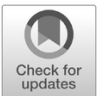


**TEACHERS SUPPORT OF STUDENTS' SOCIAL-  
EMOTIONAL AND SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS USING A  
SOLUTION-FOCUSED SKILLFUL-CLASS METHOD****Shuanghong Jenny Niu<sup>a\*</sup>, Hannele Niemi<sup>a</sup>***<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland*

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**Abstract**

Increasing importance is being attached to support students' learning of social-emotional and self-management skills as they may experience all kinds of difficulties and problems at school. How can teachers support students to learn useful skills to overcome these problems? The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the Skillful-Class method, which teachers can use in their classrooms to support students learn social-emotional and self-management skills in a supportive and collaborative learning environment. A Skillful-Class project was conducted in 22 Finnish and 18 Chinese primary school classes. Data was collected by pre- and post-questionnaires from autumn 2018 – spring 2019. Qualitative data was collected using a post questionnaire with open-ended questions, interviews, and discussions on webpages, which were reviewed by content analysis. There is clear evidence showing that students' skills improved significantly; further, the relationships among students, teachers, and parents also improved. The students became more supportive of and collaborative with each other. The teachers' responses also show that their work became easier at school when students learned many social-emotional and self-management skills. Based on these findings, we can conclude that the Skillful-Class method is an effective tool for teachers to help students learn skills. Further, it improves the collaboration among teachers, students, and parents, and builds a supportive and collaborative learning community.

**Keywords:** Solution-focused approach, Skillful-Class, learning skills, learning community

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## 1. Introduction

The world is changing dramatically because of new technologies and new demands at work, and schools are facing a major crisis in trying to respond. Additionally, managing global challenges, such as climate change, requires schools and education systems to emphasize not only high-quality knowledge but also social-emotional, self-management, and behavioral skills that will lead to fostering good social relationships and help students to become active citizens. Countries and educational organizations have been promoting the learning of 21st century skills at school (OECD, 2013; Lee & Tan, 2018; Niemi & Jia, 2016; Statistics Finland, 2016). There is thus, an increasing need for teachers to help their students to learn many social-emotional and self-management skills in the school environment. Moreover, how students and teachers work together in learning skills is also extremely important in improving the relationships among students, teachers, and parents to create a supportive and collaborative learning community in schools.

It is quite common in many schools that students have certain behavior and social-emotional problems, such as disturbing others, ignoring their homework, losing their tempers when things do not go their way, becoming afraid of talking in public, etc. The purpose of this study is to assess the effect of the Skillful-Class method, which teachers can use in their classrooms to help students learn social-emotional and self-management skills in a supportive and collaborative classroom learning environment.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework of the study

This study is based on the solution-focused approach (SFA) that was developed by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer in 1980s (DeJong & Berg, 2002; de Shazer, 1985, 1988). SFA has been widely used in practice (Ajmal & Rees, 2001; Alexander & Sked, 2010; Morgan, 2016; Cepukiene, Pakrošnis, & Ulinskaite, 2018). It is a goal-directed, collaborative approach to psychotherapeutic change (Pichot, & Dolan, 2003; Lutz, 2013). The key idea behind SFA is looking into the future, or, rather, at the desired outcomes of the preferred future. It also aims to discover what the strengths and resources can be used to realize that preferred future (George, Iveson, & Ratner, 1999). The SFA also focuses on building supportive relationships (DeJong & Berg, 2002).

There are many principles and assumptions of the SFA, which have been listed by many researchers (Quick, 2008; Sklare, Sabella, & Petrosko, 2003; Lipchik, 2011; Nicholas, 2014). From the perspective of schools, the most important aspects of SFA is to help students to learn skills concerning how they can manage their own lives. It helps them to (1) focus on goals, (2) discover strengths and resources, and (3) perform many small actions for desired changes. This

means that skills must be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART), criteria which are often used in setting goals. SMART is often used to provide criteria to guide the setting of objectives, in, for example, project management, employee-performance management, and personal development (Doran, 1981; Bogue, 2018).

