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With a preface by Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO, and a foreword by Koji Miyamoto, Senior Economist, the World Bank.

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Social and emotional learning for vulnerable and marginalized children and young people

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ABSTRACT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been on the rise in recent decades in various countries and cultures across the globe. Its rise is not only a reflection of the increasing social and emotional challenges that children and young people are facing in the twenty first century and the need for education to address such issues, but also a result of the increasing evidence that SEL has social, emotional and academic benefits. Universal, school-based SEL has been found to be particularly helpful to support the social and emotional needs of vulnerable and marginalized children. In this chapter, we argue that SEL as a universal, inclusive approach is very well placed to effectively address the social and emotional needs of vulnerable and marginalized children and young people, both to promote their positive development and to prevent social, emotional and behavior difficulties. Universal interventions, however, may need to be complemented by additional targeted interventions. Integrated multi-tiered interventions within an inclusive whole school approach will ensure that vulnerable and marginalized children are more likely to be reached and supported without the risk of labelling and stigmatization.

L'apprentissage social et émotionnel pour les enfants et les jeunes vulnérables et marginalisés

L'apprentissage social et émotionnel (ASE) a connu un essor au cours des dernières décennies dans divers pays et cultures du monde. Cet essor reflète non seulement les défis sociaux et émotionnels croissants auxquels les enfants et les jeunes sont confrontés au XXI^e siècle et la nécessité pour l'éducation de s'attaquer à ces problèmes, mais aussi les preuves de plus en plus nombreuses des avantages sociaux, émotionnels et scolaires de l'ASE. L'ASE universel en milieu scolaire s'est avéré particulièrement utile pour répondre aux besoins sociaux et émotionnels des enfants vulnérables et marginalisés. Dans ce chapitre, nous soutenons que l'ASE comme approche universelle et inclusive est très bien placée pour répondre efficacement aux besoins sociaux et émotionnels des enfants et des jeunes vulnérables et marginalisés, à la fois pour promouvoir leur développement positif et pour prévenir les difficultés sociales, émotionnelles et comportementales. Les interventions universelles nécessiteront toutefois d'être complétées par des interventions supplémentaires ciblées. Des interventions intégrées à plusieurs niveaux dans le cadre d'une approche inclusive de l'ensemble de l'école garantiront que les enfants vulnérables et marginalisés auront plus de chances d'être atteints et soutenus sans risque d'étiquetage et de stigmatisation.

Aprendizaje socioemocional para niños, niñas y adolescentes vulnerables y marginados

El aprendizaje socioemocional (SEL, por sus siglas en inglés) ha ido en aumento en las últimas décadas en varios países y culturas de todo el mundo. Este auge no es sólo un reflejo de los crecientes retos sociales y emocionales a los que se enfrentan los niños, niñas y adolescentes en el siglo XXI y de la necesidad de que la educación aborde estos problemas, sino también el resultado de la creciente evidencia de que el aprendizaje socioemocional tiene

beneficios sociales, emocionales y académicos. Se ha encontrado que el SEL universal basado en la escuela es particularmente útil para atender las necesidades sociales y emocionales de los niños y niñas vulnerables y marginados. En este capítulo, sostenemos que el SEL como enfoque universal e inclusivo está muy bien situado para abordar eficazmente las necesidades sociales y emocionales de niños, niñas y adolescentes vulnerables y marginados, tanto para promover su desarrollo como para prevenir dificultades sociales, emocionales y de comportamiento. Estas intervenciones universales, sin embargo, podrían requerir ser complementadas con intervenciones específicas adicionales. Las intervenciones integradas de varios niveles dentro de un enfoque escolar inclusivo garantizarán que los niños y niñas vulnerables y marginados tengan más probabilidades de formar parte de las intervenciones sin el riesgo de ser etiquetados y estigmatizados.

Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a strengths-based approach that promotes the social and emotional competence of children and young people. It helps to promote positive social and academic outcomes such as social and emotional competences, positive attitudes, prosocial behavior and academic learning, while decreasing internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviors such as violence and anti-social behavior (Cefai et al, 2018; Durlak et al, 2011; Goldberg et al, 2008; Sklad et al, 2012). SEL is primarily a universal intervention approach, targeting all students at school, making use of instructional, relational and organizational strategies within a systemic and inclusive perspective (Cefai et al, 2018). There has been less attention, however, on how SEL may support the social and emotional needs of vulnerable and marginalized children such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities and children with disability. This paper discusses how SEL may address the needs of such children within an inclusive whole school approach.

Universal SEL for vulnerable and marginalized students

Evidence from various reviews of studies shows that universal SEL interventions benefit all students at school across diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Durlak et al, 2011; Sklad et al, 2012; Taylor et al, 2017; Weare and Nind, 2011). Durlak et al.'s (2011) seminal meta-analysis reported that SEL works for all schoolchildren, with positive adjustment for children coming from a range of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (though nearly one third of the studies contained no information on student ethnicity or socioeconomic status). Likewise, Taylor et al.'s review (2017) found that positive outcomes were similar regardless of students' race, socioeconomic background, or school location. Other reviews (e.g., Clarke et al, 2015; Farahmand et al, 2011; Sanchez et al, 2018; Weare and Nind, 2011) reported that universal SEL has been found to be particularly effective for vulnerable and marginalized students. Such children may have more pressing social and emotional needs and thus more likely to benefit from SEL interventions.

Furthermore, universal SEL helps to provide access to psychological resources necessary for healthy social and emotional development, which vulnerable and marginalized children may lack in other systems in their lives such as family, community and peer group. In this respect, it operates as an early intervention – a preventive strategy to promote equity by directing the developmental trajectory of vulnerable and marginalized children towards more positive outcomes (McClelland et al, 2017). Clarke et al. (2015) found that interventions aimed at increasing social and emotional competences and reducing problem behaviors (aggression, violence and substance misuse) were particularly effective with children and young people most at risk of developing such behaviors. Weare and Nind's (2011) meta-analysis reported that whilst universal approaches had a positive impact on the wellbeing and mental health of both normally developing children

and young people as well as those at risk in their development, they appeared to be particularly effective for the latter group. The systematic review of SEL studies with marginalized children by Farahmand et al (2011) found that universal interventions were more effective than targeted interventions for such children.

Another advantage of school-based universal SEL interventions is that since these are addressed to all students at school, they take place within an inclusive setting, with less likelihood of labelling and stigmatization. SEL becomes part of the mainstream culture at the school, with the whole school community engaged in its promotion and application in daily school life. There is also less likelihood of 'opportunity cost' for vulnerable and marginalized children who may otherwise miss other curricular activities in order to attend targeted SEL sessions. Furthermore, within such learning contexts, vulnerable children also have the opportunity to observe and work with more socially and emotionally competent peers who thus serve as good role models for the development of their own social and emotional competences.

Universal SEL is not just about programs. Since SEL takes place within the whole classroom group and in most instances is facilitated by the classroom teacher, the classroom climate itself becomes an integral part of the social and emotional learning process. Within an integrated taught (curricular) and caught (classroom climate) approach, students have the opportunity to observe the competences being practiced by teacher/s and peers, and apply these competences themselves in their learning and social activities, supported and reinforced by the classroom teacher. SEL thus becomes an integral aspect of daily life in the classroom. Moreover, sense of safety, sense of belonging, collaboration, inclusion and support for all students in the classroom, provide an optimal learning environment for both academic and social and emotional learning (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang et al, 2020). In their systematic review of studies, Wang et al found that the classroom climate was positively related with social competence, motivation, engagement, and academic achievement, and negatively related

with internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The impact of the classroom climate on motivation and engagement was stronger in classrooms with more ethnic minority students.

