

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS FOR CHILDREN WITH SEVERE AND PROFOUND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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Abstract

Inclusive education guarantees enable children with disabilities to develop their potential and play an important role in the development of their intellectual, social, and other skills. Social skills, as a prerequisite for a full-fledged social life, are essential for the autonomy of the individual and his/her ability to adapt to social situations. One of the more pronounced challenges for children with severe and profound special educational needs is the difficulty of verbal and non-verbal communication, which leads to the social exclusion of the individual. The research aims to reveal the peculiarities of the social skills of children with severe and profound special educational needs. The results show that social skills help children with severe and profound special educational needs to better navigate social situations. However, the social skills that make up social skills are individual to each child, leading to different levels of social adaptability and social functioning.

Keywords: development of social skills, children with severe and profound SEND, observation, content analysis, strengths perspective.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social skills are the skills that are used by human beings to interact and communicate with others to assist status in the social structure and other motivations [1]. Social skills can be defined as the ability to interact with other people in a social context in specific ways that are socially acceptable or valuable and at the same time have benefits for themselves and others [2]. Furthermore, Jurevičienė [3] divides social skills, as a part of person's social competence, as a complex multidimensional construct that consists of integrated (overlapping) and complementing structural components: 1) interaction skills; 2) communication skills; 3) participation skills; 4) emotional skills; 5) social cognition skills. Each of these structural components of social skills is composed from corresponding social abilities' complexes, which are related by close system relations. Teaching social skills to individuals with special needs and / or disabilities is „the only way forward, as they increasingly realize that social skills are connected to the independent living“ [4]. Lack of mastery of social skills can lead to potential problems, on the contrary by having social skills students can achieve success in school and society. Successful development of social, emotional, and behavioural skills is linked to the quality of life and a causes cognitive growth and prerequisite for children's ability to solve problems, create interaction with others, and, in the educational process, contribute to learning achievement through increased cooperation and motivation to learn [5], [6] [7], [4]. Teaching social skills to individuals with disabilities is the only way forward, as they increasingly realize that social skills are connected to the independent living [4].

In the majority of research, the significance of social skills for a successful socialization is being accentuated; especially, the relevance of social skills' education to children with severe and profound disabilities and the creation of necessary assumptions are highlighted. The group of children with severe disabilities also includes some children who receive services under the categories of autism, intellectual disability, or some other category [8] and have a concurrent severe intellectual disability [9]. Individuals with intellectual disability often have difficulties making and sustaining friendships, and their friendship are characterized by less warmth and closeness and less positive reciprocity than the friendships of normally developing peers [10]. This difference in ability to develop friendships has been attributed to poor social skills development [11]. Children with severe or profound special needs or multiple disabilities "often have significant difficulty and a delay in learning conventional forms of communication, such as speaking, or are unable to develop communication skills and communicate with their environment, without the support of specialized interventions. Communication is a high priority goal for students with multiple disabilities, as they need to express their needs and desires, establish social relationships, receive and give information, develop social proximity, as well as take on social responsibilities“ [12]. Education for children with severe or profound special needs and/or disabilities

aims to improve their quality of life through the ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships and independence in their environment/community.

The research problem is addressed by the following problematic question – the social skills (strengths) and challenges in educational settings of those with severe and profound special educational needs.

The research aims to reveal the peculiarities of the social skills of children with severe and profound special educational needs.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Lithuanian educational institutions between October 2022 and March 2023. The research methods were used - theoretical analysis, observation, qualitative content analysis of observation protocols,. The study is based on the theory of the strength's perspective, focusing on the child's existing strengths, including the systemic exploration of skills and resources that can be used in some way to achieve the objectives set [13]. The basis of social skills development for children with severe and profound educational needs is the identification of their individual strengths (existing abilities) and developmental/social needs (missing abilities). The knowledge of the individual structure of social skills of these pupils allows for a more targeted orientation and justification of the principles detailing the educational strategies, as well as the perspectives of modeling the development of individual social skills. Based on the teachers protocols of behavioural observation of children with severe / profound special educational needs, the structure of social skills has been revealed, highlighting the expression of the available social skills. The demographic characteristics of the cases (5 children with severe / profound special educational needs) illustrating the study data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of subjects.

