

Assessing emotional and social competence in primary school and early years settings

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Emotional and social competence are widely recognised as important for educational achievement and for life long learning (National Commission on Education, 1993; Ball, 1994; DfEE, 1997; DfES, 1998) There is increasing concern among those working in education to identify ways of supporting these aspects of development.

A recent report (Weare, 2003), commissioned and published by the DfES, has highlighted a number of promising approaches. In this context, and to complement the earlier report, we were commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to undertake a systematic search and critical appraisal of measures of emotional competence that might be suitable for use in preschool and primary school settings. During the course of the project it became clear that the great majority of instruments assessing emotional competence also assessed social competence and this review therefore covers measures of both concepts.

This small scale study, based predominantly on desk research, used a number of research methods including: a review of the published literature; and a small scale qualitative survey which asked practitioners and academics to identify issues and concerns related to assessment of these concepts.

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Key findings

- ▶ Interest in the assessment of emotional and social competence is growing in schools and early years settings, among researchers and across Government. Many instruments are available which cover some aspect of these concepts. Several instruments combine assessment of emotional, social and academic competencies.
- ▶ There has been a considerable change over the last decade in the focus and contents of instruments, and in approaches to their development and use.
- ▶ Early instruments tended to look at social incompetence, focusing on antisocial and problem behaviour, with the aim of identifying or screening for children with problems.
- ▶ Recent instruments are more likely to include positive attributes as well as problems, and to have been developed in the context of programmes to support development. Their development is more likely to have involved parents and children and less likely to have involved psychometric tests.
- ▶ Instruments covering the quality of relationships are quite numerous, but there are only a few which aim to measure the emotional literacy components of children's emotional competence.
- ▶ None of the instruments which assess emotional competence have been fully evaluated in UK schools. The most relevant instruments are still in development.
- ▶ There are many more instruments for school age children than for preschool children.
- ▶ The most common approach to assessment reported by those we spoke to was profiling children with problems, with a view to identifying ways of supporting their development.
- ▶ Some of those we spoke to valued assessment as a means of early identification, but concern was expressed about the way in which this process could label children and about the possible lack of facilities, time and resources to help the children identified.
- ▶ It was agreed that effective assessment required skilled observers, but that not all teachers want to develop these skills.
- ▶ Several of the instruments could be used for assessing the level of emotional or social competence of schools or classes. This was mentioned by some as important in the context of assessing new programmes or interventions. Concern was also expressed by respondents at the potential for such measures to be used to rank schools, and it was agreed that this would be counterproductive.

Defining emotional and social competence

The term 'emotional competence' is relatively new and there is still some debate about its meaning, particularly the way it relates to concepts such as emotional literacy and emotional intelligence. For the purposes of this project, we adopted Elias' definition of emotional competence: 'the ability to understand, manage and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development' (Elias et al., 1997). This definition includes many of the components of emotional intelligence: 'the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; the ability to understand emotions and use emotional knowledge; the ability to access and/or generate feelings which facilitate thought (creativity), and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Salovey and Sluyter, 1997, p10). Emotional regulation is a term which covers the development of the capacity to self-soothe and to manage anger effectively. It follows from these definitions that emotional literacy 'the ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions' (Sharp and Faupel, 2001) is a component of both emotional competence and emotional intelligence.

In Elias' definition, emotional competence covers the contribution that emotional literacy makes to successful relationships and to problem solving. In this respect emotional competence overlaps with social competence, a concept which will be more familiar to readers, but one about which there is still a measure of debate. We have construed social competence as behaviour, attitudes and understanding that supports the development of good relationships and enable children and adults to be successful in tasks involving others. This definition is concordant with the definition used by Weare (Weare, 2000) in which she describes the three key attributes of social competence as empathy, respect and genuineness.

It is important to make a distinction between socially competent, socially desirable and socially conformist behaviour. Social desirability may include an element of social conformity – of not rocking the boat. This is suggested in definitions such as 'processing and using the ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour to achieve social tasks and outcomes valued in the host culture and context' (Topping, 1998). A critical view of social competence instruments suggests that to some, social competence in children means behaviours that suit adults – children who withdraw rather than complain when they are distressed by something an adult has said or done (John, 2001). Others writing about social competence (Weare, 2000) however, view autonomy as an important component, and autonomy may require non-conformist behaviour, for example, taking an ethical, but unpopular stance. Autonomy might encourage children to take issue, in a mature way, with adult behaviour when the latter is distressing them. If the host culture does not value dissenting voices, or assertive children, such behaviour would fall outside Topping's definition of social competence. Although in certain circumstances – for example in resisting peer pressure to take drugs – parents, teachers and society in general seem to value autonomy in children, in others they appear to demand compliance. Conformity in children makes the job of parents, practitioners and teachers easier, but it may be counterproductive in terms of the development of desirable attributes such as life long learning, citizenship and positive mental health. We have taken the line that compliance and conformity are not an essential part of social and emotional competence.

