

A healthy socioemotional foundation in education

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In the early school years, the emphasis is more and more on cognitive output factors. Non-cognitive development is receiving less attention than before, though such factors are important determinants of academic success. This study focuses on socioemotional characteristics, more specifically, on attitudes, behavior, and relationships of 6500 grade 2 pupils who participated in the representative Dutch large-scale cohort study COOL5-18. The results showed that the teachers rated their pupil's work attitude as lower than their behavior and popularity. They were more positive regarding their relationship with the pupils. More important was that there were differences according to the pupils' social and ethnic/immigrant backgrounds: ethnic minority/immigrant pupils scored less positive on all non-cognitive characteristics than native Dutch pupils, and the higher the parental educational level, the more favorable their children performed on the non-cognitive characteristics. These findings are discussed and possible solutions are presented.

Keywords: socioemotional ; cognitive ; primary education ; attitudes ; behavior ; teacher-pupil relation ; quantitative analysis ; covid-19

1. Introduction

In the recently published The State of Education 2022, The Dutch Inspectorate of Education concludes, once again, that the level of education is plummeting ^[1]. The Inspectorate has done this for many years now, unfortunately without making a (lasting) impression on Cabinet and Parliament. Especially language and arithmetic, the so-called basic skills, are a matter of major concern. The solution, according the Inspectorate, is to now focus on these skills in the classroom. To significantly improve the pupils' achievement levels, it is necessary to provide adequate further training to teachers and head teachers. The Inspectorate is of the opinion that after having taken refresher courses, it should be possible for teaching staff to raise the pupils' achievement level sufficiently within two years.

One problem, however, is that the Inspectorate seems to forget that teachers and headteachers have been working extremely hard during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, that the workload still is increasing because of the ever growing teacher shortage, and that as a consequence of the influx of tens of thousands of especially Ukrainian refugee children the pressure is growing even more. The question the Inspectorate does not ask is: *when* will teachers and headteachers find themselves in the condition to follow refresher courses. It is clear to anyone in the field that they just don't have the time. Apart from this, for the present unsurmountable obstacle, it is necessary to first make an inventory of what exactly is lacking in terms of teachers' knowledge and skills (obviously in relation to their specific pupils' needs), then followed by the set-up of an individual refresher program, and lastly, the training of the trainers. What is clearly needed are tailor-made solutions. It is obvious that attending a refresher course for a few hours during a free afternoon or in the evening will lead to nothing.

In addition to the aspect of time, there is another, a more fundamental problem. The Inspectorate focuses on the basic skills, i.e. language and arithmetic. Research has shown that, in order to study effectively, a healthy socioemotional foundation is an essential precondition. A good socioemotional basis forms a prerequisite for a successful school career in terms of academic achievement ^[2]. During the Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying school closures several studies pointed to the fact that many children have suffered severe socioemotional problems ^[3]. It is evident, that first of all much work is needed to solve them. A relevant observation is that not all children experience the same problems and not in equal measure. Especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have such problems. At the same time, these are also the children who perform low academically ^[4].

2. A socioemotional foundation

Traditionally, early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions have focused on play, while primary schools focused on intentional learning, initially on learning to read, write, and count. Nowadays, however, attention on early learning has increased considerably, which has led to more emphasis on formalized instruction and academic achievement on the one hand and less attention on free play and non-cognitive and social-emotional aspects on the other hand ^[5]. However, it is not only in the preschool phase that academic achievement has gained more emphasis; this is also the case in the primary school years. Numerous studies have reported achievement differences between various categories of pupils. Again and again, research findings point to a correlation between a child's family background, educational opportunities, and educational and societal success ^[6]. The main indicators of family background are socio-economic status (SES) and ethnic/immigrant origin ^[7]. Many researchers have stressed the disturbing fact that the achievement gap always has been wide and, notwithstanding targeted policies and the longtime investment of enormous budgets, still is widening ^[8].

Non-cognitive factors, such as attitudes and behavior, have an important but undervalued function in school careers of children ^[2]. A positive development of children's socioemotional competencies contributes to psychosocial adjustment, adequate attitudes, and, ultimately, better academic and behavioral outcomes ^[9]. Teaching and learning in schools include social, emotional, behavioral, and academic components ^[10]. Pupils normally do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with teachers, in classes with peers, and with the support of parents at home ^[11].

Recently, a new challenge has emerged: As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, school closures have widened the already existing achievement gap even more ^[12]. There is some evidence that the level of socio-emotional well-being has gone down as well, as contact and face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers is imperative for a healthy development. This is especially the case for children from socioeconomic and ethnic disadvantaged backgrounds ^[3].

