

Introduction

Ask any parent what they ultimately want for their child and the answer is likely to be, “Happy”. The follow-up question, “What does that look like for you?” is rarely asked. This may be because, at a gut level, we all share that goal and there is little need to unpack it further. We want all children to thrive, to be the best they can be academically, physically and social-emotionally. All this is implicit in that single answer: “Happy”.

In its report *Student Agency for 2030*, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identified ‘agency’ as “an invaluable skill that students can use throughout their lives” (OECD, 2019). It recognises students as active agents in their learning, able to positively influence their own life and the world around them. Alongside this, is the expectation that students will know how to learn and exercise their agency across many contexts: moral, social, economic and creative. With a well-developed sense of agency, individuals will be able to achieve long-term goals and overcome adversity. Buried in the subtext is the statement that, “students need foundational cognitive, social and emotional skills so that they can apply agency to their own – and society’s – benefit”. However, exactly which cognitive skills are being referred to is unclear. My hunch is that they are executive functions.

Similar aspirations are evident closer to home. The Australian Early Years Learning Framework V2.0 (EYLF) clearly states that: “All young Australians

Chapter 1

Why bother developing executive functions?

“Experience without theory is blind, but theory without experience is mere intellectual play”

- Immanuel Kant

Did you know that:

- Executive functions permeate every aspect of our lives, from academic success to physical health and mental wellbeing.
- No one is born with them - only the capacity to develop them.
- Underdeveloped executive functioning is implicated in a range of clinical conditions that affect school performance, including - but not limited to - ASD and ADHD. The diagnosis of both these disorders is on the rise.
- Interventions targeting executive functions can help close the social inequities of birth.
- Executive functions are a better indicator of school readiness than early numeracy, early literacy skills or an IQ score.