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Measuring social emotional functioning to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing: introducing the Boxall Childhood Project

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1. Introduction

Previous research has shown that the healthy development of social emotional functioning (SEF) during childhood is key to mental health and wellbeing[1]. In addition children and young people lacking key social emotional skills often display challenging behaviours which prevent pupils from engaging effectively with their learning and school[2].

Although teachers can identify pupils who have clear social emotional mental health needs due to evident signs (eg difficult behaviour, withdrawal, etc) many pupils' needs remain unmet because they are not as easily observable.

In 2017 The Nurture Group Network[3] launched the Boxall Childhood Project in order to campaign for schools to assess the SEF of all their pupils.

Assumptions behind the project:

1. All pupils should be assessed to ensure that all needs are identified and met.
2. Early identification of SEF needs will lead to schools putting in place relevant and cost-effective interventions early during childhood, which can in turn prevent the development of more serious mental health difficulties during adolescence.

Aims of the project:

1. Evaluate whether measuring the SEF of all pupils in a school is useful, feasible and effective.
2. Explore the relation between SEF and other pupil variables (eg. attainment, demographics) and identify risk factors.

2. Boxall Childhood Project

Schools will measure the SEF of all their pupils using the Boxall Profile[2] (BP), an assessment tool for the social emotional skills and the challenging behaviours of children and young people (Box 1).

Start – Feb 2017: key members of staff from 40 schools were trained to use the BP online and to gain a better understanding of how SEF can translate into challenging behaviour.

Pilot Phase – Summer term 2017: the key staff members then trained their colleagues to use the BP online. They also put in place systems to manage the assessment of their pupils and they collected their first dataset of BPs.

Implementation Phase – Academic year 2017/18: schools will measure the SEF of all their pupils once a term. Additional data such as attainment and pupil demographics will also be collected.

3. Preliminary Findings

36 schools in England collected data during the pilot phase and 6160 pupils were assessed. **26 schools assessed whole year groups** (rather than only focusing on pupils who had clear SEF needs). Most pupils were in primary school and were between 4 to 10 years old (Fig 1).

Preliminary results show that approximately **1/5 of pupils had high levels of social emotional & behavioural difficulties**.

Figure 1. Preliminary Boxall Profile results (n = 5784)

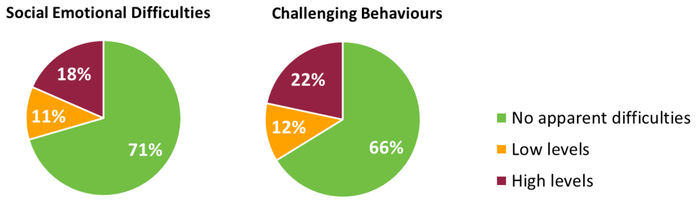
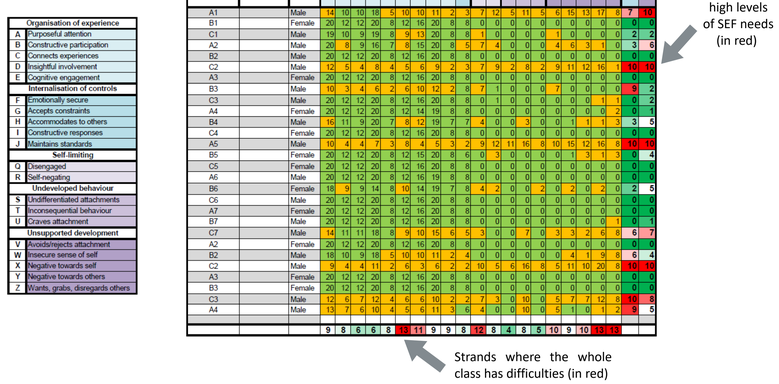


Figure 2. Example of a classroom overview



Using the BP online, teachers can create **class overviews** which provide a straightforward account of the SEF needs of a whole class at a glance (Fig 2).
It highlights pupils who could have been missed because their needs were not as obvious as others, and also encourages teachers to broaden their focus (rather than focus only on "difficult" pupils).

Schools already report several benefits of measuring the SEF of all their pupils (watch the video to know more):

i) Better **identification** of pupils' needs
ii) Better **support** provided to pupils
iii) Improved **understanding** of SEF underlying negative classroom dynamics
iv) Improved **teaching** and teachers' understanding of SEF and behaviour

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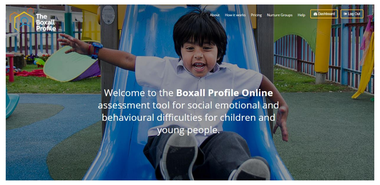
Box 1. The Boxall Profile



The Boxall Profile[2] (BP) is a standardised tool used to assess the SEF and challenging behaviours of children and young people. In addition to identifying pupils' needs, it helps teachers put in place effective strategies to support the development of missing skills. The BP is divided into two parts / 20 strands:

Developmental strands (strands A to J) give a measure of the pupil's cognitive, social and emotional skills that influence how well a child is able to learn and function in the classroom.

Diagnostic profile (strands Q to Z) measures the pupil's challenging behaviours that prevent successful social and academic performance. These behaviours are (directly or indirectly) the outcomes of impaired development in the early years and can be resolved once the necessary social and emotional skills are acquired.

boxallprofile.org

4. Discussion

The pilot phase provided preliminary evidence that **measuring all pupils' SEF can be implemented** by schools and leads to **benefits for the pupils as well as for staff**.

The next phase of the project will provide greater detail about the levels of SEF needs across our sample of schools. It will also help us evaluate whether measuring pupils' SEF does positively impact their mental health and wellbeing.

References

1. Goodman, A., Joshi, H., Nasim, B., & Tyler, C. (2015). Social and emotional skills in childhood and their long-term effects on adult life. London: Institute of Education.
2. Bennathan, M. (1998). *The Boxall Profile: handbook for teachers*. Maidstone, UK: AWCEBD.
3. www.nurturegroups.org