Kim, Kelly, and Franklin (2008) have stated that the advantages of SFA in a school setting are its strengths-based approach, client centered vision, and concrete actions in which small changes matter. Strengths-based means that people have strengths which are active in helping when managing life situations. Client-centered means clients can determine their own goals and make decisions about how and where they wish to make changes in their lives. And “small changes” means that, by focusing on making small changes that help, the children see themselves as more capable of making other and larger changes in their lives (Kim, Kelly, & Franklin, 2008).

The intervention in this study is called the Skillful-Class Method, developed from the SFA Kids’ Skill Method (KSM), which was created in the 1990s by Dr. Ben Furman and two other teachers (Furman, 2004, 2010) to help children overcome social-emotional and behavior problems by encouraging children to learn skills. Furman developed the Skillful-Class method with his experience using the KSM in over 30 countries across decades. Many teachers have used the KSM to help students having problems at school. Teachers asked how, with large class sizes and limited time for individual instruction, they might help more students. Therefore, Dr. Ben Furman and his colleague Maiju Ahola developed the Skillful-Class method for teachers to help all students to learn social-emotional and self-management skills. They asked teachers to describe common problems at school, and turned these problems into skills for the students to learn. The most needed social-emotional and self-management skills in primary schools were identified by primary school teachers in Finland. They are listed in in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Most needed social-emotional and self-management skills in primary schools identified by primary school teachers in Finland (Furman, 2018)

<b>Collective skills for the whole class</b>	1	We (I) can pack my school bag.	Self-management Skill
	2	We (I) can get homework done.	Self-management Skill
	3	We (I) can raise our (my) hand (s) before speaking.	Self-management Skill
	4	We (I) can listen to teachers’ instruction.	Self-management Skill
	5	We (I) can calm down to focus on learning.	Self-management Skill Social-emotional Skill
	6	We (I) can solve most conflicts or disagreements among ourselves.	Self-management Skill Social-emotional Skill

<b>Individual skills for each student to decide which skill he/she would like to learn. Several students can have the same skill.</b>	1	I can wait for my turn.	Self-management Skill Social-emotional Skill
	2	I can listen to others without interrupting them.	Self-management Skill Social-emotional Skill
	3	I can speak in front of others.	Social-emotional Skill
	4	I can stay on task.	Self-management Skill
	5	I can stay calm when I make a mistake or fail.	Social-emotional Skill
	6	I can accept losing in games.	Social-emotional Skill
	7	I can help others.	Social-emotional Skill
	8	I can stick up for others.	Social-emotional Skill
	9	I can move around calmly and safely.	Self-management Skill
	10	I can eat neatly and calmly without disturbing others.	Self-management Skill Social-emotional Skill
	11	I can ask for help when I need it.	Social-emotional Skill
	12	I can shift from one activity to the next activity.	Self-management skill Social-emotional Skill
	13	I can respond to others' teasing with humor.	Social-emotional Skill
	14	I can apologize to others.	Social-emotional Skill
	15	I can ask for things nicely.	Social-emotional Skill
	16	I can encourage others.	Social-emotional Skill
	17	I can have the courage to ask to join others' activities.	Social-emotional Skill
	18	I can be proud of my accomplishments.	Social-emotional Skill
	19	I can remember to thank others.	Social-emotional Skill
	20	I can appraise (give compliments to) others.	Social-emotional Skill
	21	I can calmly accept "No" from others.	Social-emotional Skill
	22	I can recognize when to say "No" to others.	Social-emotional Skill

The Skillful-Class method is based on the SFA. This means that (1) the focus is on learning the skill instead of talking about the problem, and (2) the key player is the student her or himself. He or she decides what skill to learn, and the emphasis is on students' strengths and previously learned skills. Finally, (3) small steps and progresses are big motivation factors. Additionally, when students learn skills together, they support teachers and learn from each other, which leads to a supportive and collaborative learning community.

