

Fostering Social and Emotional Skills for Well-Being and Social Progress

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Introduction

What are the skills that drive individual well-being and social progress? Policy-makers, including 11 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 and 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 individuals could better face the challenges of the 21st century. Parents, teachers and employers also know that children and young people who are motivated, goal-driven and collegial are likely to perform well in school and in the labour market; have positive relationships; weather the storms of life; and, consequently, achieve positive lifetime outcomes. 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 achieving goals, managing emotions and working with others.

The research community has started to generate information on the social and emotional skills that matter for children's future outcomes and how to raise these. Objective evidence based on large-scale longitudinal studies and intervention programmes offers useful insights. Nevertheless, this knowledge is not yet widely shared among the policy and practitioner community. Teachers' experience and parents' know-how also provide important guidance on the way in which children's social and emotional skills can be raised. Hence, exchanges between education stakeholders can help to bridge the gaps between educational practice and research.

One possible reason behind the gaps between knowledge, expectations and practices of social and emotional learning may be the perception that socio-emotional skills are difficult to improve, particularly through formal schooling. However, empirical evidence shows that these kind of skills are malleable and that policy-makers, teachers and parents can play a pivotal role by improving learning environments to enhance these skills (Almlund *et al.*, 2011). A second reason may be the impression among school principals and teachers that investing in such skills involves significant additional efforts, training and resources. Yet, the experience in some countries suggests that this need not be the case. A third reason may be the perception that social and emotional skills are difficult to measure. While measuring these skills is indeed challenging, recent developments in psycho-social 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. What is more, these measures are already used in selected local school districts.

The next section provides an overview of OECD's empirical work on identifying the skills that drive children's future outcomes (OECD, 2015). The third section describes how policy-makers, schools and families acknowledge the importance of fostering social and emotional skills development and the gap with the

available teaching practices, parenting and intervention programmes. The article then presents the OECD's approach to the study of social and emotional skills and the underlying conceptual framework developed to describe the relationships between learning contexts, skills and outcomes. The final section highlights future work in this area.

Evidence on the Importance of Social and Emotional Skills for Positive Lifetime Outcomes

Evidence from the OECD's longitudinal analyses¹ on the effects of skills on socio-economic outcomes and the empirical literature suggest that social and emotional skills, together with cognitive skills, play an important role in driving children's lifetime success (OECD, 2015). Social and emotional skills, also known as non-cognitive skills, soft skills or character skills, are involved in achieving goals, working with others and managing emotions. One of the main messages of these analyses is that social and emotional skills are particularly effective in improving many measures of social outcomes, whilst cognitive skills are particularly important drivers of tertiary education and labour market outcomes (see Table I). These

TABLE I. Cognitive, social and emotional skills contribute to children's lifetime success

	Returns on skills		
	Education	Labour market	Social
Cognitive skills	High	High	Medium
Social and emotional skills	Low – Medium	Medium	High

Source: OECD (2015).

results are consistent with those from studies that examine similar effects of skills on subsequent outcomes (Heckman, Stixrud & Urzua, 2006; Heckman *et al.*, 2011).

The importance of both cognitive and social and emotional skills for future outcomes can be illustrated by OECD's longitudinal analysis of Switzerland's Transition from Education to Employment. The following results represent the simulated impact of raising cognitive ability and self-esteem of Swiss students who, during adolescence (at age 15), ranked in the lowest decile on measures of these skills. An increase in their cognitive ability to average levels would have significantly improved their self-reported life outcomes with a drop of 7 percentage points in incidence of depression (Figure 1), an increase of a 1 percentage point in anti-social behaviour (experiencing problems with the police and school delinquency) and an increase of 32 percentage points in completion of tertiary education. Simulations show further improvements of raising self-esteem with: a drop of 14 percentage points in depression at age 25, a drop of 3 percentage points in anti-social behaviour, and of 2 percentage points in completing tertiary education. Self-esteem is only one dimension of an adolescent's social and emotional skills. Its enhancement, however, can significantly improve future outcomes. In Switzerland, for example, self-esteem during adolescence has a greater impact on reducing depression than cognitive ability.