<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Hours of observation</i>
P2_V_15	15	M	240 min.
P4_V_15	15	M	205 min.
P16_V_14-15	14 - 15	M	205 min.
P18_V_15	15	M	185 min.
P39_V_15	15	M	210 min.

Abbreviations: P2_V_15, where P & number – number of observation protocol; V – gender; number – age of subject.

Each child was observed for up to 3 astronomical hours in structured and unstructured environments: classrooms, cafeteria, outings, events, etc. Observation protocols were analysed using MAXQDA software. For social skills coding, Jurevičienė [3] structure of social skills of young people with special needs was selected: interaction skills, conversation skills, participation skills, emotional skills, social cognition skills. These social skills constituted Level I codes in the MAXQDA code structure. Each of these four social skills consisted of several observations, which formed the second-level codes in the MAXQDA code structure. MAXQDA makes it possible to provide a map of the structure of codes for each subject. When presenting the results of the study, an individual map of the structure of codes and subcodes of social skills was created for each subject (for example, Fig. 1). Summary data for social skills are depicted in Figure 3.

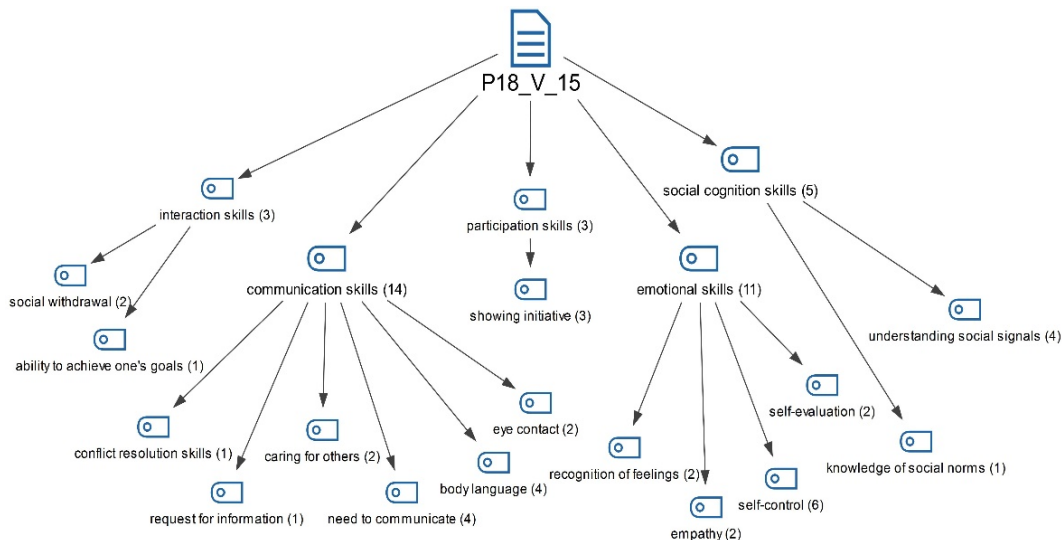


Figure 1. P18_V_15 social skills model (code hierarchy)

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The study is based on a strengths perspective, where it is assumed that that people have plenty of strengths (resources) – abilities, capacities, experiences, features, and roles, which describe a person and the quality of his/her social functioning [13]. Strengths perspective can be successfully adapted in education of persons with various disabilities [14], as it is essential not to emphasise the problems, but to stress that changes are always possible for the individual and his environment [15]. In order to realise such attitudes in the educational process, it is important for educators to focus on compensatory and transformative responses to the challenges faced by the individual; to look for natural resources available to individuals and their families; and to build personal, friendly, supportive and dialogical relationships; be guided by the principle that everyone has knowledge, talents, capacities, skills and resources that can be used to help them move closer to their potential, to solve their problems, to meet their needs and to maintain their quality of life; take a long-term perspective, without emphasising negative experiences [16]. However, it is not only educators who have an important role to play, but also parents, who are in the best position to represent the best interests of the child and to provide information about the child, the family and the prevailing cultural environment, "in the formulation of the child's objectives and in the decision-making process in relation to the child's development of school-based social skills [17]. Parents are not only seen as experts on the child's capabilities and needs, but also as equal participants in education, representing the child's needs and able to have a strong influence on the child's social skills in the family and other informal settings [3]. Therefore, a special place is given not only to the child, but also to the participation of the family in the educational process, actualizing parental involvement and purposeful interaction, cooperation and sharing of educational experiences, which are perceived as resources.