The Skillful-Class method has a strong emphasis on social community and how students can learn from each other. In that sense, it has a close relationship to the Social Culture Theory and Learning Community in which Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) argues that social interaction precedes development (Vygotsky, 1980, 1978). Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning". Vygotsky places considerable importance on social factors contributing to cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, the environment in which children grow



up will influence how they think and what they think about. He focuses on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act in and interact with shared experiences (Crawford, 1996), believing that young children are curious and actively involved in their own learning and the discovery and development of new understandings or schema.

Table 1 reveals that the purpose of the Skillful-Class method is to help students in primary schools learn many basic social-emotional and self-management skills, which are useful and beneficial for the students as well as for the teachers' work. The Skillful-Class method includes two phases. First, the students and teacher will discuss and vote for one skill to learn from the first six collective skills. The whole class will learn the same skill together, so that the students understand and learn how to learn a skill. Normally, it takes about two weeks for the students to learn the collective skill in the first phase. Second, each student will choose his or her individual skill to learn from the above-mentioned 22 skills. It is acceptable for several students to choose the same skill and form a group to learn that skill together. It takes about three to four weeks for the students to learn their individual skills in second phase.

Each participating class will receive one set of skill cards. The skill cards consist of the name of the skill, a picture of the skill, and a detailed explanation of the skill. The teacher will discuss each skill with the whole class, so that all students understand the meaning of the skill and how to perform it. The skill cards can be put up on the classroom walls. The figure 1 below illustrates what a skill card looks like.



**Figure 1.** Example picture of the skill card for the “I can ask for things nicely” skill

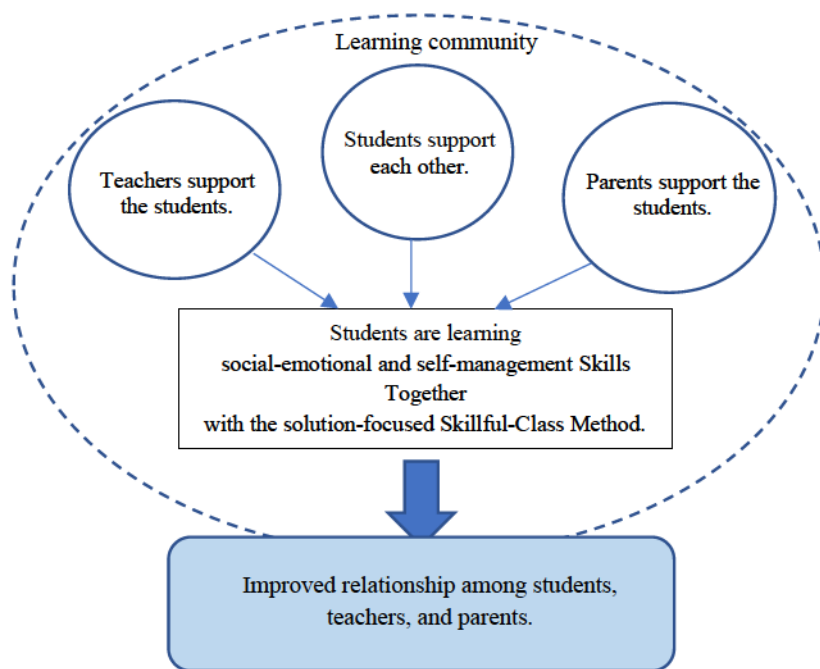
The teachers' roles are those of facilitators, supporters, coaches, offering scaffolding for the students while learning the skills. Parents are informed by the school teachers that the

children are learning these skills at school. The parents can also support their children. The teachers also inform the school principal, who is asked to support them.

Before the students start to learn the skills, the students and teachers (1) discuss the benefits of learning the selected skills, (2) demonstrate or roleplay what the skills look like, and (3) decide on the behavior that shows the students have learned the skills and (4) how to celebrate their success in learning the skill/s. After all the students have learned the skills at the end of the project, the principal will hand out a framed certificate with the Skillful-Class logo to the class. Then the whole class will celebrate their success in learning the skills together.

