



Social and emotional competence: Are preventive programmes necessary in early childhood education and care?

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Just as young children begin to develop a wide range of skills, attitudes and behaviours during the early years, the development of social and emotional competence is also rooted in early childhood. Yet, whilst some argue that this competence is nurtured through preventive programmes (Schonert-Reichl 2004), this paper argues against the need for preventive programmes as long as the adults caring for young children are themselves experiencing positive relationships and can be role models providing a stable and positive effect on children during what must be one of their most crucial and vulnerable periods of their life. The paper juxtaposes various interpretations of quality education and care in the early years and emphasises good practice which can promote social and emotional competence without the need to resort to formal, preventive programmes. Assuming that positive and appropriate approaches to early childhood education and care are promoted within homes as well as within formal early years settings, there can be a natural development of emotional and social competence.

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Introduction

The development of socialisation and emotional well-being highlights the complexities which arise from the intricate links which exist between personal traits we are born with and the environment with which we grow and interact. Both are major variables which contribute to social and emotional literacy and related skills, including motivation, self-esteem, confidence, resilience and coping strategies. Singh and Chhikra (2005, 141) report that, “developing social skills is not an easy task. It takes knowledge of correct relationship skills in addition to time and experience”. The question then becomes *How do we learn which are the acceptable relationship skills?* especially in the light of the fact that what is acceptable depends on the nature of the relationship amongst the individuals involved and the surrounding environment or context.

Social and emotional development requires relationships with adults and peers, but adult participation

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and intervention in young children's social and emotional development must be a natural process rather than developed in or through contrived situations. Social and emotional development thrives on a variety of experiences. Changes within society at large have had a major impact on the socialisation patterns of individuals, even at a young age. Whilst some may consider days gone by with a sense of nostalgia, there seem to be far-reaching implications on the development of basic skills.

... today's children lead lives not dissimilar to those of the tragic boys and girls in children's fiction of the late 19th and most of the 20th century. The tragic nature of these characters' lives lay in the fact that they were never free from controlling grown-ups, policed and monitored every minute of their waking lives by mothers, nannies, governesses and teachers, or had their movement restricted ... [contributing to] the loss of that independence and privacy from adult eyes which is a crucial part of childhood.

It is a truism that the self-confidence, sense of self, security, independence and individuality that come from roaming free for significant parts of one's childhood cannot be developed any other way. In contemporary life, the only children who have freedom are those who are neglected and whose homes are unstable. And so their adventures are not rooted in imagination, discovery and innocence...

(Caruana-Galizia 2009, 22)

Society has changed radically and the lifestyles and social patterns of adults and families have had a bearing on child-rearing patterns. Families are more cautious about how they raise their children and what relationships are allowed to develop. Years ago, relationships among children developed and flourished while running around on the streets. Nowadays parents are exerting more control over children's mobility. Guldberg (2009, 32) argues that:

Children are healthier and wealthier than ever before; they are given time, attention, protection and education. The bad news however is that society's desire to protect children from the harsh realities of life has in many ways gone too far. There is a real danger that by cocooning children, over-protecting and over-supervising them, society could be denying kids the opportunity to grow up into capable, confident adults.

These excerpts suggest that children are able to develop certain skills which contribute to social and emotional stability especially when placed in situations where they have to look after themselves. Espinosa (2010, 43) refers to 'resilient children' as those who 'manage to develop their human potential despite living in chronic poverty or exposure to stressful events'. By being over-protective of children, adults are inadvertently leading children to failure because rather than going through life without scrapes or with perfect results, it is more crucial and important to know how to handle and cope with failure or difficulties (Guldberg 2009).

Social and emotional development is linked to success at school. Thompson (2002) argues that in addition to intellectual skills and motivational qualities, young children are prepared and ready for school when they have 'socio-emotional qualities'. These are children who have experienced positive relationships with adults and peers, built capacities to co-operate and resolve conflict successfully and participate actively in

group learning experiences are more likely to make smooth transitions in the early stages of schooling. These skills are requisites for positive achievements during the years of formal schooling as children need amongst others to collaborate with others, try to understand other people's point of view, resolve conflicts amicably, co-operate with adults and peers and exercise a certain degree of self-control (Thompson, 2002).

