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Article

Interpersonal Competences and Attitude to Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) among Future Pedagogues and Educators—A Polish and Portuguese Perspective

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Abstract: Interpersonal competences in relationship building, collaboration and teamwork are essential both in F2F education and in distance or hybrid styles of education. In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as previous trends, some or all of the higher education didactics were transferred to the online environment. In this context, the Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) model, now known as collaborativism, is gaining importance. This research aims to diagnose and compare the level of interpersonal competences and attitude in the OCL model among students preparing for the profession of an educator, pedagogue or teacher in the autonomous region of Madeira and in Poland. Quantitative studies were conducted using the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire by D. Buhrmester, W. Furman, M.T. Wittenberg and H.T. Reis—as adapted by Poland and Portugal. In addition, the respondents expressed their views on OCL in the self-written questionnaire. According to the research findings, the highest level of competence in the Portuguese group was achieved by the respondents in terms of: Emotional Support (EW), Conflict Management and Resolution (RK) and Negative Assertion—Asserting Influence (AO). In the Polish group, EW was the lowest. The highest level of interpersonal competences was observed for Conflict Management and Resolution (RK), Disclosure (US) and Initiation (IR). The largest group of the surveyed students in both countries expressed a positive attitude towards implementing OCL in their courses of study and declared their willingness to be a member of a group that learns online together.

Keywords: collaborativism; COVID-19 pandemic; interpersonal competences; online education; teacher training

1. Introduction

Establishing social relations and being a member of a group are inherent features in the life of a human being from an early age. A human being is currently not only referred to as the social animal [1] but also the cooperative animal or the ultra-social animal [2]. Effective interaction between people is the cornerstone of many processes that are required for a society to properly function. The crisis situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that relational ties—the way in which we interact and the ability to adapt flexibly to the changing situation—are very important for many individuals and groups [3]. The issue of social and interpersonal competences related to the establishment of interpersonal relations is widely present in the literature [4,5].

Interpersonal competences for relationship building are also crucial for an effective education process. However, it has to be acknowledged that not every moment of the learning process occurs through a relationship with another person. The learning process can consist of self-education, with the student acquiring knowledge by reading text, listening to audio material or watching video material without interpersonal interaction. Information technologies also contribute to the development of autodidactism and self-education [6].

However, it should be emphasized that the trend of understanding education as a relationship is solid. Bingham and Sidorkin even assert that there is no education without relationships [7]. This applies to both the school space and direct didactics and online education. Lasfeto and Ulfa emphasize that relationships in online education have four dimensions: the interaction between the teachers and students, students and students, teachers and topic and students and topic [8]. The current study focuses on online learning environments that require social interaction as this has become the norm during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teaching and learning processes take place in relationships, often in a group [9]. The traditional theory that we should begin with, which describes learning via cooperation, is the social learning theory by Bandura [10,11]. It emphasises the fact that learning takes place through a relationship with and observation of another person.

The idea of competencies and social competencies is a broad interdisciplinary concept that has been present in the literature for many years [12,13]. There is an approach that emphasises functional aspects, i.e., defining competence in terms of a motivation-related tendency and a need to have a belief in the person's own effectiveness. Another approach refers to structural elements, which defines competencies as a complex dimension of the personality-related specificities of effective performance [14]. Interpersonal competences are not understood in this study as soft skills [15].

With the technological development and the emergence of a comprehensive media tool, collaborative learning could also employ the Internet space to build teacher–student and student–student relationships [16]. The topic discussed in a few scientific studies [17,18], which is essential in this article, is the issue of conflict management between the subjects of education in remote cooperation during online classes. Conflicts may or may not be developmental. In the case of online education, the ability to manage this process in the student–teacher and student–student relationship is an essential task for the educator. The conflict in remote education is born in the online environment. It develops there and must be resolved there [19]. It is the interpersonal competences of the teacher at the appropriate level that can make the cooperation between students run effectively. Students in remote learning have more frequently expressed a desire for peers to demonstrate better interpersonal and social skills than those in traditional learning, especially in the case of emotional support and support in general [20].

