

Component 2

Social and emotional learning for students

Summary of the literature



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The most significant influence on the development of social and emotional competencies lies within children's various developmental and ecological contexts, the most significant being home, school and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Within these contexts, it is the relationships between the child and the most important people in their lives such as parents, carers, teachers and peers which have been found to be the most important for developing social and emotional competencies (Denham, 2007; Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001). Schools offer a unique social context ideally placed to foster social and emotional learning alongside academic learning. This is due to children of primary school age spending the majority of their time at school, (Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2004).

Individuals who understand and accurately perceive their own emotions and the emotions of others, who utilise their emotions in decision making, and successfully integrate their own emotions are considered to demonstrate social and emotional competence. These individuals are more likely to enjoy positive mental health and wellbeing. The development of social and emotional skills plays an important role in promoting children's mental health and wellbeing while also supporting their academic learning. KidsMatter Primary recognises the opportunities for schools and families to work together in supporting the development of children's social and emotional competencies and Component 2 prioritises this work. It is acknowledged that this will occur most successfully when the features of a positive school community are present.

Social and emotional learning for all students

Social and emotional learning broadly refers to "the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve important life tasks" (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007). This learning promotes mental health and wellbeing, as the development of social and emotional competencies will enhance their capacity to enjoy and benefit from satisfying family life, relationships and educational opportunities. They will increase their ability to contribute to society in age-appropriate ways. Mentally healthy children are also free from problems with emotions, behaviours or social

relationships that are sufficiently marked or prolonged that lead to suffering or risk to optimal development in the child or distress or disturbance in the family (Raphael, 2000). It is evident therefore that the ongoing development of social and emotional competency is inherently related to mental health in childhood. The development of social and emotional competence can also support children's resilience during adverse events. Along with supportive relationships, skills such as effective problem-solving, affect self-regulation skills and a positive view of oneself have been found to increase resilience (Eriksson, Cater, Andershed, & Andershed, 2010).

The development of social and emotional competencies is considered a dynamic social learning process beginning from birth and continuing across the lifespan (Heckman, 2000; Halberstadt, Denham, & Dunsmore, 2001; Katz, 1996). During the primary school years, social and emotional development revolves around a child's increasing capacity to recognise and autonomously regulate their emotions, moving away from complete reliance on an adult to facilitate this process. The emotions being experienced and expressed become more sophisticated over time. Social relationships expand and children develop greater capacity to initiate and regulate interactions with peers and adults outside of the family are characteristic of this period. It is useful to note that while increasingly autonomous in this stage of development, primary school aged children still draw on reliable and responsive adult relationships to help navigate difficult circumstances and moderate their emotional responses (Denham, 2007; Carr, 2011; Duby, 2011).

The process of social and emotional development is embedded in specific cultural understandings, perceptions and expectations. Social and emotional behaviour, and what is encouraged or discouraged through development, is substantially shaped by culture. For example, sociability, independence and assertiveness are considered to be highly valued qualities in western cultures, but not necessarily encouraged or accepted universally (Rubin, 1998). When little or no cultural consideration is given, significant misunderstandings can occur about a child's behaviour and social and emotional competence (Rogoff, 2003).

Effective social and emotional learning curriculum for all students

Research suggests that children who are socially and emotionally competent, having well-developed relationship skills and social awareness, experience

improved academic outcomes (Malecki, & Elliott, 2002). Social and emotional competence has been found to predict improved academic outcomes during primary school, even after controlling for previous achievement and IQ (Teo, Carlson, Mathieu, Egeland, & Srouf, 1996). In addition to enhanced academic outcomes, decreased absences and disciplinary referrals have also been found (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

With the expanding research base indicating a reciprocal relationship between social and emotional learning and academic learning, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social and emotional learning in national and international education policy. In Australia, for example, social and emotional goals are now included in policy as part of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). This inclusion and incorporation into the Australian Curriculum recognises the important role that schools play in explicitly including the development of these skills in the day to day lives of students.

Studies have found that the implementation of social and emotional learning programs in schools benefits children in three main areas: their attitudes, behaviour and performance in school (Schaeffer et al, 2005). Durlak et al (2011) identified a number of ways in which social and emotional learning may help academic learning, including: students who are more self aware and confident about their learning capacities are likely to try harder and persist in the face of challenges; students who set high academic goals are able to motivate themselves, manage their stress and organise their approach to work, learn more and get better grades; students who use problem solving skills to overcome obstacles and make responsible decisions about studying and completing homework do better academically.

The teaching of social and emotional competencies has been informed by a significant research base. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), one of the leading international authorities on social and emotional learning research, policy and practice, recommends “that schools use evidence-based classroom social and emotional learning programs as a core component of their efforts to promote students’ social, emotional and academic learning. When implemented well, these programs have a documented record of significantly improving school climate as well as students’ behaviour and academic performance” (2012, p. 6). CASEL identified five key competency areas that are associated with the basic skills for negotiating

school, work and life tasks effectively: self awareness (understanding self, including emotions, values, personal strengths and limitations); self management (recognising and managing emotions and behaviours in order to achieve goals); social awareness (showing understanding and empathy for others); relationship skills (formation of positive relationships, ability to work in teams and effectively deal with conflict); and responsible decision making (ability to make ethical and constructive choices about personal and social behaviour). Although presented as discrete concepts, in practice they overlap and are utilised not independently of one another but in concert. For further information see www.casel.org.

