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Children's Social-Emotional Development and its Support: Guest Editorial

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ABSTRACT: This special issue of the JECER focuses on children's social-emotional development and its support. From the associations between linguistic and social-emotional development to the role of early education teachers in supporting children, the issue covers a wide range of subtopics. The importance of children's social-emotional learning (SEL) has been recognized already for a long time, but despite an extensive body of research, gaps, nonetheless, still exist in our knowledge. There are, for example, still a relatively limited number of intervention studies evaluating different SEL-programmes in early childhood education in different cultural contexts. We also need to know more about how high quality early childhood education, in particular the interaction between teachers and children, and interaction in the peer group contribute to children's developing social-emotional competencies. The articles in the present issue bring forth interesting insights in and important contributions on children's development in the social-emotional domain, ranging from toddlers to older children.

Introduction

This Special Issue of JECER focuses on children's social-emotional development and its support. The importance of social emotional learning (SEL) for children's development, well-being, and coping later in life already has a strong research base (e.g., Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). This work suggests the importance of social-emotional domain of development to children's school readiness (Denham, 2006)

and academic success (see Denham & Brown, 2010 for a review; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Moreover, SEL can improve peer relations (Denham et al., 2003; Ladd, 2007) and contribute to positive classroom, and school culture (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In addition, a body of research explores the significance of classroom experiences, especially the applicability of different SEL programmes and the role of the teacher (Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012; Lippard, La Paro, Rouse & Crosby, 2018), for child outcomes, academic success, and the development of social-emotional competence.

According to CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2012), there are five key domains of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Self-awareness includes understanding one's own emotions—for example, recognizing and labelling them (Widen & Russell, 2008)—and emotional competence (Denham, 2007; Denham et al., 2003; Kongäs, 2018), values, and goals. Self-management implies the skills of emotion regulation, for example, controlling one's impulses and persevering to achieve one's goals (e.g., Denham et al., 2012). Social awareness, on the other hand, entails the ability to understand other people's perspectives and to have feelings of empathy and compassion (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2011). When interacting and building social relationships, individuals need relationship skills, which are manifested as an ability to establish and maintain relationships, as well as the ability to communicate, cooperate, resolve conflict, and to ask for help (e.g., Ladd, 2007). The last domain, responsible decision making, "requires the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings" (Weissberg et al., 2015, p. 7).

Although social-emotional learning has been widely studied from various perspectives, a gap, nonetheless, exists in the research literature. Knowledge about the prevalence of social-emotional difficulties in children coming from different economic and cultural backgrounds needs to be strengthened. High variance is often found in prevalence figures reported; the results depend on the research methodology used and the target population of the studies. According to a recent review (Kato, Yaganawa, Fujinawa, & Morawska, 2015), 10 to 20% of children have clinically significant problems; a large majority of children with behavioural problems do not have a referral to get help from medical services. However, prevalence figures higher than those have also been reported. Social-emotional and behavioral development problems have also been found to emerge early, already in children under the age of two (Alakortes, 2018).

Children's social-emotional problems also emerge, naturally, in the early childhood education environment. It seems that recently these challenges have been growing, or, at least, they have become more apparent among parents, early education practitioners, and clinicians. A national survey conducted in Finland (Määttä et al., 2017) provided space for early educators to voice their concerns: among the 94 respondents, 11% mentioned children's behavioural challenges; they had perceived the social-emotional challenges and restlessness of children to have increased. In day care centres, social-emotional aspects manifest themselves in the daily interactions and learning experiences between children and between children and teachers. Studies suggest that the following have a central impact on children's SEL and classroom's climate: the teachers' own social-emotional competence, well-being (see Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) and stress (Jeon, Buettner, Grant, & Lang, 2018), the quality of teacher-child relationships (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003), the effectiveness of the SEL implementation (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010), and the teachers' classroom management skills. As Köngäs (2018) highlights, the teachers' emotional availability, as well as their absence or stress, has an important influence on the ways children express and regulate their emotions (see also Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In order to tackle children's difficulties in social-emotional competence and skills, several SEL intervention programmes have been developed, and they are accompanied by a growing research base to verify their effectiveness (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015). A recent report by Määttä et al. (2017), however, highlights the shortage of reports in all four Nordic countries on the effects of intervention on children's social-emotional problems. Additionally in the study, the researchers reported a lack of knowledge about the interactive relationships between children and between children and adults.

