CACE cracked: Social and emotional learning provides PATHS to improved quality of life for primary school children

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Margarita is a Research Associate at the Manchester Institute of Education. She has a particular interest in advanced statistical analysis and measurement particularly within quality of life and mental health.

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Alex currently works as a Research Fellow within MIE, and has been involved in a numerous large scale research projects that have evaluated the impact of education initiatives on both academic outcomes and pupil mental health.


What we did

We looked at whether a universal social and emotional learning (SEL) intervention, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum, can improve three key aspects of children’s quality of life: psychological wellbeing, peer social support, and school connectedness. We also wanted to find out whether the amount of the PATHS curriculum teachers actually delivered in practice made a difference to the amount of improvement that we saw, because we know that school life is busy and it can be difficult to deliver all the parts of an intervention.

The aim of PATHS is to help all children manage their behaviour, understand their emotions, and work well with others. It is delivered by class teachers and includes a series of lessons on topics such as identifying and labelling feelings, generalization activities and techniques, and supplementary materials for parents. Further information can be found at www.pathseducation.co.uk.

Who?

5,218 children aged seven to nine (51% boys, 49% girls) from 45 primary schools in Greater Manchester took part.
How?

The 45 schools were randomly chosen to either deliver PATHS for two years or to continue with their usual practice. Children answered questions about their quality of life at the beginning and end of the trial. We visited schools to observe teachers delivering PATHS lessons and this allowed us to understand how much of the curriculum they had taught.

What did we find?

First, we found that children in school who had delivered PATHS showed a small improvement in their psychological wellbeing, when compared with children in usual practice schools. We did not find a difference in how children viewed their peer social support or school connectedness.

Next, we looked at whether these results changed after we took into account the proportion of lessons that teachers taught (this is known as complier average causal effect estimation, or CACE). We found that PATHS led to substantial improvements in all three aspects of children’s quality of life when at least half of the lessons had been delivered.

Wait a minute!

Our CACE analysis only looked at the proportion of lessons taught by teachers. This means that other potentially important aspects of intervention delivery (for example, the quality of delivery) were not assessed.

What does this mean for educators?

Our study shows that SEL interventions can lead to meaningful improvements in children’s quality of life. However, further efforts to optimize their delivery in the classroom are needed if their true potential is to be realized. That is, it seems important to make sure that teachers are able to deliver as many sessions or components of an intervention as possible for it to make a difference.