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many official institutions around the world—above all schools and universities—use e-learning and blended learning to successfully continue the teaching process. Scientific studies show that an increasing number of higher education institutions in the world have chosen to replace the traditional teaching process partly by a hybrid or remote process, which does not adversely affect the proper implementation of the learning outcomes [21–23].

In this context, the online collaborative learning (OCL) model proposed by Harasim [24] has gained special relevance. The model emphasises the importance of the Internet as a remote synchronous and asynchronous space, where students, with the help of a teacher, build their knowledge in three processes: 1 idea generating, 2 idea organising, 3 intellectual convergence. This is carried out via mutual interaction, cooperation and a joint search for solutions and discussion. The learners create and develop knowledge together. Currently, OCL functions as collaborativism, which highlights the importance of virtual tools and technologies in the operation of this common online learning space, including the asynchronous one [25].

In view of the global changes in education, it is important to analyse and revise the system of preparing future teachers and educators for the profession. Their level of interpersonal competences (which facilitates or hinders the process of building relations in the peer learning environment at present) and the opinion and motivation to use individual tools as well as comprehensive collaborative learning models can potentially be of major importance for their future professional work in a technologically modified environment. The opportunity to learn in cooperation is a preparation step for the future implementation of the collaborative teamwork model, which is based on a variety of interactions, in solving

organisational problems and implementing projects [26]. This applies not only to the business sphere, but also to modern education. In the context of very dynamic changes in the world, including the COVID-19 pandemic, education is constantly changing. In many cases, OCL has been implemented at every school and higher education stage. To successfully implement this model, future teachers should demonstrate a high level of interpersonal competencies and a positive attitude towards OCL. However, this level and attitude may vary. As Stoytcheva claims, collaborative work skills and an inclination towards cooperation are not innate and need to be built. It is a strenuous and time-consuming task, but the benefits of collaborations are enormous [27]. In the first place, the teacher and his competence determine the success or lack of success in implementing online education [28]. In this context, research on people preparing for work as a teacher, educator and pedagogue seems to be crucial. As Lee and Osman admit after their research, the study of the OCL in diverse countries needs to be implemented in the near future [29].

The aim of the studies is to diagnose the level of interpersonal competences in five dimensions among students preparing for the profession of a teacher and educator at two selected universities in Poland and Portugal. In addition, the opinion of the respondents on the online collaborative learning model and the individual digital learning tools will be analysed.

2. Materials and Methods

The studies were quantitative and employed a diagnostic survey based on a questionnaire drawn up by the authors and a test based on the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire by Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg and Reis [30]—in the Polish version: Kwestionariusz Kompetencji Interpersonalnych ICQ-R as adapted by Klinkosz, Iskra and Dawidowicz [31] and in the Portuguese version: O questionário de competência interpessoal (QCI) as adapted by Assunção, Ávila and Mena Matos [32]. Both language versions of the questionnaire were based on the original tool. They contain 40 items each that refer to similar social situations. In the Polish version of the tool, the authors used the version of the questions and made some more detailed, giving specific examples of the situation. In the Portuguese version, these are declarative sentences. In both versions, the respondents refer to items on a five-point scale. When applying elements of the 'emic' strategy [33], this article uses the tools adapted in a given country. When selecting two countries for the comparative research, elements of the 'epic' strategy [33] were taken into account. Portugal and Poland are similar in the context of culture and religion, economy and society to some extent. Guerra and Zańko emphasise Portugal and Poland are not close to each other in all aspects. Moreover, in the context of membership to the European Union, the course of both countries seems to diverge; however, comparing these two countries may show a new perspective [34]. In both countries, the financial expenditures from the state budget for the education sector are similar. In 2018, they amounted to 11.12% in Poland and 10.81% in Portugal [35]. Although countries differ significantly in geographic and climatic factors, i.e., the location and size of the territory, climate and comparative analyses of social issues, including education, have been taken into account in scientific research. Higher education in both countries has implemented the provisions of the Bologna Process [36]. Students are educated in public and private universities and polytechnics. Before the present research, other studies that justify such comparisons were analysed [37–39]. It should be emphasized that in the curricula of future teachers and educators at both selected universities, online teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic was not used. The model of teaching in direct contact was dominant.