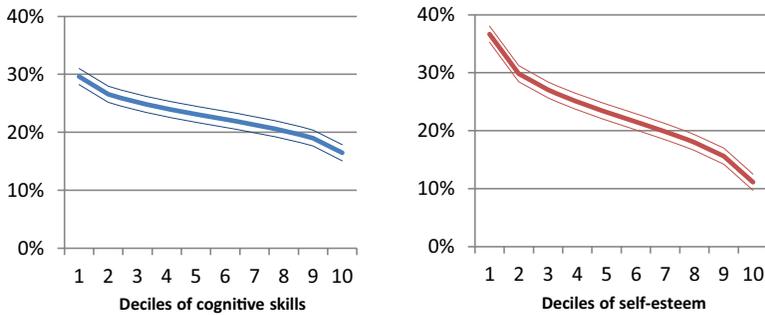


FIGURE 1. Probability of self-reported depression at age 25 in Switzerland, by deciles of cognitive skills and self-esteem

Note: Solid lines depict the probability of being in the top quartile of a depression scale at age 25 based on self-reports, and thin lines, 2.5–97.5% confidence intervals. Cognitive skills are captured by a latent cognitive skill factor using measures of PISA reading, maths and science scores at age 15. Self-esteem is captured by a latent factor estimated using measures of self-satisfaction, ‘acknowledgement of own good qualities’, and ‘confidence in doing things well’ at age 16. The depression scale was constructed using self-reported measures of positive and negative affectivity.

Source: OECD (2015)

The impact of social and emotional skills derives, in part, from their capacity to shape people’s behaviour and lifestyles and to benefit more from attending formal education and so better leverage their cognitive capabilities. Among the social and emotional skills that were measured and tested, conscientiousness (responsibility and persistence), sociability and emotional stability were among the most important dimensions that drove children’s future labour market and social prospects.

The empirical analyses show consistent findings, although they were based on longitudinal data from nine different countries using different measures of children’s skills and outcomes across different ages. Nevertheless, the impact of social and emotional skills on outcomes can vary, depending on the measure used. For instance, for Switzerland, while an increase in the level of children’s self-esteem and self-efficacy helped to reduce school delinquency and problems with the police at age 17, children’s persistence increased their chances of engaging in these experiences. This highlights the importance of taking a nuanced view of the empirical results. Having more of a particular skill does not necessarily help to improve all socio-economic outcomes. Instead, it is a combination of different cognitive and social and emotional skills that can help individuals to perform well across different life situations. Additionally, results showed that the effect of social and emotional skills on socio-economic outcomes could be heterogeneous across countries. While some skills may be effective in improving one outcome in a particular country, they may not be as effective in another. Cross-country differences occur not only because different indicators of social and emotional skills were used in the analysis, but also because of differences in the cultural settings. Some skills may be particularly effective in one culture, but less so in another. The OECD report adds evidence about the importance of social and emotional skills in driving individual’s future outcomes (OECD, 2015). However, it also shows the lack of international comparable data on skills development. As a result, the

OECD is preparing an international longitudinal study of skills to address this gap and better understand the type of skills that matter for children who are growing up in the 21st century and how learning contexts can help to develop these skills.

Gaps between Knowledge and Practices to Enhance Social and Emotional Skills

Education systems in OECD countries and partner economies acknowledge the need to develop students' social and emotional skills. Drawing on policy statements and education acts identified through country questionnaires and desk research by the OECD study, in all the surveyed countries, the general objectives of education include fostering social and emotional skills, such as autonomy, responsibility and the ability to co-operate (OECD, 2015). These objectives emphasise the holistic development of individuals and stress the importance of nurturing their personality, attitudes and values, as well as their knowledge and intellectual abilities. The emphasis on social and emotional skills in education policy statements is not new. Some of the education laws date back more than half a century, such as Japan's 1947 fundamental law on education (revised in 2006) and Austria's 1962 law on the organisation of schooling. These policy statements clearly set out the objectives of education as the development of well-rounded personalities and citizenship.

