

Editorial

The recent upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East have resulted in an influx of immigrants crossing the Mediterranean to European shores; while in 2013 the figure stood at 60,000, this year so far the number has more than doubled at 130,000. Migration has been also one of the main issues which influenced voting in the European elections held earlier this year, showing an increase in its importance in 19 member states since the last elections five years ago. The rise of rightist movements and political parties with their anti-immigration policies in various European countries, has also been another issue of concern in this respect. The first paper in this issue on sensitizing children to the social and emotional mechanisms underlying racism, is thus very welcome in this context. Sofia Trilvia and her colleagues (Greece) present the results of an intervention programme to help primary school students identify emotions associated with prejudice, discrimination and stereotypical thinking, understand similarities and differences between people, and develop perspective taking and empathic skills in relation to diverse others. The evaluation of the programme underlined such mechanisms as group discussions, dialogue and problem solving on perspective taking, naming emotions and identifying bias in simulations and role plays, as well as group engagement in art and imaginative praxis, as effective tools in enhancing children's empathy and understandings on stereotypes, bias, and discrimination, and consequently in preventing racism and ethnocentrism.

The second paper presents the results of another intervention programme with primary school children, namely a school-based mindfulness program for children at risk of social exclusion, with a particular focus on the children's own experience of the programme. Mindfulness has been generating considerable interest as a promising intervention for health promotion and resilience building in schools, not only for school staff, but more recently for students as well. Costello and Lawler (Ireland) report that their evaluation of the intervention provides support for the inclusion of mindfulness education in the school curriculum as a tool to empower children in difficulty or at risk in their development, not only to manage the stresses in their lives, but also to engage more actively in the learning process.

Bullying is a recurring major issue faced by schools across the world. In the third paper, Christopher Donoghue and colleagues (USA) examined the predictions made by middle school students about the ways that they would cope with verbal and social bullying. It is interesting to note that while generally students said

they would utilize adaptive coping strategies in seeking to solve the problem, those who had experienced recent bullying were more likely to predict that they would engage in maladaptive avoidance coping strategies if victimized in the future. Willingness to report bullying and seek help was found to be enhanced by approach coping strategies, less aggressive attitudes, and lower perceptions of school bullying. Educational interventions encouraging young adolescents to engage in more adaptive coping in dealing with bullying are recommended as effective tools for middle school students to respond to verbal and social bullying.

In the fourth paper, Zsolnai and Kasik (Hungary) sought to map the trajectory of social skills development from middle childhood to early adolescents, examining three cohorts of 7, 9 and 11 year old respectively. An important implication of the study is that the evaluation of children's social skills is highly dependent on situational and contextual variables, and on the person making the evaluation. Amongst other findings, they reported no spontaneous development of social skills between the ages of 7 and 11, and that for many participants, the acquisition of social skills was not completed at 11 years old, underlining the need for social skills programming at primary school level.

In the fifth paper, Camenzuli and Buhagiar (Malta) present an extended action research study on the use of inquiry based learning in the teaching of mathematics to secondary school students with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD). The authors reported improved student behaviour, motivation and engagement in the learning of mathematics, leading to increased academic performance. They relate the success of this pedagogical approach to the match between instruction and the students' preferred learning mode, in contrast to traditional, non SEBD friendly classrooms. Citing Gardner, they conclude that in their positive evaluation of the programme, the students were thus "emphasising their right to be taught in a manner that respects the way they learn best".

In this edition, we are also including two short discussion papers related to the current debate on the PISA standards in educational systems across the world. We would like to stimulate and contribute to the present debate on what constitutes a meaningful, useful and relevant education for children and young people across the world today. In the first discussion paper, Cefai and colleagues argue on the dangers of transforming educational systems on the basis of standardised tests measuring a narrow range of cognitive abilities across cultures, turning education into a reductionist, measurable and economic project. They propose a five point statement called the *Santander Declaration*, underlining the right of every child across the world to a balanced, meaningful, holistic, creative and arts-rich education. Complementary to this paper, Cooper provides another short opinion piece on the effects of the marketization of education on higher education, with particular reference to the implications for teacher education and the social-emotional education agenda.

We are inviting our readers to respond to these two discussion papers and send us their feedback in the coming weeks. We will publish the comments in the next edition of this journal.

Paul Cooper and Carmel Cefai
November 2014