

Social competence in more able students: a professional enquiry

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Abstract

Social competence is extremely important for the welfare and development of school children and is sometimes low in more able children, whose needs are as important as those of students with any other special educational need or disability. Low social competence in more able students can stem from – amongst other causes – bullying or a congenital condition such as autism or Asperger’s Syndrome. This study used a triangulation of qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (analysis of existing progress and behavioural data) methodologies to assess the impact of low social competence as a barrier to learning in more able students. Detailed interviews with students, tutors and teachers revealed extremely complex relationships between social competence, ability, progress and attainment. In conclusion, the need for teachers to get to know individual students personally was stressed. Factors such as confidence, teacher communication and parental involvement and support (stemming from a stable, happy home life) were all found to both affect social competence and have impacts on other aspects of school life for students.

Introduction

When discussing anonymised students and members of staff, male pronouns will be used (i.e. ‘he,’ ‘his’ and ‘him’) but it should be noted that this is not necessarily indicative of the person’s gender. Research was conducted at a secondary school in Cornwall, UK, which will be referred to henceforth as “the School”.

More Able Students

When implementing a curriculum within a school, the needs of ‘gifted’ children and exceptional learners are just as significant for consideration as the needs of those with other special educational needs (Pollard, 1997, p. 198). The state clearly understands that high performing students are an important target area, as is evident from the wealth of literature printed by the government for identifying and promoting excellence in ‘gifted and talented’ learners (e.g. Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Estyn, 2012; Ofsted, 2013). For many years there have been reports in the media of Ofsted’s “fears” and “warnings” that schools in Britain are, “failing... their brightest students,” (BBC, 2001; BBC, 2013; Sellgren, 2013) and almost a third of Ofsted reports describe a failing in provision for more able students (Hackman, 2014).

There are a number of means for identifying successful learners at school and even school children are able to distinguish between ability and hard work (Blumenfeld, Pintrich, and Hamilton (1986). Historically, ‘gifted and talented’ was a measure of identifying exceptional learners that was almost entirely based on IQ, now a somewhat discredited measure that neglects various types of intelligence and often underrepresents various minorities (Slavin, 2000, p. 427). For the purposes of this report, the term more able (Mable) will refer to a range of high achievers, including: those identified as ‘gifted and talented’ in a particular subject; those who are naturally ‘bright’; and those who are consistently hard workers.

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Social Competence

Although varying in specific definition, social competence is a useful term which can supersede more “primitive” terms such as ‘social skills’, ‘communication’ and ‘ability to interact’ (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). Social competence as a concept is central to children’s cognitive development and is important for two reasons:

- first, for a student’s ongoing welfare and sense of wellbeing;
- and second, an individual’s social competence affects their ability to achieve personal development and is a predictor of long-term adjustment (Waters & Sroufe, 1983; Slavin, 2000, p. 89; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007).

With low social competence, both of these factors could feasibly lead to the degradation of a student’s mental health and could have a deleterious effect on their academic progress. This is supported by Wentzel (1991) who states that social responsibility is “instrumental in the acquisition of knowledge and the development of cognitive abilities”.

All people have social needs, such as the feeling of group membership, which enable them to grow, learn and accomplish tasks (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1991, p. 243). A mismatch between an individual’s work environment and their “social character type” can lead to negative consequences, such as frustration and resentment (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1991, p. 94) whilst a ‘good’ social environment (based on respect, acceptance and a lack of discrimination) is important for allowing individuals to fulfil their potential (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1991, p. 159). Even teachers themselves may unwittingly contribute towards the degradation of individual students’ social competence. It is difficult to not have preconceptions; because of this, teachers have been shown to be, “affected by the sex, race or social class of the children and even by their names,” (Meighan, 1981, as cited by Pollard, 1997).

Causes of low social competence

Social difficulties often originate from one of two distinct sources. On the one hand, social difficulties are often a direct consequence of high ability. Bullying is strongly linked to status and, crucially, conformity (Pollard, 1997). A Mable student could be seen by peers as not conforming and could subsequently become a target for bullies, thus diminishing the student’s social competence through segregation and social isolation. Increasing social competence has been directly championed as a means of reducing bullying (Orpinas & Horne, 2012).

The alternative possibility is that low social competence and high academic performance may both be symptoms of another, causative factor. A large proportion of research into social difficulties, whether in adults or children, concern congenital conditions that have previously been linked with both low social competence and high intelligence, such as autism (Howlin & Yates, 1999; Howlin et al., 2000; Parsons & Mitchell, 2002), Asperger’s syndrome (Marriage et al., 1995) and others (e.g. Davies et al., 1998).

