

Chapter 13

Social–Emotional Learning and Students’ Transition from Kindergarten to Primary School in Italy

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ABSTRACT

The transition from kindergarten to primary school is a critical period in the development of children. Children who start primary school with good emotional and social skills have more friends, can easily establish new social relationships with peers and adults, and adjust better and achieve more at school. Although in the last couple of decades social-emotional learning programs have received considerable scientific attention in various countries, little is known about the implementation of such programs in the Italian context. This chapter describes a quasi-experimental study on the effectiveness of the implementation of a social-emotional program with Italian kindergarten children. Children’s assessment by the researcher and reports from teachers and parents indicated that the program called “By Your Hand” had a positive impact on the social and emotional competence of children over time as they moved from kindergarten to primary school, with indications of enhanced emotional competence and reduced behaviour problems.

INTRODUCTION

The recommendations of the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2006) on the key competences for lifelong learning, underline that schools need to contribute actively to the development of

pupils’ personal and interpersonal skills in order to promote their education as active citizens in society. Within this perspective, the school fully meets its educational quest when the curriculum promotes both cognitive and socio-emotional development, emphasising the relationships among

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the various social actors involved, namely pupils, teachers and parents/carers.

Over the last few decades, various studies have been carried out on how schools may address this issue effectively by means of 'social and emotional learning' (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012) defines SEL as the process of developing the ability to recognise and manage emotions, develop care and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively.

Various SEL initiatives have been organised across the world, including the USA (CASEL) Australia (KidsMatter) and the UK (SEAL). The Fundación Marcelino Botín Reports (2008, 2011, 2013) published various case studies from various countries in Europe and across the world on how different countries are addressing SEL in schools. Although these reports provide details concerning national social-emotional programs in several European countries such as England, Sweden, Holland, Spain and Germany, Italy has not yet been included in these studies and until now very little has been written on this subject in Italy.

The guidelines "Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione" (MIUR, 2012) issued by the Italian Ministry of Education state:

At the end of the three-year course of kindergarten, it is reasonable to expect that every child has developed some basic skills that structure his/her personal growth: [...] to recognise and express emotions, to be aware of his/her own and others' desires and fears, to share experiences and games, [...], to cope with conflicts and start to recognize behavioural rules (p. 23).

The teaching of social-emotional learning in Italy, however, is not included in the national curriculum, and only recently has there been any interest in developing SEL programs in schools, focusing on emotional expression (Cavioni, Zanetti,

& Renati, 2012; Grazzani Gavazzi, Ornaghi, & Antonioti, 2011; Francescato, Putton, & Cudini, 1989; Francescato, Putton, De Gennaro, & Pirri, 1995); emotional competence (Ornaghi, Piralli, & Cherubin, 2013); emotional language development (Ornaghi, Brockmeier, & Grazzani, 2014; Ornaghi & Grazzani, 2013; Ornaghi, Grazzani, & Piralli, 2011); emotion regulation (Di Pietro, 2000); and empathy, prosocial behaviour and social skills (Bulgarelli, et al., 2013; Morganti, 2012).

The kindergarten period is characterised by developmental tasks that are based on SEL competencies, namely the ability to perceive, express and understand emotions (Carter, 2002), to use emotional coping strategies (Parker & Gottman, 1989) and to build positive social relationships with peers and adults (Denham, et al., 2012). When social and emotional development milestones are not negotiated successfully, kindergarten children may experience both short and long term problems (Denham & Burton, 1996). Behavioural problems at this early age tend to be consolidated, maintained and increased later on in childhood (Brotman, et al., 2005; Webster-Stratton, 1996; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). On the other hand, research shows that kindergarten children with more developed SEL skills at school entry, are not only successful in early adjustment to school but achieve more than children without developmentally appropriate emotional and social competencies (Denham, 2006). Given these circumstances, it is imperative for children's long-term mental health to foster social-emotional skills from early childhood.

Numerous studies have underlined the importance of school-based interventions specifically designed to promote children's SEL from early childhood (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Over the last decade, evidence-based interventions on the promotion of social-emotional learning in kindergarten have received increasing scientific interest (Nation, et al., 2003; Nelson, Westhues, & MacLeod, 2003; Payton, et al., 2008). Research shows that SEL programs ob-

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