Access and exposure to positive relationships and experiences in the very early years is so essential, it is thought to impact on brain development (Hawley and Gunner 2000). Direct interaction between parents and their babies as well as between child-carers and the infants in child-care, is far more crucial than providing children with toys or keeping them quiet in front of a television screen. The brain develops through activating and keeping alive the network of synapses which are stimulated and motivated, while pruning those which are not in use. Depending on the nature of the relationships in early years, some children may be under-challenged and under-stimulated, thus left struggling to cope with situations which could have become natural events.

Undeniably, relationships in the early years are a contributing variable to the development of healthy social and emotional skills as well as success at school. The healthy growth and development of young children requires warm, understanding and caring adults who show a genuine interest in children's queries and interests and who can successfully stimulate and motivate their curiosity. Where adults are responsible and knowledgeable in providing appropriate, timely support, the need to psychologise childhood or apply clinical intervention to naturally developing processes would thus be minimised or, one may argue, may even become redundant, as children develop by emulating and modelling their relationships on the strengths of their first-hand experiences.

The dangers of preventive programmes

Preventive programmes aim to explicitly develop "comprehensive and co-ordinated social and emotional learning from pre-school through adolescence" to ensure that irrespective of the background children are growing up in, they systematically develop attitudes, behaviours and cognitions to become healthy and competent (Elias et.al. 1997, 10). However, in perceiving a need to subject everyone to a preventive programme, may suggest that it is difficult if not impossible for children to develop healthy social and emotional skills in a natural manner. There appears to be an underlying preconceived assumption that a proactive stance must be adopted to stop sinister events from occurring. For example, an undated publication by the Centre for the Study of Social Policy (nd, 2) aimed at strengthening families through early care and education highlights that:

Excellent early care and education programs use common program strategies to build the protective factors known to reduce child abuse and neglect.

Five protective factors are listed including, parental resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; concrete support in times of needs; and social and emotional competence of children. From amongst this list of "protective factors", only one is within the direct control of the child. The

onus of the remaining four factors rests with adults and primary caregivers surrounding the child, suggesting that the responsibility for and success in developing appropriate socio-emotional skills are outside and beyond the child. This raises a number of questions, namely:

- To what extent can children develop strong social and emotional skills if the adults around them do not have the necessary attitudes, knowledge, values and skills?
- What happens if the relationships offer limited, faulty or negative experiences?
- To what extent do adults allow children to develop skills associated with independence, risk-taking and resilience?
- To what extent can a child be an active and involved participant in what goes on around him or her without necessarily having a watchful eye to provide reassurance, approval or disapproval?
- What are adults' views about children and childhood? Are children considered helpless human beings who must grow-up in a carefully planned and structured environment as determined by adults, or can young children make their own choices? Do adults listen to children? How much importance is attributed to children's voices?
- To what extent do relationships have an impact on later development?

Having a programme with 'strategies to build the protective factors' suggests that early childhood education and care is tantamount to embarking on a road of potential risks and dangers. Yet curricula associated with high quality early care and education:

- use discourse which credits children with positive achievements, attitudes and dispositions;
- acknowledge and celebrate children's achievements as a result of their direct participation and contribution;
- use assessment as a measure of learning rather than assessment for learning; and
- use assessment tools of a descriptive nature to capture a more accurate record of every child's individual achievements.

A quality early years programme cannot consist of systematic and scripted activities, developed by adults who predetermine what they perceive is essential for children to follow. The design of a programme and the expected outcomes for an intended target audience are as crucial considerations as is the flexibility or rigidity with which a programme is to be followed. In the context of early childhood education and care, developing highly prescriptive programmes can be a great disservice to both adults and children for a number of reasons. Firstly, strict and rigid adherence to a programme suggests that all participants will be treated in identical ways without due consideration to diverse learning styles or needs. Secondly, it implies a lack of recognition and acknowledgement that individual participants may be side-tracked in their pursuit of an interest which arises unexpectedly. Finally such an adherence de-contextualises learning, which goes against a

major characteristic of young children's learning, namely learning through first-hand experience. Learning out of context ignores young children's conceptual frameworks which could lead to misunderstandings or worst still no understanding. By inviting young children to learn out of context, we also risk limiting the extent to which they are able to transfer any acquired knowledge to real-life situations. How can we be sure that all participants are at a conceptual level of understanding which allows them to engage with, reflect upon and internalise the appropriate skills, knowledge, attitudes and/or values we would have tried to promote?