Although they may contain the same behavioural symptoms, because of the different psychology involved, it seems as though these two cases would necessitate entirely different methods of both treatment and preventative methods.

Assessing social competence

Social competence is related to a wide range of other factors, including intellect, behaviour and psychopathology (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). Whilst humans naturally assess others’ personalities sufficiently accurately to be able to interact with them socially, these assessments are notoriously inaccurate, leading to stereotypes and, potentially, discrimination (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1991, p.

138). Critical assessment of social competence is a complex affair but can be achieved by considering the salient issues governing how a student accomplishes tasks and how the student is dealing with those issues (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). For the purposes of this enquiry, detailed interviews were conducted for each candidate student; in each case this included the student and two members of staff.

Ethics

When interviewing potentially vulnerable participants, problems can surface when discussing emotive issues (Smith, 1992). Study participants were selected under strict criteria which were determined with the assistance and agreement of various members of School staff. All participants were informed that their cooperation was entirely optional and that anonymity would be assured.

Participants

Participant safety

The subjects of interviews contained, necessarily, potentially emotive and distressing issues for the student participants. Knox and Burkard (2009) describe how interviewers need to be careful in such cases, especially when not trained in addressing distress. The main aspect that could have led to safeguarding concerns was that of bullying; were bullying to be mentioned, it would have to be brought to the attention of members of staff responsible for safeguarding and, therefore, anonymity could no longer be assured to the students.

Participant comfort

To minimise participant distress, tutors were asked to recommend students who, in their opinions, would likely be comfortable being interviewed by a member of staff about such personal matters. More than one tutor mentioned a student who would be good as a study subject but who would have been uncomfortable being interviewed; any such students were not considered for interview. It is therefore possible that some appropriate subjects for interview were overlooked for ethical reasons.

Anonymity and data protection

Confidentiality is a particularly important issue when interviewing subjects (Haverkamp, 2005) and, as such, anonymity was an important consideration. However, the students' genders are considered as a potentially important variable and are therefore included in their respective profiles. No interview progressed without the consent of the participant themselves, as well as that of the aforementioned members of staff.

Research ethics: validity of conclusions

The "trustworthiness" of the interviewer is particularly important for qualitative interviewing (Haverkamp, 2005), hence the stressed importance of methodologies such as the three-interview structure (Seidman, 2012, p. 20). A trustworthy interviewer is more likely to obtain honest, open responses. The semi-structured nature of interviews attempted to enforce this trustworthiness.

Maintenance of credibility in qualitative research is of paramount importance (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Use of the triangulation methodology can go a long way to increasing both the reliability and the validity of conclusions drawn from qualitative data (Golafshani, 2003).

Research impact and legacy

Dissemination of research results is a particularly important consideration (Seidman, 2012, p. vii; Brown & Dowling, 1997; Harmsworth & Turpin, 2010; DfEE, 1998) and, no matter the quality of a piece of research, it is useless if not disseminated appropriately (Bryman, 2012, p. 14). As well as

through discussion with colleagues and teacher training tutors, copies of the final report were provided for the Heads of Year 10, tutors and senior leadership team.

Methods

This study used a triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000) of qualitative and quantitative methodologies to build profiles of participating students. Triangulation is defined broadly as, “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon,” (Denzin, 1978, as cited by Jick, 1979) and is seen as, “a good way to reap the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative methods,” (Hussein, 2009), whilst helping to accompany for the disadvantages of both (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012).

Qualitative methods

When interviewing for research, the interview structure is a crucial consideration. Bryman (2012, pp. 212-3) mentions 12 structures; of these, the ‘semi-structured interview’ was selected for this study. This involved the creation of ‘interview schedules’ – a broad set of general questions to be covered – but allowed deviation as necessary (2012, p. 471).

The provision of context is an important consideration for qualitative interviewing, without which the meanings of experiences cannot fully be explored (Schuman, 1982; Patton, 1989; both as cited by Seidman, 2012). Seidman (2012) recommends the ‘three-interview structure’, in which all participants are interviewed on three separate occasions, each time with a different focus. Whilst this was not feasible for this study, three interviews were conducted relating to each participant: the student themselves, their form tutor and their Science teacher. Furthermore, this methodology provided insights into the sometimes contrasting opinions of students and staff, eliminating bias resulting from when individual interviewees falsely attribute happenings to erroneous causes (Bryman, 2012).

