capital ripple outward as social benefits—effectively transforming psychological capital into social capital. Social and emotional competencies have been shown to reduce school dropout rates, increase graduation rates, and support successful employment, which in turn are associated with lower unemployment, reduced crime, and

the spread of democratic values. Considering that the development of social and emotional skills proportionally increases the likelihood of graduation and employment, these effects can also be understood as a spillover into physical and economic capital. Accordingly, the development of psychological capital also increases access to economic capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework, it can even be conceptualized as a transformation into cultural capital. Social and emotional skills acquired and internalized through social and emotional learning, once stabilized, can become part of an individual's habitus, manifesting in their behavior and, from a Bourdieusian perspective, appearing as incorporated cultural capital. Thus, the development of psychological capital offers schools an opportunity to enhance academic outcomes, support students' mental health, and lay the foundation for future success in the labor market. Considering that psychological capital appears to be developable even through short-term intervention programs (Luthans et al., 2006), it is hoped that the planned three-month DMT-based SEL development programs in this research will produce measurable positive outcomes, alongside longer-term processes. In summary, it can be concluded that the development of psychological capital represents an intervention point within school life that encourages the realization of students' potential and contributes to both academic success and future life achievements. The components of psychological capital have already demonstrated their significance for students' psychological well-being and academic performance. Research generally indicates that the four components of psychological capital jointly support academic achievement, well-being, satisfaction, the development of other psychological resources, and the foundation for successful adult life (Avey et al., 2011; Jafri, 2013; Luthans et al., 2013). Based on these findings, the integration of social and emotional skills into school practice can be viewed as an application of psychological capital in an educational context. In other words, SEL represents a systemic approach to applying psychological capital, contributing to academic achievement as well as the psychological well-being of both teachers and students.

Dance and Movement Therapy (DMT)

Movement and dance therapy can be considered a genuine psychotherapeutic process when the bodily experiences that emerge during practice, together with the memories and associations linked to specific body parts, are verbally processed and integrated into a narrative framework. Thus, several conditions must be met for the method to be applied psychotherapeutically—one of the most important being its incorporation into verbal reflection and narrative meaning-making (Simon, 2021). In my research, I adapt the working methods and tools of movement and dance therapy, applying body-awareness techniques within a pedagogical environment—specifically in teacher education—as instruments for the development of social and emotional skills. I also regard this approach as a potential methodology of social and emotional education and learning. Nevertheless, the opportunity for verbal reflection is also integrated into the process. The methodology of movement and dance therapy is closely related to body-awareness techniques. A growing body of research in recent decades has explored the potential applications of

methods integrating body-awareness techniques, although this field still offers numerous opportunities for further investigation. Studies have emerged from medical, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives alike. In Hungary, however, relatively few analyses have been conducted—particularly those examining body-awareness practices from a pedagogical standpoint, which constitutes the primary focus of the present research. Across the various approaches to body-awareness, it can be stated that beyond their focus on bodily sensations, all of these methods engage with the recognition and regulation of emotional processes. Moreover, group-based body-awareness practices place particular emphasis on experiencing and working through relational competences. Each specific method prioritizes the development of different sets of abilities and skills. *“Empathic capacity appears to be more easily developed through active body-awareness methods, particularly in movement and dance therapy, as well as in the practice of tai chi chuan.”* (Korbai, 2019) A key component of emotional intelligence (EI) and social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies is emotion regulation and self-regulation, both of which are closely associated with the regulation of the autonomic nervous system. Considering the interconnection between body and mind, the application of dance and movement therapy (DMT) emerges as a legitimate and promising approach for fostering emotion regulation, empathy, and the development of SEL-related skills. Another essential element of EI and SEL competencies is self-awareness, which constitutes a prerequisite for self-regulation, since one can only regulate those internal states and processes that are consciously perceived and recognized. During dance and movement therapy sessions — even through simple movement exercises such as walking, running, or rolling — continuous self-perception, self-monitoring, and bodily awareness are cultivated, thereby strengthening the embodied foundations of self-regulation and emotional competence. (Merényi, 2004) There are both passive and active body awareness techniques. Methods based on passive body awareness techniques involve focusing on bodily sensations while remaining in a motionless, static state, such as in mindfulness, relaxation, meditation, or autogenic training practices. In contrast, the dance and movement therapy (DMT) approach that constitutes the focus of this study is more closely related to active body awareness techniques. As Korbai (2019) explains, *“In methods based on active body awareness techniques, attention to bodily sensations represents only one component of the process; practitioners observe and become aware of their bodily sensations in various postures and during movement. Here, attention is directed both inward—to the bodily sensations experienced during movement—and outward—to the connection with the physical and social environment and the bodily sensations arising from these interactions.”* Given that the research process involves testing a body awareness session based on Psychodynamic Movement and Dance Therapy (PMT) in the context of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) development, it is necessary to briefly introduce this particular therapeutic approach. The Psychodynamic Movement and Dance Therapy (PMT) approach, which builds on the unity of body and mind, was developed by Márta Merényi in the 1980s (Merényi, 2004; 2008). Today, a growing number of professionals in Hungary apply this method, and several hundred studies have already been published on its use and outcomes. Unlike most traditional and contemporary body

