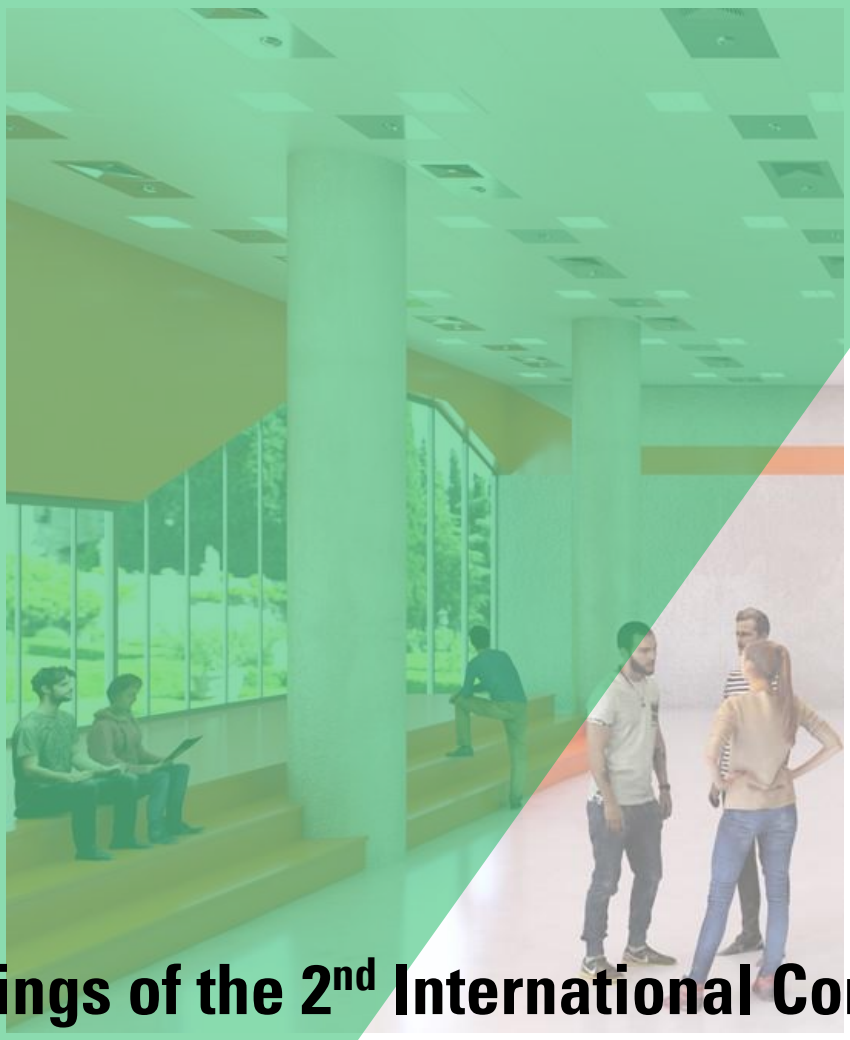

Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of the Journal Scuola Democratica

REINVENTING EDUCATION

2-5 June 2021

VOLUME I

Citizenship, Work and The Global Age

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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Title **Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal "Scuola Democratica" – Reinventing Education VOLUME I Citizenship, Work and The Global Age**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal "Scuola Democratica" which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education 'for what' as well as 'how' and 'for whom' has become unavoidable and yet it largely remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems. Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners' mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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Explicit and Implicit Effects of Socioemotional Skills. An Analysis of 2018 PISA Data

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ABSTRACT: *In international literature the Socio-Emotional Skills (SES) are considered to have an important role in giving to young people the right equipment to face present and future challenges, as well as contribute to the development of a sense of cohesion, greater equity and social justice. In this paper, starting with an analysis of OECD-PISA 2018 data, we sought to estimate the explanatory potential with respect to reading achievement of several measures attributable to the sphere of SES. A first result is that socio-economic and cultural conditions being equal (summarized in the ESCS measure, Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status), socio-emotional skills have a small but significant own independent strength in terms of better results in standardized tests. A second result is that these competences have a benefit especially for students characterized by a low level of ESCS (to simplify, we could define them as students of low social class). The implications of these results are of particular interest for the purposes of policies for the social equality of opportunities, equity and system effectiveness.*