## 2. Research problem and objectives

The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of Skillful-Class method in helping students learn socio-emotional and self-management skills together and how this method improves the positive relationships among students, teachers, and parents. The design of the study is illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The design of the study

Our research questions are:

- Can the solution-focused Skillful-Class method effectively support students to learn socio-emotional and self-management skills?
- What are the impacts on, or changes to, the relationships among students, teachers, and parents when students are learning social-emotional and self-management skills?

### 3. Research methodology

This project was implemented in Finland and China at the same time, 2018 autumn – 2019 spring. This project was designed for primary school teachers to help students learn the social-emotional and self-management skills described in Table 1. The project invitation was sent to the school teachers who showed interest in August 2018, and participation was voluntary. 22 Finnish primary school classes with 20 Finnish teachers, and 18 Chinese primary school classes with 18 Chinese teachers participated in the project.

Table 2. Study Participants

Country	Number of schools	Number of class/teachers	Gender of the teachers	Grades in primary school (In Finland, grade 1 starts with age 7, in China, grade 1 start with age 6)					Number of students
				1	2	3	4	5	
Finland	13	22	22 Female	3	7	8	3	1	20-26 per class
China	12	18	18 Female	1	3	6	5	3	40-50 per class

The 22 Finnish teachers are from 4 different cities and 13 different primary schools. Some of these teachers had used Dr. Ben Furman's KSM before, and were interested in doing more. Some teachers heard about this project from their colleagues and became interested. Most are from capital areas (Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa), except two from Ikaalinen. The participating Chinese teachers had used the KSM or heard about it. They were very eager to join the project to improve their classes. They are from the following city and provinces: Beijing city, Hebei province, Guizhou province, Liaoning province, and the Zhejiang province. All participating teachers from both Finland and China are female (see table 2).

#### 3.1. Research context

Before the project started, the teachers from Finland came to a central meeting place in Helsinki and were given one day training by Dr. Ben Furman and the main researcher for this project on how to implement the Skillful-Class Method. The Skillful-Class Method instruction and 28 skill cards were given to all the teachers. The students and teacher would study the skill

cards together to understand what the skills mean and how to demonstrate them. The skill cards are placed on the wall of the classroom when the students are learning the skills as a reminder, and so the students may look at the cards in case they forget what the skills mean. A webpage for Finnish teachers was set up. All participating Finnish teachers, Dr. Ben Furman and his team, and the main researcher (who speaks English, Chinese, and Finnish) had access to the webpage, so that the Finnish teachers could ask questions and gain support from Dr. Furman and the researcher during the project. The teachers could also share their experiences and get ideas from each other via webpage interaction.

The teachers in China are from several areas, making it logistically difficult to get all the teachers together in one place. The training for Chinese teachers was thus conducted in the Chinese language over the online Chinese social media tool WeChat by the Kids' Skill company in China and the project's main researcher. There were three two-hour training sessions. A WeChat group was created with all participating Chinese teachers, two staff from the Kids' Skill company in China, and the main researcher. The teachers could ask questions, offer support, and share information in this Skillful-Class project group.

In this study, the Skillful-Class project was implemented in the following two phases:

Phase 1: All students in the same class were learning one similar skill together. The skill was selected and decided upon by the whole class.

Phase 2: After all the students had learned the collectively selected skill, each student chose his or her own skill to learn. Several students could choose the same individual skill and learn it together.

First, the teacher introduced the project to the class and showed them the skill cards. The students and teacher discussed what each skill meant. All students in the class assessed how good they were with the six collective skills on a scale from one to five. The teacher then showed the students the class' average score for each. Then, the whole class voted on which skill to learn together. After the class had chosen the collective skill, the teacher discussed with the students the following aspects, which are adapted from Furman's KSM (Furman, 2004, 2010):

1. What are the benefits of learning this skill?
2. Why do we all believe that the students can learn the skill by discovering together their strengths, resources, and past successes?
3. How do we define the skill? Ask the students to show and demonstrate the skill, and record or photograph it with a mobile phone.
4. How can the students support each other in learning the skill, and how can their parents, grandparents, or other teachers be their supporters? What do the students want their



supporters to do when they do a great job in practicing their skill? In case the students forget the skill, how do the students want their supporters to remind them?