A good example of a curriculum framework with a strong social and emotional element is the Australian Curriculum for Foundation to Year 10. It identifies seven 'general capabilities' which include 'personal and social capability', 'ethical understanding' and 'intercultural understanding'. These capabilities are not added as specific subjects in the curriculum, but are addressed across all subjects. For example, the mathematics curriculum can enhance 'personal and social capability' by providing opportunities for taking initiatives, decision making, communicating processes and findings, and working independently and collaboratively in the mathematics classroom. Similarly, the study of English can help students to understand how language can be used to influence judgements about behaviour, speculate about consequences and influence opinions, or work in teams by preparing group assignments. Additionally, in most OECD countries, national or subnational curricula include subjects that are specifically aimed at developing students' social and emotional skills (Box 1). They include physical and health education, civic and citizenship education, and moral or religious education. For example, physical education is a mandatory subject in all countries and, in general, its objective is to

Box 1. Specific Subjects Addressing Social and Emotional Skills

In England, personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) is offered as a non-statutory subject in lower secondary schools. The subject is expected to contribute to personal development by helping students to build their personal identities, confidence and self-esteem; make career choices; and understand what influences their decisions, including financial ones. As there are no standardised frameworks or programmes of study, teachers are given flexibility to deliver the subject based on their students' needs. The Department for Education provides grant funding to the PSHE Association to work closely with schools to advise them in developing their own PSHE curricula and to improve the quality of teaching.

promote physical development and healthy lifestyles through the development of social and emotional skills, such as setting goals and working towards their implementation, team work and controlling emotions. Countries are also increasingly adopting curricula to integrate social and emotional skills across subjects. For example, Ireland recently adopted a new curriculum for lower secondary school students (the Junior Cycle Framework), which places greater emphasis on students' social and emotional development across all subjects. It features six 'key skills': 1) managing myself; 2) staying well; 3) communicating; 4) being creative; 5) working with others; and 6) managing information and thinking. These skills will feature in the learning outcomes of all curriculum specifications, and teachers will be encouraged to build them into their class planning, pedagogy and assessments. (Department for Education and Skills, 2012).

Many countries and local jurisdictions provide guidelines for assessing students' social and emotional skills. Assessments, however, are not carried out using standardised measures, but tend to be based on teachers' observations and judgement of students' day-to-day behaviour in different situations. They are usually administered in a formative manner to help teachers and students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in terms of social and emotional skills. In some cases, specific tools are available for teachers to design their assessment. For example, in Flemish Belgium, measurement tools are available to measure primary school students' involvement and well-being in the classroom. The most commonly known and used tool is the instrument developed by the Centre for Experience-based Education (CEGO). Schools can use this scale to assess the behaviour of primary school students, such as acting spontaneously, having an open mind to whatever comes their way and feeling self-confident (www.cego.be). Some countries assess students' social and emotional skills in their national surveys to evaluate their education systems. These surveys are not meant for individual feedback to students or teachers, but rather for understanding the current state of the education system at the school, regional and national levels. The collected data are analysed to identify the systems' strength and weakness and to make suggestions for further improvement. For example, Norwegian students in different grades in primary and secondary education participate in the Pupil Survey that includes assessment of students' social and emotional well-being at school (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2014).

In addition, schools in most countries mobilise a range of extra-curricular activities to enhance social and emotional skills. They include sports, music, art clubs and volunteering and give students opportunities to learn outside the classroom with the help of adult facilitators who can act as mentors. Through these activities, students can effectively learn relevant skills, such as responsibility, perseverance, ability to work in a team, and self-confidence. Schools and local education offices have greater autonomy to plan extra-curricular activities than curricular ones. Hence, through these activities they have greater flexibility to test experimental initiatives to foster social and emotional skills (Box 2).

