In November, we held an event looking at social and emotional learning in the classroom as part of the ESRC Festival for Social Science. In this post, Michael reflects on our learning from discussion with the primary school teachers who attended.

This is part of a wider ongoing project, ‘Programmes to Practice’ which is attempting to identify effective, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies for teachers and schools. This project was co-commissioned by the Educational Endowment Foundation and the Early Intervention Foundation.

What we did

For the wider Programmes to Practice project, we examined a range of activities from a small number of ‘evidence informed’ SEL programmes (i.e. those that have a good evidence base) (see box 1). The research team went through the activities in each programme and identified common features across programmes. We did this so that we could find key practices that teachers might be able to integrate into their daily practice, rather than implementing an entire SEL programme.

*Example: Although different programmes took different teaching approaches (worksheets, spelling tests, songs), a common feature across programmes was the development of emotional vocabulary and to develop children’s ability to recognise their own emotional states.*

Although this produced a short list of potentially effective activities, it was not clear how exactly this could ‘translate’ into real world classrooms. For instance, we were unsure what might help or hinder teachers’ use of these types of specific SEL strategies in the wider school context. To find out, we invited a number of primary school teachers from the local area to examine our early findings and to discuss whether these strategies might be useful in the context of their own classrooms.

Teacher focus groups

Teachers were presented with example activities and asked to discuss to what they thought. This included:
- Whether they felt that SEL was consistent with their priorities as teachers
- What would help facilitate using SEL strategies
- What barriers they saw in using SEL strategies

Teachers’ responses were illustrated in ‘visual minutes’ created by artists from More than Minutes (www.morethanminutes.co.uk):

**Holistic approaches and the wider environment:** Teachers felt that the wider ethos around SEL was an important factor. Without an ‘SEL environment’ across the whole school it was felt that specific class-based activities would be more difficult to actually carry out, and less effective. This is consistent with a range of literature highlighting the importance of schoolwide support for SEL in the classroom.¹

**Adaptation:** Teachers said that activities were often very prescriptive. For instance, many examples of activities included a script to be read out. Teachers felt this was restrictive, as it prevented children of different abilities accessing the same material. This is a common issue, and researchers are still trying to figure out whether it is better to stick to the specific instructions, or try to change these activities to best suit the needs of all children.², ³

**Overuse of worksheets:** Teachers pointed out the heavy emphasis on worksheets in many of the examples we looked at. They felt that there were missed opportunities for more engaging kinesthetic methods like drama and dance. In theory this might make sense for some elements of SEL, but it’s important to make sure that the key skills are still being covered (e.g. increasing emotional vocabulary).
**Time:** Unsurprisingly, time was consistently noted as one of the largest barriers preventing the use of SEL activities in the classroom. Teachers all agreed that school timetables were overpacked, and often programmes or strategies were seen as ‘unaffordable extras’. Time is often recognised as a significant barrier in using SEL strategies. Part of the rationale of the wider project (Programmes to Practice) is to identify ‘low time’ or ‘time neutral’ activities that can be part of existing timetables (e.g. including emotional vocabulary words in a spelling test) rather than taking away from existing priorities.

**Next Steps**

The Education Endowment Foundation is due to publish a guidance report on SEL in Summer 2019, covering our findings from Programmes to Practice. The guidance will also be informed by a review of the SEL literature, which is currently being carried out here in the Manchester Institute of Education.

**What does this mean for teachers?**

- It might not be necessary to invest in full intervention approaches – there might be specific activities and strategies that can be used on their own in the classroom
- Teachers could think about other ways to slot in SEL learning in their existing timetables, such as including emotional vocabulary words in a spelling test
- School leaders interested in the use of SEL strategies in the classroom might want to think about the overall ethos of the school and how this can promote and support individual teachers’ approaches to SEL

**References**

Appendix 1 – short list of evidence informed programmes
(NB: This is not a recommendation for the programmes themselves)

• FRIENDS
• I Can Problem Solve
• Insights
• KIVA
• Roots of Empathy
• SSIS
• Tools for Getting Along
• Tools of the Mind
• Zippy’s Friends
• Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)
• Positive Action
• Second Step
• Steps to Respect