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Complexities of Assessing Social and Emotional Competence and Wellbeing in Young Children

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DEVELOPING POSITIVE SOCIAL and emotional growth and development in young children has always been a fundamental priority of early childhood practitioners. However, with an increasing economic and political focus on the foundational early childhood years, there has been a global push for the measurement of outcomes in early childhood education. This paper reports the findings of a major literature review to examine the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing in young children. The review was conducted by a team at Edith Cowan University as part of a project funded by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. It describes a number of issues about assessment dominating the early childhood literature. The paper then reports on the complexities of examining a domain that is socially and culturally constructed and where meaning belongs to the individual rather than to the person assessing the individual's behaviours.

Introduction

THERE IS OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE that growth and development in the social and emotional domain during the early years affects the health, wellbeing and competence of children throughout life (Denham, 2006; Mental Health Taskforce, 2004). Experiences that promote curiosity, self-confidence, engagement and satisfying reciprocal relationships have been strongly linked to high levels of self-esteem and socialisation. Therefore, the experiences children are exposed to have the potential to influence their future life trajectory that over time may become more difficult to modify (Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007). More specifically, research conducted by Denham (2006) outlines the importance of social and emotional competence to school readiness, future academic performance, and success in participation and interactions with peers and adults. Support for children's social and emotional growth in early childhood programs is dependent on how well the teachers know the child and how skilled they are at gaining meaningful information about children's social and emotional knowledge, skills and dispositions, and how this information is used to create effective programs.

Defining terms

There is considerable debate in the literature about what constitutes 'social and emotional competence and wellbeing', how it is defined and how it should be assessed. Terms such as social competence, emotional regulation, emotional literacy, emotional intelligence and mental health abound in the literature and add to the difficulty of clearly defining this construct. Work in psychology, health (both mental health and health promotions) and education often use different terms to describe similar aspects of social and emotional development. While there is variation in the types of terms used, there is general consensus regarding the major aspects of early childhood social and emotional development and the key achievements in this domain. These are:

- *Emotional competence:* defined as 'the ability to effectively regulate one's emotions to accomplish one's goal' (Squires, Bricker & Twombly, 2003, p.6).
- *Social competence:* described as 'the ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve interpersonal goals and social outcomes' (MacKay & Keyes, 2002 cited in Kostelnik et al., 2006, p.2).

- *Wellbeing:* referred to as 'children's physical, social and emotional welfare and development' (Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), 2005, p.3).

Why is social and emotional competence and wellbeing important?

The empirical research is overwhelming in providing evidence that strong growth in social and emotional competence and wellbeing underlies all later growth and development. A number of benefits identified in the literature highlight the importance of positive growth in this area. These include:

- *Positive relationships and inclusion:* Positive representations of self, emotional knowledge and regulatory abilities are some of the social and emotional competencies children learn through positive early relationships. Research on early schooling suggests that children's relationships with teachers and peers are pivotal to school success (Raver & Knitze, 2002; Raver & Zigler, 2004).

- *Foundation for positive mental health:* Effective social and emotional competence and positive wellbeing are an important foundation for mental health throughout childhood and into later life (Hertzman, 2004; Moore, 2006; Sosna & Mastergeorge, 2005). Effective social skills are attributed to overall happiness, quality of life, good treatment and respect from parents, and high self-esteem (Danielson & Phelps, 2003).

- *Early school success: From neurons to neighbourhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) is one work that highlights the link between emotional development and academic learning. There is overwhelming longitudinal evidence over 20 years that children's early school success is linked to a firm foundation of children's social and emotional skills (Stipek, 2006; Raver, 2002).

- *Integration of developmental domain:* Social and emotional competence and wellbeing is important both in its own right and because it affects other domains of development, especially language and communication skills, and early literacy and numeracy (Cohen et al., 2005). Denham (2006) suggests that social and emotional competence can be used to benchmark children's progress and program effectiveness.

Why assess social and emotional growth and development?

A key theme emerging from the literature is that assessment is a critical component of the learning and teaching cycle. 'Assessment' in this paper refers to all forms of measurement and appraisal that are recorded and integrated in an organised manner for the purpose of gathering authentic, regular, detailed and objective information about a child's accomplishments (MacAfee & Leong, 2002). Effective early childhood programs cannot be created unless teachers know what children can do independently and with the assistance of an adult. Teaching and learning are reciprocal processes that affect each other, and assessment is a way of finding out how well the teacher is teaching and the learner is learning (Kellough & Kellough, cited in Early Learning Standards Taskforce and Kindergarten Assessment Work Group, 2005). Fundamentally, it is important to assess social and emotional competence and wellbeing in children in order to give them the best chance of participating in early childhood programs (Sosna & Mastergeorge, 2005).

Issues and complexities of assessing social and emotional competence and wellbeing

Assessment in the early childhood phase has been described as problematic; however, assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing raises further issues worthy of discussion. These include complexities of the domain; focus on academic skills and school readiness; children from diverse cultures and backgrounds; the importance of the teacher; the influence of context; lack of consistency in terminology, including the voice of the child; and ethics associated with assessment.