Key principles that allow for a strengths-based perspective in modelling child- and family-centred social skills cognitive strategies: the individual is unique, his/her strengths add additional developmental resources; the use of observation, interviews, etc. The material collected is a key way to know and assess the individual's strengths; an important resource for education is the shared aspirations of the individual/child, the family, and the school community; the ability of each to control and change the educational process and to adapt to change; comprehensive support is designed to help the individual to integrate into the community, to reinforce and improve skills, values, and commitments [16].

In scientific literature there is a variety of social skills conceptions. Different authors explain the structure of social skills, selecting different values and varying criteria. That brings confusion in interpreting the concept of social skills in general. Following an analysis of the scientific literature, the authors have developed a diagram of the structure of social skills (Fig. 2). The development of socially competent behaviour through social skills is important for the inclusion of children in social interactions and relationships. The latter are divided into: peer-related skills, self-management skills, (social)cognitive skills, social compliance skills, skills for asserting one's rights; communication skills; prosocial behavior and emotional adjustment skills [18], [19]. Communication skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing, argumentation, dialogue, etc.) are key interdisciplinary skills that are necessary for effective learning

and permeate all subject areas [20]. Expressive communication, receptive communication, and written communication, which includes the ability to communicate one's own needs and to understand the communication of others and is expressed through verbal and non-verbal behaviour, reading/writing [21]. MacDonald [22] highlights developmental stages in becoming social and communicative: interaction; nonverbal communication; social language; conversation; civil behaviour. Cognitive processes such as knowledge, understanding, analysis and, ultimately, evaluation are important because they „help children acquire knowledge, obtain information from their environment and eventually learn to estimate, remember, measure, compare and understand the causes and results” [4].