5. How do students plan to celebrate when the whole class has learned the skill? What shows that the students have learned the skill?

From these discussions, the students see the benefits of learning the skill they have chosen, believe they can do it, and know how. Most importantly, they know that they are learning the skill together: they will receive support from each other and from teachers, parents, and so on. A collaborative and supportive learning community is formed, with the goal of learning the skill.

The whole process of discussion is built on

1. students' participation and autonomy
2. the benefits of learning the skill
3. students' confidence, strengths, resources, and past successes
4. collaboration and support in the learning community
5. future success

The aim is that the students develop powerful motivation and confidence for learning the skill. The method also encourages the students' participation and strengthens their feeling of choice, decision, and inner motivation. The goal of the discussion is to: (1) discover and create motivation for learning, (2) increase students' confidence in learning the skills, (3) clearly show how to perform the skills, and (4) build a supportive learning community.

### *3.2. Data gathering*

The study design includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Since the Skillful-Class method is designed for younger students in primary schools to help them develop social-emotional and self-management skills in the beginning of their schooling, the studied students are from grades one to four. The students are considered too young to provide reliable data. Therefore, we mainly focused on the teachers' perceptions. Before the teachers started to implement Skillful-Class method, all participating teachers from Finland and China were asked to fill out the pre-questionnaire. After the whole project was completed, all the teachers were asked to fill out the post-questionnaire, which includes not only quantitative data questions but also open-ended, qualitative data questions.

Qualitative data consisted also of web discussions, WeChat discussions, and a few teacher interviews. Students' parents were informed about the school project and that students would be learning the skills, but data was not gathered from them.

### 3.3. The instruments

All the instruments (Skillful-Class Instruction, Skills Cards, Questionnaires) were created in English first, then translated to Finnish and Chinese. The main researcher is fluent in English, Chinese, and Finnish. The English versions were checked and doublechecked by at least five experts in the field, and the Chinese and Finnish versions were each checked by three native speakers. The 28 skill cards each had a picture to illustrate the meaning of the skill, the name of the skill, and a detailed description of the skills. Before producing the skills cards, we asked three young students to look at them to determine whether they understood the skills on the card, and modifications were made if needed. The teachers were asked to assess the students' six skills and the relationships among students, teachers, and parents before and after the project. The teachers' questionnaire is illustrated in Tables 3 and 4. Open-ended questions were asked in the end.

**Table 3.** Teachers' perception of students' six skills before and after the Skillful-Class intervention

Questions to be answered by teachers	Scale from 1 to 5 1= poorly, 5= excellently
1. The students can pack their school bags.	
2. The students can get homework done.	
3. The students can raise their hands before speaking.	
4. The students can listen to teachers' instruction.	
5. The students can calm down to focus on learning.	
6. The students can solve most conflicts or disagreement among themselves.	

**Table 4.** The teachers' perception of the relationships among students, teachers, and parents before and after the Skillful-Class intervention

Questions to be answered by teachers	Scale from 1 to 5 1= never, 5=always
1. The students are helpful towards each other.	
2. The students encourage and support each other.	
3. The students are able to do group work.	
4. The students are friendly towards each other.	
5. I like to enter my class and be with my students.	
6. It is easy for me to get the students excited about things.	
7. When students have problems or difficulties, we find solutions.	
8. I praise, encourage and thank my students.	
9. I get along with my students' guardians.	
10. I feel that the guardians like me and appreciate my work.	

Open-ended questions to be answered by teachers about the changes after the project are the following:

- I. What kind of changes have you perceived on students' behavior and class atmosphere after the Skillful-Class project?
- II. What kind of changes have you perceived on your work and life after the Skillful-Class project?
- III. What kind of changes have you perceived on the relationship between you and the students' parents after the Skillful-Class project?
- IV. Any additional comments about the Skillful-Class Method?