Whilst six Year 10 participants were initially selected (three male and three female), unavoidable circumstances meant that one participant became unavailable. Five students (three male, two female) were therefore used as participants; these are referred to as Student 1 through to Student 5 (S1-S5). Similarly, their respective tutors will be referred to as Tutors 1 to 5 (Tu1-Tu5) and their Science teachers as Teachers 1 to 5 (Te1-Te5).

Interviews were all recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed by the author using Express Scribe Transcription Software (NCH Software, Canberra, Australia).

Quantitative methods

Bias can arise from participants observing interviewer responses and, possibly subconsciously, amend their reactions (Knox & Burkard, 2009). Quantitative data were used to further increase the context of the interview data. The following, existing data were collected (with permission) from the School and analysed:

Data on progress and attainment. Students’ data were compared to the mean equivalent figures for Year 10 within the School. Specifically, the following variables were examined:

- Number of GCSE subjects taken;
- Mean levels of progress (LOP) across all subjects since Year 7;
- LOP in English and Maths;
- Total number of attainment ‘points’ (pts) according to predicted; and
- Mean number of points across all subjects.

- Attendance, behaviour and classification data. Mean figures for Year 10 were not available but these figures were comparable between participants. Specifically, the following data were taken:
- Percentage attendance in year 10;
- Percentage of authorised and unauthorised absences;
- Percentage of late attendances;
- Identification by the School of students being G&T, or as having a SEN; and
- Behaviour and achievement ‘points’ and their respective explanations.

Analysis

Maintenance of the context provided by the multiple interviews was an important consideration and the recommended secondary analysis technique (Bryman, 2012, p. 312) was used; the transcribed, anonymised interview scripts were read and summarised by a secondary, unconnected researcher with social sciences interviewing experience. The profiles built in the Results section of this report represent the summative considerations of the author’s initial analysis, the secondary analysis and the quantitative data.

To analyse the quantitative data, mean, maximum and minimum values were calculated for all variables in order to demonstrate how participating students compared to each other and, where possible, the rest of Year 10.

Results

Student data

Attainment and progress

All students were above the mean for Year 10 in all measurements of academic progress. To date, S1 was making a mean 4.22 LOP across all subjects, whereas all other students are making a mean 4.00 LOP (exactly 4 LOP in all subjects); this is considerably higher than 2.83 LOP – the Year 10 mean. All students were above the Year 10 mean for attainment pts score but below the Year 10 maximum.

Behaviour, attendance and SEN

S3 and S5 both had a 100% attendance record for the year to date; furthermore, S3 had never been recorded as late, whereas S5 had been recorded late on only two occasions (0.7%). S1’s attendance was 94.1% but none of these was classed as an unauthorised absence, while only two had been late attendances. Meanwhile, S4 and S2’s attendance figures were 91.9% and 91.4% respectively; furthermore, 4.8% of S4’s attendances were unauthorised, compared to 21.1% of S1’s.

Regarding behaviour, S1 has a behaviour points score of -9, indicating nine occurrences of detentions or similar sanctions. S2, S4 and S5 all have a number of positive behaviour points, relating to having won House points or, in S2’s case, commendations for excellent school work. S1 and S5 are the only two students identified by the School as G&T and only S1 has any other SEN, detailed as, “possible Asperger’s”.

Student profiles

Student 1

Whilst S1 is a high ability male student who is able to express very good ideas vocally, he is described by Tu1 and Te1 as having very low motivation. A lack of focus in lessons is a frequent cause of him not meeting his very high potential, which, according to Tu1, relates to his strong desire to be liked and his constant, often unsuccessful, efforts to fit in socially. On the few occasions that S1 is socially comfortable, he can produce “brilliant work”. Regardless of his application in lessons, S1 is progressing well at School, making a higher mean number of LOP than S2-S5.

S1 was striking because his thoughts on his own social competence, and the effects of his social life on his school work, were largely at odds with Tu1's and Te1's. S1 struggled during Years 7 and 8 and admits talking too much in lessons; he claims that more recently, in Years 9 and 10, he has been much more comfortable. His friendship groups have changed and fluxed slowly over the years but, when asked whether he thought his social life had had any effect on his progress at School, he responded, "No, it's completely separate."