The design of specific programmes may restrict, prevent or reduce creative adults from having the freedom of choosing or adapting activities to becoming mere operators, working through the mechanics of a programme. For instance, one example of what appears to be a highly rigid programme meant for young learners is the document entitled *Excellence and Enjoyment: social and emotional aspects of learning* (DfES 2008). Below is an excerpt from the introduction:

This theme focuses on developing children's knowledge, understanding and skills in four key social and emotional aspects of learning...(it) offers children the opportunity to see themselves as valued individuals within a community, and to contribute to shaping a welcoming, safe and fair learning community for all.. (p.1)

Getting children to verbally express these understandings is difficult, because children's language development is still ongoing and the outcomes are abstract. This implies that adults are more likely to be observing, assessing and recording what is going on, and therefore sensitive staff needs to be capable of recording children's behaviours and analysing situations in a given context.

Excellence and Enjoyment refers to teaching activities which seem to be too formal for the early years. In providing details of how to organise activities, the adult user is given instructions such as Key vocabulary (to be introduced within the theme and across the curriculum) as well as information about specific activities and resources which are to be done.

Yet, it is well-known that learning in the early years should be fun, enjoyable, experiential and relevant to children's conceptual level. Abstract concepts are difficult for children to understand, appreciate and reflect upon. Creating scenarios deliberately to promote specific skills is artificial. There needs to be leeway for spontaneity where activities arise and are explored because the children are genuinely interested. Within scripted programmes, assessment procedures are also dubious as they record the acquisition or absence of these skills, therefore delineating the deficits or shortcomings:

From Sept 2008 every registered early years provider and school is required to follow the EYFS and monitor children's progress according to 69 'early learning goals'...embodying the notion that young children can be put on some kind of officially approved conveyor belt towards success....

(Guldberg 2009, 149)

In contrast to rigid programmes, more flexible programmes allow for choices to be made by the adults and children. Such programmes may provide guidelines, suggestions, and a repertoire of activities from

amongst which one can choose and adapt those which are appropriate to the needs, interests and aptitudes of the learners. Such programmes respect the child and adult in that planning and choice are less restrictive. However, making use of flexible programmes necessitates highly-trained and well-informed adults who can make professional and informed judgements according to the potential of the learners. Rather than concentrate on preventive programmes, it would appear more logical to promote early childhood programmes which take account of and adjust the curricular frameworks to address the adults' and society's views of the child and childhood; the adults' expectations for young children as they develop in their early years; and the social, cultural and environmental forces which children experience within homes, in informal situations as well as formal settings such as day-care and kindergarten centres or schools.

In an attempt to argue against preventive programmes in early childhood education and care, it is worth considering how these three factors impinge on early childhood education and care.

The development of social and emotional aspects in early years

Alongside physical, cognitive and language development, social and emotional development begins at birth and develops rapidly in the first years of life. Socio-emotional development reflects a child's desire to connect with others, allows for a sense of identity, and contributes to building relationships. During this time children develop the capacities that prepare them to be self-confident, trusting, empathic, intellectually inquisitive, competent and capable of understanding and adjusting well to others. They learn to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, and cope with challenges. These skills provide children with the confidence required for perseverance in achieving goals and persistence in the face of difficulty. Like the other important milestones babies and toddlers achieve in the early years, developing socio-emotional skills takes times, practice, and lots of patience from parents and caregivers. However, unlike learning to walk and talk, social-emotional skills are not as easy to see and parents must learn to read their children's cues in order to understand what they may be thinking and feeling. It is only when adults display sensitivity, can healthy development in all aspects, including socio-emotional skills be supported. As a result of actively responding to as well as stimulating children, adults provide the necessary support for the development of motivation, positive dispositions, self-esteem, confidence, resilience and coping strategies.

Such development is reminiscent of Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development and Bruner's views about scaffolding. With support from a more knowledgeable other, a child is expected to achieve more than what s/he can do on his own. Since the adult is in-tune with the ongoing development, the child is led to new levels of knowledge. Two key ingredients are necessary in this process, namely the active participation of the child, and the sensitive responses of the adults and community of experts surrounding the novice.

Issues for families

Traditionally, babies, toddlers and infants spent most of their time with the mother and other family members at home. The latter were at an advantage over early years' educators in institutionalised settings because within families there would be less children to cope with than there are in child-care and kindergarten centres, with more time to get to know the children better and respond to individual needs. Within communities, families had more children who grew up together and offered each other support to develop social and emotional skills.