### *3.4. Data analysis*

Both quantitative and qualitative data were extracted in this study. We used content analysis for the qualitative data. Content analysis is a research method for making valid inferences from data relevant to its context; the purpose is to provide knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts, and a practical guide for action (Krippendorff, 1980). The challenge can be that each researcher interprets the data according to her or his subjective perspective (Sandelowski, 1995). Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano and Morales (2007) say that qualitative researchers approach their topics with a specific worldview, which contains a set of beliefs or assumptions. This study involved Finnish-, Chinese-, and English-speaking researchers, and we wanted to be aware of our cultural backgrounds while we aimed to understand what happens in the Finnish and Chinese classrooms. Levitt (2015) argues that qualitative research requires one to adopt an interpretative rather than procedure-driven method of working. Qualitative research relies on the identification of the "subjective interpretation of data", which enables meaningful data interpretation (Levitt, 2015).

In this study, the quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as mean values and standard deviation. We performed the summative variable reliability test for the items relating to students' skills and the relationships among students, teachers, and parents. The scales' reliability was deemed to be very good. The Cronbach alpha of the Student Skill scale's pre-test and post-test was .78 and .76 respectively both of which are in the acceptable range. The Cronbach alpha for the pre-test of the Relationship among Students, Teachers, and Parents scales' was .81 while that of the post-test was .89, both of which are also in the acceptable range.

#### 4. Research findings

The research questions focus on how well the students learned certain defined social-emotional and self-management skills and what changes happened in the relationships among students, teachers, and parents with the Skillful-Class intervention. Table 5 shows the teachers' perceptions of the changes on the students' skills and relationship. Teachers assessed that in Finnish classrooms, students' social-emotional and self-management skills increased from mean value of 3.17 to 3.80 ( $p = .000$ ). They assessed also that the relationship among students, teachers, and parents improved from mean value of 3.67 to 4.10 ( $p = .000$ ). In Chinese classrooms, students' social-emotional and self-management skills increased from mean value of 3.44 to 4.42 ( $p = .000$ ). And the relationship among students, teachers, and parents also improved from mean value of 4.04 to 4.60 ( $p = .000$ ). All changes between pre and post measurements were statistically significant.

**Table 5.** Teachers' perceptions of the changes on the students' skills and relationships

	Finland				China			
	Mean	SD	t	p	Mean	SD	t	p
Pre-measurement of students' skills	3.17	.55	-6.45	.000	3.44	.55	-8.87	.000
Post-measurement of students' skills	3.80	.36			4.42	.39		
Pre-measurement of relationship among students, teachers, and parents	3.67	.40	-5.25	.000	4.04	.41	-4.99	.000
Post-measurement of relationship among students, teachers, and parents	4.10	.43			4.60	.33		

What follows are quotes from teachers based on the open-ended questionnaire and from interviews. The following quotes illustrate the teachers' perceptions on the changes in students' skills. After each quote, there is a code in brackets, which indicates for each teacher an identification code with country (Fi= Finland, Ch=China) and a number. Several teachers stated that the students had better self-management skills (including the behaviour skills):

*Children have become better at verbalizing and speaking with good manners. (Fi5)*

*The students have learned conversational skills and have become better at listening to each other. (Fi14)*

*Children are very happy to learn skills; they become better and better at how to learn skills. (Ch1)*

*Children are now better in their behavior; they concentrate more in their studying. (Ch4)*



*Students become more self-disciplined. (Ch9)*

*Students are better now at self-control. (Ch15)*

Several teachers stated that the students have better social emotional skills, including self-confidence, collaboration, and supportiveness:

*There is now more peer support in the class. (Fi1)*

*The skill of Calming Down for Lessons has improved the class atmosphere. We also have a moment each day when children praised each other, which was also helpful. (Fi3)*

*Learning the skill worked well. The children are now better able to calm down for lessons. Praising and supporting others now has become a nature part of our schooling days. (Fi4)*

*Students become more empathetic and respect each other; the class atmosphere became better. (Ch3, 4)*

*Students are now always talking about learning skills; they remind, support, and encourage each other. The culture in the class is very collaborative and positive. (Ch6)*

*Students learned how to be together; they learned how to solve their conflicts without teachers' help in most situations; they become more thoughtful of each other. (Ch8)*