After preliminary analyses the following research questions were formulated to diagnose the level of interpersonal skills among respondents from two universities in Poland and Portugal and to discern their opinion on OCL:

- What level of interpersonal competences is dominant among students of teaching and pedagogical courses in Poland and Portugal?
- Is there a correlation between the different dimensions of interpersonal competences?

- What is the opinion of the respondents in Poland and Portugal on the Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) model, and does the competence level differentiate the results?

The survey was conducted among students of full-time teaching and pedagogical courses at the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland) (N = 172) and at Universidade de Madeira in Funchal, the autonomous region of Madeira (Portugal) (N = 104).

The Polish and Portuguese versions of the original tool, the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire adapted to the local conditions in each country, were used for the authors' own research. In the case of the studies in Poland, it was the latest version prepared under the patronage of the Laboratory of Psychological and Pedagogical Tests [40] in 2017 for use by certain professional groups. The Portuguese adaptation was created in 2010 [32] and was used in the research with the consent of the authors of that version.

The questionnaires in the Polish and Portuguese language versions serve self-assessment and contain 40 statements, each of which the subjects respond to on a 5-point scale. The questions in the tool are designed to determine the level of interpersonal competences in 5 domains that are identified in the authors' own studies with the following acronyms: IR, AO, US, EW and RK:

IR: Initiation—initiating relations and interactions;
AO: Negative Assertion—Asserting Influence—declaring personal rights and assertive discontent, expressing criticism of actions undertaken by other people;
US: Disclosure—sharing personal information about yourself, revealing emotions to others;
EW: Emotional Support—providing assistance and support to other people, an assistance based approach;
RK: Conflict Management and Resolution—solving problems, hassles, conflicts and crises without fighting or disputing with other people [31].

The normalised results are given on the T-score scale with a standard deviation of 10 T. A result below 40 T was interpreted as significantly low and a result above 60 T as significantly high. Between these values, the results were referred to as average (medium).

The questionnaire used in the diagnostic survey was written in Polish, Portuguese and English language versions by the authors and referred to the use of social media, collaborative learning with regard to the Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) model and interpersonal competences. For the purposes of this article, results on opinions on OCL and collaborative learning were identified and collected on the basis of closed-cafeteria questions.

3. Results

The results collected from the responses from future pedagogues, educators and teachers in the Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire were quantified, the raw scores were calculated and referred to the T-score scales, and some statistical parameters were calculated.

The respondents achieved the highest level of competence in the Portuguese group in terms of Emotional Support (EW), Conflict Management and Resolution (RK) and Negative Assertion—Asserting Influence (AO). Among Polish respondents, the highest level of interpersonal competences was observed for Conflict Management and Resolution (RK), Disclosure (US) and Initiation (IR). In the Polish group, Emotional Support (EW) was the lowest. Therefore, the results on this scale are utterly opposite in the two studied groups. The most significant correlation in the Portuguese group (medium relationship) was found between AO and EW, US and EW and EW and RK. Among Polish students, an average relationship was observed only between IR and AO. Details on this aspect and the analysis of the responses obtained in the questionnaire are presented below in the text and the tables.

Table 1 shows the level of Portuguese respondents' interpersonal competences in five domains. At the highest level of competence (median = 58.00) at a significantly elevated level (>60 T) the respondents present in relation to the assistance attitude in a relationship,

providing help and support to other people (EW). In this case, the most numerous group, which was 48.08%, represents a significantly elevated level. In other domains, competences were mainly at a medium level (40–60 T), with the lowest level referring to initiating relations and interactions with other people (IR), where as many as 28.85% of the subjects demonstrated a low level in this regard, and it was high for only 3.85%.

Table 1. Levels of interpersonal competences among students of Universidade de Madeira (N = 104).

