



# A Research Proposal for a Programme to cultivate **Empathy, Relational Competence and Mindfulness**, using a **Whole School Approach** (unpublished proposal, [www.empathie-macht-schule.de](http://www.empathie-macht-schule.de))

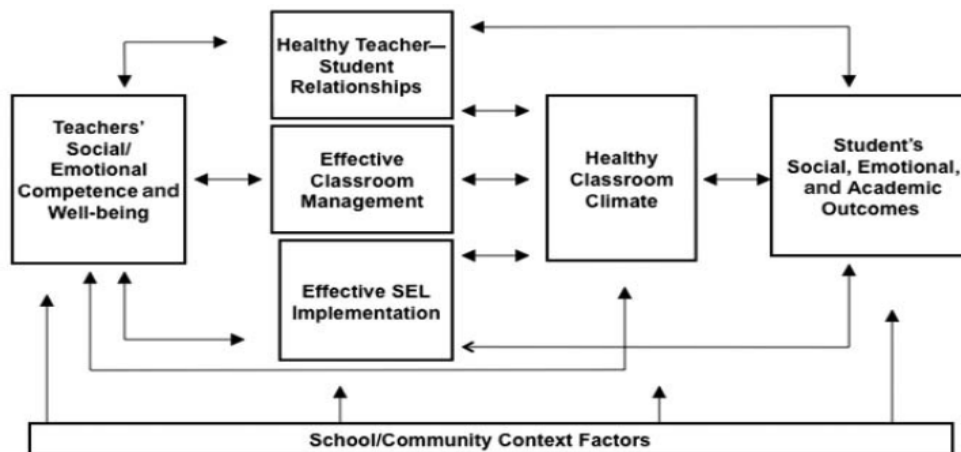
## Rationale

Contemplating the wide array of global challenges in the 21st century, an important question is whether our schools actually prepare our children to meet those challenges. What is it that children need to learn in order to navigate the complexities which lie ahead of them? A recent OECD report concludes: “In an increasingly fast-changing, complex and diverse world, social and emotional skills are becoming ever more important.” (Chernyshenko, Kankaras, & Drasgow, 2018). And further:

*“We know that preparing students with technical or academic skills alone will not be enough for them to achieve success, connectedness and well-being whatever endeavours they wish to pursue. Social and emotional skills, such as perseverance, empathy, mindfulness, courage or leadership are central to this”* (OECD, 2015; see also Chernyshenko, O., M. Kankaraš and F. Drasgow, 2018).

A substantial amount of scientific work points to the positive impact on children’s social, emotional and cognitive development when working systematically with various social emotional learning (SEL) approaches at the school (Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley & Weissberg, 2017; Durlak, 2015; 2016; Payton 2008). Meta-analyses have contributed solid evidence about these effects (e.g. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the success of SEL programs depends significantly on the quality of their implementation. As Durlak et al. (2015, p. 12) put poignantly, „We should not think about SEL programs as being effective; it is well-implemented SEL programs that are effective.” From the different components of implementation, Durlak particularly highlights two factors: 1) teachers who emerged as positive role models for others seemed to be influential in sustaining the schools’ commitment and motivation, and 2) programmes that were integrated and became part of the entire school and its daily practices were more likely to be continued opposed to programs in only some classrooms (Durlak, 2016).

Summing up, “a whole school approach” (Jennings & Greenberg 2009: figure 1), involving the full pedagogical staff at a school, e.g. both teachers, pedagogues and school leaders, as well as the school students, must be emphasised (below we are just referring to the pedagogical staff as “teachers”). Furthermore, a research approach following closely the implementation and with collaboration (“co-creation”) between teachers, developers/trainers, and researchers can be recommended.



**Figure 1:** The complex interactions in the prosocial classroom, illustration from Jennings & Greenberg advocating a whole school approach

The teachers’ relational competence is seen as the foundation for creating an inclusive environment in the classroom (Jensen et. al 2015; Juul & Jensen 2002), defining relational competence as:

*“The professional’s ability to ‘see’ the individual child on its own terms and attune teacher behaviour accordingly without giving up leadership, as well as the ability to be authentic in the contact with the child. And as the professional’s ability and will to take full responsibility for the quality of the relation” (Juul & Jensen 2002).*

Given this paramount importance of relational quality, it is important in the research to acknowledge both the teachers’ and the students’ perspectives. It is noteworthy that so far only a few studies have addressed students’ perceptions of changes following SEL implementations (e.g. Doikou-Avlidou & Dadatsi 2013; Lizuka et al. 2014) – even though this seems to be an obvious field of investigation. Our study will therefore include insights and perspectives as formulated by the participating children, not only testing them and measuring their social-emotional and/or academic development along the process, but really acknowledging their perspectives (Sommer et al., 2013; Söderback et al., 2011):

*“...there is a need to reflect on and illuminate the difference between a child perspective and the child’s perspective [...] a child perspective is characterized by the adults’ outside perspective on children’s conditions, experiences, perceptions and actions, with the individual child and his/her best interests in mind. A child’s perspective is characterized by the child’s insider perspective on the conditions, experiences, perceptions and actions, based on what he or she find as important. Both perspectives are required to perceive and encounter children as equal human beings” (Söderback et al., 2011)*

This accentuates the point of acknowledging also students’ perspectives in the co-creation process, and the possibility of using the research data, including perspectives from teachers and students, to review and readjust program elements as for example emphasised in developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) and Design Based Research approaches (Barab & Squire, 2004).