awareness techniques, which are typically individual or solitary practices, Psychodynamic Movement and Dance Therapy (PMT) emphasizes relational processes in addition to bodily awareness. In PMT, attunement to bodily sensations represents only one aspect of the therapeutic focus; interpersonal connection, movement-based interaction, and the symbolic use of shared space also play a central role in the process. (Korbai, 2019) *“Psychodynamic Movement and Dance Therapy (PMT) is a self-explorative and psychotherapeutic method that integrates the creative and healing potentials inherent in body-awareness exercises, movement improvisation, and dance with the tools of psychoanalytically oriented group therapy. It simultaneously attends to the dynamics, fluctuations, and tensions of individual bodily and emotional experiences, as well as to the emerging somatic and affective processes within the group, exploring their interrelations and the underlying group dynamics.”*¹ (Vermes, Felelős test. Exkarnáció és inkarnáció ritmusai, 2023) The PMT method can be described as a nonverbal psychotherapeutic process, in which interpersonal relationships are emphasized through group and paired movement exercises. The process highlights the importance of affective attunement, synchronization, nonverbal communication, and continuous intersubjective engagement. In PMT, relational work and creative improvisation are built upon the foundation of embodied, body-awareness experiences, integrating both individual somatic awareness and collective dynamics. Participants learn to move and dance both individually and in relational contexts, gaining the opportunity to “rewrite” not only their bodily self-perception but also the patterns of their interpersonal connections at the level of fundamental bodily experiences. (Incze, 2008) All of these relational aspects justify examining the PMT-based process at the core of this research from the perspective of social competence development. Dance therapy methods present an even more diverse picture in the international literature, as numerous other movement and dance therapy (DMT) group interventions exist. When mapping the effects of DMT on various psychological variables, Koch and colleagues (2014) reported in a meta-analysis that DMT effectively enhances quality of life and reduces clinical symptoms of depression and anxiety. Positive effects were also observed in subjective well-being, positive affect and emotions, and body image. The method shows promising results in the domain of interpersonal competence, though the authors note that the heterogeneity of available data indicates that further research is needed in this area. Since Koch and colleagues (2014) primarily reviewed individual DMT interventions in their meta-analysis, the relational competencies within the group-based PMT method may carry even greater significance (Korbai, 2019). This observation further justifies the implementation of the present study, which examines the connections between movement and dance therapy and social-emotional learning and development.

¹The translation is provided by the author of this article.

Other Related and Complementary Theoretical Domains

Given the research's connection to community-based education, its philosophical foundation is rooted in constructivism, whose first major proponent was the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. Constructivism represents a pedagogical model that encourages learners to adopt a participatory and interactive stance within the learning process. It is therefore a form of action-oriented teaching, the aim of which is to ensure that learners do not receive information passively but actively engage in the construction of knowledge. The constructivist model is grounded in the assumption that each individual develops through processes of self-construction. The main principles of constructivist theory that I highlight as particularly relevant to this research and its observational context include: *human interaction with the environment*, *the cultivation of meaning through lived experience*, and the notion of the *active organism*. From a psychological perspective, the study may also draw on Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory of personality, particularly in relation to examining the effects of movement improvisation on personality development and interpersonal relationships. Sullivan's central premise was that an individual's personality and *sense of self* evolve through interactions with their social environment and through the perception and interpretation of these interactions. Movement and dance therapy sessions provide a safe space for participants to experience and explore self-perception and self-awareness as individuals within a group context, through nonverbal, movement-based social interactions. Owing to the intrinsic relationship between bodily experience and the experience of the Other, it is also necessary to refer to the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Lévinas, as well as to the broader phenomenological tradition. The work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is particularly foundational for phenomenological and embodiment theories concerning the lived body and embodied perception. (Vermes, 2023) Phenomenologists reject the notion of objective research. They maintain that the analysis of everyday human behavior leads to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality. Rather than collecting conventional empirical data, phenomenologists focus on the study of conscious experience. They argue that individuals should be examined in order to understand the unique ways in which each person reflects and embodies the society in which they live. The philosophical grounding for the movement-therapeutic aspects of this research can be found in contemporary phenomenological inquiries concerning passive modes of relating, non-intentional feelings, moods that cannot be clearly identified as discrete affects, as well as kinaesthetic sensations and experiences of rhythm—all of which may serve as key dimensions of the movement therapy sessions I intend to study. (Vermes, 2023) As Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, he does not reject either the laws described by the natural sciences or socially constructed knowledge; rather, he calls attention to the fact that these can each contribute only a single dimension to the interpretation of reality, and that none of them can be totalized in explaining individual experience. In his view, perception cannot be universalized, as it is fundamentally shaped by individual bodily experience. (Kiss, 2021) Phenomenology contributes to addressing the mind-body problem by seeking to understand the extent to which our embodiment

determines and influences our experiences of the world, of ourselves, and of others. (Zahavi & Gallagher, 2008, p. 136)

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion illustrates the complexity of the theoretical framework underlying a study that aims to examine the impact of an adaptive movement and dance therapy process on the development of social and emotional competences among students of pedagogy. The researcher's central assumption is that through engagement in movement and dance therapy practices, pedagogy students can acquire—or further develop—skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, awareness and regulation of bodily sensations, self-acceptance and acceptance of others, focused attention, emotional containment, and a range of other relational, social, and emotional competencies. Possessing and refining these abilities may enable pedagogy students to become more authentic, emotionally attuned, and collaborative educators, capable of establishing high-quality interpersonal relationships with their students and fostering a supportive classroom climate. In this way, they may also more effectively facilitate the socio-emotional development of their students throughout their teaching careers. The movement and dance therapy process is expected to shape participants' social and emotional learning (SEL) by providing opportunities for them to experiment with and embody alternative behavioral patterns beyond their habitual modes of action and interaction. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that participation in such therapeutic movement practices may enhance the mental and physical well-being of teacher education students and promote their self-awareness and self-reflective capacities. These developments may help them attain a more integrated mind–body state, equipping them with the resilience and reflective awareness necessary to navigate the everyday challenges inherent in the teaching profession.

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