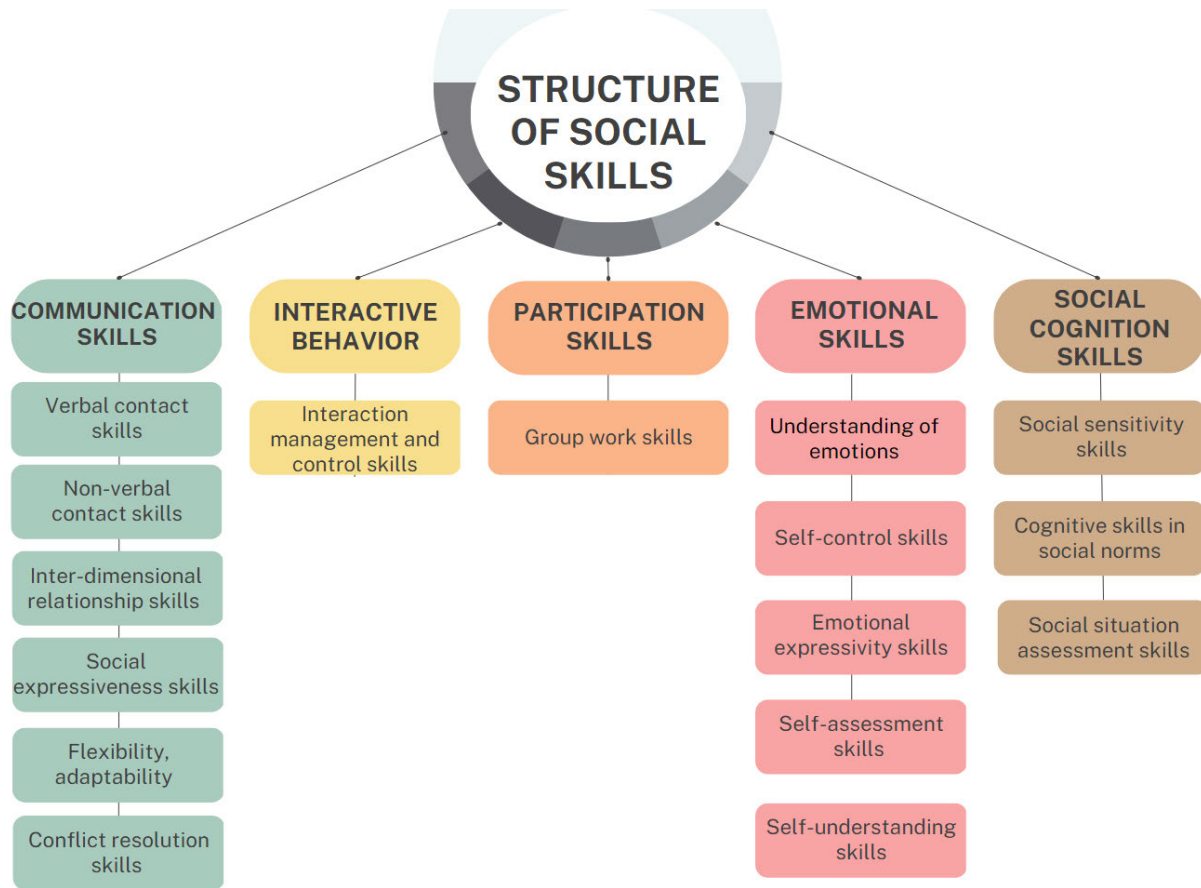


Figure 2. Structural components of social skills (composed by authors, based on Jurevičienė, 2012, Canney, Byrne, 2006, Malinauskas, 2004, Cornish, Ross, 2004, etc.)

Promoting social interaction and communication skills, and building social relationships, are essential for the successful inclusion of children with severe or profound special educational needs. This can be realised through social skills groups, whose effectiveness is based on the cooperation and continuity of all the groups involved [26], [27]. Researchers [23], [28], [29], [30] emphasise the importance of learning social skills indirectly through interaction in groups “in the long term” [31], through modelling and shaping behaviours, through “enjoyable group activities, such as: foundation skills (observation, eye-contact, gesture and facial expression), interaction skills (initiating conversation, reflecting back, repairing breakdowns and turn-taking), affective skills (recognising one’s own feelings as well as others’ feelings, trust and disclosure), cognitive skills (such as social perception, problem solving, negotiating and self-monitoring” [23]. Social skills groups can be effective for children experiencing feelings of exclusion/otherness, inappropriate social relationships or difficulties in acquiring basic social skills, inability to express a need for help, or a specific learning difficulty with regard to some aspects of social skills acquisition [27]. It is appropriate to focus on several aspects when designing a social skills programme, i.e. parental involvement (informing parents about the activities and when they can be continued in the home environment), teachers' involvement (encouraging and developing social skills), social skills background information (taking into account the needs of each child and giving individual attention). These programmes teach play skills, eye contact, sharing, being aware of one's own/others' feelings, listening, focusing [27]. Research findings [32] support ways for children with learning disabilities to deal with social problems through a social intervention programme by development of the

individual's ability to: „cooperate with others, including one-on-one cooperation with a peer or an adult; accept authority and obey requests and demands made by a peer or an adult; express positive and negative emotions, and to accept himself; listen and focus on tasks, to be able to carry out tasks to the best of one's ability; deal with stress, anxiety and embarrassment; make decisions and set goals“. Thus, led to significant improvement in children's social skills.

4 RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The observation results revealed the expression of social skills of children with severe and profound special educational needs in **interaction management and control abilities**. When children feel anxious, avoidance reactions, social withdrawal, for example, "after the teachers came to ask what happened, [the child] shook his head, weakly pushing it away" (P18_V_15); "sitting on the bench, [the child] hunches over it, covers his head with a scarf, and does not participate in the lesson" (P16_V_14-15), "next to [the child], the teacher's assistant sits, trying to draw [the child's] attention to the task. "Why did you come here?"... [the child] suddenly stops, walks around the classroom, talks"" (P4_V_15), are demonstrated. Observation data highlight that some children seek their goals in social situations (ability to achieve one's goals) - "after receiving a classmate's remark not to look at the phone, [the child] orders not to explain how to behave" (P16_V_14-15). Demonstrative contradiction is noticed: "the teacher's assistant tries to stop [the child], explains in a calm voice, speaks rudely to the assistant, argues, demonstratively takes hold of [their] head" (P4_V_15). They seek independence, for example, "returns to the classroom, speaks angrily that the teacher's assistant is persecuting him" (P4_V_15); "looks for goods in a store according to the list made by the teacher" (P39_V_15). In complex situations for the teenager, resistance to social pressure is highlighted, i.e. they know how to deal with peer pressure ("When asked to get up from the chair, [the child] does not give up [their] place," P16_V_14-15) and know how to behave if they are being teased ("Responds to the classmate's teasing, calling him a loser. Tells the teacher that the classmate is teasing him" (P16_V_14-15). Difficulties in mastering etiquette arise, for example, "In the corridor, the geography teacher greets [the child], <...> [the child] rolls [their] eyes" (P18_V_15), remembers the rules of behavior: "the teacher asks the boy how to behave on the bus.... [the child] turns around and says 'OK'" (P2_V_15). Difficulties in coping with irritation, bullying arise: "The classmate calls the boy with curse words. [The boy] puts away [their] phone, stands up, and walks towards the classmate" (P16_V_14-15).