To add to the tension and dilemmas in raising children and ensuring optimal development, in today's economies families need to take decisions over which they may have little control. With the advancement of women in society, institutionalised early childhood settings mushroomed, resulting in challenges parents must face in the upbringing of children. There is compelling evidence which suggests that:

Children who receive sensitive, responsive care from their parents and other caregivers in the first years of life enjoy an important head start toward success in their lives. The secure relationships they develop with the important adults in their lives lay the foundation for emotional development and help protect them from the many stresses they may face as they grow.

(Werner and Smith 1992 as cited in Hawley and Gunner 2000, 5)

Many parents however, are themselves leading stressful lives where they have to juggle between employment, career choices, having children, and deciding whether to stay home. How can working parents, predominantly the mother, reconcile the necessary balance between work and family life? In reality, what does it mean to have optimal relationships with young children to support them in building their confidence, developing their self-identity, challenging their inquisitive minds and ensuring that the stimulating support is readily available?

The multi-faceted issues which impinge on raising children and the quality of the relationships which children can be offered by their primary caregivers, are well-documented in the OECD series *Babies and Bosses at work*. Family-work balance is a critical issue for families directly as well as policy makers.

Whether or not parents are in paid work is a key determinant of the poverty risk of families and children. Parents finding a good work/life balance is a critical issue for child well-being, as both poverty and a lack of personal attention can harm child development. A good work/family balance also reduces parental stress, and thus benefits both parent-child and parent-parent relationships

(OECD 2007, 2)

The data and evidence from around the world points to a need for parents to have access to support in raising a family, and the reasons for this requirement vary. If parents need to look outside the home for support, they must have access to affordable, quality childcare facilities. One of the hallmarks of quality in early years' settings is the degree to which early years' educators successfully develop relationships with the children which in turn depends on the adults' ability to get to know children in their care (Stephen 2006).

Early childhood education and care

Adults acting on behalf of primary caregivers require sensitivity to nurture and stimulate responses. This is no easy task to achieve. Within institutions, it appears to be difficult for adults to establish a special rapport with every child in care. Issues of staff-to-child-ratios are crucial in determining the extent to which adults and children can spend quality time together. The relationships within an early years setting occur through a myriad of activities which depend upon amongst other, what is emphasised in the early years and expectations about children's achievements; the range of characteristics which enhance quality in early years' settings; and the extent to which outcomes and expectations of early years' development allow for healthy socio and emotional development.

Several early years' settings claim to follow curricula or adhere to frameworks which contribute to the holistic development of young children. Specific goals identify key areas of development (cognitive/intellectual; socio-emotional; linguistic; understanding of the world; numeracy) contributing towards the foundations of lifelong learning. Policies of early years setting make reference to the role of the adult, inclusive practices and parental collaboration. Many believe that they embrace a pedagogy which promotes active and play-based experiences which lead to development, independence, responsibility, well-being and self-confidence.

Different countries and cultures have their own expectations of the purpose of early childhood education, and these expectations are reflected in their interpretations of early years' programmes and philosophies. It cannot be assumed that parents are necessarily aware of what goes on within early years centres. For example, research about insights into parental satisfaction with their choice of child-care or kindergarten centres indicate that although 77% and 64% of participants were using child-care and KG settings for the first time respectively, 58% of families with children in child-care and 50% of families using KG settings, did not even shop around to see what is available to make an informed choice; 73% chose a centre on the basis of recommendations of friends and relatives (Sollars 2002).

In spite of developments to move away from prescriptive curricula to more flexible approaches based on principles, perspectives and values of childhood and child development, learning and pedagogy, early years' frameworks appear to embrace one of two distinct pedagogical approaches, namely those which emphasise a pre-primary perspective against those of a social pedagogic perspective (Deguara 2009). The former prepares children for school "through the transfer of subject knowledge from the teacher to the children in a formal, school-like, academic way" whilst the latter emphasises the learning processes together with the developmental needs of children in an informal and child-centred approach. A pre-primary and instrumental view of education emphasises the authority of the adult and the needs of society over the child and the individual, while the progressive, social pedagogic perspective emphasises the decentralisation of adult authority and puts a focus on the child at the centre of curriculum activities.

Policy recommendations drawn from the review of twenty OECD countries (2001, 2006), suggest that much more needs to be done for children under the age of six, prior to the onset of formal education:

To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child's agency and natural learning strategies: Children's well-being and learning are core goals of early childhood services,A challenge exists in many countries to focus more on the child, and to show greater understanding of the specific developmental tasks and learning strategies of young children.

