Given that internationalisation is an increasing influence on education systems across the world, there is a real need for more fora to offer critical exchange, dissemination and debate on policy reports in education that are purporting to address international audiences and influence a wide range of national education systems. Against this backdrop, the International Journal of Emotional Education has decided to add Policy Reports to the scope of reviewed works for its book reviews section. This issue focuses on a review by Neil Boland of the OECD’s Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills. While the OECD’s PISA findings do include a limited focus on students’ perceptions of belongingness and sense of inclusion in school, this OECD report represents an expansion of the ambit of its previous concerns. The assumptions underlying this attempted expansion are interrogated by Boland.

If there are other Policy Reports in Education that readers would like to review or have reviewed, please contact me at: paul.downes@dcu.ie

Professor Erna Nairz-Wirth offers a review of the multidisciplinary book Winning Without Fighting which combines theoretically informed understandings with practical approaches for education and working in the classroom. It addresses key issues such as the need to go beyond stigmatising labels for children and to focus on interactional dimensions to experience and behaviour.

Paul Downes
Book Reviews Editor
1. *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*

**Author:** OECD  
**Publisher:** OECD Publishing  
**Year of Publication:** 2015  
**ISBN:** 978-92-64-22614-2  
**DOI:** 10.1787/9789264226159-en

OECD’s influence on education is significant; it is best known for its analyses of PISA assessments since 2000. To date, these assessments have measured and reported on cognitive skills in a wide range of OECD member countries. The impact of putting the results into league tables of national educational “achievement” can hardly be underestimated. That this has been positive for educational policy-making worldwide is contested (Dohn, 2007; Gorur, 2011; Meyer, 2014).

OECD’s strong focus on cognitive attainment has been widely criticized as one-sided, including in this Journal (Cefai et al, 2014) and it is praiseworthy that the perspective given by *Skills for Social Progress* is notably broader. The report is the result of a three-year project by OECD’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation analysing longitudinal studies, policy statements and practices in a number of countries. It places social and emotional capabilities squarely in the ranks of valuable educational outcomes. The authors talk about the importance of developing the “whole child” with a balanced range of cognitive, emotional and social skills (p. 13). While it is welcome that OECD acknowledges that not everything in education is about cognitive achievement, educating the “whole child” will need to include physical, active skills as well as cognitive, social and emotional ones. Nonetheless, this report is a major advance by OECD in their picture of what is important in education.

At the same time, *Skills for Social Progress* raises many questions. In the report, social and emotional skills (SES) are never defined. The three skills which receive most emphasis are conscientiousness, sociability and emotional stability. These three have the most positive effect on life outcomes (p. 14). This leads to what is, for me, the first big question: how is “success” being defined and by whom? Unsurprisingly, OECD defines successful life outcomes as a rise in socio-economic level and access to the labour market. Though this is certainly a widely held view, it is not the only definition. A successful student becomes one who is conscientious, socially able and has self-control (p. 70). Elsewhere, being respectful is mentioned as a factor in helping improve assessment scores (p. 76). All this seems to add up to an image of the successful student as an ideal employee and a keeper of the status quo, someone who does not challenge or rock the boat. The graphics throughout the publication illustrating skill development reinforce this; they show a baby crawling, a toddler, a youth and finally a man with a briefcase. Using varied images including those with female silhouettes and without a business-bias would have been welcome.
The report discusses measuring instruments which, it states, are able to quantify SES reliably, though further work needs to be done. These instruments include “self-reported personality, behavioural characteristics [such as school attendance] and objective psychological assessments” (p. 14). Among these instruments is The Big Five Inventory. These Big Five areas are Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability and Openness (p. 35). These are divided further into subcategories, the most interesting of which are under Openness and include imagination, creativity and critical thinking. These three involve both cognitive and social and emotional skills. It is stated that the current socio-economic climate is calling out strongly for innovation and these attributes which use “divergent thinking” (p. 36) are possibly the skills most likely to lead to innovative approaches. It is disappointing that they are not emphasised in the report or are part of any countries’ longitudinal studies. Though again, this is perhaps not surprising as which instruments would measure these reliably?

I am left thinking that the title, Skills for Social Progress, is a misnomer. This is not a report which offers a vision of social progress towards a more equitable and human-based future. Rather, it advocates skills which are found to leverage productivity at a time of financial uncertainty while maintaining the social status quo, which is that the needs of the global economy are paramount. That social and emotional skills help lead to personal well-being is attractive, but what is stressed most in the report is that they help the economy. To this end, OECD’s next international longitudinal study will be “to identify the process of social and emotional skills formation and its socio-economic outcomes” (p. 135).

Over the last twenty years, the educational debate around the world has been increasingly distracted by what Keri Facer calls the “neurotic comparison of statistical evidence” (2011, p. 21) and the managerial quantification of educational “attainment.” Reports from OECD are a major factor in this distraction. What seems inevitable from this report is that there is going to be an increase in the assessment of children in schools and that new league tables will result. For whatever reasons, this cannot but increase pressures on teachers, parents and students.