Communication skills. It has been observed that some children express their social need to communicate passively by observing ("She watches where the teacher is, constantly following her with her eyes...Observes a new person" (P18_V_15), "Carefully watches the cashier" (P39_V_15)). It has been noted that children maintain short-term eye contact ("Responds to the question 'well'...Maintaining eye contact and appropriate personal space poses difficulties: "During the conversation, [the child] doesn't listen, looks at the wall, sometimes twists, flaps their hands, touches their lips with their fingers" (P2_V_15)). A lack of willingness to communicate has also been observed: "Doesn't react when spoken to" (P16_V_14-15). Children use body language to communicate ("Sometimes flaps their hands" (P2_V_15), "Approaches the teacher, hugs her" (P18_V_15), "Tries to touch other children's fingers in the corridor" (P2_V_15), "Stops at the store...jumps, claps hands, points with a finger at a passing car" (P39_V_15), "The teacher offers him a sandwich. The boy shakes his head" (P2_V_15); "Approaches the teacher with his schedule, touches her shoulder" (P18_V_15)). Some children satisfy their social need to communicate through verbal means ("Repeats 'Gražvydas is good, cool'" (P18_V_15); initiates conversation, communication ("Strikes up a conversation with a younger child who is passing by 'let's go play'" (P4_V_15); "Willingly tells where he visited cemeteries, how and where to drive to Šakiai, which highways and regional roads to take, asks if the teacher hears what he's saying" (P39_V_15); "Comes to meet me, addresses me by name, says we haven't seen each other for a long time" (P16_V_14-15); establishes contact with the interlocutor by asking various questions or the same questions ("Approaches the teacher and asks 'Where are we?' 'What are we going to do?'...Getting off [the bus], he looks around, asks the bus driver 'Where did you bring us?' (P4_V_15), "Asks, comments, constantly asks the same question, the teacher answers several times"...Approaches the assistant, smiles, asks her 'How are you?'...Waiting for the trolley, he talks to the assistant and asks several times 'How are you?' The assistant replies...asks the same question again" (P2_V_15)). Short-term interpersonal relationship maintenance skills have been observed: "The assistant asks, 'how are you?'...he replies 'good' and quickly turns around, flapping his hands" (P2_V_15). A desire to dominate has been noted: "Listens to what others are saying, comments, talks on topic, constantly tries to speak louder than others" (P4_V_15).

The study participants has developed **conflict resolution skills**; they are able to recognize conflicts and try to solve disputes without fighting ("They clapped their hands on their legs... intervenes and asks to be quiet" (P39_V_15)); they can control their anger and aggression towards others, although it is not easy for them ("Angry, they approach the boy who called them "achkarik"... Children restrain them, the boy sits down and starts to mutter something quietly" (P18_V_15)).

Participation skills manifest through showing initiative, such as urging others to get off the bus quickly ("As the bus stops, he waits his turn to get off, urging others to "hurry up, hurry up" (P16_V_14-15); Approaches a boy and invites him to walk together (P39_V_15). Study participants seek to act within the group, "independently goes to the whole team, reads the recipe to everyone" (P39_V_15). It has been noticed that they have the ability to care for others, "returns to class with other students, helps a student with mobility difficulties to walk, holds onto their hand" (P18_V_15), "brings glasses, tells who left them and asks for them to be returned" (P39_V_15).