Contrastingly, Tu1 painted the picture of an excluded child, a member of a few social groups but more by association than being an integral, valued member of any. S1 has been assessed for behavioural and learning conditions that might affect his ability to socialise – such as autism, Asperger's syndrome or ADHD – but, as Tu1 describes, he came out "just below" the thresholds for any diagnoses. Tu1 is confident, however, that such a condition is a causative factor in S1's low social competence. Tu1 described S1's ability to communicate as low, as he jumps from one extreme to the other, either attempting to lead group discussions, talking over other people, or showing no interest in taking part at all: "He's got no idea of social conventions of politeness and waiting for a turn to speak and things like that as well which, again, I think puts people off him." In class, S1 has frequently displayed an active choice to "abstain from learning", in the words of Te1. Although S1 is currently making five LOP in Science and is predicted an A, his classwork often does not reflect this potential. However, in the past month, following a Year 10 Parents' Evening, S1 has displayed a significantly improved attitude, working harder in lessons and, concordantly, making the active decision to physically distance himself from his friendship groups in lessons, leading to less distraction.

Student 2

S2 is a female student and is a high achiever: a very reliable, hard-working student who consistently meets her targets. Tu2 described her as a very "bright student, and a bright person in general." She describes herself as feeling safe and comfortable at School. Her friendship groups have largely remained consistent during secondary school but differences in subject choices have limited her time spent with some of her main friendship group.

S2's communication and social skills were so low in her initial two years at the School that she was assessed by the School for Asperger's syndrome. However, in Years 9 and 10, her inclusion within a "lively circle of young ladies" has helped her to develop her social competence very successfully. A controversial, social media-based event within her social group during year 10 has had both negative short-term and positive long-term effects, traumatising her at the time but allowing her to "mature" and keep "a low profile", more appropriately balancing the social and academic aspects of her life. Her ability to have learned from this event is, in Tu2's opinion, evidence of her social intelligence, and has helped her to, "Develop her own personality into something more of a complete student". The ongoing ramifications from this event have, in Tu2's opinion, had some impact on the quality of her work but have not stopped her from being a high achiever, consistently meeting her targets. In lessons, S2 is described as bright and motivated but very quiet and reluctant to ask for help, leading on occasion to her making no progress until the teacher specifically asks if she is stuck. Her lack of motivation is, according to Te2, possibly down to the whole class's work ethic; however, her poor attendance record of 91.5% – and particularly with 21.1% of those absences being unauthorised – perhaps tell the tale of a more socially troubled student than one might initially think.

Student 3

Tu3 describes S3 as a very bright all-round female student; she has not been identified as gifted and talented in any particular subject because she is such a high achiever across the board. S3 is a very quiet, withdrawn student who rarely communicates within her social group; she is "quite lonely by nature". Despite being part of a friendship group who do not judge her, she retains an unwillingness

to socialise, potentially an attempt not to share personal information that might make her feel vulnerable within the group; Tu3 mentions that her quietness is “due to some family issues.” As a positive, S3 has good independent work skills and, “Will actually work harder, do more homework, read more and therefore achieve better than the students who have a very busy social life.” Like S2, Te3 mentions that S3 is a quiet, female student who is reluctant to ask for help when stuck, but does engage with work and she gets on well with friends in lessons.

Student 4

S4 is a very bright, talented, independent and conscientious male student with, as summarised by Tu4, the ability, character and mind-set to overcome any challenge put before him. He is universally described by teachers as likeably, easy-going, lovely to teach and extremely organised. Socially, he is “as good as any.” This viewpoint seems to be echoed by S1 himself, who initially struggled, having joined the School from a much smaller private school, but has since made good friends easily. S4 is of the opinion that this strong circle of close friends is very important to his school life and his progress, helping and supporting him both in and out of lessons. Tu4 confirms this view, stating that he “Seems to be well-adjusted, sociable... He will be a success in his life, no doubt about it.” With that said, S4 is very independent; he is often absent from tutor time because he is independently working in the library or on the School Council.

Unlike S3, Tu4 states that, despite his independence, he has a high social competence and his character and work ethic are sufficiently strong to not let any potential social issues affect his attainment at School. In lessons, S4 talks comfortably with his friends. He is on target and set to make four LOP across the board.

Student 5

S5 is an extremely bright, successful male student; he is very logically minded and, whilst Maths and Science are particular strengths, since Year 7 he has been hitting or exceeding every one of his targets: “100%. Absolutely consistent.”