A whole school, multi-tiered approach for marginalized and vulnerable children

Some studies have found that universal interventions for vulnerable and marginalized students are *more* effective than interventions which target only these children (e.g., Farahmand et al's 2011 systematic review on SEL programs for low income, urban young people). This raises the question of whether there is a place for SEL-targeted interventions with vulnerable marginalized children, such as interventions tailored specifically to the needs of students considered at risk (selective interventions) or students with more complex social and emotional needs (indicated interventions). Whilst universal SEL for all children, including vulnerable and marginalized ones, remains the intervention of choice within a whole school approach to SEL, additional, more intensive, interventions may be needed to address the diverse and complex needs of students at risk or in difficulty (Cefai et al, 2018; Weare and Nind, 2011). Research indicates that integrated, universal-targeted interventions may be the most effective approach for marginalized students or those experiencing social and emotional difficulties (Murano et al, 2020; Stockings et al, 2016; Werner Seidler et al, 2017; Weare and Nind, 2011). In their meta-analysis of reviews, Weare and Nind (2011) reported that while universal approaches provide a more effective environment for working with students experiencing difficulties than targeted approaches alone, universal approaches on their own are not as effective for such students as those that also include a targeted component. In a review of universal and targeted school-based interventions to prevent depression and anxiety amongst young people, Werner Seidler et al. (2017) found that both universal and targeted interventions were effective in preventing depression

and anxiety. They suggest an integrated, staged approach, with universal interventions followed by targeted interventions for students at risk or experiencing difficulties.

Furthermore, an integrated universal–targeted approach will have maximum reach and thus be more likely to be effective, particularly in the case of vulnerable and marginalized children and families who may not have equal access to universal programs and services (Corrieri et al, 2014). In this way, integrated, school-based SEL interventions can help to overcome disparities in accessibility to programs and services.

An integrated universal-targeted interventions approach

Within a systemic, integrated approach to SEL, all schoolchildren will be provided with an SEL curriculum as part of their formal education from early years to high school. They will have the opportunity to develop such competences as nurturing a positive self-concept, identifying and making use of their strengths, expressing and regulating emotions, coping with challenges, stress and adversity, being empathic and understanding, appreciating diversity, caring for themselves, others and the environment, building healthy relationships, working with others as part of a team, and resolving conflict constructively. The curriculum seeks to address the diverse needs of the learners in the group within an inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms, with activities tailored according to the individual needs of the learners. Some universal programs also include activities that are specifically addressed to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized children such as discrimination, exclusion, bullying, change, loss, and adversity (see proportionate universality below). On the other hand, some programs focus exclusively on challenges and difficulties of substance use, aggression, bullying and victimisation, depression and anxiety (selective interventions). Such focused interventions complement the universal interventions that learners are already

exposed to and may be organized as preventive interventions for children at risk, such as those from low SES or migrant backgrounds, children with disability, and children exposed to abuse and violence. Finally a number of children may have more complex and chronic social and emotional needs that manifest in emotional, behavioral and mental health needs (indicated interventions). Indicated interventions are more personalized and intensive and may involve various professionals besides school staff. They also make use of other therapeutic strategies besides SEL, such as cognitive behavior therapy and other psycho-social approaches. A multi-tiered approach thus provides social and emotional education and support according to need within the school system in collaboration with other systems such as parents, local community and professionals (Cefai et al, 2018).

Targeted interventions, however, need to be implemented in a way that do not result in exclusion, labelling or stigma. Being part of a systemic, whole school approach to SEL, focusing on strengths rather than deficits, with interventions facilitated where possible by school staff in contrast to medicalized interventions by external clinicians, and with school-based targeted interventions seen as part of a continuum of support for all students as necessary, help to avoid vulnerable and marginalized children becoming excluded from their peers or labelled as children with deficits in their social and emotional development. School-based targeted interventions ensure that children and families will have access to these services, that the children and families will more likely attend the intervention, and that there will be less likelihood of labelling and stigma (Sanchez et al, 2018). Another approach to make SEL intervention for marginalized children more inclusive and less stigmatising is what Boivin and Hertzman (2012) call ‘proportional universality’. Whilst SEL activities are organized within a universal approach for all children in the group, their dosage and intensity are proportionate to the degree of disadvantage or marginalization in a particular context. Universal intervention strategies are thus tailored to reach children across diverse backgrounds and to

address the specific barriers to access that some children and young people may experience.