	Percentage (%) and Number (N) of the Respondents at the Respective Levels of Competences Portugal—T-Score Scale (N = 104)										
	IR T-scores %/N	AO T-scores code	US T-scores code	EW T-scores code	RK T-scores code	T-score range		max. competences		min. competences	
1	28.85% (30)	10.58% (11)	9.62% (10)	5.77% (6)	5.77% (6)	<40	low level	28.85%	IR	5.77%	RK
2	67.31% (70)	69.23% (72)	77.88% (81)	46.15% (48)	64.42% (67)	40–60	medium level	77.88%	US	46.15%	EW
3	3.85% (4)	20.19% (21)	12.50% (13)	48.08% (50)	29.81% (31)	>60	high level	48.08%	EW	3.85%	IR
	100% (104)	100% (104)	100% (104)	100% (104)	100% (104)						
T-score median	43.00	52.00	50.00	58.00	53.00						

In the domain of resolving conflicts without a fight (RK), 28.81% of the respondents presented a high level and 64.42% demonstrated a medium level. This is the second relatively highest result, because only 5.77% of the subjects had a low level in this domain, and it is the same result as in the highest represented domain, i.e., EW.

The results for Polish students are presented in Table 2. The respondents did not demonstrate a dominantly high level in any of the domains of interpersonal competences. For the four domains, Initiation (IR), Asserting Influence (AO), Disclosure (US) and Conflict Management (RK), the average and the largest number of the subjects represent this level.

Table 2. Levels of interpersonal competences among students at the University of Silesia (N = 172).

	Percentage (%) and Number (N) of the Respondents at the Respective Levels of Competences Poland—T-Score Scale (N = 172)										
	IR	AO	US	EW	RK	T-scores		max. competences		min. competences	
1	10.47%	24.42%	6.40%	52.91%	16.28%	<40	low level	52.91%	IR	6.40%	RK
2	63.95%	61.05%	66.28%	43.02%	48.84%	40–60	medium level	66.28%	US	43.02%	EW
3	25.58%	14.53%	27.33%	4.07%	34.88%	>60	high level	34.88%	EW	4.07%	IR
Median	100.00% 51.00	100.00% 48.00	100.00% 52.00	100.00% 39.00	100.00% 53.00						

In the case of Emotional Support (EW), the largest percentage of the respondents, 52.91%, represents a low level, whereas the high level was only 4.07%. The median of this range was 39.00, which is the lowest value among Polish students in contrast with the highest value of this domain 58.00 among Portuguese respondents.

Overall, the Polish students represented the highest interpersonal competences in the domains of Management and Resolution (RK) and Disclosure (US), while the Portuguese students demonstrated the highest competences in the domains of Emotional Support (EW) and Conflict Management and Resolution (RK).

A linear correlation coefficient between the variables, i.e., domains of interpersonal competences, was calculated on the basis of the results. Two hypotheses were defined: Hypothesis H_0, which states that there is no linear relationship between the variables, and Hypothesis H_1, stating that there is a linear relationship between the variables. For the results of the Madeira students (Table 3), the critical value of the test statistics is

t* = 1.983495. The critical value of the linear correlation coefficient is r* = 0.193. Given that if the inequality |r| < r* is met, there are no grounds to reject Hypothesis H_o, otherwise we reject Hypothesis H_0 and assume H_1 as the true one on the basis of the results in Table 3; only the lack of a linear relationship between IR and RK competences can be concluded. In other cases, there is a relationship. Between the domains AO and EW and US and EW as well as EW and RK this is a medium relationship. Between IR and AO; IR and EW; and AO and US the relationship is weak and in other cases very weak.

Table 3. Correlation between domains of interpersonal competences among the students at Universidade de Madeira (N = 104).