Emotional skills. The ability to understand oneself is highlighted, such as the ability to express and describe one's own emotions ("Feels happy <...> gives five, shows off" (P18_V_15)). Emotional self-control skills are also expressed, where children can control their emotions ("walk around the table in a circle, breathe to calm down, talk to themselves" (P18_V_15)). However, anxiety and stress often arise, when study participants "can't find the homework notebook, laments, starts crying" (P39_V_15). Therefore, seeking help from others is necessary to calm down, for example, "the teacher helps find the things, calms down, stops crying <...> 'The teacher suggests going to the hallway to calm down. The boy calms down'" (P39_V_15). Sometimes study participants manage to control their anxiety, they know and use calming strategies ("Asks to be let into the classroom, but when not allowed, breathes deeply and goes to the end of the corridor behind the column and sits on the floor" (P4_V_15); "He sees other young people with whom he disagrees, the teacher shows him, gesturing no, I don't want to be together, calms down by breathing deeply so as not to get angry" (P18_V_15); "The teacher goes into the bathroom, closes himself in, refuses to communicate, tries to calm down by taking a shower and breathing" (P18_V_15)). Difficulties in calming down and finding a suitable solution are noted, when observed adolescent "argues with a classmate, no longer performs the assigned tasks, does not color or draw, gets angry" (P16_V_14-15). Difficulties arise in coping with unforeseen changes, "playing children express anger, <...> catch their ball, throw it further away, children scream at him, <...> nervously twitching, calling children by their nicknames, catch their ball, run out of the playground crying and looking back to see if anyone is following him" (P4_V_15); "asked by the teacher to prepare for a new lesson, suddenly stands up, takes books out of the backpack, throws them on the table, talks loudly <...> sits down, pulls the chair to the table, puts his hands on the table in front of him, lies down on the table" (P4_V_15).

Social cognition skills. Children are aware of social cues that signal that it is not appropriate to misbehave, for example, "teachers scold and make <...> sit on a chair until everyone gathers in the classroom" (P16_V_14-15); "the teacher puts the tablet on the table, reminds them of the agreements. They calm down, sit down, lean over the task," (P4_V_15). One of the observed adolescent (P39_V_15) understands that actions have an impact on others: "walks, calls someone 'fat', then turns to the teacher, saying sorry". Children are able to assess social situations ("Waiting for everyone," P2_V_15). They can make decisions, evaluate appropriate/inappropriate behavior: "reacting to bullying from a classmate by calling him a loser. Trying to tell the teacher that the classmate is teasing him" (P4_V_15).

The expression of social skills is illustrated in Figure 3. The graph of social skills expression was compiled by analyzing the expression of observable skills within each social skill structure. For example, it was observed that communication skills were described by 6 attributes (skills) among the study participants, while participation skills were described by only one attribute. Emotional skills were described by 5 observable attributes, interaction skills by 4 attributes, and cognitive skills by 3 attributes. The social skills of the adolescents who participated in the study have similarities and individual differences. The expression of communication skills, emotional skills, and social cognition skills were observed in the behavior of all the observed adolescents. However, the expression of participation skills was not observed in the behavior of all the observed adolescents. For example, there was no expression of participation skills in the behavior of P2_V_15 and P39_V_15, while some expressions of participation skills were observed in the behavior of P4_V_15, P16_V_15, and P18_V_15. P4_V_15 actively took on the role of the group leader during the outing, urging other classmates to get off the bus faster by saying "come on, come on". In this context, the observed adolescent demonstrated leadership, as if taking on the role of the group leader, urging classmates to get off the bus and knowing that he himself had to get off last. Another observed adolescent, P16_V_14-15, was more passive. He perceived his role as a student and, when the bell rang, he came to class, sat down at his desk, looked for items for the lesson, and prepared to participate with other students in the lesson. An even more active expression of

participation was observed in the behavior of P18_V_15, who, while walking with the whole class in the morning circle, led another classmate who was walking slowly and supported him by holding his hand. During the morning circle, P18_V_15 "observed others, repeated the actions and movements shown".