(OECD 2006, 6)

These recommendations have implications for the healthy development of social and emotional skills, namely assisting and supporting parents in raising the family and attributing importance to the ongoing development of the child. This necessitates particular resources rather than treating children as though they are already in compulsory education. Whilst some countries consider the early years and a relevant curriculum as preparation for primary school, others emphasise how children learn in supportive contexts necessary for learning to be meaningful and relevant. For example, the Early Years Foundation Stage (Dept for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) in England gives details about moving from principles to practice in each of four themes: A unique child; Positive relationships; Enabling environments; Learning and developing. There are details about what constitutes effective practice, challenges and dilemmas and reflecting on practice.

The aims of the *Curriculum for excellence* in Scotland (The Scottish Executive, 2004) are for every child and young person to know they are valued and will be supported to become a successful learner, an effective contributor, a confident individual and a responsible citizen. The Scottish curriculum purports to develop the attributes and capabilities necessary to fulfil the four capacities through 8 curricular learning areas. Each of these learning areas has very clearly defined experiences and outcomes.

The early years learning framework in Australia emphasises the socio-emotional development which is expected as a precursor of later learning:

Fundamental to the Framework is a view of children's lives as characterised by belonging, being and becoming. From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place. Their earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families, who are children's first and most influential educators

(Commonwealth of Australia 2009, 7).

The learning outcomes which promote a strong sense of identity, well-being, confident and involved learners who are effective communicators, connected with and contributing to the world around them, can be achieved through principles which promote secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; have high expectations and promote equity as well as respect for diversity. The Te Whàriki early childhood curriculum in New Zealand is founded on

aspirations for children to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society. ... This curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things.

(New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996, 9)

The crucial and sometimes subtle difference between curricula revolves around the image of the child who can be either seen as an active contributor and participant in extending and modifying his own understanding, or as someone who should take on a more passive role and merely follow the diet of activities determined by others. These differences in perceptions of the child and expectations about achievement, coupled with the type of curriculum which is offered, become manifest in the way early years' educators record and assess young children's achievements. This depends on the extent to which a curriculum is scripted and outcomes prescribed. For instance, educators may be working towards a deficit model where a judgement has to be made about the presence or absence of a skill, behaviour or knowledge. However, assessing children through a narrow skills-acquisition approach does not do justice to what a child can do or who s/he is. And for this reason, prescriptive programmes in early years need to be avoided.

In eradicating behaviours, massive doses of correction are administered to the child. As a result, we minimize or ignore strengths and competencies a child possesses that could promote adaptation and wellness.

(Breslin 2005, 47)

Children need to leave early years settings with a positive disposition towards learning as a result of highly stimulating experiences which ought to characterise quality early years programmes. Such programmes allow and support children to develop competences which promote risk-taking, experimentation, questioning, exploration, and discovery-learning. Children need to experience success and failure, excitement, happiness and disappointment, thus enabling them to face and surmount challenges in a capable way. Social and emotional literacy therefore, plays a key role in an early years programme as dispositions and competences are developed. What is crucial in the early years is the need for highly trained, sensitive adults who are responsive to the demands of the children in their care.

Social and emotional development: developed through nurturing or preventive programmes?

As with all forms of development that occurs with considerable rapidity in the first years of life, social and emotional development needs to be considered in a context of meaningful, relevant learning which supports development and understanding rather than through scripted programmes which can come across as being artificial. Novick (2002, 84) reports that "a narrow focus on academics does not always bring results". Within institutionalised settings, highly trained staff ought to adopt approaches which promote and support social and emotional development by seeking opportunities to observe, listen to and interact with children to foster and ensure caring relationships. Educators need to constantly evaluate and reflect on their own interactions and involvement with the children and prepare stimulating, meaningful and relevant activities which support children's overall development within high quality supportive environments.

Where preventive programmes are necessary, they should be required for the minority of children who need *explicit instruction in social skills and emotional regulation* or even '*intensive, individualized interventions*'. Some will need *systematic and focused instruction* to learn *discrete social emotional skills*;

others may require comprehensive, assessment-based behaviour support plans to deal with persistent challenging behaviour (Fox and Hemmeter 2009). But with nurturing relationships and supportive environments, children should be able develop social and emotional literacy in a natural way.

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