

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

A review of school-based interventions for the improvement of social emotional skills and wider outcomes of education

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Non-cognitive skills
School-based interventions
Effect sizes
Systematic review

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a review of interventions which have the evidence of impact on students' non-cognitive skills. The review included 3000 studies out of which 138 studies were found relevant. Only 13 studies could be considered for the final results of the review process. Aggregating the results from the selected studies, we conclude that there is weak but positive evidence that some non-cognitive skills can be improved by school-based interventions. The most effective interventions involved schools and parent collaboration, freedom for students to communicate and express their feelings and regular implementation of the interventions. However, there is very less evidence concerning the persistence of intervention effects and to what extent they contribute to students' life-long achievements.

1. Introduction

Educational research generally focuses on ways to improve academic attainment. The knowledge about the interventions which improve the non-cognitive domains is quite limited compared to the existing evidence available on approaches for cognitive outcomes. This is mainly because performance in cognitive tasks such as performance in academic tests, mainly determine path-ways of occupational success. In addition, it has been supported that the non-cognitive skills are difficult to measure because they are more heterogeneous than cognitive skills and their measurement is based mostly on self-reports and observations (Brunello & Schlotter, 2011). This paper reviews the existing evidence on interventions which improve the non-cognitive skills as a learning domain since these skills 'matter for their own sake' (Garcia, 2014, p 3)

In England, students' behavior and social skills in schools are judged as one of the school effectiveness criterions (Ofsted, 2015). Similarly, some charter schools in United States have adopted the school effectiveness models based on students' performance on non-cognitive measures such as conscientiousness, self-control and resilience (West et al. 2015). Assessment of school performance on these non-cognitive measures can be justified in view of the evidence that shows students who struggle to communicate effectively are likely to be at risk of social isolation, rejection and victim of bullying (Botting & Conti-Ramsden, 2000; Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003; Hartshorne, 2007). Longitudinal studies have shown that children having social emotional and behavioural challenges in the primary school age are less likely to achieve good results in school (Patalay et al., 2016), less likely to attain higher education qualification, more likely to be involved in crime and are at higher risk of poor health, drug addiction, depression and other mental health problems (Carneiro et al., 2007, p.6). Children good in social skills are more engaged in schools and have positive friendship clusters (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012).

Non-cognitive are considered crucial for the life-long outcomes and have been found associated with domains, such as cognitive skill development (Blair & Raver, 2014; Heckman & Kautz, 2013; Tierney et al., 1995) and the labour market outcomes (Acosta et al.,

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2015). Research studies have reported that non-cognitive skills play a key role in the attainment outcomes between different social groups and thus can be related with social inequalities since earlier academic stages (Noden & West, 2009). Furthermore, non-cognitive skills can be a predictor for adult criminality (Agan, 2011), health (McCord, 1978) or admission into higher education (González-Torres and Artuch-Garde, 2014; West et al., 2015). For example, a follow-up of the Seattle Social Development Programme has used social behaviour in childhood as a predictor of positive adult functioning and preventing mental health problems and substance abuse (Hawkins et al., 2005).

England in comparison with other OECD countries is at the bottom of the list where children aged 10–12 years report their life satisfaction at school and their relationship with teachers (The Children's Society, 2015). Only 26% of English students fully agreed with the statement 'I like going to schools' and 38% reported been hit by other children. Even though this finding is based on children's subjective reporting and sometimes contradicts with objective measures of children's well-being, it urges the development of non-cognitive skills of students.

There is evidence suggesting that early age social skills have positive correlation with later outcomes in life such as employment status and hourly wages. It is found more so important and effective for success and life chances of people born in poverty (Carneiro et al., 2007). Social skills and social connectedness in early years are also found better determinants of well-being in adulthood life rather than academic achievement in school (Olsson et al., 2013). Supportive peers, school environment and community develop characteristics that are associated with nurturing good social skills and effective communication behaviour. In particular, active engagement with school (or school connectedness) is thought to be inversely linked with risk-taking behaviours. Schools are a micro-society for children where they learn about trust, mutual respect and expectations from a wider society (Gorard and Smith, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial that school policies should focus on readiness of children to meet the wider social world.

Therefore, these skills are crucial to be developed and this review examines school-based interventions that have published reporting impacts on these non-cognitive skills. We use the term skills instead of traits, abilities or constructs because this makes evident that they can be transformed and they are not stable characteristics. Eysenck and Eysenck (1980, p.191) described personality traits as 'importantly determined by hereditary factors'. Therefore, we use the term skills to emphasize the ability to improve these characteristics. In this review, we are just focused on the selected non-cognitive skills that are most often targeted for improvement in the school contexts and the following were examined in this review:

- **Social skills:** This is a broad category and it includes all the skills which concern interaction with other individuals. For instance, working in a team effectively can be considered one of these skills or sociability. There is evidence that social skills are malleable at school age level (Gutman & Schoon, 2013).
- **Grit/Resilience:** Grit can be defined as 'persistence and passion for long-term goals [...] maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress' (Duckworth et al. 2007, p. 1087–1088).
- **Emotional wellbeing:** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is often described as a single unit by the SEL programmes which targets skills, such as recognition and management of emotions, setting of realistic goals, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and good decision making mostly, including interpersonal situations (Payton et al. 2008, p.4). By saying emotional stability, we mean mostly the recognition and management of emotions.
- **Motivation and Locus of Control:** Study of motivation refers to 'the determinants of thought and action - it addresses why behaviour is initiated, persists, and stops, as well as what choices are made' (Weiner, 1992, p.17). Locus of control is a concept which is closely associated with motivation. Rotter has suggested a one-dimensional model where locus of control is either external or internal to the person, while Weiner suggested a two-dimensional model where except for the internal and external classification, there is also of classification of causes between stable and unstable (Weiner, 1974). Thus, there are four main causes to success; ability (stable and internal locus of control), task difficulty (stable and external locus of control), effort (unstable to some extent and internal locus of control) and luck (unstable and external locus of control) (Weiner, 1974).
- **Self-efficacy and self-esteem:** According to Bandura (1997) these abilities are about making judgments of 'personal capacity' and 'self-worth' (p. 11).
- **Self-regulation:** According to Zimmerman, Bonner and Kovach (1997, p.11) the self-regulatory learning cycle involves a) self-evaluation and monitoring of the prior performance, b) goal setting and strategic planning, c) strategy implementation to succeed the goal(s) and d) the outcome monitoring. All these stages are associated with learning outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that these skills could be interrelated and, therefore, interventions could possibly have wider known or unknown impacts. For example, Bandura (1997) links the development of intrinsic motivation and interest through the enhancement of self-efficacy (p.218–223) and discusses the role of self-efficacy in the self-regulated learning (p. 227–234). It has also been supported that the self-regulation gives a sense of personal control which is a major source of intrinsic motivation (Zimmerman, Bonner & Kovach, 1997, p. 3). In other words, non-cognitive skills should be perceived as a grid with links and interdependency between skills. There is no clear and robust evidence that determine if these skills are independent of each other and improvement interventions can have effect on associated skills variably. There is very less evidence that shows if the interdependency can be measured or controlled and how targeted intervention outcomes have impacts on the associated skills.

2. Method

The research studies of this review were retrieved by several electronic databases; ERIC, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Project MUSE, EPPICentre database, SSRN and ProQuest (for dissertations and thesis). For EBSCOhost searching the

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