KEYWORDS: *Socio-Emotional Skills, Cognitive Skills, Equality of Opportunities, Social Inequalities, School Curriculum*

Introduction

Contemporary society, characterized by continuous and rapid changes at global, social, economic and technological levels, entails the emergence of new challenges for young people and, consequently, for the educational system: inequalities, bullying and cyberbullying, family conflicts, consumerism, media development and technology dependence, academic stress and pressure, social isolation, migration, mobility, family and structural changes in communities (Cefai *et al.*, 2018). The main mechanisms underlying social complexity can be identified in an expansion of possibilities for action and experience, also due to the spread of technologies, an overall acceleration of social life and a saturation of social and symbolic space (Eriksen, 2016). All these elements determine a pressure on the Self of individuals (Maccarini,

2019). In order to cope with this complexity, it is necessary to develop an approach to education that focuses as much on cognitive skills as on socio-emotional skills. An education system that is able to include a socio-emotional education, and to find a balance between cognitive and non-cognitive skills curricula is key for a society that is capable of fighting socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, poverty, discrimination and social exclusion (OECD, 2015).

Research has amply demonstrated the positive developmental outcomes on different aspects of individuals' lives resulting from the possession of Social and Emotional Skills, both in the short and long term. Indeed, the latter are instrumental in reducing mental health problems in children and young people (Clarke *et al.*, 2015; Durlak *et al.*, 2011; OECD, 2015). In addition, social-emotional skills act on school performance by improving performance, increase self-esteem, foster cooperative relationships with peers, increase employment chances in later life (Clarke *et al.*, 2015) and, in addition, positively influence the chances of long tertiary education (Domitrovich *et al.*, 2017; Durlak *et al.*, 2011) and generally improve outcomes in adult life from an economic and relational perspective (Patera, 2019). We are aware that the delimitation of the socio-emotional dimension of learning to the sphere of skills and social and emotional skills appears problematic and blurring (Giancola, Viteritti, 2019). Competences appear in scientific and public debates as a boundary object, an information, a concept, used in different ways by different epistemic communities. They are as plastic and mobile objects, interpreted in different ways by the various communities of reference but with sufficiently homogeneous contents to allow a certain integrity of the concept and a certain mutual recognition of the communities using it to be maintained. They take the form of symbolic artefacts that are weakly structured in their common uses, that can be abstract or concrete, and that have different meanings in different parts of the world. Their basic structure remains common, recognizable and stable and, in more than one world, they become a vehicle of translation between various epistemic communities (academic, institutional, productive, training). As the authors who coined it state, the management and reworking of these boundary objects is fundamental to developing and maintaining the coherence. This happens also the case with skills, a theme, a concept, an object that unites but also distinguishes meanings and actors, a field of interest that creates understanding but also differentiation, a differentiation, a symbolic artefact that creates a field of inter-organisational meanings (Viteritti, 1999) not devoid of tensions and contrasts. Finally, it must be kept in mind that the field of non-cognitive and socio-emotional (and affective) competencies is crossed by various currents of thought, even in bitter contrast between them, with strong operational repercussions on the instrumentation used for quantification and measurement. Precisely these last two operational dimensions are then the subject of frequent technical revisions that still make the methodological

apparatus in use by the various supranational agencies working on the subject very unstable (Giancola, Lovecchio, 2018).

Moving beyond the debate around this boundary object, we want to focus on functional value of non-cognitive skills. The most recent studies in the field of education (Chiosso *et al.*, 2021) recognise that schools play a crucial role in both transmitting and building cognitive knowledge and in developing social-emotional skills. A school that is able to prepare students not only to pass tests but to overcome the obstacles that life poses on a daily basis will experience positive results in both areas: social-emotional and academic success. In this way, the school takes on a decisive role in promoting well-being of young people. So, our hypothesis is that non-cognitive skills have a functional value with respect to the growing up of the individual especially when individuals are embedded in a fragile background. Statistical analysis shows that non cognitive skills in students with the same background have a positive correlation more with low social class children than with high social class children. Therefore, even if we know that correlation is not causation, we can say that not cognitive skills can be an important picklock to unhinge the mechanisms of inequalities reproduction, especially in middle school and in the first years of high school.