The recommended practice for teaching social and emotional learning is through regular, structured, formal instruction, embedded within the curriculum across all year levels. This should then be reinforced through the opportunity for skills to be generalised beyond the classroom in everyday interactions that occur across a school day (Kress & Elias, 2007; Elbertson, Brackett & Weissberg, 2009). Program choice, method of implementation and embedding social and emotional learning programs in a broader context of a positive school community are contributing factors to achieving the desired positive effects associated with implementing a program. Factors such as the cost of implementation, availability of resources, access to training and availability of implementation materials are likely and necessary considerations for schools when determining their social and emotional learning curriculum (Forman & Barakat, 2011).

Schools will also want to ensure that the time and resources invested in a program will be well spent and have the desired outcomes. Accordingly, a sound evidence for its efficacy and effectiveness will want to be considered. KidsMatter provides a Program Guide which reviews programs available in Australia to assist schools in their choice of programs (www.kidsmatter.edu.au). Once a program is selected, regular internal evaluation of the program’s effectiveness within the school is also recommended to monitor whether the intervention is providing benefits in comparison to what was typically or previously provided (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007). For most benefit, programs need to “fit” with the school’s mission, values, goals, and curriculum as well as cultural expectations of the school community (Forman & Barakat, 2011). This requires appropriate adaptations without losing those aspects of the program that are required to be maintained in order for successful implementation to occur.

Given the significant influence the family has on the development of children's social and emotional competence, the involvement of family in school based social and emotional learning is fundamental (Reinke, Splett, Robeson & Offutt, 2009). As with other student learning, working collaboratively with families is more likely to yield substantial and sustained improvements for children's learning and behaviour (Elias, 2003; Stormshak, Dishion, Light & Yasui, 2005). This collaboration can take into account factors such as family background, cultural norms and values of families in their school community.

Opportunities for children to practise and transfer their social and emotional skills

Just as the teacher-student relationship shapes academic learning, so it does with social and emotional learning. A teacher's influence on student social and emotional learning is not only related to what is taught or the teaching process, it is also about how teachers relate and interact with students on a day to day basis (Lochman, Powell, Boxmeyer, Qu & Wells, 2008). Adults in schools are role models for children and will be providing input to children's understandings of social and emotional skills through their daily witnessing of adult behaviours and interactions. Within everyday interactions at school, students can see and hear how school staff and other students think through ideas and resolve problems, providing incidental and reinforcing learning opportunities, consistent with the idea that whenever an adult responds to one student, many more will learn a lesson (Goleman, 1995). School staff members who have well developed social and emotional skills are better able to reflect on their own judgements and emotional responses to challenging situations (Chang & Davis, 2009). Teacher ratings of children's social and emotional competence have been found to significantly influenced by the teacher's own cultural background and culturally embedded expectations (Han, 2010). The priority by the school of ongoing professional development systems and supports to develop staff skills, including awareness of cultural impacts, will assist staff to integrate social and emotional learning with academic learning (CASEL, 2012).

School wide factors such as discipline policies, structures and procedures which influence children's development directly need to be consistent with programs' messages. Given these factors it is important for school leadership and staff

to support the effective implementation of programs and to model the language and practices established in the classroom (CASEL, 2012).

Co-operative or collaborative learning methods, involving students working in small groups or teams to help one another and achieve shared learning goals, provides obvious opportunities within the classroom for children to practise their social and emotional learning skills. Research indicates that co-operative learning methods will be most successful when cooperation is the foundation on which classroom and school life is based, again supporting that a positive school community is fundamental (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1986).

Parents and carers who are emotionally reflective and manage their emotions well, and who through their interactions with their children convey an understanding of emotions and appropriate ways to express and manage feelings, support the development of these same competencies in their children (Denham, 2007; Halberstadt, Denham & Dunsmore, 2001; Denham, 1993). In order to help students improve social and emotional learning competencies, family members will benefit from access to information on social and emotional competencies, and strategies for supporting social and emotional learning in the home. KidsMatter provides a range of information sheets for parents and carers for this purpose (www.kidsmatter.edu.au). Schools can keep families informed of social and emotional learning program implementation and outcomes, including them in relevant activities and events to reinforce messages so that children may be able to receive consistency across school and home settings.

Conclusion

Social and emotional competence forms an integral aspect of mental health and wellbeing, as well as effective teaching and learning more broadly. Social and emotional learning can form part of the school curriculum with skills that can be formally taught. Effective social and emotional learning best occurs within a positive school community, where relationships between staff and students are respectful and responsive, and where the social and emotional skills being taught are modelled and practised in everyday interactions between all members of the school community. Together, the formal teaching of social and emotional skills, their naturalistic modelling and system application throughout the school, and generalisation beyond the school with the support of parents serve to support children's mental health and wellbeing.

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