From the above, it can be concluded that differences exist between children from diverse social and ethnic/immigrant backgrounds regarding their level of academic achievement. The picture with respect to non-cognitive outcome measures, such as the pupils' attitudes, behavior, and relationships, is less clear, and this is especially the case for the early school years. The present study aims at shedding more light on this issue. The national Dutch COOL5-18 cohort study contains information on both pupils' attitudes and behavior and teacher-pupil relationships, as well as their social and ethnic/immigrant backgrounds. This study aims at answering the following questions: (1) How do young children perform on a number of non-cognitive characteristics, more specifically, attitudes, behavior, and relationships? (2) Are there any differences with regard to those characteristics according to the pupils' social and ethnic/immigrant background?

3. The study

3.1 Participants

The data for the present study come from the large-scale Dutch cohort study COOL5-18 collected in the 2013/2014 school year ^[13]. The focus is on nearly 6500 grade 2 pupils (6-year-olds) in the sample which is representative of all Dutch primary schools.

3.2 Instruments

Three instruments/measures are relevant for this study. First of all, the pupils' socio-ethnic background, which was constructed on the basis of two family characteristics available from the schools' administration. (1) The parental educational level, with three levels: low (maximum of pre-vocational secondary education), medium (maximum of senior secondary vocational education), and high (higher professional and university education). (2) The pupils' ethnic origin, with two categories: non-Western immigrant, and native Dutch and Western immigrant.

Secondly, the so-called pupil profile comprised 10 questions to the teachers about their pupils' attitudes and behavior ^[14]. The answer options for the 5-point Likert items were: 1 = definitely not true; 2 = not true; 3 = not true, true; 4 = true; 5 = definitely true. Factor analyses revealed three factors: behavior (e.g., "This pupil often is cheeky"), work attitude (e.g., "This pupil gives up quickly"), and popularity (e.g., "This child is popular with classmates"). Three scale scores were computed by averaging the scores of the constituent items, if necessary, after recoding negatively formulated items. A high score thus indicates favorable behavior, a good work attitude, and a popular pupil.

Third is the Teacher–Student Relationship Scale (TSRS) ^[15]. The underlying idea is that a supportive teacher–pupil relationship is a very important determinant of pupils’ emotional and behavioral adjustment and—ultimately—high academic achievement. For the COOL cohort study, a shortened version of the TSRS was used. The teachers had to answer a total of 15 questions about their relationship with the pupils. The answer options were the same as those for the pupil profile. Factor analyses resulted in three scales: dependency (the degree to which the pupil is clingy, overly dependent, and overly reliant on the teacher); conflict (the degree to which a teacher–pupil relationship is a negative, unpleasant, and conflictual one); and closeness (the degree to which a teacher–pupil relationship is a satisfactory and positive one, characterized by warmth, support, and affection). As with the pupil profile, three scale scores were computed by averaging the scores of the constituent items.

3.3 Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, both descriptive analyses and one- and two-way analyses of variance were performed. In addition, effect sizes were computed to obtain an impression of possible specific differences between socio-ethnic background categories. In the analyses of variance, the *eta* coefficient was computed to obtain an impression of the magnitude of the differences between the background categories. This coefficient can be interpreted in the same way as the correlation coefficient *r*. To do so, the criteria of Cohen can be taken as a guideline: 0.10 = weak; 0.30 = medium; and 0.50 = strong ^[16].

4. Results

Regarding their attitudes and behavior, the pupils achieved the highest on popularity (mean score 3.81), followed by behavior (3.71), and the lowest on work attitude (3.45). Teachers therefore rated their pupils’ work attitude as lower than the pupils’ behavior and popularity. Regarding the teacher–pupil relations, the general picture looks favorable. It appears that teachers are of the opinion that they are rather close to their pupils (mean score 3.97), that their pupils are not overly dependent (2.10), and that they have a pleasant relationship with their pupils, i.e., no conflicted relationships (1.66).

More interesting than an absolute interpretation of the pupils’ attitudes, behavior and relationship is a relative interpretation according to their socio-ethnic background. Separate analyses were conducted for parental education level and immigrant background; see Table 1.

Table 1. Non-cognitive pupil characteristics by parental education and immigrant background (means).