2. Data and methods

Already from the first international test-based surveys conducted by the OECD, in addition to cognitive skills, an important space was reserved for non-cognitive dimensions. During the various waves of the OECD-PISA, the PIAAC survey and its follow-ups carried out in view of the new large-scale edition (see Di Francesco *et al.*, 2014), non-cognitive skills have been progressively re-conceptualized in terms of socio-emotional skills (Giancola, Lovecchio, 2018). The objective of this paper is to illustrate, using the OECD PISA 2018 wave data, how socio-emotional skills, in the operationalized and measured version within PISA, have a significant impact on cognitive skills (reading, math, science). The presented study shows two other interesting results. Using a set of OLS multiple regression models, it was possible to estimate the single effect, the additional effect and the combinatorial effect produced by socio-emotional skills.

TAB. 1. *Measures of Social and Emotional Skills*

Measures	Items and scaling
Adaptation of instruction	Four items, a four-point Liker
Competitiveness	Three items, a four-point Likert scale
Work mastery	Three items, a four-point Likert scale
General fear of failure	Five items, a four-point Likert scale
Mastery goal orientation	Three items, a four-point Likert
Resilience	Three items, a five-point Likert

Source: OECD, 2019

OECD PISA survey is thus composed not only measures of test, but also by student questionnaire, so this produced a large number of variables and synthetic measures, so we select (see Tab. 1) the following indices, which are referred to, among others, as dimensions of the overall construct that refers to the idea of Social and Emotional Skills. All indices are based on IRT scaling, validated on multiple international samples and tested over time.

The analyses presented are all based on multiple linear regression models (using the OLS, 'ordinary least squares' method). OLS chooses the parameters of a linear function of a set of explanatory variables according to the least squares principle: minimizing the sum of squares of the differences between the observed dependent variable (values of the observed variable) in the given dataset and those predicted by the linear function of the independent variable.

The dependent variable, for all models presented below, consists of individual scores on reading skills tests. In a first step (see par. 3), the objective was to estimate the individual linear effect of each measure of social-emotional competence on the aforementioned reading score (Table 3). This step allowed us to estimate the weights of individual proficiency measures in order to identify the areas of social-emotional competence with the greatest influence on learning outcomes represented by test-based measures.

Next, the net effects of the various measures of social-emotional competence were estimated in a model that simultaneously used all the indicators shown in Table 1. The following step is divided into two different analysis actions. Because the goal was to identify the relative benefit of possessing social-emotional skills for students from various social categories (in terms of socio-economic and cultural stratification), using the ESCS index provided by PISA, three groups of students were identified. In each of these groups, the effect of SES on test scores was then estimated (Table 4). The final step was to produce a saturated model that included variables related to social-emotional competence, those related to individual ascriptive factors, and those related to the educational pathway (defined as process variables).

Therefore, in order to identify the actual weight of SES in terms of reducing the inequalities produced by the ascriptive and process factors, we first produced a model with the variables that included the set of ascriptive and school career-related variables as independents (Table 5) and then replicated it by including the previously used social-emotional skills variables (Table 6).

3. The direct effects of SES on reading skills

As just described, in the first step of the analysis, we used the individual measures of social-emotional skills in single regression models. We can

observe a range of low explained variance up to a slightly higher level of explained variance (but still small in magnitude).

The three measures with the highest explained the variance are in order: work mastery (3.92%), mastery goal orientation (3.07%) and resilience (2.50%). It is also important to point out that regressors such as competitiveness and general fear of failure not only show low variance explained but also that the value in terms of standard beta also decreases in statistical significance.

TAB. 2. *Effects of individual indices on reading proficiency (OLS regression models)*

	R^2	Beta Standard
Adaptation of instruction	0,56%	0,08
Competitiveness	0,46%	0,07*
General fear of failure	0,33%	0,06*
Work mastery	3,92%	0,20
Mastery goal orientation	3,07%	0,18
Resilience	2,50%	0,16

All Beta are significant for 0,000, except for * significant for 0,05

After this step we produced a new regression model where all index played at the same time. As previously said, the aim of this model is estimating the net effect in terms of strength of each variable on reading performance (Table 3). With this simultaneous model, we observed an explained overall variance of 8.74%. We still observed that the more influent regressors are: work mastery (0.171), resilience (0.146) and mastery goal orientation (0.123). Again, the competitiveness and general fear of failure indices show little effect bordering on significance. But the most interesting aspect is that the various measures of social-emotional competence taken into analysis produce a non-negligible amount of explained variance. Clearly, the construct of social-emotional competence is so abstract, operationally, that it implies the simultaneous use of various measures and thus a necessarily multidimensional and multifactorial approach.