We have also taken the view that emotional and social competence, as we have defined them, are so closely related that it would be unhelpful to separate them in searching for instruments which might be useful for assessment. We have, however, had to work with a literature which has sometimes used the term social competence to mean something slightly differently from the way we have defined it here.

Research objectives

The aims of this research review were;

- ▶ to search electronically for research describing issues surrounding the measurement of emotional competence;
- ▶ to review and report on evidence presented in studies published from 1990 onwards;
- ▶ to search electronically for assessment frameworks and tools for measuring emotional competence in children aged 3-11 yrs developed since 1990;
- ▶ to search for assessment frameworks which are not yet in the public domain or were not identifiable in the electronic searches, by contacting those known to be active in research or development in this area;
- ▶ to describe the assessment frameworks and critically appraise their content, reliability and validity;
- ▶ to contact those working in the field in England to gather their views on the measurement of emotional competence;
- ▶ to review issues related to emotional competence measurement and comment on the instruments identified in the light of these issues.

Aims of assessment

It is clear from the literature that instruments have been developed for use in a number of different ways. They share the aim of improving outcomes for children, but support rather different approaches to doing so. Broadly speaking they fall into three categories – early identification (screening), profiling and monitoring. Screening instruments need to be able to separate children who are likely to need special support or intervention from those who do not. As they need to help practitioners make this judgement, they are summative. Because all children will be screened, these instruments also need to be appropriate for use with all children and quick to administer. They need to have high sensitivity (which means they will miss few children) and specificity (which means that they will not incorrectly judge normal children as having problems).

Instruments suitable for profiling need to be able to describe a child from many different perspectives in a way that enables both adults and children to identify what might be done to improve their emotional and social competence. Profiling is therefore formative. It does not aim to classify children as normal or abnormal as screening does, rather to identify where a child has got to, in terms of their development. Profiling benefits from multiple observers including the children themselves.

Instruments suitable for monitoring need to be able to assess change over time. They need, like profiling and screening instruments, to be valid and reliable, but also to detect change accurately. They need to help a teacher or practitioner decide whether what they are doing with a child, a school or a class is resulting in improvement.

All three approaches of, screening, profiling and monitoring can be used for individual children or for groups of children (in a school or classroom or a preschool setting). In the latter case the aim would be to identify schools or settings in need of special support (screening), or to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a class/school and suggest ways of supporting class/school development (profiling).

Methods

We gathered data both from the published literature and by talking to researchers, teachers and practitioners who were working in this field.

To identify instruments, we searched six electronic databases (ERIC, PsycINFO, Sociofile, Health Star, Embase, Medline) from 1990 onwards. We posted a notice on the CASEL Website and searched the child database of the Oxford Outcomes Project. Contact was made with academics working worldwide, known to be active in the field and with all Local Education Authorities, Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) Advisors and lead officers in Early Years – Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs) in England. We included in the review all instruments suitable for use with children aged 3-11 years in school or pre-school settings, whose development covered ‘normal’ children, and in which some reliability or validity checks had been undertaken. We excluded instruments published before 1990 and in languages other than English. We extracted data about the contents, method of development, suitable age group, validation and reliability assessment, who completes, in what setting, time taken to complete and the purposes for which the instrument had been used. All these details are tabulated in the full report on this project. (Edmunds and Stewart-Brown, 2003).

We developed a brief semi-structured questionnaire which we mailed, emailed or telephoned to all those LEAs, EYDCP and PSHE advisors and researchers who had responded to our initial letter. The questionnaire asked respondents;

- ▶ what they saw as the purpose of assessment of emotional and social competence,
- ▶ what they saw as effective assessment,
- ▶ how assessment was viewed by parents, teachers, practitioners and children,
- ▶ what they saw as its significance to teachers,
- ▶ when children should be assessed and in what context,
- ▶ who should carry out assessments,
- ▶ what they perceived to be the barriers to assessment
- ▶ whether they perceived any special issues relating to high risk groups.

In our searches of the literature we also aimed to identify papers that addressed these issues.