For the investigation of the relational quality between various agents embedded in a system of complex interactions, we will adopt a “social fields perspective”. We use the notion of social fields as a complementary to the notion of systems, as suggested by Senge, Scharmer, and Böll (2015): “At the moment we step inside

a social system—that is, at the moment we begin to inquire into its interiority by ‘turning the camera’ around from the third-person to the first-person view—we switch the perspective from the social system to the social field”. A social fields perspective aims at understanding the co-creation of a social space from the perspective of its various agents (e.g., teachers and students) with specific focus on a) the agents’ interior condition on a phenomenological level, b) the agents’ ways of shaping their relations, and c) the complex interactional patterns that co-arise in the social field between the agents and the larger systemic context. When actors engage with each other in a relational space with an increased intentionality and willingness to connect, the social field can turn *generative* Boell (2018). Generative social fields increase the intensity and density of agents’ connections and begin to propagate, allowing for learning and collective creativity and yielding outcomes which are beneficial within a larger context (Senge et al., 2015).

## Research Questions

Based on these background perspectives our research questions are:

### RQ1: Training evaluation:

What are the effects of the intervention on

- the classroom climate?
- the teachers’ relational competence?
- the teachers’ self-efficacy concerning relational work?
- the students’ well-being, presence, awareness?
- the students’ self-efficacy concerning broad aspects of school and life: feeling socially, emotionally, relationally and academically competent?

### RQ2: Implementation process:

What characterizes the implementation across schools and classrooms?

- How do the teachers’ work with the active ingredients from the intervention:
  - in relation to own personal-professional development?
  - in the classroom?
  - in staff group/teacher teams?
  - in parental cooperation?
- How does the school context influence the implementation?

### RQ3: Process-related investigation of changes in the social field:

- What are the teachers’ perspectives on the social field focusing on:
  - Qualities of generative social fields (e.g., empathy, creativity, emergence, mindfulness)?
  - Experiences of particular shifts regarding those qualities
  - Translation processes between personal-professional development and the relation to students, colleagues, and parents
- How do teachers perceive the work on intended relation building?
  - in relation to own personal-professional development?

- in the classroom?
- in staff group/teacher teams?
- in parental cooperation?
- What are the students' perspectives on the social field in relation to:
  - indicators of generative social field (creativity, wellbeing, joy of life, etc.)?
  - the relational environment in class (between peers, teacher etc.)?

## Intervention

The “Empathie macht Schule”<sup>1</sup> training - will target all together 180 teachers in six 3-day-modules which are spread out over 18 months. It will be led by Helle Jensen, family therapist, psychologist, and developer of the training, along with co-facilitators which come from a pedagogical or therapeutic background and have completed a 2-year training with Helle Jensen. The teachers come from 3 elementary schools situated in 3 socioeconomically diverse districts in Berlin, Germany. The overall duration of the intervention is 4.5 years, with a training period of 1.5 years, followed by a period supervision. Training groups are comprised of 23 teachers.

Training content was developed by the Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children (Juul et al 2012), in particular the work of Juul and Jensen (2009) and Jensen (2014) in order to cultivate empathy, mindfulness, compassion, and relational competence. It closely links theory and practice, aiming to create a safe and dynamic learning environment based on equal dignity (Juul & Jensen, 2009), and has been successfully applied in teacher training in Denmark (Jensen, E., Skibsted, & Christensen, 2015, Lund Nielsen, B., 2016). The training comprises 6 modules which focus on 1) the “natural competences” (body, breath, heart, creativity, consciousness), 2) the capacity for dialogue and co-creation of the teaching and learning , 3) working with conflicts, challenging relationships, and children with special needs, 4) bereavement, loss (including divorce), 5) Peer reflection, and 6) Practical application and evaluation of personal-professional goals.

The modules employ a wide array of practices and methods, such as various guided meditations (e.g. focused attention on natural competences), mindful movement, dyadic meditations, dialogue practices in dyadic and small group settings, and process work in the whole group. For descriptions, see, e.g., Jensen (2014).