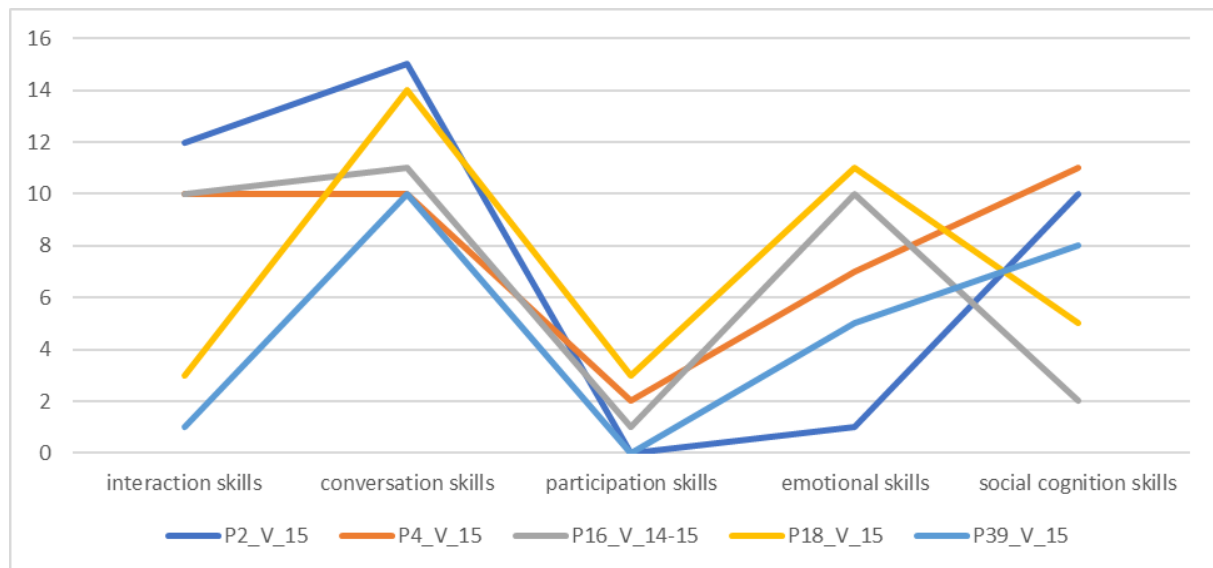


Figure 3. Subjects' social skills expression.

The expression of interaction skills also shows significant differences. For example, P16_V_14-15, when angry, uses the social withdrawal strategy of interaction skills by "sitting down on a bench, curling up on it, covering his head with his hands, and not participating in the lesson." Another observed student, P18_V_15, also uses this strategy when angry by "locking himself in the bathroom and refusing to communicate when teachers come into the bathroom," but demonstrates the ability to control his emotions by "trying to calm down by washing and breathing". The observed behavior indicates that besides the social withdrawal strategy, P18_V_15 uses psychophysiological relaxation exercises to overcome stress and calm down during detachment. This behavior reveals certain self-regulation skills. Another observed student (P4_V_15) also demonstrates social withdrawal reactions and difficulties with emotional self-control - when angry, he does not hesitate to demonstrate verbal aggression to maintain distance and detachment. He angrily asks the teacher's aide, "What are you doing here?" <...> then suddenly stops, walks away, and talks to himself.

The illustrative examples of behavior expression in observed contexts and the graph of social skills curves reveal the individual social skills profile of each observed adolescent.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The empirical research data revealed peculiarities in the expression of social skills in various environments among students with severe and profound educational needs. It was found that students experience difficulties in social interactions due to insufficient social skills in all areas. Interaction skills were revealed through difficulties in managing and controlling interpersonal interactions when faced with challenges, demonstrated by avoidance reactions. Difficulties in mastering etiquette were also noticed. Additionally, the children's tendency to achieve their set goals in social situations was revealed. Elementary abilities to resist negative environmental influences, deal with peer pressure, and respond appropriately to bullying were also observed. A desire for independence was evident, but adult confirmation was needed.

Communication skills are demonstrated through the ability to initiate contact, maintain short-term eye contact and personal space during conversation. The need to communicate is met with elementary language tools and nonverbal communication. Constant clarification of information and repetitive questioning was observed. Conflict resolution skills of observed teenagers are demonstrated through the ability to recognize conflicts and use calming strategies. However, sometimes there are difficulties in managing conflicts constructively.

Participation skills are demonstrated through showing initiative to act in a group and the ability to take care of others, ask for help, and offer assistance. It was revealed that the ability to express emotions is

demonstrated verbally and non-verbally. Difficulties were observed in expressing and managing one's own emotions, controlling stress, impulses, coping with unforeseen changes, finding appropriate solutions, coping with annoying situations without anger, and accepting another's opinion. Social cognition skills are demonstrated through recognizing problematic situations and problem-solving methods. It was observed that children are aware of the behavioral rules in their immediate environment and are able to make appropriate decisions in these environments, for example, by seeking help from a teacher or teacher's assistant.

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