This report is published at a time when people in all countries are facing huge challenges – global warming, diminishing resources, artificial intelligence, overpopulation, generational alienation, economic stagnation/collapse, the list could go on – and many look towards education to contribute to the search for alternatives. What is highlighted in the report will not lead to alternatives being found. Though it shows a welcome widening of the parameters of ‘education’, it supports the current socio-economic model which is being challenged worldwide as at no other time. The outlook may have widened, but the direction is unaltered.

This publication does not offer a path towards social progress as I understand it.

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References


2. Winning without Fighting

**Author:** Claudette Portelli, Matteo Papantuono & Padraic Gibson

**Publisher:** Malta University Press Publishing

**Year of Publication:** 2014

**ISBN:** 978-99909-44-66-2

*Winning without fighting* is written for those working professionally with young people, as well as for caregivers who are confronted with the challenges that school children and young people often present. The book is divided into three sections - *The Model, Common Child Difficulties,* and *Effective Non-Ordinary Interventions* - and concludes with extensive case studies and interventions presented by teachers and clinicians. These case studies represent a key factor in supporting the theoretical model with practical problem-solving methods. The manual aims to give the reader a perspective on more effective ways to cooperate in order to resolve social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) in school children and young people. The interventions proposed by the three authors are a result of twenty years of scientific and practical research in the field of human change. Thus the authors fulfil their promise (in the introduction) that this book will be a source of interventions from which the practitioner can successfully deal with social and emotional difficulties without stigmatising the individual. Impressive is, for example, the respectful and differentiated style in which the authors describe the family background of the pupils. The book can be seen
as a manual for teachers, psychologists and school support staff, but in my opinion it is also useful as a preventative tool and can be used effectively in teacher training and supervision.

The book opens by offering the reader basic theoretical models of intervention for dealing with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in school-aged children and adolescents. The dominant perspective of the authors is that they distance themselves clearly from any attitude which stigmatizes the concerned students. Building on anthropological-constructivist theory (Amatea 1989, 2005; Balbi & Artine, 2009; Watzlawik, 1967ff) obstacles, problems and difficulties are interpreted as interactional phenomena (p. 32) and not as a result of individual pathological behaviour. The similarities and differences to existing perspectives are analysed and illustrated through regular case studies and examples. These also shed light on the multifunctional role of teachers and the influence that their behaviour has on the pupils. Papantuone, Portelli and Gibson also focus strongly on the Brief Constructivist Strategic approach, which, through years of experience in action research in clinics, schools and other social contexts has shown to be effective in facilitating behavioural change.

Chapter two develops constructivist theories further and shows how they can be transferred to the school situation. The central theme is how reality - including school reality - is constructed, especially in regard to language. The most important attitude of the authors – “Everything is perspective and perspective is everything” (p. 39) has obvious consequences for relationships at school and how individuals approach their difficulties. There follows a detailed presentation of the five axioms of Watzlawick’s theory of constructivism, and examples are used to illustrate their social dimension.

The third chapter deals in detail with an alternative model for diagnosing difficulties (“operative diagnosis”) with the focus on the inner dynamic of communication processes and their practical consequences. Here it becomes clear how fully the authors distance themselves from the stigmatising effect of medical and psychiatric definitions of individual pupils (“mental disorders”, p. 61) and that they reject oversimplified mono-causal explanations of deviant behaviour, urging for general caution when interpreting human behaviour (“Fluid Nature of Human Behaviour”, p. 66) The dangers of the self-fulfilling prophecy and “Pygmalion effect” (Rosenthal S 72-77) are also dealt with. The theory that concludes this section (Chapter 4) introduces the “operative tool” that offers practitioners an exemplary series of steps (“a pass-par-tout”, p. 82) to overcome communication difficulties. All the steps are illustrated with examples and short case studies and include a problem-solving process, analyzing failed attempted solutions (p. 85), and searching for exceptions (De Shazer 1988).

Chapter 5 gives attention to the influence of emotions on the learning process. The four primary emotions- fear, pain, anger and pleasure as defined by Nardone and Ekmann (1993) - are analysed, in line with their constructivist perspective. The authors argue that these uncontrolled emotions should not be diagnosed as pathological, but that the teacher can in fact support their transformation into strengths. Following Nardone and Watzlawick (2005) the authors believe that “individuals need to experience and feel something different to be freed from their constraining sensations, perceptions and reactions”. (p. 112)
This forms a transition to the following four chapters in which the effects of extreme forms of these emotions on childrens’ behaviour are explored in detail. These behaviour difficulties are illustrated by case studies which are then followed by a description of a concrete intervention which have solved the problem.

This book certainly has a great deal to offer for the field of education, especially as it draws on a rich base of psychological, sociological and educational research. At the same time its accessible style and numerous examples make it a useful practical manual. However, it nevertheless has some slight weaknesses. The layout is not always ideal for the presentation of this very interesting content: for example, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between titles and subtitles. Also the transitions from one topic to the other are at times somewhat abrupt. Despite this I closed this book with a similar feeling stated in the forward: “I consider it to be a must read for all school-based practitioners and those in the field of education”.

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