The expected effects are:

- Improvement of relational competence and empathy (Jensen, Skibsted & Christensen, 2015; Valk et al. 2017; Hildebrandt, McCall & Singer, 2017)
- Cultivation of a warm and generative class- and school climate
- Improvement of wellbeing and stress reduction (Collie, Shapka & Perry, 2012; Engert, Kok, Papassotiriou, Chrousos, & Singer, 2017)
- Strengthening of self-efficacy, and relational competence among students (Durlak, 2015, 2016; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> \*abbr.: EMS, Engl.: “Empathy catches on” / “Empathy in school”, see [www.empathie-macht-schule.de](http://www.empathie-macht-schule.de)

## Research Design

### Methodology and sample size

The research design is a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (e.g., Cresswell & Clark, 2017) measuring effects using pre- and post-testing assessments (quantitative data), and collecting multiple qualitative data from the 3 schools involved in the intervention following the processes over time. This research design is targeting the well-known complexity of every school and classroom, and not at least, the complexity involved in the processes initiated

**Teachers:** The sample size for the quantitative assessment aims at an  $n = 360$  subjects, with  $n = 180$  participants in the experimental group (with training, cohorts 1/2) and  $n = 180$  participants in the control group-Gruppe (without training/waitlist-control; cohorts 3/4). By including 3 schools per EG and CG, on average  $n = 60$  participants per school will be assessed. The sampling of the EG cohorts will happen randomly, depended on the practicabilities and constrained by the school administration's resource planning. Cohort 1 begins the training in March 2020, Cohort 2 begins after 1.5 years, in September 2021. As shown in Figure 2, all participants will be assessed at four time points based on questionnaires (1: pre- / baseline; 2: after 1.5 years, 3: after 3 years, 4: post, after 4 years). CG's Cohorts 3 and 4 will be assessed parallel to cohorts 1 and 2, respectively.



**Figure 2:** A time line illustrating the quantitative data-collection at teacher level

**Students:** All students in 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade will be assessed 2 times/year. For the students in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade the data-collection will be repeated un-structured interviews during their work in class following a classroom observation.

### Data-collection instruments

The following array of quantitative and qualitative instruments will be employed:

- Quantitative data (Questionnaires):
  - Demography and control variables
  - Expectation, motivation regarding the training
  - Work and life satisfaction
  - School- and classroom climate
  - Relational quality (staff- and classroom-level)
  - Self-efficacy (multiple levels)
  - Health, burnout, resilience, stress
  - Mindfulness (state, trait)
  - Empathy, perspective-taking, (self-)compassion
- Qualitative data:
  - Repeated focus group interview with teachers
  - Repeated dialogical and microphenomenological interviews with teachers



School year	School start autumn 2019 – summer 2020	School start autumn 2020 – summer 2021	School start autumn 2021 – summer 2022	School start autumn 2022 – summer 2023	School start autumn 2023 – summer 2024	School start autumn 2024 – summer 2025
Timeline	Aug. 2019   June 2020	Aug. 2020   Feb. 2021	Aug. 2021   Feb. 2022	Aug. 2022   Feb. 2023	Aug. 2023   Feb. 2024	Aug. 2024   Feb. 2025
<b>Pupils of cohort 1</b> Measurement points	start diary for 4 <sup>th</sup> –6 <sup>th</sup> graders (for max. 1 year; new 4 <sup>th</sup> graders enter the process for a year also) → end diary					
	Info   t1   t2	t3   t4	t5   t6			
			4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)		
		4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)		
	4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)			
	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)				
	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)					
<b>Pupils of cohort 2</b> Measurement points	start diary for 4 <sup>th</sup> –6 <sup>th</sup> graders (for max. 1 year; new 4 <sup>th</sup> graders enter the process for a year also) → end diary					
	Info		t1   t2   t3	t4   t5	t6	
					4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	
				4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	
			4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	
			5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)		
			6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)			

Table 3. Quantitative data assessment, student level, experimental group (EG)

School year	School start autumn 2019 – summer 2020	School start autumn 2020 – summer 2021	School start autumn 2021 – summer 2022	School start autumn 2022 – summer 2023	School start autumn 2023 – summer 2024	School start autumn 2024 – summer 2025
Timeline	Aug. 2019   June 2020	Aug. 2020   Feb. 2021	Aug. 2021   Feb. 2022	Aug. 2022   Feb. 2023	Aug. 2023   Feb. 2024	Aug. 2024   Feb. 2025
<b>Pupils of cohort 3</b> Measurement points	→					
	Info   t1   t2	t3   t4	t5   t6			
			4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)			
		4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)			
	4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)			
	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)				
	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)					
<b>Pupils of cohort 4</b> Measurement points	→					
	Info		t1   t2   t3	t4   t5	t6	
					4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	
				4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	
			4 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	
			5 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)	6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)		
			6 <sup>th</sup> graders (classes of each of the 3 schools)			

Table 4. Quantitative data assessment, student level, control group (CG)

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