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Social emotional learning: Essential dispositions in a challenging world

Developmental scientists and educators agree that social-emotional skills, including the ability to manage emotions, interact with others, and inhibit some behaviors while activating others in accordance with societal expectations and individual goals, are central to understanding adaptive functioning across the lifespan. In fact, some argue that these skills are as important for children's life success as are their early cognitive skills (Heckman et al., 2006; Kautz et al., 2014). Children in the U.S. who enter school with essential social-emotional competencies are far more likely to succeed than are their peers without these early skills (Claessens et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2007; Li-Grining et al., 2010). In contrast, children with poor social-emotional skills are at increased risk for academic failure, conduct problems, criminality, and unemployment in adulthood (Heckman, 2006). The importance of social-emotional skills is also widely recognized in international contexts, where positive skills predict better health outcomes, higher subjective well being, and fewer anti-social behaviors, at least among OECD countries (OECD, 2013; 2015). Far less is known about the role these skills might play in developing countries, although there is some evidence to suggest that they are a stronger indicator of non-western perceptions of intelligence and subsequent success than are traditionally western concepts of intelligence (Serpell & Jere-Folotiya, 2008).

Despite a preponderance of evidence demonstrating the importance of these skills, there is little consensus on how to define and measure social-emotional competencies in young children (Jones et al., 2016). The handful of measures that have been developed for use in international contexts commonly assess skills deemed necessary for success in developed countries rather than skills that might be needed in "uncertain" contexts (Epstein & Yuthas, 2012). Importantly, although research suggests that children who participate social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, which are designed to teach them to recognize their own and others' emotions, establish and maintain positive relationship, manage their emotions, and make responsible decisions, demonstrate better academic and social-emotional skills and fewer behavior problems (Durlak et al., 2011), there is little consensus on how best to adapt and contextualize existing SEL programs. Further, the majority of programs that do exist are "add-on" programs that are not well integrated into existing curricula and thus do not last long.

The challenges of conceptualizing and measuring social-emotional skills in "uncertain" contexts and developing effective SEL programs for children in these contexts are often even greater. Indeed, in their 2015 report titled *Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*, the OECD noted that although social-emotional skills can be reliably measured within a culture, there are

considerable differences across cultures in how we assess and foster these skills (OECD, 2015). Thus, a critical next step towards fostering human capital and improving social progress may be to carefully evaluate the skills that are deemed important for success in different contexts and to reconsider the tools we use to measure these skills so that we can better support their development through SEL programs in both school and out of school environments.