Socially, S5 seems something of an enigma, but with a high social competence. After his closest friend left the School in Year 7, he describes how he quickly and easily made new friends. He is very popular within his social group of five or six students. In tutor time he is quiet but very popular with all students, male and female, and constantly included in all sorts of activities. Tu5 made a particular point of how, in spite of identifying as a “nerd” and being proud of it, he has the confidence to socialise with the “lads” of the class who might traditionally be thought of as “cooler”. Much of this high social competence comes down to a high level of confidence that other, similar students frequently lack. S5 is the most academically successful of the participants interviewed in terms of attainment, with the highest pts scores (both mean and total). His 100% attendance record further paints a picture of a dedicated, happy student.

In contrast to Tu5’s assessment, Te5 states that S5 is less hard-working than some students but naturally very bright and quite quiet and shy in class. He is less socially comfortable with female students than he is with other males. Social interactions with anyone other than the four students he regularly sits with have seemed, in Te5’s opinion, a little “awkward”.

Discussion

The effects of social competence on academic progress

Most students claimed that a consistent group of good, reliable friends was important for a student to do well in lessons. However, whilst S1 admitted that he found it important to have at least one friend in every class to, “Talk to and not be quiet all lesson,” he claimed that fallouts and regular shifting in his friendship group were “completely separate” from his academic progress and,

furthermore, that having a reliable group of friends to see in break times and after School had no bearing on how he did at School. S1's tutor disagreed.

The effects of friends in lessons

Many students admitted that, whilst they can benefit from sitting their friends in lessons, it can lead to distractions and similar hindrances. Seating plans often affect not only the behaviour of individuals but how individuals are perceived by their peers within the class (Schwabel & Cherlin, 1972). In his meta-analysis of factors affecting learning, Hattie (2003) included student disposition to learn (motivation) and the class environment as the 6th and 7th most important factors. Other than "peer effects" in 15th position (effect size of 0.38), these are the two factors that could relate to social competence issues being discussed here.

"Good" friends and "bad" friends

S4 discriminated between "good" and "bad" friends, mentioning that, whilst friends can be "restrictive" in lessons, "good friends... want you to do well, they will help you more than distract you, so that's good having those friends that know what you want". When asked how a student can manage the balance between friends being supportive in lessons and distracting you from your work, S4 replied, "That's quite a hard one actually. You want to talk to them, but you don't want to push them away, either." Without seating plans, students arrange themselves based upon complex social ecology patterns (Hendrick, Giesen & Cock, 1974), implying strong social factors affecting learning.

Fallouts

S5 described how fallouts may affect a student's happiness at School but that, in his experience, he has always been able to separate such occurrences from his academic work: "It kind of, just, encouraged me to get my head down anyway. I've never really taken that into a lesson." Following a fallout, Tu2 emphasises safeguarding; he considers a teachers' role not to include direct involvement in students' social lives – not to try and persuade particular students to become or not become friends – but first and foremost to try and make sure all students are safe.

As previously stated, S5 described how he has never had difficulty in not taking social issues into lessons: "I just try and focus on what I have to do." However, he admitted that some people found it much harder and that, regarding social difficulties, many students, "Bring it into the classroom, and that causes distraction."

Social media

A controversial Facebook conversation was the cause of a good deal of trauma for S2 in the few months previous to my interview with Tu2, but led to her maturing socially and tempering her involvement with the group. Tu2 described how social media has had huge impacts on students' lives, both positive and negative, and that it will be particularly important for incoming, younger generations of teachers, who are more *au fait* with social media, to, "Actually bring in something which we lack, which is a better knowledge of social media and the positive impact it could have on the learning as well." Online social media have the potential to revolutionise education and all other aspects of global life but have complex ramifications and require careful, informed consideration when the safeguarding of pupils is concerned (Friesen & Lowe, 2011).

Communicating with the teacher

A distinct difference was observed between the reported relationships between students and teachers in lessons which seemingly related to confidence. S2 and S3, for example, were both noted by their Science teachers as often simply sitting quietly without asking for help when they are stuck. Conversely, S4 is described by both Tu4 and Te4 as always having the confidence and self-awareness to approach the teacher and ask for help if he is struggling in lesson. 'Feedback', 'instructional

quality', 'direct instruction' and 'remediation/feedback' take up positions one, three, four and five in Hattie's top ten factors affecting learning (Hattie, 2003) and all come from direct communication between teacher and student. Social difficulties that may affect this relationship therefore require important intervention to ensure effective and efficient communication to all members of a class.

Other factors

Throughout interviews, a range additional factors was mentioned that either affect student's social competence directly, or that otherwise affect stress levels and mental wellbeing.