The current Special Issue of the JECER provides interesting viewpoints on all of these areas. The issue contains nine articles, and they shed light on the associations with and the prerequisites of social-emotional development, its challenges, and ways to provide support to children.

In the beginning of this issue, the role of background factors (e.g., linguistic abilities) on children's social-emotional development is explored. Vocabulary size is known to reflect children's overall linguistic abilities. Indeed, in the study by **Paavola-Ruotsalainen, Rantalainen, Alakortes, Carter, Ebeling, and Kunnari**, vocabulary is related to the social-emotional and behavioural problems children have. Externalizing problems are especially associated with receptive vocabulary. Furthermore, in pre-school children, strong reciprocal associations between social competence and language and pre-literacy skills are shown in the article by **Pakarinen, Salminen, Lerkkanen, and von**

Suchodoletz. Moreover, **Mihic and Novak** studied the possible gender differences in emotion regulation and behaviour problems. They found out that 6- to 8-year-old children with poor emotion regulation skills, assessed by their teachers, had more internalizing or externalizing behavioural problems: boys had more problems with attention and hyperactive-impulsive behaviour than girls did.

In this issue, children's peer relations and their association in social-emotional learning is explored in two articles. **Wang, Kajamies, Hurme, Kinoshita, and Palonen** report on 5- to 6-year-old children's behaviour during peer interaction in an early education environment—in situations in which they played tablet games. Children showed more prosocial than problem behaviour with some interesting differences between girls and boys and verbal and nonverbal behaviour. Peer interactions in game playing are also described and typologized in the study by **Lipponen, Koivula, Huttunen, Turja, and Laakso**, in which the authors explored children's collaboration and social-emotional learning in the context of playing a digital Emotion Detectives game. In both of these reports, children preferred to have their own friends as their collaborators when playing.

The teacher's role and significance on children's social-emotional skills is studied in two articles. **Kurki, Järvenoja, and Järvelä** provide evidence that the quality of early education teacher monitoring activities and the level of support are associated with children's social-emotional growth and their ability to adopt effective strategies to solve conflicts in challenging social situations. For this active monitoring, the child group size needs to be manageable and early educators need the skills obtained through basic, high-level, and continuing education. Moreover, the article of **Løkken, Broekhuizen, Barnes, Moser, and Bjørnstad** sheds light on the associations between interaction quality and prosocial behaviour, self-control, assertiveness, adjustment, and fairness for children three years of age. The authors found out that quality of interaction was associated with the empathy shown by toddlers, and, therefore, it can impact the children's well-being and feelings of belonging.

The effectiveness of the COPE-R intervention programme is explored in the study by **Pang, Frydenberg, Liang, Deans, and Su**. They examined the impact of the programme on 4- to 5-year-old children's coping strategies, and discovered that due to the intervention, children's conduct problems were reduced, teachers reported less negative coping strategies, and the children studied showed fewer emotional problems than earlier.

The last article of this special issue explores an important but sometimes overlooked topic, namely parents' support for the development of their children's social skills. This

support is crucial, as **Neitola** shows in her article. Parents valued the social skills of their children, but, at the same time, they believed that social skills—particularly prosocial, emotional and co-operation skills as well conflict resolution and coping skills—need improvement. The significance of prosocial skills was particularly highlighted by the parents Neitola studied.

Taking it together, the articles of this special issue offer a variety of perspectives on children’s social-emotional learning. Regarding the context of early childhood education, the importance of the role of the teacher needs to be highlighted. The need of early education teachers to sensitively recognize children’s emotions and to react to children’s needs and conflicts was voiced in the study of Köngäs (2018). Based on her observations, the teachers did not invest enough time for responding to the children’s emotional states and providing constructive ways to solve conflicts between the children. To attain this, early childhood educators must pay attention to the importance of emotional sensitivity and responsiveness.

We hope that the present special issue, from its part, strengthens the research and evidence base of early childhood education. Children have the right to get the best care, teaching, and support we can provide them with.

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