



“Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills”

Executive summary

What are the skills that drive well-being and social progress? Policy makers, including eleven Education Ministers and Vice-Ministers, discussed this question at the OECD’s informal Ministerial meeting on *Skills for Social Progress* in Sao Paulo, Brazil on 23-24 March 2014. They unanimously agreed on the need to develop a “whole child” with a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills so that they can better face the challenges of the 21st century. Parents, teachers and employers know that children who are talented, motivated, goal-driven and collegial are more likely to weather the storms of life, perform well in the labour market and consequently achieve lifetime success. Yet, there are considerable differences across countries and local jurisdictions in the availability of policies and programmes designed to measure and enhance social and emotional skills such as perseverance, self-esteem and sociability. Teachers and parents may not know if their efforts at developing these skills are paying off, and what they could do better. These skills are seldom taken into account in school and university admission decisions.

One possible reason behind these gaps is the perception that social and emotional skills are hard to measure. While measuring these skills reliably is indeed challenging, recent developments in psychosocial assessments point to a number of instruments that can be used to reliably measure relevant social and emotional skills within a culture or linguistic boundary, and they are already employed in selected local school districts. Another reason for these gaps may come from the perception that social and emotional skills are hard to improve, particularly through formal schooling. The good news is that at least some of the essential social and emotional skills are malleable, and policy makers, teachers and parents can play a pivotal role by improving learning environments to enhance these skills.

This report presents a synthesis of the OECD empirical work that aims at identifying the types of social and emotional skills that drive children’s future outcomes. It also describes evidence on how policy makers, schools and families facilitate social and emotional skills development through teaching practices, parenting and intervention programmes. This report investigates how policy makers and schools are currently responding to the demands for monitoring, and enhancing social and emotional skills. It concludes by questioning whether education stakeholders can do more to better develop and mobilise these skills. The following items provide a summary of the main findings.

Children need a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills for achieving positive life outcomes

Evidence from an analysis of longitudinal studies in nine OECD countries shows that both cognitive and social and emotional skills play a significant role in improving economic and social outcomes. Raising children’s levels of cognitive skills — as measured by literacy, academic achievement tests and academic grades — can have a particularly strong effect on tertiary-education attendance and labour market outcomes. Raising levels of social and emotional skills — such as perseverance, self-esteem and sociability — can in turn have a particularly strong effect on improving health-related

outcomes and subjective well-being, as well as reducing anti-social behaviours. Results show that conscientiousness, sociability and emotional stability are among the important dimensions of social and emotional skills that affect children's future prospects. Social and emotional skills do not play a role in isolation, they interact with cognitive skills, cross-fertilise, and further enhance children's likelihood of achieving positive outcomes later in life.

Teachers and parents can help improve children's social and emotional skills by promoting strong relationships with children and mobilising practical learning experiences

Contrary to popular misconception, children are not born with a fixed set of abilities. Some important skills are malleable and there are roles for policy makers, teachers and parents to play in improving the learning environments in which they develop. This report suggests that promoting strong relationships between educators (e.g. parents, teachers and mentors) and children, mobilising real-life examples and practical experience in existing curricular activities, and emphasising hands-on learning in extracurricular activities figure among the effective approaches to enhance their sense of responsibility, capacity to work in a team and self-confidence. Successful early childhood intervention programmes that target disadvantaged families involve parents through training programmes. Programmes aimed at older children emphasise teachers' professional development. Among adolescents, mentoring appears to be particularly important, while hands-on workplace experiences can instil skills like team work, self-efficacy and motivation. Improvements in learning contexts and practices do not necessarily require major reforms or resources. Rather, they can be incorporated into ongoing curricular and extracurricular activities.

As "skills beget skills", early interventions in social and emotional skills can play an important role in efficiently raising skills and reducing educational, labour market and social disparities

Social and emotional skills are relatively more malleable between early childhood and adolescence. Early investment in social and emotional skills is particularly important since these skills develop progressively building on past investments made on these skills. Moreover, those with higher levels of social and emotional skills (e.g. self-confidence and perseverance) are likely to benefit more from further investment in cognitive skills (e.g. maths and science classes). Hence, small ability gaps early in life can lead to significant gaps over the life cycle, and these skill gaps may contribute to worsening economic and social disparities. Intervention and large-scale longitudinal studies, provide evidence on the positive impact of early and continuous investment in social and emotional skills on improving the socio-economic prospects of disadvantaged populations.

Social and emotional skills can be reliably measured within a culture or linguistic boundary

There are reliable measures of social and emotional skills that can be used across age groups at least within a cultural and linguistic boundary. They include self-reported personality, behavioural characteristics and objective psychological assessments. Some of these measures have been demonstrated to predict numerous indicators of educational, labour market and social success. They can provide teachers and parents with a chance to identify the need to adapt teaching and parenting practices to enhance the social and emotional skills that matter. However, more efforts need to be made to identify relevant social and emotional skills constructs and improve measurement instruments so that they are robust to inter-cultural and linguistic diversities and response styles. The OECD will continue contributing to this process by building on efforts made in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as well as the new phase of the ESP project which will focus on assessing the distribution and development of social and emotional skills.

Education stakeholders would benefit from receiving information on what works and guidelines to help foster children's socio-emotional development

OECD countries and partner economies generally recognise the importance of developing social and emotional skills through schooling. Countries differ, however, in their approaches to fostering these skills. Moreover, there are big gaps between stakeholders' knowledge, expectations and capabilities on how best to mobilise children's social and emotional skills. Widely disseminating detailed evidence-based guidelines would help reduce these gaps and encourage those teachers who may have limited information and experience.

Stakeholders need to work together to ensure that children achieve lifetime success and contribute to social progress

Policy makers, teachers, parents and researchers can help expand children's growth potential by actively engaging in skill development within the domains that they are responsible for. However, given that "skills beget skills", education policies and programmes need to ensure coherence across learning contexts (i.e. family, school and the community) and stages of school progression (i.e. across primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schooling). This is an important way to maximise the returns to skills investment over the life cycle.

Follow-up

To discuss the OECD's work on Education and Social Progress, please contact:

Koji Miyamoto, Author and project leader
(for questions in English)

Tel: +33 1 45 24 85 52

Email: koji.miyamoto@oecd.org

Maria Huerta, Author and analyst
(for questions in French and Spanish)

Tel: +33 1 45 24 96 12

Email: maria.huerta@oecd.org

Hiroko Ikesako Author and research assistant
(for questions in Japanese)

Tel: +33 1 45 24 94 62

Email: hiroko.ikesako@oecd.org

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