Portugal						
Linear Correlation Coefficient *r* between Variables						
	IR	**AO**	**US**	**EW**	**RK**	number of observations
IR	1					*n* = 104.00
AO	0.348	1				
US	0.446	0.443	1			
EW	0.294	0.536	0.456	1		
RK	0.192	0.261	0.296	0.572	1	

The linear correlation results for the variables in the group of students in Poland are shown in Table 4. The critical value of the test statistics is t* = 1.983495. The critical value of the linear correlation coefficient is r* = 0.150. As shown in the data in Table 4, there is no linear relationship between the competences of US and RK; IR and RK; AO and EW; AO and RK. The linear relationship between IR and AO is medium. The relationship between the levels of interpersonal competences of IR and US as well as AO and US should be assessed as weak. Other relationships should be defined as very weak.

Table 4. Correlation between domains of interpersonal competences among the students at the University of Silesia in Katowice (N = 172).

Poland						
Linear Correlation Coefficient *r* between Variables						
	IR	**AO**	**US**	**EW**	**RK**	
IR	1					number of observations
AO	0.53109689	1				*n*= 172.00
US	0.37647026	0.349636	1			
EW	0.16515401	0.077533	0.164892	1		
RK	0.05675054	0.0222	−0.0133	0.237878	1	

A part of the survey submitted to the respondents included closed questions about opinions on the OCL. The students from Poland and Portugal were asked if they would like to be a member of a group that would learn together in a virtual environment according to the Online Collaborative Learning model and whether the OCL strategy should be implemented as part of their courses of study (Table 5).

Table 5. Breakdown of answers given by the Polish and Portuguese respondents to the OCL survey according to the level of interpersonal competences in the five dimensions (N = 276).

Competence dimension															
	Do You Think That Using the Online Collaborative Learning Strategy Should Be Implemented as Part of the Course You Are Taking and That Students Should Be Encouraged to Participate in This Form?														
	Number of Respondents														
	IR			AO			US			EW			RK		
Answers given in the survey	yes	no	I do not know	yes	no	I do not know	yes	no	I do not know	Yes	No	I do not know	yes	no	I do not know
Competence level															
low level	15	10	23	20	10	23	7	2	12	49	14	34	19	7	8
medium level	90	22	68	91	17	69	98	25	72	58	14	50	74	19	58
hight level	31	3	14	25	8	13	31	8	21	29	7	21	43	9	39
Total	136	35	105	136	35	105	136	35	105	136	35	105	136	35	105
	Would you like to be a member of a group that learns online together?														
low level	16	12	20	32	8	13	9	3	9	55	11	31	19	5	10
medium level	88	23	69	76	25	76	94	30	71	54	19	49	64	26	61
hight level	25	8	15	21	10	15	26	10	24	20	13	24	46	12	33
Total	129	43	104	129	43	104	129	43	104	129	43	104	129	43	104

The greatest number of the respondents, i.e., 136 (49.27%) provided a positive answer. A total of 35 people (19.88%) believed that OCL should not be implemented in their courses of study. A large group of 105 (38.04%) of the subjects had no opinion on this topic.

Referring to the second part of the question, 129 (46.73%) of the surveyed students wanted to be a member of a group of online learners, and the affirmative answer was most often chosen. 4A total of 3 (15.57%) respondents were of the opposite opinion, and again a fairly large group was represented by students who do not have a clear view on this issue, i.e., 104 respondents (37.68%). Table 5 shows a detailed breakdown of answers by high, medium and low level of interpersonal competences in their respective dimensions.

At a later stage, a correlation was defined between the level of interpersonal competences in each of the five domains among all the respondents taking part in the study and the opinion on OCL. For each dimension of interpersonal competences, the Chi-square statistics and Cramér's V coefficient were calculated. The competence level was defined as variable X, and the answer to the question in the survey was defined as variable Y. Hypothesis Ho was assumed, stating that there is no relationship between variable X and variable Y, and Hypothesis H_1 stated that the relationship between the variables X and Y does occur. As Table 6 shows, there is a relationship between the opinion on the implementation of OCL in the course of study and the level of interpersonal competences in the domains of Initiation (IR) and Negative Assertion—Asserting Influence (AO).

Table 6. Correlation between competence dimensions (X) and OCL survey answers (Y) among the Polish and Portuguese respondents (N = 276).

