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Assessing social and emotional skills

In this edited version of her presentation at ACER's Research Conference Dr Sue Thomson looks at the assessment of social and emotional skills in an increasingly fast-changing and diverse world.

The importance of developing social and emotional skills is becoming clear, with evidence showing that these skills have strong relationships with life outcomes and are a key component of 21st century skills.

A growing number of countries and economies participate in large-scale assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The performance of students in mathematics, science and reading on these tests has an influence on education policy. Sometimes it's just the published rankings in the form of league tables that have the influence. However, though large-scale international assessments can influence national education policy, they sometimes fail to capture the underlying traits that really matter.

There seems to be an increasing recognition by policymakers that social and emotional skills are important, prompting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to commission work to provide policymakers with valid, reliable, and comparable information on social and emotional skills.

The OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills is a new international assessment of students at primary and secondary schools. The study also gathers information on students' families, schools and community learning contexts, aiming to provide information about the conditions or practices that foster or hinder the development of these critical skills.

What are social and emotional skills?

Research has shown that education is an important predictor for success in life – leading to higher levels of tertiary education completion, better job outcomes, and higher salaries. It has also shown the importance of social and emotional skills such as the ability to pursue long-term goals, work with others and manage emotions.

The development of cognitive, social and emotional skills interact. For example, children who have strongly developed skills in self-control or perseverance are more likely to finish reading a book, or finish their homework, which in turn contributes to further enhanced cognitive skills. As more education systems identify social and emotional skills as being of primary importance in the development of 21st century skills, there is a need to develop a set of metrics that can be used to enhance policies to improve the development and wellbeing of children and young people.

The OECD's view is that cognitive skills do not just involve applying knowledge, but also include the ability to reflect and engage in more complex thinking patterns. Measures of self-belief, motivation, expectations, and perseverance have been included in all of the major large-scale international assessments since their inception, and students' scores on these indices are used to help explain differences in achievement between students and between countries.

The OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills

The new OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills is underway, and has been created to capture valid, reliable and comparable information about these essential skills. The purposes of the study are to:

- provide participating cities and countries with information on the social and emotional skills of their students
- provide insights on how to support students to develop social and emotional skills
- demonstrate that valid, reliable, and comparable information on social and emotional skills can be produced across diverse populations and settings.

The study is aimed at 10-year-old and 15-year-old students. Students report on their social and emotional skills in both their home and school environment. In addition to the students' responses, parents of the selected students will provide a report on their child's social and emotional skills in the home environment, while a teacher who knows the student well will provide information about their social and emotional skills within the school environment. Asking both student age cohorts, teachers and parents to respond to the same items allows the domains to be compared in school and home contexts, as well as providing an insight into how social and emotional skills develop across childhood and adolescence.

As with many other large-scale studies, a range of contextual information is also sought. This includes family, school and community learning contexts and the background characteristics of students, teachers and parents.

Usually, an organiser of an international assessment only allows countries to participate; however, the OECD believes there is an increasing role for cities to take responsibility for the education of its citizens, as a number of cities now have relative autonomy over their

education system. The 11 sites participating in the study are in: Canada, China, Colombia, Finland, Italy, Portugal, Russia, South Korea, Turkey and the United States.



Students will respond on a five-point scale (strongly disagree through to strongly agree), about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that behaviours accurately described themselves.

Teachers and parents will be asked to respond in the same way to the same questions (for example *this student does not care what happens to other people, my child is helpful and unselfish with others*) to report on the student's social and emotional skills.

Students will complete a questionnaire about factors such as: wellbeing, attitudes and aspirations; family and peer relations (e.g. perceived treatment by mother/father, peer affiliation and social acceptance); school life (e.g. sense of belonging at school, bullying at school, cyberbullying).

The main study, in October and November 2019, involves a random sample of 3000 students for each of the two age cohorts in each participating city or country.

The results of the OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills in September 2020 should provide information and guidance for policy makers and educators about factors that can help the development of these critical skills.

[Read Dr Sue Thomson's full paper](https://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2019/5august/4/)

(https://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference/RC2019/5august/4/) from ACER's *Research Conference 2019: Preparing students for life in the 21st Century: Identifying, developing and assessing what matters*, which was held in Melbourne in August.

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