Complexities of the domain

Social and emotional competence is a multifaceted domain incorporating elements such as feelings, temperament, values, personality, dispositions and behaviour. There is disagreement in the field on what aspects of these elements should be assessed and what the criteria for the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing should be. Young children experience dramatic growth spurts and competencies are constantly evolving, adding to the complexity of assessment. If development and growth is not uniform, and knowledge and skills in this area are socially and contextually framed, decisions about when and how to assess and what to assess become problematic. In addition, Squires, Bricker and Twombly (2003) identify the following key variables—setting and timing of assessment, child health, family culture and child development—as affecting a child's performance and hence the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing.

Focus on academic skills and school readiness

Arthur et al., (2008, p. 6) reported that, at a conference in Australia on the transition to school, 'school readiness'

was described as 'being able to hold a pencil correctly and knowing the letters of the alphabet'. Many early childhood practitioners claim there is a danger that the non-compulsory years of school are becoming more formal, with a focus on academic learning of content areas (Miller & Almon, 2009). It is imperative that social competence and interpersonal skills are seen as equally important when children begin school (Raver, 2002) and become a strong consideration for school readiness, and that early childhood programs provide a balanced curriculum across the development of children's knowledge, skills and dispositions.

An issue surrounding the focus on academic and school readiness skills in the literature is the use of standardised tests in early childhood. While there may be sound reasons for the use of particular standardised tests, Stipek (2006) emphasises the need for careful development, monitoring and selection of standardised tests used for accountability purposes.

Standardised testing of children has received great criticism in the educational literature (Stipek, 2006). Such tests include developmental inventories, academic readiness tests, diagnostic tools for special needs, group aptitude and achievement tests, and tests in almost any domain or learning area (McAfee & Leong, 2002).

Criticism is aimed at the use of standardised tests with young children for a number of reasons:

- *Unsuitability for this phase of development:* Standardised tests usually take the children from their familiar environment, or at the very least ask them to do prescribed tasks that are not part of their daily activities. The uneven development across domains in some instances makes it difficult to provide meaningful data, as children may make great social gains in one month but not meet any new academic goals.

- *Technical and educational inadequacy:* Many tests have been developed on an outmoded theory of how children learn and develop (Shepard, 2000). Many tests do not adequately represent the norms of society and therefore cannot be trusted to be valid and reliable in their scoring.

- *Often skills are tested in isolation:* Standardised tests can be a useful measuring tool of cognitive achievement and a measure of mental health, but are not appropriate for all situations and should not comprise the primary source of information about a young child.

- *Unsuitability for some groups of children:* Standardised tests are usually constructed based on the norms of the dominant culture's middle-class children and as such can be biased against linguistically and culturally different children.

- *Overuse of tests and misuse of data:* This is reported as particularly problematic in the literature in the United States of America. Evidence indicates that if isolated skills are assessed then programs are likely to focus on isolated skills (Stipek, 2006). McAfee and Leong (2002) report that educational institutions spend a lot of time and financial resources on tests and testing. Children are spending much of school time preparing for tests, and the misuse of test data may cost children valuable time if used for purposes of retention.

- *Influence on classroom practice:* All too often standardised tests are being used to show accountability and report how well schools and districts are doing. Such comparisons lead to distortions and misunderstandings of the tests' properties. They can also sway teachers to teach to the test and not necessarily what is of the greatest worth to the class or individual in a particular context.

However, this is not to say that standardised tests should not be used with young children, but rather that teachers should be cautious. Well-researched and appropriate screening and identification tools should be based on knowledge about how young children learn, and used to provide valuable information to guide important decisions. In some situations tests may be the best way to find out about particular types of learning.

Children from diverse cultures or with *English as an additional language/English as an additional dialect* backgrounds

The literature highlights two important issues when considering the assessment of social and emotional competence and wellbeing of children from diverse cultural backgrounds. The first issue reinforces the concept that culture provides a context in which children develop a sense of identity and a frame of reference that assists them in making sense of their world (Denham & Weissburg, 2004). Hudley (2001, cited in Denham & Weissburg, 2004) reminds us that we can seriously misunderstand the social and emotional needs of children if we do not understand the child's culture and our own cultural perspective. Therefore, when assessing behaviours associated with social and emotional competence, teachers may make assumptions based on their own culture that are incorrect.

The second issue is that most standardised instruments have been constructed around the norms of white middle-class populations. Such tools tend to label non-mainstream children as abnormal or deviant rather than different (Fantuzzo et al., 1995). An issue of concern is the void of reliable and valid tools to assess the social and emotional competence and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The importance of the teacher in assessment

There is much written about who should conduct the assessments of young children. The early childhood literature argues that whoever makes the assessment should have a relationship with the child and see the child daily (Edmunds & Stewart-Brown, 2003; McAfee & Leong, 2002). Others suggest it would depend on the type of assessment being completed. If a professional diagnostic assessment were to be made, then speech therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists or physiotherapists may become involved. Teachers need to make judgements about when to ask for professional assistance, and this is usually done when a holistic study of the child has been conducted by a variety of means, including observations across different situations and from multiple viewpoints. However, there are issues which teachers need to be aware of when making judgements about children's social and emotional competence and wellbeing. They are:

- *Teacher bias and assessment subjectivity:* Early childhood practitioners often do not understand that children bring their own cultural lens to experiences, which plays a major role in their interactions with others. This understanding is critical when practitioners apply their own cultural lens to assess, assign meaning to, or interpret the social and emotional competence and wellbeing of children (Denham & Weissberg, 2004). There is abundant evidence of teachers' cultural bias when making assessments.