Factors affecting social competence and friendship groups

Friendships across tutor groups and classes

In Year 7, students have lessons in mixed-ability tutor groups before changing to tiered, ability-based sets from Year 8 onwards. This can be a strong source of disruption within and between social groups, as described by S1, whose social group changed significantly after he was placed in a different set from his closest friends. Students' ability to cope with this change seems to depend strongly on their natural social competence, as demonstrated by S1's low ability (and constant efforts) to cope in contrast to S5's natural affinity for socialising with a range of other students.

Gender

S1 described how, although social groupings fluxed to a large degree through Years 7, 8 and 9, they largely remained all-male, with female groups being separate. Inter-gender socialisation is generally fairly good at the School but divides seem to remain, as commented upon by several of the tutors and teachers.

Family

Tu3 described "family issues" as having led S3 to be a very quiet girl. Contrastingly, those students with high social competence (such as S5) often have happy home lives without family issues. Parental involvement and the lack of turbulence within the family unit often contribute to successful school careers and well-rounded, sociable students (Fehrmann, Keith & Reimers, 1987; Lareau, 2000; Fields & Fields, 2010).

Alternatives

Interventions

Early intervention is crucial for many behavioural problems with children; for example, in order to reduce incidences of bullying, intervention to better develop social competence is most effective early, as 'prevention' rather than 'cure' (Orpinas & Horne, 2012). The early, ongoing promotion of positive social interactions is crucial (Wentzel, 1991) and interventions generally consist of reinforcement of appropriate social behaviour, modelling and coaching (Slavin, 2000, p. 89), therefore becoming a complex, situation-dependent task. Slavin (2000, p. 89) stresses that the success of an intervention can vary and depends on the involvement of the individual's peers as well as the teacher.

The early, ongoing promotion of positive social interactions is crucial (Wentzel, 1991) and interventions generally consist of reinforcement of appropriate social behaviour, modelling and coaching (Slavin, 2000, p. 89), therefore becoming a complex, situation-dependent task. Slavin (2000, p. 89) stresses that the success of an intervention can vary and depends on the involvement of the individual's peers as well as the teacher.

Adapting teaching

S1 stated that teachers making lessons interactive and fun is the main way for students' progress to be maintained, and that online revision resources are important for the reduction of stress levels.

Adapting teaching to various learning styles is certainly important for reaching the maximum number of students and such adaptation is represented in the Government's Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011).

Seating plans

Tu1 described that seating S1 in isolation for a mock GCSE exam produced a considerably better mark than a similar exam done in the classroom with other students, perhaps due to the removal of other students as a distracting stimulus, as S1 often prioritises trying to fit in socially over focussing on school work. Exclusion during group work is a common factor for S1, so Tu1 often picks random groups, such as numbering students and picking groups that way. However, Te1 stated how he had tried "every variation" of the seating plan, unsuccessfully, before S1 had his recent attitude change, actively taking himself away from the source of distraction in class.

Getting to know individuals

As summarised by Tu1: "There is no (*all-inclusive*) answer... and for each different student there will be a different idea, a different answer." An important factor in improving progress at school is taking time getting to know individual students and what drives them. The long-term school relationship between Tu2 and S2 – from Year 7 through to Year 10 – has allowed Tu2 to witness the success of her social development within her social group and, particularly, how much of an achievement it was for her to deal with the social media-based event which could have severely knocked her confidence and impacted on her progress at School.

Natural development

Tu2 described how, although S2 could have been given targets to increase her participation in classrooms, school clubs and other scenarios, she joined a social group of her own volition, quite naturally, and this was one of the greatest factors in improving her confidence and developing her social and communication skills. This is similar to S1's seemingly spontaneous decision to focus more in lessons. Piaget (1973) argued that all children go through the same developmental stages, only at different rates. Whilst with S2 this was a particularly successful occurrence, it is very difficult to predict, and is not an argument that students should simply be left to figure these things out for themselves.

Conclusion

Social competence appears to have a complex relationship with school progress and could therefore be considered a potential barrier to learning. Whether or not the relationships are causal is extremely difficult to ascertain and is likely to be different for any students. The importance of teachers getting to know students personally, rather than placing them in metaphorical boxes and providing them with standardised interventions, cannot be emphasised strongly enough. However, some techniques and interventions are commonly effective at assisting social development in students. These include swift adaptation to learning styles and effective communication within lessons. Seating plans have limited use but do seem to help minimise social distractions. Factors such as confidence, communication with the teacher and parental involvement and support (stemming from a stable, happy home life) are all factors that both affect social competence and have impacts on other aspects of school life for students.

Future research should focus on the individual elements of social competence mentioned in this report and evaluate their effects on academic progress.

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