

Making personal development quantifiable

The idea of using quantitative measures to evaluate students' personal and social development can arouse considerable anxiety. **James Park**, director of Antidote, argues that there is a way

Ofsted's insistence that schools should not 'shirk' the need to evaluate learners' personal development and wellbeing, 'however hard these may be to quantify', has provoked anxiety as well as perplexity. 'Should we do that?', ask some. 'Is it possible?', ask others.

Justifiable wariness

One concern is that schools will end up being compelled to grade young people for who they are and how they interact with others. Such a judgemental process would clearly be damaging to individual and community wellbeing. There are doubts too about whether individual measures can be trusted to say anything reliable about a student's personal and social capacities.

Arguing for numbers

There remains, however, a strong case for finding a way to put numbers to the impact a school is having on the ability of young people to practise the skills of negotiating, collaborating and dealing with setbacks.

For a start, parents and policymakers are entranced by figures. As long as the only figures available relate to test performance, then these will remain the drivers of educational change. Finding safe measures of personal development and wellbeing would be the best possible guarantor that we could sustain the level of attention on these aspects that has been generated by *Every Child Matters*.

Such an instrument would also make it possible for people to look seriously at the interaction between emotional and intellectual development.

Resolving the dilemma

It was five years ago that Antidote started looking for a meaningful way to measure a school's impact on emotional development in relation to learning. We were at the start of a four-year project designed to explore ways of developing more emotionally literate school cultures. Our belief was that this would have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

A validated indicator of 'learning power' was provided by the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI). This had been developed by the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education to look at how such learning-friendly dispositions as

curiosity, resilience and meaning-making were distributed across a class and in individuals.

In many ways, the parallel tool for emotional literacy that we developed through extensive research with our project schools was modelled on ELLI. Called the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS) it is, like ELLI, designed to be used online. Unlike ELLI, it takes as much interest in the experience of staff as it does of students. Our research suggests that each powerfully impacts upon the other.

Turning the key

But how were we going to assess the school's impact on personal and social development, if we held to our view that it was inappropriate to gauge the personal and social development of individuals?

The answer we came up with drew on our reluctance to see emotional literacy as a discrete set of skills. Rather, we defined it as a 'process of interacting with others in a way that builds understanding of their own and others' emotions, then using this understanding to shape their actions.'

There was plenty of evidence that, where young people were able to engage in these sorts of interactions – exploring their fears and hopes; discovering with others what they felt, thought and needed; shaping decisions through those conversations – they would be developing personally and socially. It followed that, if they could tell us to what extent the school provided them with conditions favourable to such conversations, then that would provide a measure of the school's impact on personal and social development.

Key dimensions

So we asked adults and young people what enabled them to have emotionally literate conversations. As we analysed the answers they gave, we discovered that five key dimensions had a shaping influence. These related to how far the processes of communication and relationship in the school enabled them to feel CLASI:

- Capable – through being supported to realise their potential
- Listened to – in ways that might lead to change
- Accepted – for who they really are

- Safe – because there is an acknowledgement of how emotions affect what they think, say and do
- Included – with a distinctive role that enables them to feel valued.

These dimensions are measured by SEELS.

Data

While the survey provides an important benchmark for assessing whether change has taken place, and a way of comparing one's own results with those of different schools, it has also been useful in stimulating conversations about how the learning environment can be made even better.

In six schools, we were able to compare the SEELS results with ELLI. This showed that there was a clear link between 'learning power' and the emotional literacy of the organisation as a whole. There was also a link between ELLI scores and achievement, as measured on standardised scores for English, maths and science.

Feedback

The 27 primary and secondary schools that have used SEELS so far report that it has:

- helped leaders understand the factors impacting on the personal and social development of students
- provided an important forum for engaging staff and students in conversations about how to improve their emotional experience
- helped bring about improvements in attitudes to learning.

Martin Buck, head of Lister Community School in Plaistow, Newham has said:

'The institution as a whole has grown in maturity. SEELS has provided valuable insight into staff and student feelings, revealing how school structures and practices affect relationships, and why there is a need for warmer, and more open communication in all areas of school life.'

More information

SEELS – www.antidote.org.uk/offer/seels.html

ELLI – www.bristol.ac.uk/education/enterprise/elli

James Park can be contacted at james@antidote.org.uk