Competence Dimension	IR	AO	US	EW	RK	Competence Dimension	IR	AO	US	EW	RK
	Do You Think That Using the Online Collaborative Learning Strategy Should Be Implemented as Part of the Course You Are Taking and That Students Should Be Encouraged to Participate in This Form?						**Would You Like to Be a Member of a Group That Learns Online Together?**				
Chi-Square	11.81	7.16	3.60	1.04	5.06	Chi-Square	6.74	8.08	0.70	8.24	3.08
Df	2	2	2	2	2	Df	2	2	2	2	2
p-value	0.00	0.03	0.17	0.59	0.08	*p*-value	0.03	0.02	0.71	0.02	0.21
Cramér's V coefficient	0.15	0.11	0.08	0.04	0.10	Cramér's V coefficient	0.11	0.12	0.04	0.12	0.07

As for a question in the survey about the willingness or unwillingness to participate in an online group of learners, it was demonstrated that there is a relationship between the level of interpersonal competences in relation to the three aspects: Initiation (IR), Negative

Assertion—Asserting Influence (AO) and Emotional Support (EW), and the declared answer to this question.

In other cases, there is no reason to reject Hypothesis Ho saying that there is no relationship between variable X and variable Y.

4. Discussion

Summing up the results and referring to the defined research problems, it should be noted that for the majority of the respondents in Poland and Portugal, the medium level of interpersonal competences prevails in the defined five dimensions. In the case of Madeira pedagogical and educational course students, the highest level of competences was in terms of skills and readiness to provide emotional support to others (EW), conflict resolution without fighting (RK) and assertive behaviour in relation to others (AO). For the first domain listed, most of the subjects represented a significantly high level, and for the remaining part, the level was medium. The Portuguese students represented the lowest level of competency in Initiation (IR), but also in this case the majority of the respondents had a medium level in this dimension.

For future educators, pedagogues and teachers from Poland, the highest level of interpersonal competences among the respondents was based on the following dimensions: problem solving without fighting (RK), disclosure (US) and initiation of interaction and relations (IR), with all dimensions at a medium level. The young Poles demonstrated the lowest level of competences in terms of emotional support provided to others (EW)—the largest number of the respondents showed a low level in this dimension.

It should be emphasized that the result of Portugal and Poland is similar in the case of the conflict resolutions (RK) dimension. In both groups, the competence is at a relatively high level. Portugal is entirely different from Poland in terms of emotional support to others (EW) dimension. Portuguese respondents obtained the highest level here, and the Polish obtained the lowest. This is quite the opposite result as compared Polish respondents to the Portuguese respondents.

Earlier research has shown that emotional support is one of the key elements in group work in online learning environment [41]. Emotional support is an element much expected by students from their peers and the teacher [20]. Polish respondents may have a big problem in this area. Perhaps training in showing support is needed. In the sample, the students from Portugal demonstrated a greater potential in this area. The level of interpersonal competences is important in the context of group activities and work both in face-to-face contact and in distance work. The higher the level in each dimension, the easier it will be for the group members to build relational ties and collective ties, which affect the tendency towards group support and group assistance activities. If such ties are weakened, the efforts made for the benefit of the group [42] become lower. For OCL, group support activities are an important component of the educational success. On the other hand, in comparison to individual learning, collaborative learning—including through space and web tools—has a positive impact on socialisation and skills development, e.g., creative problem solving in a group [43]. The level of interpersonal competences can also be correlated in general with relations built towards support, mutual understanding, cooperation and assistance [44]. Respondents in both surveyed countries obtained relatively high results in conflict resolution without fighting dimension. Resolving conflicts without quarrels and managing the conflict is essential in designing and conducting online education [17,18], as can also be assumed in the OCL model. As future teachers and educators, both the Portuguese and Polish respondents showed great potential in this area. This is a good prognosis for their future professional career.