- *Teacher workload and philosophy.* A practical barrier to assessment in this area can be teacher workload. Teachers from a study in the United Kingdom (Edmunds & Stewart-Brown, 2003) reported that time and school supports were issues they needed to contend with. They said they found both informal and formal assessments to be time-consuming and that time had become a barrier for assessment.

- *Teacher wellbeing and school/classroom environment:* Weare and Gray (2003) report that the teacher's own behaviour and attitudes are factors influencing children's social and emotional competence and wellbeing was the teacher's own behaviour and attitudes. Teachers cannot transmit emotional and social competence and wellbeing to children if their own emotional and social needs are not being met.

- *Teacher knowledge and competence:* Central to administering any assessment tool (whether summative or formative) is the teacher's understanding of assessment procedures and processes and knowledge of the area of social and emotional competence and wellbeing. As well, they

need to know how to apply the information they have gained to relevant and useful classroom practice.

Influence of context

As reported in the literature, young children's learning, actions and behaviours are constantly evolving through social construction within the context of their families and communities. By the time children enter school, their social and emotional wellbeing has been influenced by a number of factors: the immediate setting of family, peers and school impact most directly, while media, government agencies and social services exert a more indirect influence. As development and growth is not uniform, and knowledge and skills are socially framed, decisions about what social competence looks like are problematic.

Lack of consistent terminology

A problem associated with this area is the lack of common terms that describe growth and development. Further, assessment of social and emotional development and wellbeing is often hampered by a lack of appropriate diagnostic terms. A limited range of assessment tools in some cases, and an unwillingness to acknowledge that a range of social and emotional concerns can affect young children, also hamper efforts for policy-makers to consider assessment in this area (Mental Health Taskforce, 2004).

Voice of the child

Many researchers and teachers believe that including the voice of the child in assessment is vital yet largely overlooked as a point of reference, particularly in more formal assessment procedures. As outlined by one UK school principal, children's feelings and anxieties are demonstrated through words as well as actions, and therefore it is important to listen and hear the child's voice (cited in Edmunds & Stewart-Brown, 2003, p. 32). Quite young children are capable of making judgements about their own efforts and can play a helpful part in their own assessment. There are practical implications for including the child's voice but research has shown the use of narratives that give meaning to events and objects, and are constructions of children's learning and processes, is a valid form of assessment (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998).

Ethics

The rights of children and their families, as described in The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1998), has had an impact on the area of assessment, especially in the early childhood phase. The ethical responsibility in assessment rests on teachers'

understanding of the rights of children and families and their realisation of the limits of their personal knowledge and the choice of assessment tools. US and UK authors describe high stakes accountability that may be responsible for pressuring teachers into practices they believe are not in the best interests of the child (Dowling, 2007; Mindes, 2003). The failure of teachers to consider the ethical issues in assessment and assessment results can cause serious damage, such as lifelong stigmatisation and the restriction of educational prospects. Mindes (2003, p.15) describes the 'dreadful history in the Unites States in making improper decisions about the mismatch of the assessment tool to the purpose, the interpretation of results beyond the limits of the tool employed and the failure to consider the contextual factors'. Mindes (2003) suggests that making decisions about children's school entrance, retention or promotion dependent on test results could be detrimental and have lifelong consequences.

Conclusion

Developing strong social and emotional competence is essential for children's everyday wellbeing, as well as for engagement and learning in school and beyond. Healthy growth in this area is vital for positive mental health and affects growth in all other domains. Assessment in this area should reflect the drive for the highest possible goals for young children's learning and should be used to support quality teaching and learning programs. The early childhood years are important in their own right, and the cautions of formal assessments need to be heeded so that children's capabilities are viewed as emerging, not fixed. The literature is clear about the narrowness and inappropriateness of using standardised testing alone, which has the capacity to centre on isolated skills and results in narrow and potentially misleading diagnosis. As reported by Arthur et al. (2008, p4.), it is 'critical to balance the focus on the future contribution of young children to society with recognition of what happens in their lives in the present'.

Social and emotional competence and wellbeing should be situated within a comprehensive policy on assessment which has a shared knowledge, a shared language, and a comprehensive and coordinated approach to its implementation. The identification of a collection of formal and informal assessment resources that address a range of purposes, contexts, methods and timing, and complement the teacher's philosophy and school goals, would ensure that tools and processes relate directly to children's needs.

A number of factors in a child's life that influence social and emotional competence and wellbeing are beyond

the control of the teacher. So processes and procedures need to be put in place to assist teachers in supporting healthy growth in this domain. Assessing social and emotional skills with a range of tools, including observations, can help teachers to identify those that need further diagnosis and assistance.

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