Reading 2.3.1

Evidence to demonstrate the links between work on social and emotional skills and academic learning

The aim of this reading is to outline the evidence for links between programmes that promote social and emotional skills and academic learning/school achievement.

Where the evidence comes from

The evidence for this paper is drawn from projects that originate in the US, as that is where the major systematic evaluation of programmes has taken place. Some evidence is starting to emerge from work in other parts of the world, including the UK. This includes the recent evaluation of Primary SEAL (Hallam, S., Rhamie, J. and Shaw, J., 2006) Overall this emerging evidence supports the conclusions drawn here. This suggests that work on social and emotional learning supports academic learning. The evidence for this reading is restricted to evidence that comes from systematic reviews as they are viewed as the most rigorous and trustworthy base for action. They use control groups against which to measure change in the group undergoing the intervention, and are of a sufficient size for sound conclusions to be drawn.

Evidence from systematic reviews

According to a recent systematic review of the programmes in the US carried out by Casel, a major US network (Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Wang, M.C. and Walberg. H., 2004) the best designed programmes which aim to improve social and emotional competence are clearly also improving children’s academic learning and school achievement – 83% of the social and emotional programmes they reviewed produced academic gains. They also reported on a review by the US Department of Health and Human Services in 2002 which identified 45 programmes as examples of good practice, which concluded that:

Among the specific academic outcomes were improved grades, standardized test scores, and graduation rates; increased grade point average; and improved reading, maths, and writing skills. (Zins et al., 2004, p. 15).

Evidence of specific gains in learning from social and emotional education programmes

Below are some examples from the most effective programmes.

The Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is a major project for primary school children that originated in Seattle and can now be found in countries across the globe, including in continental Europe and Britain. The methods used include direct instruction, role-play, class discussion, modelling by teachers and pupils, giving rewards and feedback for positive behaviour, and individual work with worksheets. As well as major improvements in the goals of the programme, which were to improve pupils’ ability to discuss, understand, express and
manage their emotions, pupils showed improvements in thinking skills, such as non-verbal reasoning, problem-solving and planning in their academic work, while deaf children showed improvements in reading comprehension.
(Greenberg, M., Kusche, C., Cook, E. and Quamma, J. 1995).

The **Child Development Project** is a primary and middle school project which can be found across the US. It teaches cooperative learning, has a values based reading, language and arts programme, and uses developmental discipline techniques, peer mediation, and whole-school and classroom community building activities. It includes work on teacher education. As well as improvements in the goals of the programme, which were to encourage cooperation, develop pupils’ attachment to their school, develop sense of right and wrong, establish the importance of social behaviour, and improve connections between parents, schools and community, pupils in some schools on the programme scored higher in reading, mathematics, social studies and science.

The **Social Decision-Making/Social Problem-Solving Project**. This project has been running for over 15 years in schools across the US. It intervenes at several levels, including in whole class and small groups to teach skills, with interventions into the school’s discipline system and school routines and policies, and by providing staff professional development. In addition to realising its goals, which were to help pupils think more clearly, behave more socially and be more sensitive to the feelings of others through the teaching of decision-making skills, pupils performed better in mathematics, language, arts and social studies, and showed better ‘learning to learn’ skills.

The **Cooperative Learning Intervention** is the name given to a study of 16 studies of the ‘Peacemaker Programme’ in eight different schools in two different countries (the US and Hungary) for children aged 5 to 14. As well as making improvements in the aims of the intervention, which were to increase cooperation, conflict resolution and citizenship, mainly through working in small groups, pupils who experienced the intervention also achieved higher test scores and/or grades, and used higher-level reasoning strategies.
(Johnson, D.W., and Johnson, R. 2000).

The **Resolving Conflict Creatively Programme** is a programme for primary schools designed to address the major problem of violence and conflict in New York schools. It teaches pupils communication skills, conflict resolution, listening, assertiveness, negotiation, problem-solving skills, and peer meditation. It uses role-play and discussion, and includes work on improving the school and classroom environment and ethos, teacher training, and working with parents/carers and the community. As well as major improvements in the social behaviour which was the main target of the programme, pupils on the programme improved their mathematics scores.

The **Check and Connect Intervention** is led by the University of Minnesota, with Minneapolis Public Schools and Dakota County Community Services. It uses ‘monitors’ to devise individualized intervention strategies to help pupils develop habits of learning and successful engagement, using long-term outreach to the pupil and family to build trust. Efforts include regularly checking on pupil attendance and academic performance, providing ongoing
feedback about pupil progress, modelling the use of problem-solving skills, frequently communicating with families about both good and bad news, and being available to the pupils to listen about personal concerns. As well as improvements in the aims of the intervention, which were to help pupils at risk of exclusion aged from 5 to 18 to become more engaged with their schools and their learning, and help them to become more persistent and resilient learners through teaching problem-solving strategies, **pupils on the project also made more progress in reading, and specifically in phonological awareness.** (Christenson, S.L. and Havsy, L. 2004).

The **Seattle Social Development Project.** This is a community-based project which works with schools in Seattle, particularly those with high intakes of poorer and minority ethnic children. It attempts to help primary aged pupils to develop bonds with school and family, support parents/carers to manage their families in more positive ways, and teach staff how to create classrooms which increase pupil participation. **In general, project pupils showed higher overall achievement in their test scores and/or grades.** (Hawkins, J.D., Smith, B.H. and Catalano, R.F. 2004).

**Improving learning through tackling the risk factors for educational failure**

The same risk factors underlie poor behaviour, poor attitudes and poor learning. A large number of pieces of well-conducted research (summarised in Zins et al., ibid) have shown that a pupil’s behaviour in school and class is strongly linked with their learning and intellectual abilities, and very predictive of their performance on standardized achievement tests and examinations. Similarly bad behaviour and negative attitudes to school usually go together with poor academic performance.

Therefore it is not surprising that improving school behaviour and attitudes have been shown to be strongly linked to improving learning and school performance, particularly among children at risk of failing. Many programmes of social and emotional learning aim to, and succeed in, improving children’s behaviour in schools and classrooms, their attitudes to school, and their attitudes to themselves as learners, and result in a wide range of educational gains, including improved school attendance, higher motivation, and higher morale. (The international research base for this work is summarised in Weare, K. and Gray, G. 2003).

A comprehensive review of Australian interventions designed to prevent childhood behaviour problems (Marshall, J. and Watt, P. 1999) concluded that the 11 programmes it reviewed that were intended to teach social competences were effective in decreasing early behaviour problems.

To give some concrete examples, the seven projects outlined above as having direct impacts on learning have also been shown to have improved a range of attitudes and behaviours, including: children’s understanding of the consequences of behaviour; their ability to cope more effectively with school stress; more classroom participation; more sociable behaviour; improved attitudes to school; greater effort to achieve; higher aspirations; fewer absences and exclusions; better transition to middle school; and a higher sense of community (evidence summarised in Zins et al., ibid). This may go a long way to explaining their success in improving learning.
References


http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB717.pdf – research brief