At the same time, there are many independent programmes that are designed, in part, to raise social and emotional skills. However, few have been subject to rigorous or long-term evaluations. Kautz *et al.* (2014) provide three examples of US-based programmes, albeit with only short-term evaluations: Tools of the Mind, Mindset and OneGoal. To date, these programmes are showing positive results, including improvements in classroom behaviour and academic indicators.

Intervention programmes for poverty reduction, crime prevention or reducing drop-out rates have significant scope to enhance social and emotional skills, especially for disadvantaged children. OECD (2015) has compiled a list of promising intervention programmes that have been rigorously evaluated and proven to have directly or indirectly raised social and emotional skills. This review shows that successful early childhood and childhood interventions tend to emphasise strong family involvement; positive parent-child interactions; and parental and teacher training (Table II). They take place mostly in schools or community centres and at home. Promising childhood programmes include Project STAR and the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP). On the other hand, OECD (2015) found only a limited number of adolescent interventions. Existing ones are mainly in the US and often lack rigorous evaluations to establish their long-term effects. Among the few existing programmes, mentoring appears to be particularly important, while hands-on workplace experiences can instil such skills as team work, self-efficacy and motivation (Table II) (Kautz *et al.*, 2014).

Local and experimental initiatives provide useful lessons and materials to develop social and emotional skills. However, policies and programmes specifically designed to enhance these skills rarely exist at the system level. A national school curriculum does not necessarily provide explicit and practical instructions on how

Box 2. School-Based Extra-Curricular Programmes that Address Social and Emotional Skills

The State of Bavaria in Germany has been conducting the ‘Mentor Sport nach 1’ (Mentor sport after one) project in secondary schools since 2007. It enables selected students to become mentors of their classmates in self-organised sport activities during breaks, such as basketball, football, handball, volleyball, badminton, tennis, table tennis, juggling and dance. The school is responsible for supervising and supporting these activities and teachers provide advice if needed. The focus of the project is not only on health, but also on character-building aspects of ownership. The project thus makes an important contribution to values education in the school.

In Luxembourg, 17 out of 36 secondary schools offer a ‘Peer Mediation’ programme in which students volunteer to engage in external training to learn how to mediate in-school conflicts among students. The training is provided by the National Youth Service, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. The programme teaches students basic techniques and attitudes to improve communication, to better understand the nature of conflicts and violence, and to simulate mediation process with peers. The training comprises 42 hours and takes place during the weekends or as ‘activité parascolaire’. After the training, they regularly work together in a group at school, accompanied by adult coaches. In addition to mediating skills, students learn how to deal with conflicts and violence in everyday life. The programme therefore not only teaches conflict management, but also develops students’ interpersonal skills and self-esteem, and empowers them to actively engage in the community. *Sources:* Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus (2007), Leitfaden für Schulleiter und Mentorenbetreuer, Druckhaus Schmid, Jesenwang; Peermediation (2014).

TABLE II. Key features of promising intervention programmes

	Family involvement	Parent-child attachment	Mentoring	Programmes
Early childhood (0-4)	●	●	—	Abecedarian (US), Jamaican Supplementation Study (Jamaica), Head Start (US), Perry Pre-school (US) Chicago Child Parent Center (US), Sure Start (UK)
Childhood (5-9)	●	○	—	Project Start (US), Seattle Social Development (US), Montreal Longitudinal Experimental Study (Canada)
Adolescence (10-18)	○	—	●	Big Brothers Big Sisters (US), Entrepreneurs for Social Inclusion (US), Becoming a Man (US), Pathways to Education (US), Job Corps (US), Dominica Youth Employment Program, Year Up (US), Joven (Chile)

Note: ● Specifically targeted; ○: Implicitly targeted; — Not targeted.

social and emotional skills should be taught in schools. While this lack of practical training provides schools and teachers with flexibility in designing their own lessons, it may not help teachers who are not sure how to best teach these skills. Thus, it may be useful to make the information on local initiatives widely available and experiment successful practices at the system level to identify robust approaches and critically examine the strengths and limitations of experimental programmes. This will help countries to better understand ‘what works’ to raise social and emotional skills, under what conditions, and for whom.

