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## Head and Heart for Children's Education: The role of the classroom teacher

By Carmel Cefai and Valeria Cavioni

### Introduction

The *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* underlines the fundamental cognitive processes which prepare young people for the global economic challenges and consequently the market economy. Academic learning and performance indicators thus become the benchmark by which the quality of education is evaluated, leaving little space or time for other, non-cognitive, aspects of education. Such a reductionist view of education, however, denies children and young people the right to a balanced and quality education. Such an imbalance is evident within the PISA outcomes themselves, with little or no relationship found between learning outcomes and sense of well-being at school. Some of the highly ranked countries in learning outcomes reported lower levels of student happiness, while countries lower down the scale in cognitive outcomes, reported high rates of student happiness (Currie et al, 2012).

As preparation for the demands and 'tests' of the adult world, children and young people need a balanced education which provides them with the requisite cognitive, social, and emotional competences to grow and succeed in the face of the present and future challenges. Layard and Hagell (2015) underline the dual role of education, focusing on both cognitive and socio-emotional processes, both academic performance and well-being, both Head and Heart. They argue that in the end happy individuals are more productive and successful.

'The well-being of children at school should be an acknowledged and explicit objective of every school, besides its objective of receiving good learning outcomes'  
(Layard and Hagell, 2015, p.109).

It may be argued that the focus on social and emotional learning and well-being may take time away from academic learning. The evidence shows, however, that academic learning

and social and emotional learning are on the same side and mutually supportive (Diamond, 2010). Social and emotional learning provides a foundation upon which effective learning and academic success can be built, enabling students to regulate their emotions and deal with emotional distress, cope better with classroom demands and frustration, solve problems more effectively, have healthier relationships, and work more collaboratively with others (Cefai and Cavioni, 2014). In their meta-analysis of over 200 studies, Durlack et al. (2011) reported that students who participated in social and emotional learning programmes, scored significantly higher on standardised achievement tests when compared to peers who were not exposed to such interventions.

#### **The Santander Declaration 2014 (Cefai et al, 2014)**

In 2014, a number of educationalists, including the two authors, concerned about the negative impact the PISA standards were having on education across the world, drew up a declaration to underline the need for a balanced, meaningful and holistic education. The 'Santander Declaration' which was sent to the UN, UNICEF, OECD, and the European Commission amongst others, puts particular emphasis on social and emotional learning and well-being as a key goal in education. The following is the text of the Declaration:

*We believe that every child and young person has the right to a balanced, meaningful, holistic, creative and arts-rich education. In order to advance the above, we commit ourselves to promote the following:*

- 1. That schools and early years settings provide a learning environment where academic, social and emotional education competences are in creative balance;*
- 2. That schools and early years settings operate as learning and caring communities in which all students, teachers and parents have the opportunity to experience sustainability and well-being;*
- 3. That educational and learning contexts consciously seek to strengthen students' connectedness with themselves, others and the environment;*
- 4. That social and emotional education be embedded in all initial teacher education and that practicing teachers and educators can access on-going professional education and support to continuously develop their relational and emotional competences;*
- 5. That schools and early years settings have the autonomy and agency to determine their educational and social agenda according to their own respective cultures and contexts.*

## Promoting well-being in school

A whole school approach to social and emotional learning and well-being, addresses social and emotional issues in the curriculum and in the organisation of teaching and learning, the development of a supportive school ethos and environment, and partnership with the wider school community (WHO, 2007). It integrates the development of individual social and emotional competences such as self-awareness and management, emotional resilience, healthy relationships, and effective problem solving, with the creation of healthy communities at classroom and whole school levels. The school's culture, policies, practices, curriculum, pedagogy and relationships all contribute in a synergetic way to the development of students' social and emotional learning and well-being (Adelman and

Taylor, 2009; Cefai and Cavioni, 2014). This approach, known also as a ‘taught and caught’ approach takes a dual focus with the explicit teaching of social and emotional competences as a core subject in the mainstream curriculum (‘taught’), complimented by classroom and school climates which provide a context which promotes and supports the social and emotional competences being learnt in the classroom (‘caught’).

#### *The Taught Component:*

*Content.* Regular teaching of developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive social and emotional competences with application to real life situations, is at the heart of social and emotional learning in school. This requires a set curriculum and available resources to support consistency and continuity of delivery; one-off programmes or interventions are unlikely to have any long-term effect on students’ behaviour (Durlack et al., 2011). Cefai and Cavioni (2014) propose a social and emotional learning curriculum focused on intrapersonal and interpersonal competence and resilience skills. It includes two main dimensions that incorporate various skills to be learned—namely self-social dimension on one side and awareness-management on the other. The four areas developed from the two dimensions (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management) incorporate the five social and emotional learning areas proposed by CASEL (2005) as well as other competences such as positive emotions, optimism, persistence, self-efficacy, autonomy/agency and sense of leadership, success-oriented engagement (goal setting, self-monitoring, and persistence), critical and creative thinking, spiritual development (sense of meaning and purpose), moral development, mindfulness, responsible decision-making, inclusion, diversity and children’s rights, and appreciation and care for the environment.

