

How the 'Big 5' help and hinder us

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The profile given to personality in the BBC Child of Our Time series earlier this year reflects the public's fascination with the subject. The programmes are timely for educationalists, as personality is at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence. It is rooted in the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000, which defines the purpose of education as being "to encourage the development of the personality, talents and abilities of pupils to their fullest potential". As the four capacities are seen as the optimal personal qualities, CfE could be conceptualised as a personality development programme.

Resistance surrounding this reform may be inherent in the struggle between personality development and socialisation. Personality development is all about encouraging self-realisation and celebrating the diversity which follows. Socialisation is what education has a tendency to default to - trying to make everyone the same as they conform to a one-size-fits-all system.

Personality is our personal organiser that shapes how we adapt to different situations. Our individuality comes from our unique personality which shapes the way we try to meet our needs. Extensive research has led to the identification of five broad traits that we use to describe personality, known as the "Big 5": Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Ocean).

Everyone exhibits these five traits to a greater or lesser degree, which allows us to build up a unique "personality fingerprint" that can be used to compare individuals.

Openness indicates how willing we are to explore new ideas and think out of the box. Being "open to experience" is being creative, unconventional and willing to question authority and champion change. Openness is linked to, but broader than, intelligence and includes receptivity to one's feelings. Low openness reflects a conforming, risk-averse, cautious person.

Conscientiousness indicates how well we plan and show determination to succeed. It is crucial for the internalisation of values and is an important contributor to long-term achievement, independent of ability.

Extraversion indicates our desire for stimulation. Extraverts are energised by interacting with the world, while introverts draw from their inner world. Extraverts enjoy competitive sports and enterprise. Introverts perform better when attention needs to be sustained or when reflection and caution is required.

Agreeableness indicates how easily we get along with others and involves being respectful, co-operative and trusting. It is a key foundation for getting on well at school. A lack of agreeableness is marked by a tough-minded, self-reliant and impatient approach.

Neuroticism is the tendency to experience negative emotions, leaving the individual vulnerable to stress. Low neuroticism is reflected in a calm, assertive and optimistic approach along with a desire to take the lead.

The Big 5 traits consist of helpful and unhelpful aspects. For example, the sociability of extraverts helps teamwork, but their impulsivity can make them over-competitive and arrogant. Agreeable people are popular, but they can be disadvantaged in competitive situations and, when stressed, they tend to self-sacrifice. Conscientiousness is essential for achievement, but can stifle enterprise and creativity.

Personality doesn't predict academic achievement. Achievement is more closely related to individual pupils' approaches to learning, such as their learning stances which are learnt and changeable components of personality. The four capacities, however, will benefit from all aspects of the Big 5 that help to instil confidence, ambition and an eagerness to participate and learn, especially conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness.

Paradoxically, schools tend to be somewhat personality-blind. Teachers receive little, if any, training about it. A common unspoken assumption is that it is hard-wired, so there is little we can do about it. If that were the case, CfE would be doomed before it started. Personality is seldom considered explicitly when discussing pupils and is rarely taken into account, even when it is a prominent factor, for example, when pupils are being assessed on public presentations.

We need to better understand and acknowledge the powerful role personality plays and see it in the school context. Developing personality means helping to bring out the natural preferences of each pupil's personality. Pupils should be helped to function within the best part of their personality, rather than expected to compromise their individuality.

Personalisation is the most challenging of the new curriculum's principles, along with the expectation that schools will adapt to pupils as opposed to pupils having to adapt to schools. However, teachers influence pupil personality most directly through their teaching styles and classroom climate. Schools, too, have different personalities: we call it school ethos, and the Big 5 can be usefully applied.

Within school, pupil personality evolves through their two-way interactions with the classroom. Correlations between childhood and adult personality are moderate, suggesting personality is dynamic and open to change to allow us to profit from experience. Pupils express their personalities differently, to the extent that the context meets their needs.

Support for autonomy is critical, as it is essentially support for being oneself. Fortunately, this is what CfE is all about and most of the supporting initiatives do exactly this, including Assessment is for Learning, active learning and co-operative learning.

The more the climate supports autonomy, the more pupils will be outgoing, agreeable, open, conscientious and emotionally stable. The more they feel controlled, the more they become closed, less caring, less outgoing and less energetic, while becoming more tense and unstable.