Measurement of Social and Emotional Skills

Regular measurements of social and emotional skills can provide valuable information to improve learning contexts and ensure that they are conducive to skill development. Social and emotional skills can be reliably measured, at least within specific cultures and linguistic boundaries. Some measures have been good predictors of future outcomes, including adult education, labour market, health status, and life-satisfaction. Good measures of such skills, together with information on learning environments, can provide policy-makers, teachers and parents with valuable information about deficits and trends in social and emotional skills; the possible need to adapt teaching and parenting practices; and the importance of these types of skills in promoting children’s lifetime success and societal progress.

The OECD will contribute to this process by building on efforts made in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and by launching an international longitudinal data collection to assess the distribution and development of social and emotional skills. The OECD’s new data collection is motivated by the lack of internationally comparable longitudinal data on skills. The aim of this study is to follow the lives of two child cohorts (Grades 1 and 7 – approximately 6- and 12- year-olds, respectively) by collecting data on a range of social and emotional skill measures, learning contexts and socioeconomic outcomes over time. In the short term, the micro-data will be used to assess the distribution of

social and emotional skills and identify the learning contexts associated with their development. In the medium term, the data will be used to evaluate social and emotional skills formation as children move up the educational system. In the long term, the data will be used to shed light on the relevant policy inputs that could help to improve social and emotional skills and identify the skills that drive individuals' lifetime success as indicated by such outcomes as tertiary education attainment, smooth transitions from school to work, healthy lifestyles and active citizenship. Box 3 summarises the main characteristics of the proposed study.

Box 3. OECD's International Longitudinal Study of Skills Development in Cities	
—Objectives	To identify the process of social and emotional skills formation and its socio-economic outcomes.
—Respondents	Students, teachers and parents.
—Target cohorts	Children in Grades 1 and 7 (approximately 6 and 12 years old, respectively).
—Geographical coverage	Major cities, states or provinces (with an option of nation-wide coverage).
—Sampling method	Random selection of schools. Full sampling of Grade 1 and 7 cohorts within schools.
—Duration	Minimum of three years. Ideally until early adulthood.
—Measures of skills	Focus on diverse measures of social and emotional skills.
—Measures of contexts	School, family and community learning contexts.
—Measures of outcomes	Education, labour market, health, bullying, civic engagement, subjective well-being, etc.

OECD's Conceptual Framework of Learning Contexts, Skills and Outcomes

Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework that has been developed to capture the key mechanisms through which learning contexts shape individual well-being and

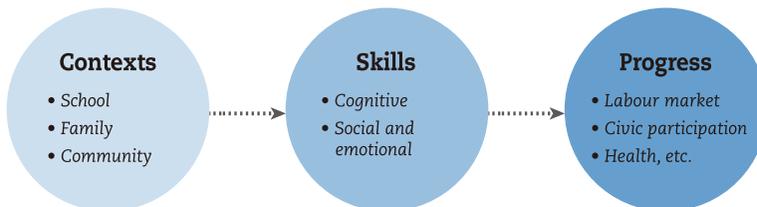


FIGURE 2. The relationship between learning contexts, skills and social progress
Source: OECD (2015)

societal progress. This framework, while acknowledging the importance of cognitive skills in driving socioeconomic outcomes, sheds light on the role of social and emotional skills, such as the ability to pursue long-term goals, manage emotions and work with others. Finishing tertiary education, securing a job, enjoying good health or actively participating in society require a different set of skills. Similarly, it is important to understand how these different types of skills contribute to improving outcomes. The framework formally incorporates different outcomes representing the multifaceted nature of social and economic progress – not just education and jobs, but also health, civic engagement and life satisfaction. Moreover, it allows for interactions between cognitive and social and emotional skills which can benefit each other (see also Almlund *et al*, 2011).