With regard to the second research issue, it should be noted that the correlation between the various dimensions of interpersonal competences was more visible in the Portuguese group. According to the authors of the original research tool, Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg and Reis, it is very likely that people who are competent in one dimension or context are prone to acquiring higher skills also in other domains, as one may

gain insight from another [30]. In the sample, the relationships between dimensions were very weak, weak and medium. There were no strong relationships recorded.

With regard to the third research issue, it should be noted that most of the respondents wanted Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) to be implemented in their courses of study. Polish and Portuguese respondents presented similar opinions. However, a significant percentage of the subjects could not give a clear answer to this question. Perhaps there is still little knowledge on the practical strategies for action in this model. In putting OCL into practice, this aspect should be taken into account in a broader sense, as attitudes, perceived usefulness and perceived potential enjoyment have a positive influence on the online collaborative work situation [45]. At the same time, after analysing the answers obtained to this question, it must be admitted that a large number of respondents who did not have an unambiguous opinion may have been influenced by an overly complex question in the survey. It is very possible a high percentage of respondents who 'did not know' may have answered differently if that question had been divided into two parts.

In the second aspect, the largest group of the respondents was represented by the students who would wish to participate in the online learning group. This is a positive result given that the current trends in higher education didactics imply not only face-to-face but also hybrid and distance teaching. This is linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the trend in higher education institutions indicates that universities may stick to this formula even after the pandemic has ended [21–23,46]. This is very likely given that even before 2020, many universities offered part of their overall teacher training programmes or specific courses in the online mode [47]. At the same time, as the authors' own studies show a large percentage, i.e., as many as 37.68% of the total number of the respondents, do not have a clear view on this issue. This may be due to some ambivalent approach to F2F learning and online/blended learning. As other studies show, in general, students tend to prefer in-contact activities, but in the face of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the option of distance and hybrid education is perceived much more positively [48].

Statistical analyses show that there is a correlation between the opinion on OCL and the willingness to participate in an online learning group, and the level of competences of Initiation (IR) and Negative Assertion—Asserting Influence (AO). Other studies stress the influence of a high level of teacher–student and student–student interaction in a group on the effectiveness of group learning [49]. In the authors' own studies, the relationship between the level of competency to initiate such a relation and the willingness to participate in an online learning group has been confirmed.

The theoretical implications of the studies relate to the Online Collaborative Learning model by Harasim [24,50–52] and extend the findings in this respect, referring to the latest version of the concept, collaborativism. Collaborativism is based on an integral inclusion of virtual educational applications and online media in the teaching process, which is unlimited in time and space, where students work together to find new solutions to problems and tasks [25].

The research results can be a guide for policymakers who create education and training programs for teachers and educators. Both interpersonal competency programs and OCL in practice should be included there.

Based on own analyses, one can also draw conclusions about the importance of broader priorities in education related to cooperation, communication and showing emotional support, especially when a crisis causes the partial or complete implementation of online education in higher education. This applies to all fields of study, but in particular to humanities and social studies for future educators and educators, who in the future will most likely implement the OCL model in formal and informal education themselves.

The results of the studies have some limitations—the determination of the attitude to OCL was investigated in declaratory terms as an opinion survey. Only a limited sample of students preparing for the teaching profession took part in the study, from among two selected leading higher education centres in the main cities of the region concerned, namely Funchal in the Autonomous Region of Madeira (the only university in Madeira)

and in Katowice, Silesian Province (leading public university in Katowice in the area of preparation of future pedagogues). Due to the nature of educational and pedagogical courses, female students dominated both in Portugal and Poland.

Perhaps an extension of the research group and further investigation of this aspect using elements of the experimental method would be a good direction for further explorations. Another possible wide range of scientific explorations that could be included is the verification of the benefits on which researchers agree upon with regard to traditional cooperative learning, such as: building ties and respect between people, increasing tolerance, increasing skills to work effectively with others, increasing self-esteem, making friends more easily and improving acceptance of people with disabilities in the group [53] and transferring this to the online sphere. The verification of whether the same benefits of cooperation in the group relate to education together in online communities would make it possible to draw practical conclusions on the future implementation of collaborativism in the course programmes in universities or in school education.

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