*Students solve problems by themselves. (Ch14)*

*Students learned to thank others. (Ch10)*

The following quotes illustrate the teachers' perception on the changes in the atmosphere of the class and the relationships among students, teachers, and parents:

*This project clearly increased the culture of mutual support and helping among students. (Fi8)*

*The pupils feel they have more positive experiences of the kind 'we have a nice class', 'I'm an industrious pupil', 'I have friends in school', and 'I'm good at learning'. That has united the pupils, increased self-understanding and understanding of others – and consequently also enhanced the pupils' feeling of safety. (Fi11)*

*There is more and more appreciation, support and collaboration among students. Students' relationship become closer. (Ch7)*

*Students' relationship become closer; the cohesion of the class has become stronger. (Ch13)*

*The atmosphere has improved as a result of collective goals. Joint encouragement has created a wonderful supportive atmosphere and lots of friendly encounters. (Fi12)*

*Communication with students become happier, students are more supportive in the class... (Ch4, 5)*

*The relationships among teacher and students becomes better; we are more supportive to each other. (Ch16)*

*The communication with parents became easier and more enjoyable when we do not talk about the problems, we talk about the progress in learning skills...parents trust and support me more. (Ch8)*

*Parents and I have better understanding with each other, we talk more often about positive things, we talk in a nice way. (Ch1)*

*Parents become very supportive. (Ch2, 3, 5, 12, 17)*

*Since I started working with this project last spring all parties (the teacher, the pupils and the parents) feel that the atmosphere of the class has improved. (Fi10)*

*We all (teachers, students, parents) support and collaborate in this project and in practicing the skills, the learning atmosphere in the class become better. (Ch2)*

Additionally, there are some surprising changes in students' learning, attitudes, and mindsets which were noticed by several teachers:

*Students are not only paying attention to the skills they are learning, but also pay attention to other skills in the Skillful-Class cards. There is a positive effect on skills at class level. (Fi6)*

*Pupils got into the habit of praising each other when they were practicing their collective skills and since then have become better at praising each other also about other things unrelated to the project. (Fi16)*

*Skillful-Class has had a positive effect on class atmosphere. Everyone has benefited from the pupils having learned skills that make them better at solving their own arguments! (Fi15)*

*Children have become better at giving positive feedback to one another, which has improved the class atmosphere. (Fi17)*

*Before the Skillful-Class project, students used words such as: he does stupid things. After the project they learned to say: he needs to learn the skill of moving around calmly. (Fi7)*

*This project has improved [students'] structure of learning; children are more goal-oriented and focus more on positive things. (Fi2)*

*Students become more goal oriented, they are more active and self-driven. (Ch11,12)*

*...students are more looking for solutions instead of complaining... (Ch14)*

*Students become more positive in many things. (Ch17)*

*Students are more active, have more skills, and inner motivation becomes stronger.*  
(Ch18)

There were also interesting and relevant changes to the teachers' attitudes and mindsets:  
*Skillful-Class has given me a new way of approaching my work. (Fi19)*

*I have noticed some small changes in my own attitude...I have adopted a more solution-focused approach. (Fi7)*

*Skillful-Class has shifted my thinking from problems to skills when working with the class and individual students. (Fi6)*

*I started to give more positive feedback. (Fi5)*

*I became more positive and happier. (Ch1, 8, 11, 13, 16)*

*I am learning the skill of "Angel's Eyes"; I notice more and more positive things and what good things the children have done...I smile more... (Ch8)*

*My family life became better, I have better communication with my husband and mother-in-law. (Ch5, 14)*

*When my own kids make mistakes or have problems, I do not get so upset anymore, I know that she just needs to learn a skill. (Ch18)*

Four teachers also stated that their work become easier after students learned many skills:

*I first thought that the project will take too much time in my class but when we got started and the children got the hang of it, time didn't mean much anymore. When skills improve, more time is left for studying simply because less time needs to be spent on resolving arguments and conflicts. Children want to be Skillful! (Fi9)*

*Students can guide and advise each other better, which makes my work easier. (Fi14)*