The ultimate goal for education policy-makers, teachers and parents is to help children to achieve the highest level of well-being possible. Figure 3 draws from the



FIGURE 3. A framework for individual well-being and social progress
 Source: Adapted from OECD (2011)

OECD's Framework for Measuring Well-Being and Progress which emphasises the broad spectrum of outcomes that is relevant in the modern world. These include education and skills, labour market outcomes, health, civic engagement, personal security, family and social connections, subjective well-being, environmental outcomes and material conditions. The framework reflects the way policy thinking has evolved towards understanding not only economic, but also a wider range of factors that matter for individual well-being and societal progress. The importance of securing and maintaining social outcomes, such as good health, positive social relationships, and engaged citizenship, is ever-pressing in the context of a world that seeks to recover from the global economic crisis. In this framework, skills are broadly defined as individual characteristics that drive at least one dimension of individual well-being and socioeconomic progress (*productivity*), that are malleable through environmental changes and investments (*malleability*), and that can be measured in a meaningful way (*measurability*). Social and emotional skills manifest themselves in countless everyday life situations.

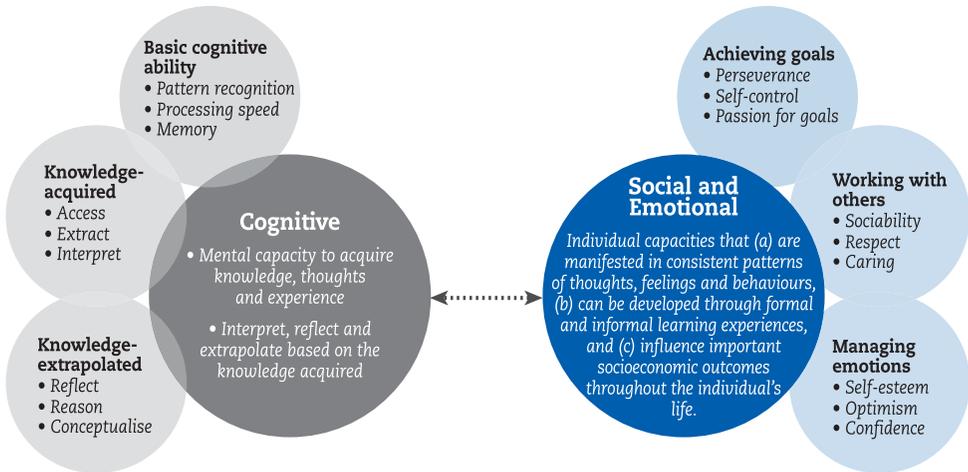


FIGURE 4. A framework for cognitive, social and emotional skills
 Source: OECD (2015)

Figure 4 presents a categorisation of skills based on some of their most important functions. Clearly, social and emotional skills play a crucial role in all stages of life. For example, people pursue goals from an early age (e.g. when playing games, solving puzzles, finishing homework) and this becomes ever-more important in adulthood (e.g. for academic degrees, finding good jobs, starting a business, etc.). Learning appropriate ways of showing positive and negative emotions and managing stress and frustration is a lifelong pursuit, especially when dealing with life changes such as divorce, unemployment and long-term disabilities. Working with others is also relevant throughout the life course: whether playing with peers in the playground or collaborating with others in professional settings. These broad skill categories (i.e. pursuing goals, working with others and managing emotions) include a number of lower-level skill constructs, as described in Figure 4.