*Process.* As in the case of the other content areas of the curriculum, social and emotional learning is characterised by increasing complexity of behaviour and social contexts. A spiral approach develops basic to more complex skills from one year to the other, building on what students already know, and equipping them with the skills needed for different stages in their development. Teaching follows the SAFE approach (CASEL, 2005), namely a sequenced step-by-step approach, use of experiential and participative learning, focus on skills development, and explicit learning goals. Formative (rather than summative) assessment of the competences being learnt, making use of a range of assessment modes and strategies, and providing useful feedback on strengths and areas for development, will ensure that assessment becomes an integral part of the learning process (Cefai and Cavioni, 2014). Another important strategy is for the teachers to infuse social and emotional learning into the other content areas of the curriculum. This enables students to generalise and apply the skills across the curriculum, and to integrate social and emotional learning into their daily learning and social behaviours.

#### *The Caught Component:*

One of the most important contexts for the promotion of social and emotional learning and well-being is a positive classroom climate where students feel safe and supported, enjoy positive relationships with both the teachers and staff, and have the opportunity to observe and practice the social and emotional competences they have been learning. A classroom

climate characterised by caring and supportive relationships and engagement in meaningful learning activities adapted to students' needs and strengths, provides an ideal context where well-being becomes embedded in the daily life of the classroom (Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson, 2004; Pianta and Stuhlman, 2004). In a study in primary schools, Cefai (2008) suggested that classrooms which promoted social and emotional learning and well-being, operated as caring learning communities. These communities are characterised by caring and supportive teacher–student relationships; positive classroom management built on making responsible choices; harmonious and supportive peer relationships, including peer mentoring and tutoring; collaborative learning with a focus on building learning experiences together; active and meaningful activities related to students' real life experiences; equal access and inclusion for all learners irrespective of any difference; opportunity for students to make choices and participate in classroom decision; teachers' positive beliefs and high expectations for all their students; teacher–parent/caregiver collaboration, and staff collaboration and collegiality.

Within a 'relational ethics of care... based on caring relationships, choices and rights, and engaging learning experiences', well-being becomes integrated in 'positive experiences of being, becoming and belonging'

(Watson et al., 2012, p. 223)

## Supporting teachers as caring educators

In supporting students' social and emotional learning and well-being, teachers need to be supported in exercising their role as caring educators. This entails adequate opportunities for personal and professional development in social and emotional learning, including education, mentoring, and provision of human and physical resources, supportive administration, staff engagement, collaboration and collegiality, and home school collaboration (Cefai et al, 2015; Cefai and Cavioni, 2014):

*Staff education.* Appropriate training in the teaching and facilitation of social and emotional learning in the classroom is key to the success of initiatives to promote students' social and emotional learning. Such training may also include education in the implementation of the particular programme/package being used at the school and provision of a resource pack with specified objectives, model lesson plans, resources and assessment material. Staff also need to be provided with continuing professional development in areas such as relationship building, behaviour management, child and adolescent development, mental health, conflict management, responding to diversity in the classroom, and mindfulness education.

*Supportive administration and staff engagement and collegiality.* Staff need a supportive administration which prioritises social and emotional learning as a core aspect of children's education and provides the necessary resources, opportunities for professional development, and support for efforts in this area. There also needs to be opportunities for staff to participate actively in the life of the school, to take part in decision-making, develop and make use of their strengths and expertise, and to engage in their own physical and

psychological self care, including workshops on mindfulness and stress management. Collegial and collaborative staff relationships at both formal and informal levels, including teamwork, mentoring schemes, and time and space for staff to spend work and social time together, are a key aspect of a whole school approach to social and emotional learning.

*Home-school collaboration.* In striving to promote students' academic and social and emotional learning, teachers need to work in an open school environment where schools work in close collaboration with the parents and the community, including parents' active involvement in social and emotional learning and well-being initiatives at the school.

**What some secondary school teachers in Italy said during a recent workshop on social emotional learning facilitated by one of the authors:**

*I have been working at the school for a few months. The head teacher stopped me in the corridor as he wanted to talk to me, I didn't even know that he knew me! He told me that he had heard from many students that they were very happy in my class especially because I had organised some special courses for those who had difficulty in my subject. It was the first time I felt really good as a teacher, it was a source of energy in my work (Teacher 1)*

*Some days ago a student came to me at the end of a workshop and told me he liked everything in that lesson and that I was able to engage his interest for the whole session. I thanked him and I felt very satisfied and I shared what happened with my colleagues (Teacher 2).*

*When I had to move to another school, my students organised a 'goodbye party' for me, and every student gave me a personal card with a positive message on it. I was surprised as I didn't know that after only a few months I had managed to create such a warm and strong relationship with my students. I still have these messages and I read them every now and then (Teacher 3).*

*I felt really happy when a student in the first grade, who used to get many reprimands and suspensions, came to me and told me that he kept coming to school just because of me, because I was able to understand him and help him (Teacher 4).*

## Conclusion

Education is not just about academic achievement but about the cognitive, social and emotional competences that children and young people need to develop into successful, healthy and happy individuals. Both Head and Heart are necessary for an adequate education for the twentieth-first century and both aspects complement and support one another rather than being in conflict with each other. To focus only on one aspect, such as academic achievement, at the expense of the other aspect, would be short changing our children and denying them a basic right for an adequate, meaningful and relevant education. However, if school teachers are to exercise their role as caring educators, they need not only to work in a climate where social and emotional learning is considered as a

core aspect of children’s education, but also where they are provided with the necessary education, resources and support.

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