

Social and emotional learning

Moderate impact for moderate cost, based on extensive evidence.



+4

Interventions which target social and emotional learning (SEL) seek to improve attainment by improving the social and emotional dimensions of learning, as opposed to focusing directly on the academic or cognitive elements of learning. SEL interventions might focus on the ways in which students work with (and alongside) their peers, teachers, family or community. Three broad categories of SEL interventions can be identified: 1. Universal programmes which generally take place in the classroom; 2. More specialised programmes which are targeted at students with particular social or emotional problems; 3. School-level approaches to developing a positive school ethos which also aim to support greater engagement in learning.

In 2005, a national SEL programme was introduced to support effective learning, positive behaviour, attendance and emotional well-being, first in primary schools and then in secondary schools.

How effective is it?

On average, SEL interventions have an identifiable and significant impact on attitudes to learning, social relationships in school, and attainment itself (four months' additional progress on average).

Although SEL interventions almost always improve emotional or attitudinal outcomes, not all interventions are equally effective at raising attainment. Improvements appear more likely when approaches are embedded into routine educational practices, and supported by professional development and training for staff. In addition, the implementation of the programme and the degree to which teachers are committed to the approach appear to be important.

SEL programmes appear to benefit disadvantaged or low-attaining pupils more than other pupils, though all pupils benefit on average. Approaches have been found to be effective from nursery to secondary school.

How secure is the evidence?

There is extensive research in this area and a number of meta-analyses, though more research has been undertaken with younger children in primary, than in secondary schools, and more studies have evaluated the impact on disadvantaged or low attaining pupils.

In England, a number of studies have identified a link between SEL interventions and academic outcomes. However, evidence from the nationwide SEL programme introduced in 2005 does underline the fact that benefits on learning will not be automatically achieved and that the quality of engagement with the SEL approach is likely to affect outcomes. A quasi-experimental evaluation of the impact of the secondary programme did not find a secure impact on attainment in the SEL schools. Similarly, a 2015 randomised controlled trial of an SEL intervention, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, found that it did not have a positive impact on academic attainment.

What are the costs?

Universal approaches that encourage social and emotional learning throughout a school will benefit from professional development and may require new materials and resources, but these costs are likely to be very low. Social and emotional strategies targeted at specific individuals will be much more expensive. Estimates from the US suggest targeted programs cost about £2,800 per child per year and involve professional counselling or psychological services. On average, the costs per child are estimated as moderate.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Skills should be taught purposefully and explicitly linked to direct learning in schools, encouraging pupils to apply the skills they learn.
2. Teachers and other school staff can effectively support these approaches, particularly with appropriate professional development
3. How will you ensure that staff commit to supporting the programme and consistently apply the skills more widely in school?
4. Sensitive and targeted intervention may benefit at risk or more vulnerable pupils.
5. The impact on attainment of social and emotional aspects of learning is not found consistently, so it is important to evaluate the impact of any initiative. Have you considered how you will evaluate the impact of these approaches?