Scale	Parental Education			Ethnicity			
	Low	Medium	High	<i>eta</i> *	Immigrant	Native Dutch	<i>eta</i>
Behavior	3.60	3.68	3.79	0.09	3.56	3.75	0.09
Work attitude	3.27	3.41	3.57	0.12	3.31	3.48	0.07
Popularity	3.61	3.80	3.90	0.13	3.60	3.96	0.14
Dependency	2.25	2.12	2.01	0.11	2.24	2.07	0.09
Conflict	1.79	1.68	1.58	0.10	1.89	1.61	0.14
Closeness	3.84	3.97	4.03	0.11	3.80	4.01	0.13

* All associations are linear.

To start with parental educational level, although the *eta* coefficients are only weak, the mean scores show a gradual development, which in fact is linear: The higher the parental level, the more favorable the pupil characteristics. The mean scores according to ethnicity in all instances show a more favorable position for native Dutch children. However, in this case, too, in terms of *eta*, the differences are only small. In addition to these (one-way) analyses of variance, hierarchical two-way analyses of variance were performed to check which of the two background characteristics, parental education or ethnicity, had the greatest impact. Although it should be stressed that the differences (*eta*'s) already were very small, these analyses showed that the *beta*'s hardly differed. Regarding behavior and popularity, there were no differences at all; regarding work attitude and dependency, parental education was somewhat more important; and regarding conflict and closeness, ethnicity was slightly more important.

5. Conclusions

For quite some time now, there has been a discussion regarding the fact that, in the early school years, the focus has shifted too much from (free) play to (planned) learning, and as a consequence, also from an emphasis on non-cognitive factors to that on cognitive factors [3]. It is being argued that non-cognitive factors are being undervalued, as non-cognitive skills and motivation are important determinants of academic success [17]. The results of the present study show that teachers rated their pupils' work attitude as lower than their behavior and popularity. Teachers seem somewhat more positive about their relation with the pupils: They are of the opinion that they are rather close to their pupils, that their pupils are not overly dependent, and that they have a pleasant relationship with their pupils. Interesting are the differences according to the pupils' social and ethnic background. Although the differences in a statistical sense are not really big, there clearly is a link to this background: ethnic minority/immigrant pupils score lower on all non-cognitive characteristics than native Dutch pupils, and the higher their parental educational level, the more favorable the children perform on the non-cognitive characteristics.

The focus in this study was on non-cognitive characteristics of young pupils. Many studies have shown there to be a correlation between cognitive (i.e., academic) achievement and socio-ethnic background [18]. This study demonstrates that this correlation also exists with non-cognitive characteristics. As a reaction to the finding that disadvantage already exists when the children enter the educational system and that, therefore, action is required at that stage (or even earlier), numerous pre- and early-school compensation programs have been developed and implemented. Many of them aim at improving both cognitive and non-cognitive development in an educational institution as well as at home. Though the budgets of such programs are plentiful, the results mostly are disappointing, however [19].

The results of the present study may give a too rosy picture as the data analyzed were collected before the Covid-19 pandemic. Several studies have shown that as a consequence of the school closures, the already existing disadvantage gap regarding academic achievement has even widened. Therefore, in various countries, educational recovery programs have been implemented. The emphasis of such programs mostly is on language and math. While it is clear that many children also struggle with social-emotional and psychological problems, information regarding occurrence still is scarce. Nevertheless, it would be quite reasonable to expect that the gap in terms of non-cognitive outcomes has widened also, as contact and face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers is imperative for a healthy development. This probably is especially the case for children from socioeconomically and ethnically disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, to get a better understanding more large-scale studies focusing on social-emotional development are needed [20].

Many studies confirm that social-emotional competencies can be taught [21]. The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) approach considers that, as with academic skills, the development of social and emotional skills can be acquired through explicit instruction [22]. The acquisition of social and emotional competences in this approach takes place within and outside the classroom in the school context, but also at the family and community levels [9]. Though SEL in principle aims at pupils of all ages, research on its effectiveness for the pre- and early-school phase is mostly lacking and thus urgently needed.

A specific approach aiming at improving teacher–pupil relationships of disadvantaged groups is culturally relevant teaching (CRT), which acknowledges the need for effective education for the entire classroom while also meeting the specific needs of ethnic and culturally diverse pupil groups [23]. CRT is more of an underlying pedagogy than an intervention. The main features are that it acknowledges the strengths of the pupils' diverse backgrounds and employs cultural resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. Although CRT is considered as a powerful method for increasing pupil engagement and achievement and for reducing achievement gaps, research into its effectiveness is limited and mainly consists of case studies [24].

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