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Why education is embracing Facebook-style personality profiling for schoolchildren

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The recent Cambridge Analytica scandal concerned the alleged psychographic profiling of millions of Facebook users without their knowledge. Its controversial actions reflect the wider aspirations of the data analytics industry to see into the hidden depths of people. But this focus on personality measurement is also being reflected in new trends in education.

The collection and analysis of more personal information from schoolchildren will be a defining feature of education in coming years. And just as the Facebook debacle raises public concerns about the use of personal data, a new international test of ten and 15-year-olds is to be introduced by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – a powerful influence on national education policies at a global scale.

Until recently, most data collected about students came from conventional examinations of knowledge and skills. International test results such as those of the OECD have become surrogate measures of the future economic potential of nations, prompting a global education race between national education systems.

And as countries compete for economic advantage, the collection of more “intimate” data about social and emotional skills to measure personality is likely to prompt policymakers to emphasise programmes that improve personality scores. Despite the Cambridge Analytica controversy, personality data looks likely to be used in education to achieve political ambitions.

The big five

The science of the psychographic profiling employed by Cambridge Analytica has been highly contested. But it is based on psychological methods that have a long history for measuring and

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categorising people by personality. At its core is a psychological model called the “five factor model” of personality – or the “Big Five.”

Social-Emotional Learning: What Is SEL and Why It Matters



Communities For Children/YouTube.

These include “openness”, “conscientiousness”, “extroversion”, “agreeableness” and “neuroticism” (OCEAN). Personality theorists believe these categories are suitable for classifying the full range of human personalities. Psychologists have invented instruments such as the **Big Five Inventory** to capture OCEAN data for personality modelling.

Cambridge Analytica reportedly harvested the details of a digital personality questionnaire from up to 50m Facebook users to capture their OCEAN data. According to former employee-turned-whistleblower **Christopher Wylie**, it sought to use this data to **target voters in the US election**. Whether it really worked remains open to debate, though it has revealed the extent to which Facebook is capturing highly intimate user data to secure commercial advantage through micro-targeted advertising.

Assessing students

In 2019, the OECD plans to launch its international **Study on Social Emotional Learning**. Designed as a computer-based self-completion questionnaire, at its core the test is a modified version of the **Big Five Inventory**. When implemented, the social and emotional skills test will assess students against each of the **Big Five** categories.



There are concerns that concentrating on personality testing could distract teachers from actually teaching.

The assumption behind the test is that social and emotional skills are important predictors of educational progress and future workplace performance. Large-scale personality data is therefore presumed by the OECD to be predictive of a country's potential social and economic progress.

To be clear, although the OECD claims it is a test of social and emotional skills, it belongs to the same family of methods used in the Cambridge Analytica personality quiz. The same psychological assumptions and personality assessment methods underpin both.

Personality and policy

The OECD is already a powerful influence on the moulding of national education policies. Its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has reshaped school curricula, assessments and whole systems in the global education race. So could its emphasis on personality testing similarly reshape education policy and school practices?

The organisation is seeking to measure student personality to gather policy-relevant insights for participating countries. The inevitable consequence in countries with disappointing results will be new policies and interventions to improve students' personalities to ensure competitiveness in the global race. Just as PISA has influenced a global market in products to support the skills tested by the assessment, the same is now occurring around social-emotional learning and personality development.

Already, a commercial market of ed-tech apps and products, such as ClassDojo, has emerged to support and measure the development of students' social-emotional skills in schools. Likewise, educational policies have begun to focus on social-emotional categories of learning, such as grit,

growth mindset and character. The Department for Education supports the development of character skills in schools.

Introduce students to ClassDojo



ClassDojo/YouTube.

A new focus

It seems likely that as the OECD and others seek to shift the emphasis on to social and emotional learning and skills, national education policies and practices will continue to follow. The emphasis will move further towards capturing intimate data from students, mining beneath the surface of their examination grades to capture interior details about their personalities. **Advanced education technologies** are already under development to see into the submerged depths of students' personalities and emotions.

Clearly, education policy, technology and practice is taking a psychological turn towards the assessment and measurement of personality. It reflects a wider political interest in using techniques from the psychological and behavioural sciences alongside data analytics to assess and target people through their personality profiles. Along the way, students' social and emotional skills and personalities are becoming predictors of national productivity in a global education race.

The recent use of personality data for advantage by Facebook and Cambridge Analytica has led to a significant public backlash. In education, however, tests and technologies to measure student personality are passing unchallenged. The capturing of students' personality data as a way of predicting economic outcomes should be seen as equally controversial.

It risks reframing public education in terms of personality modification, driven by the political race for future economic advantage, rather than the pursuit of meaningful knowledge and understanding. It treats children as little indicators of future labour markets, and may distract teachers from other curriculum aims.

As education consultant Joe Nutt wrote in the Times Educational Supplement last year, “If you make data generation the goal of education then data is what you will get. Not quality teaching.”

 [OECD](#) [Personality testing](#) 

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