*...my work became easier and more enjoyable... (Ch9, 13)*

Some parents also gave some feedback to the teachers about this project:

*... Parents were pleased with the project and they have given positive feedback about it. (Fi16)*

*... Parents were satisfied that school has done some concrete work to make improvements in class atmosphere with the project... (Fi3)*

*... parents were readily agreed to have the Skillful-Class project, but some parents want to have individual skills for their kids to learn. They want to influence which skill the child should learn. ... (Fi8)*

*... Parents told me that they were very happy see the changes in their kids. (Ch6)*

*... Most parents were very supportive in this project, some parents also started to learn some skills themselves! (Ch13)*

*Parents become more supportive of my work! (Ch12)*

When we asked the participating teachers what other comments they had about the Skillful-Class Method, the majority expressed their interest in continuing to use it or the SFA in their classes. They said that learning skills instead of talking about problems was the better approach. One teacher, Fi19, said a couple of students lied about the progress of the class' collective skill because they were so eager to achieve the target. She suggested that next time she would progress more slowly and devote enough time to learning the class collective skill to make sure that all students master the skill before moving to the individual skill. Two teachers, Fi5 and Fi14, suggested that they could include some additional skills, categorize the skills in a way better suited to them, and make their own list of skill cards. Two teachers, Chi6 and Chi9, suggested that the parents may also need some training to be more involved in supporting their children. One teacher, Fi3, said that the skill cards and the instruction were useful, but it would be better if there was no number on the skill cards. She plans to remove some skill cards for next time.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

The aim of this study was to find out how the Skillful-Class intervention method helps students learn self-management and social-emotional skills at school and what the impacts of this intervention are on the relationships among students, teachers, and parents. With both quantitative and qualitative evidence, the current study confirms earlier research findings (DeJong & Berg, 2002; Morgan, 2016; Cepukienė et al., 2018) that SFA can create positive changes. Cepukienė and Pakrošnis' (2011) stated that SFBT can be especially useful for altering behavior. The effectiveness of SFA and SFBT have been studied by many researchers (Corcoran & Pillai, 2007; Franklin, Treper, Gringerich, & McCollum, 2012; Gringerich, Kim, Stams, & Macdonald, 2012; Gringerich & Peterson, 2013; Kim & Franklin, 2009; Stobie, Boyle, & Woolfson, 2005) with a focus on family problems and child behavior in the context of both school and family. Bond, Woods, Humphrey, Symes and Green (2013) have done a comprehensive study of SFBT with families and children. They provide preliminary evidence that SFBT can improve children's internal social-emotional and external behavioral problems



both in school and with their families. The Skillful-Class intervention method is based on SFA and SFBT. The present study provides significant results based on quantitative data and rich evidence from qualitative data that the students in this study learned many self-management and social-emotional skills. In our study, we identified the positive changes in the relationships among students, teachers, and parents, which is the basis for positive improvements. Additionally, there is also evidence showing that students' and teachers' mindsets and attitudes have changed. They became more positive, solution-focused, and goal-oriented. Some teachers also stated that their work became easier. Finally, we found similar results in both Finnish and Chinese schools, which have different cultural backgrounds and contexts which proves that the Skillful-Class intervention method is successful even in different socio-cultural contexts.

In conclusion, based on the findings, the solution-focused Skillful-Class method provides an effective pedagogical tool for teachers when supporting students' development towards self-management and social-emotional skills. Further, this method improves the relationships among students, teachers, and parents. After the students learned many useful skills, teachers' work become easier and the classroom atmosphere improved. Students' and teachers' mindsets and attitudes are also shifting to become positive and goal-focused instead of problem-focused.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

This is the first research project for the SFA Skillful-Class intervention method. Our samples are limited to 22 Finnish classes and 18 Chinese classes. For future studies, the sample size can be increased. Additional self-management and social-emotion skills can be suggested and differentiated for different aged students. For students over 10 years old, simple questionnaire data and interviews can be used to obtain students' perceptions on this method. It can also be carried out in different countries and in different contexts.

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