TAB. 3. *Simultaneous effects of indices on reading skills (OLS regression model)*

	Beta[1]	Beta Standard
R^2 = 8,74%		
(Constant)	477,413	0,046
Adaptation of instruction	4,347	0,001*
Competitiveness	-2,084	-0,04*
General fear of failure	3,700	0,193
Work mastery	17,149	0,171
Mastery goal orientation	12,187	0,123
Resilience	16,552	0,146

1 Reading as PISA point. All Beta are significant for 0,000 except for *

To conclude this first phase of analysis, we have chosen (in line with the cognitive objectives) to bring the issue of equity (Benadusi, Giancola, 2021) to the center of attention. For this reason, as made explicit in the methodology section, we have broken in three equal groups the population on the based on the index of social background (ESCS)[1]. So, we replicated the regression model with six regressors seen before. We can observe that the impact is more pronounced for lower class students (Tab. 4). This evidence tells us that upper-middle class students enjoy many tangible and intangible resources such as relational and family support (see Colarusso, Giancola, 2020) that make the effect of possessing social-emotional skills marginal (but not negligible). For students of low social class, on the other hand, this type of skills seems to play a much stronger role and, we can hypothesize (as we will see in the following analyses), of an almost compensatory type.

TAB. 4. *Who benefits most from SES? (OLS regression models)*

	Students with low ESCS	Students with average ESCS	Students with high ESCS
R^2	9,4	8,4	5,1
	Beta Standard	Beta Standard	Beta Standard
Adaptation of instruction	0,029	0,050*	0,064
Competitiveness	*-0,017*	0,005*	0,002*
General fear of failure	-0,011*	0,082	0,056
Work mastery	*0,242*	0,197	0,160
Mastery goal orientation	*0,142*	0,127	0,070
Resilience	*0,168*	0,065	0,012

All Beta are significant for 0,000 except for *

For this category of students, the possession of skills such as those captured by the work mastery, resilience, mastery goal orientation measures, have a positive and marked effect. This provides indirect clues on the skills to be strengthened in order to reduce the effects produced and induced on the one hand by the social origin (as we will see shortly) but also those of a structural type (the subdivision of the Italian education system into well-differentiated tracks) and experiential (such as grade repetition episodes during the school career)[2].

[1] The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) index of economic, social and cultural status is based on the following variables: the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI); the highest level of education of the student's parents, converted into years of schooling; the PISA index of family wealth; the PISA index of home educational resources; and the PISA index of possessions related to 'classical' culture in the family home (for the operational and statistical details see Glossary in *Education at a Glance*, OECD, Paris, 2002,).

[2] Following Bourdieu's approach in the analysis of the reproduction of educational inequalities (Giancola, Salmieri, 2020a), the 'selection' phase corresponds to the selection / addressing phase of the students in the various school tracks, while the 'expulsion' phase is strictly recordable to the practice of the grade repetition (Ikeda,

4. Effect of SES, ascriptive variables and school career variables

The literature on educational inequalities both at international and national level, on the base of robust empirical evidence (see Pensiero *et al.*, 2020; Argentin, Pavolini, 2020), shows that some variables have a very significant effect on cognitive outcomes on tests. Among these available in the OECD-PISA dataset, we consider here as individual variables: gender; socio-economic and cultural status of the family (ESCS Index); migration background.

As process variables (school career, variables) we consider instead: grade repetition; school track choice.

Obviously, the choice of these variables is not arbitrary, but is the result of a weighted choice on the basis of recent analysis on the Italian education system (Giancola, Salmieri, 2019; Bendausi, Giancola, 2021). Although in summary, it is worth remembering that most of the school inequalities in the Italian case pass through different interconnected mechanisms: *i)* in a first step through a direct effect of the socio-economic and cultural status of students on the results; *ii)* in a second step, the social origin of students has a strong impact on educational choices (in terms of both school track and choice of school), producing a dynamic of self-reinforcing differentiation; *iii)* in a third step, there is the combined effect of the school track, the social origin, and the average background at school level both on competences and on extra cognitive aspects such as educational expectations. Thus, a complex chains effect is configured in the (re)production of education inequalities in Italy, based on the interplays between ascriptive and school-tracks factors (Giancola, Salmieri, 2020b). Furthermore, as highlighted in Giancola and Colarusso (2020), there is also an important role played by the expectations and family motivations of students on the one hand in determining educational choices and expectations and on the other in providing motivational and orientation support.

