

0057

Evaluating The Educational Effectiveness Of An Intervention Programme For Social Emotional Learning

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Background

The paper presents a critical reflection on the first phase of a longitudinal randomised evaluation of Together 4 All, a social and emotional intervention programme based on the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) prevention curriculum developed in the US. In the pilot phase of the programme's development, Together 4 All was introduced into six Primary Schools in the Craigavon area of Northern Ireland, which represents the country's religious, cultural, social and economic diversity. Given the turbulent history of Northern Ireland, a major goal in adopting the programme was to inculcate in this generation of children positive attitudes toward citizenship, respect for others, and recognizing and expressing feelings.

Research Questions

The main evaluation questions are:

What are the impacts of the programme on teachers' pedagogic behaviours and on children's pro-social behaviour, mutual respect and understanding, and emotional and social development?

How do the observation findings correspond with teachers' ratings of pupil behaviour?

What are the implications for educational research and educational effectiveness?

Methods

The research instruments used in the evaluation included interviews with key stake holders, individual assessments of pupils' social and emotional competence, and teacher's programme implementation ratings. However, the main data sources to be considered in this paper are teacher ratings of pupil behaviour, classroom observations of teaching behaviour (COBs teaching) and of pupil behaviour (COBs pupil behaviours), and playtime observations of pupil behaviour (POBs).

Teacher ratings of pupil behaviour

Teachers of children aged 5, 6, 9 and 10 in 12 Primary schools were asked to rate children's behaviour on 26 items using the following 6 point scale: 'Never or almost never', 'Rarely', 'Sometimes', 'Often', 'Very often', and 'Almost always'.

1711 teacher ratings were completed at the beginning and end of the first six months of implementation: 798 for 5 and 6 year olds and 913 for 9 and 10 year olds.

Classroom Observations (COBs) and playtime observations (POBs) of behaviour

Observation measures (COBs teaching behaviours) were developed to capture a range of 11 teaching behaviours positively associated with the aims of the Together 4 All programme, such as emotion modelling, positive behaviour modelling, and supporting peer interaction.

Classroom observations of pupil behaviours in lessons (COBs pupil behaviours) focus on 9 pupil behaviours, including items on positive coping strategies, co-operation in learning, and showing mutual respect and understanding. Examples of the 10 items of pupil behaviour in the playtime observations (POBs) include turn-taking, including others, complimenting others and complying with playtime rules.

Observations were rated on a 4-point scale for prevalence and frequency. Playtime observations included an overall impression of children's mutual respect and understanding using a rubric and best-fit.

Frame

The paper takes a socio-cultural perspective. As an intervention programme to enhance social emotional learning, mutual respect and understanding and pro-social behaviour, the Together 4 All programme is an agent of cultural change and social action. Because communities organise themselves through conflict as well as through co-operation, individuals are often prevented from learning to see the world as others do, and may be led to believe that there is only one way of seeing or doing and that that way is best.

From this socio-cultural perspective, teachers, parents and other significant adults are more experienced social partners from whom children learn the social practices and cultural conventions of social interactions. The social emotional language of Together 4 All and its associated discourses and visual representations, for example compliment slips and control signals, may be viewed as a resource for cultural change. Identifying changes in teacher behaviours are central to evaluating programme effects on children's social interaction and pro-social behaviours in and out of the classroom.

Research findings

Teacher ratings of pupil behaviour

Teacher ratings of pupil behaviour at the beginning and at the end of the first 6 months of implementation were analysed using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

To statistically control for baseline differences in teacher ratings, "adjusted" posttest means were computed for the intervention and control groups.

For children aged 5 and 6, the non-significant directional pattern of comparison between means across 26 items favoured the intervention group on 13 items and the control on 10 (identical means were obtained on 2 items). Directional advantages for the intervention group included 'thinks things out before acting', 'considerate of other people's feelings', and 'initiates interactions with others in a positive manner'.

For children aged 9 and 10, statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) favoured the intervention group on:

- Gets on better with adults*
- Often complains of headaches*
- Nervous or clingy in new situations*
- Picked on or bullied*
- Recognises and labels feelings appropriately
- Often unhappy*
- Often seems worried*

*These negative behaviours were observed less in the intervention group than in the control group.

The directional pattern of the comparisons between means favoured the intervention group on an additional 7 items.

Statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) favoured the control group on:

- Thinks things out before acting
- Sees tasks through to the end
- Shares readily with others

Classroom Observations (COBs) and playtime observations (POBs)

Analysis of baseline classroom observations of teaching behaviour undertaken after 6 months of implementation suggests superior teaching behaviour in the intervention classes on 10 out of 11 items, including positive behaviour modelling, emotion modelling, encouraging social problem solving, and providing feedback on peer interaction. Emotion regulation was observed more in control classes.

Analysis of baseline classroom observations of pupil behaviour after 6 months of implementation suggests superior pupil behaviours in the intervention classes in:

- Showing mutual respect and understanding
- Positive coping strategies
- Expressing feelings
- Identifying feelings of others

Directional advantage for the control group was found in co-operative learning.

Analysis did not reveal strong patterns in pupils' playtime behaviour. Directional advantage included less physically aggressive behaviour in the intervention group and more turn-taking in the control group.

As PATHS did not use observations, the present paper introduces a new measure for evaluating teaching and pupil behaviours, alongside teacher ratings, relating to the development of social emotional learning and mutual respect and understanding. Implications are identified for educational research, effectiveness and policy.