Summary of findings

We received twenty-three replies to fifty-six questionnaires some of which represented the view of groups of practitioners. Responses suggested a lot of interest in the assessment of emotional and social competence among primary teachers, Early Years practitioners and researchers, but respondents were a self-selected group who had taken the time and trouble to reply. Some of these respondents reported doubts about the extent to which assessment is possible, and concerns about the consequences of assessment. They spoke mostly in the context of the assessment and monitoring of children with identified emotional and behavioural difficulties. In this context, formative assessment, which included the voice of the child and that of many other observers, was viewed as particularly important. These respondents emphasised that the purpose of such assessment was to identify what would help the child. A smaller number of respondents talked about assessment in the context of identifying children who could benefit from special help (screening). Such summative assessment was, however, viewed by some respondents as judgemental and counterproductive. In the context of screening, time pressure on teachers/practitioners was seen as a potential problem as would be a lack of resources to help children identified as having problems. The need for teachers to be skilled in assessment was identified as important, but it was pointed out to us that some teachers may be more interested in developing these skills than others. Only a handful of respondents spoke about the value of monitoring the emotional and social competence of the whole school, usually in the context of measuring the impact of interventions. The potential for using the results of school competence assessments to rank schools or children, on the other hand, concerned several respondents.

We identified fifty-eight instruments from around the world and classified them by their type and purpose. It is unlikely, given the incompleteness of databases and the limitations of electronic searching, that we identified all English language instruments developed since 1990. Twenty-five instruments were identified by electronic searching of the academic literature and twenty-three by contact with those active in research or practice in this field. We also identified ten instruments currently in development. Most instruments were relevant for primary school age children and the choice of instruments for pre-school children is limited. Several of the instruments we identified combined assessment of social and emotional competence with assessment of academic competence. Some of the instruments are not in the public domain and the use of these instruments incurs a charge.

Almost all the instruments identified from the published literature had been subjected to psychometric testing. On the whole they were well validated and showed good reliability. Most of them had been developed primarily to detect problem or antisocial behaviour and most comprised descriptions of behaviours considered pathological by experts. Many were therefore suitable for screening and some for monitoring change over time. Most were designed to be completed by single observers. Several of these instruments touched on the capacity to make good relationships with peers, but only a small number included items relevant to the emotional literacy component of emotional competence. Several contained only negative descriptions and very few were entirely positive. The positive items often reflected social conformity and desirability rather than social competence as defined here. We identified examples of class and school based assessment measures.

The twenty-three instruments identified through contact with those researching and working in the field differed from published instruments in that they all included positive questions or statements and many covered aspects of emotional literacy. These instruments had been subjected to varying degrees of validation and reliability testing. Some had been developed and tested using a psychometric approach, others using a participative, iterative approach in which the primary concern was the face validity and veracity of the instrument. Some had been subjected only to minimal validation. These newer instruments were more likely to have been developed in consultation with parents and a number allow self report by the child. They were more likely to have been developed in the context of programmes which could help children develop their emotional and social competence in schools, rather than for referral of problem children elsewhere. The methods used for assessment have also evolved. Newer instruments include some based on observation of children's emotional and social responses to photographs, drawings or video vignettes. Many of the more recent instruments are now available in computer format.

During the course of the project we were sent details of ten instruments which are currently in development in the UK or Europe. From what we were told and from the early prototypes we saw the next few years are likely to see the publication of several instruments which may prove more appropriate for the assessment of emotional and social competence than those which are currently available. A notable feature of these new instruments is that they are being developed with children.

Conclusions

None of the instruments we identified for assessing emotional and social competence had been fully validated and tested in UK schools and this validity cannot be assumed. However, instruments suitable for all three purposes – screening, profiling and monitoring – will be available in the near future. Some teachers and practitioners interviewed as part of this study were very interested in using such measures now and have the skills to use them effectively. For a variety of reasons some do not believe assessment would be valuable. Findings from this largely qualitative study indicate that the usefulness of class/school assessments as part of class/school based interventions was not widely understood.

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Further information

Further copies of this summary are available from:

- ▶ DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottinghamshire, NG15 0DJ (Tel 0845 6022260 or e-mail: dfes@prolog.uk.com)
- ▶ Quote reference EOR/SBU/2002/042
- ▶ Copies of the full report of 'Assessing emotional and social competence in primary school and early years settings' are available from the above address (quote reference EOR/SBU/2002/042) or from the Sure Start website www.surestart.gov.uk
- ▶ Further information about Sure Start and Sure Start local programmes can be found at www.surestart.gov.uk