For this series of reasons, we have developed a first model with only the ascriptive and path variables (Table 5), in order to observe the effect induced – in a subsequent model – by the inclusion of the variables relating to the sphere of socio-emotional skills. In line with the aforementioned analysis, it is evident that social extraction plays a role, once again, in a decisive manner. Again, we observe a very strong effect linked to the frequency of the 'general track' (in the Italian case the so-called *Liceo*). At the same time, there is a definite negative effect produced by the grade repetition experience. Finally, the strength, measured in terms of the overall explained variance (which reaches 28.3%), of the set of variables considered should be emphasized.

We then proceed with a model that includes both these variables and the indices pertaining to the area of socio-emotional skills (Table 6).

García, 2014) to which students of low social class and technical/professional schools are subject with much higher frequency than others.

Inserting the SES as independent variables the added value in terms of overall explained variance is of moderate entity, with an increase of 4.2 percentage points reaching a share of 32.5% of explained variance. As far as the effects of the ascriptive and school path variables are concerned, there is no erosion of their explanatory power (and therefore of reproductive factors of inequalities).

Among the SES work mastery, mastery goal orientation and resilience, show still an independent explanatory potential (the full effect is partially absorbed by the background variables).

TAB. 5. *Ascriptive variables and Process variables (OLS regression models) – model 1*

	R^2 = 28,3%	
	Beta	Beta standard
Constant	443,157	
Female (ref. Male)	4,875	0,026
Index of economic, social and cultural status	13,906	0,136
Native (ref. Non-native)	9,782	0,031
Licei/General (ref. *Tecn.Prof.*)	68,115	0,365
Grade Repetition (ref. Regular)	-54,462	-0,197

All Beta are full significant for 0,000

TAB. 6. *Ascriptive variables, Process variables and index of SES (OLS regression models) – model 2*

	R^2 = 32,5%	
	Beta	Beta standard
Constant	446,161	
Female (ref. Male)	1,826	0,010
Index of economic, social and cultural status	12,637	0,128
Native (ref. Non-native)	9,105	0,030
Licei/General (ref. *Tecn.Prof.)*	63,736	0,357
Grade Repetition (ref. Regular)	-46,660	-0,171
Adaptation of instruction	4,732	0,051
Competitiveness	-2,905	-0,032
General fear of failure	1,404	0,015*
Work mastery	10,986	0,123
Mastery goal orientation	6,885	0,075
Resilience	12,134	0,250

All Beta are significant for 0,000 except for *

Conclusion

Overall, the OCED PISA proposed SES show moderate predictive power with respect to reading achievement. The SES with greater impact would appear to have a stronger effect for students of lower social class. By letting background and school path variables play simultaneously, the latter do not seem to reduce their effect in terms of inequality with respect to reading outcomes. The variables/indices

pertaining to the sphere of socio-emotional competence as proposed by OCED PISA show moderate predictive power with respect to reading results. Furthermore, letting the variables of background and scholastic path and those relating to the socio-emotional sphere play at the same time, the latter do not reduce the effect in terms of inequality of the former. At the same time, variables/indices of the sphere SES such as work mastery, mastery goal orientation and resilience show an independent effect of their own. The effect of possessing these types of skills, from the evidence presented, appears to be more consistent for lower class students than for upper-middle class students. Obviously, the results presented are limited to the conceptualization and operationalization carried out as part of the OECD-PISA survey. The methodological apparatus for measuring non-cognitive skills and all the many facets of the general construct of social-emotional competence are the subject of sociological, psychological and pedagogical research and debate (e.g., as in the case of the ongoing OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills). Starting with these necessary theoretical-methodological cautions, we can hypothesize that the enhancement of these competencies slightly triggers a form of compensatory action. These data suggest that in terms of equity and inclusion it would be useful to integrate teaching strategies SES-based in cognitive oriented teaching and for the support of the whole person, but above all as a support tool for socially disadvantaged students both in terms of results (even though it is undeniable that the focus for combating inequalities lies elsewhere) and in terms of motivation, creation of meaning with respect to the educational and scholastic experience, and self-confidence.

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