The framework presented here for social and emotional skills is broadly in line with other existing frameworks, particularly the 'Big Five' personality taxonomy (a classification that makes a distinction between extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience). Yet, it also draws upon other theoretical perspectives (e.g. positive psychology; personal strivings; self-efficacy beliefs) and existing frameworks (e.g. Character Education of the Center for Curriculum Redesign (non-profit education organisation); Social and Emotional Care Competencies by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) in the US; KIPP schools (Knowledge is Power Program in the US); and the South Korea Ministry of Education programmes) that categorise those individual characteristics that education stakeholders can foster through adequate practices.

Cognitive skills are also described in various ways, such as smarts, knowledge, or intelligence. They are involved in the process of acquiring and applying knowledge. Our framework also reflects this diversity, making a distinction between basic cognitive ability, knowledge acquired and knowledge extrapolated (see Figure 4). It is consistent with, and draws inspiration from, other cognitive skill frameworks, in particular that of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA's definition of literacy as the capacity of students to analyse, reason

and communicate effectively as they pose, solve and interpret problems in a variety of subject matter areas (OECD, 2006) illustrates the multidimensional character of cognitive skills.

Implications for Policy-makers, Teachers and Parents

A wide set of cognitive, social and emotional skills is needed to face the socio-economic challenges of the 21st century. Different types of skills matter for different outcomes. Cognitive skills are particularly important for education and labour market outcomes. Social and emotional skills, on the other hand, play a key role in promoting healthier outcomes, greater life-satisfaction, active citizenship and safer societies. Policy-makers need to think more broadly and consider raising a wider range of capabilities, where social and emotional skills are just as important as cognitive ones.

Some of the socio-emotional skills that drive future outcomes are malleable and policy-makers, teachers and parents can play a role in improving the learning environments in which they develop. There are already many promising pedagogical approaches and learning contexts from selected school districts and individual schools to be explored (OECD, 2015). Systematic exchange of such information among educational stakeholders and researchers would help to provide opportunities for others to experiment with such practices and enrich the evidence base. Although there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, given children's diverse social and cultural backgrounds, identifying and expanding promising strategies on a larger and wider scale would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of educational systems in developing these crucial social and emotional skills.

The different OECD countries and partner economies generally recognise the importance of developing social and emotional skills through schooling. They differ, however, in their approaches to fostering them. Moreover, there are big gaps between stakeholders' knowledge, expectations and capabilities on how best to mobilise children's social and emotional skills, i.e. some stakeholders may have incomplete knowledge of these types of skills, others may have unclear expectations, and the capabilities to foster these skills are very varied. These gaps delay investments in skills; create discontinuities in investments across different stages of education; and create inequalities in the quality of learning environments. Widely disseminating detailed evidence-based guidelines would help to reduce these gaps and provide support to those teachers with limited information and experience. Stakeholders need to work together to ensure that children achieve lifetime success. Policy-makers, teachers and researchers can help to expand children's growth potential by actively engaging in skill development within the domains for which they are responsible. However, since 'skills beget skills', education policies and programmes should work towards 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.

The OECD has long played a leading role in the analysis and development of policies that support an integrated approach to education. In the last 15 years, it has achieved global prominence in international skills assessment with the development of PISA and PIAAC. More recently, it has expanded its skill focus to make sure that it addresses the skills that matter for children growing up in the 21st century. The OECD Centre for Research and Education (CERI) is developing an International

Study on Children's Social and Emotional Skills to enhance our understanding of how these skills develop and impact children's lifetime success, such as tertiary education attainment, employment, healthy lifestyles and active citizenship.

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NOTE

1. The OECD's Education and Social Progress (ESP) project conducted longitudinal analyses for 11 OECD countries, including Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, Germany, Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US. The aim was to identify: 1) the effects of skills on a variety of socioeconomic outcomes; and 2) the causal process of skill formation with past skills interacting with new learning investments. Results from nine countries, including Belgium (Flemish Community), Canada, Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US are presented in OECD, 2015.

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