RESCUR Surfing the Waves (Cefai et al, 2015) is an example of a proportionate universality curriculum for primary school students. It aims at developing children's competence in building healthy relationships, developing a growth mindset, developing self-determination, building on strengths, and turning challenges into opportunities. Activities are delivered by classroom teachers for all students, but the program is particularly focused on the needs of children from an ethnic background, low socio-economic status and children with disability. There are some indications that the program is particularly effective with children at risk or with social and emotional and mental health needs (Simoes et al, 2020). Further research is needed, however, to determine more accurately how the effect of SEL universal interventions is moderated by such factors as gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability (Rowe and Trickett, 2018).

Case study: SEL in the Maltese educational context

In the Maltese educational context, universal SEL is a mandatory content area of the formal curriculum. Personal, Social and Careers Development (PSCD) seeks to equip schoolchildren with such intra- and interpersonal competences as self-awareness, self-expression, responsible decision making, critical thinking, conflict resolution, dealing with peer pressure, respect for others, healthy relationships, and respect for diversity. Some of these competences are also embedded in other content areas of the curriculum such as Citizenship, Visual and Performing Arts, Ethics/Religious Education, Physical Education, and Circle Time (Cefai, 2020). The Maltese educational system is primarily an inclusive one, with the vast majority of schoolchildren attending mainstream schools and provided with additional support as required. Vulnerable and marginalized children such as children with learning difficulties and challenging behavior, children with disability and children

from a migrant background, thus follow the universal SEL curriculum (PSCD) with their peers. Since PSCD sessions take place in groups of not more than 15 students, this makes it more possible for the classroom teacher to address the diverse needs of all students, including those who are vulnerable and marginalized, within a universal design framework. Furthermore, students with individual educational needs such as learning, linguistic and behavior challenges, may be supported by a learning support educator who facilitates their active participation in the sessions. When the social and emotional needs of the students are more pronounced and complex, mainstream schools provide additional targeted support in small groups such as nurture classes (primary schools) and learning support zones (secondary schools). In these contexts, students are provided with more intensive and individualized support in one or two sessions per week, including positive self-esteem, anger management, emotional regulation, problem-solving, resilience-building, empathy, making friends, and working collaboratively with others. Staff at these provisions also work with the classroom teachers and parents for continuity of support in the mainstream classrooms and families respectively. Some of these students may also receive more intensive and specialized support on a one to one basis such as counselling and psychological support from the schools' psychosocial support team.

Conclusion

Universal SEL intervention for all schoolchildren, tailored according to the needs of children in particular contexts and with different needs, represents an effective approach for the promotion of positive development and the prevention of social, emotional and behavior difficulties. It provides vulnerable and marginalized children and young people with the psychological resources to overcome challenges and adversity whilst preventing the development of social, emotional and behavior difficulties. It also serves as a driver for a positive

developmental trajectory, thus operating as an early intervention, resilience-enhancing, and equity-promoting process. Universal intervention however, is more than just stand-alone programs or interventions. It needs to be implemented within a whole school approach to SEL, comprising instructional, curricular, contextual and organizational processes both in the classroom and at the whole school level, and including the whole school community, namely students, school staff, parents and the local community. It also forms part of an integrated approach that is both universal and targeted, with a provision of support catering for the diversity of the students' needs. In this way, universal and targeted interventions complement and support each other.

Finally, a word of caution. The focus of this chapter on developing the social and emotional resources of students needs to be seen within a wider systemic approach to the education and positive development of vulnerable and marginalized children. A highly individualized SEL approach may place the onus of responsibility on the victims themselves to overcome disadvantage and disparity, without addressing the structural deficits of unjust systems. A systemic approach to child development and wellbeing underlines the need for adequate structures and systems to be in place, which prevent poverty, social exclusion and other sources of vulnerability and marginalization and promote the positive development and wellbeing of all children.

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