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Promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in primary schools

ADRIAN BETHUNE

TEACHER, BROUGHTON JUNIOR SCHOOL, UK

Current state of children's mental health

Children's mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools has become a much talked-about topic for very good reason. Half of all mental ill health manifests by the age of 14, and 75 per cent by the age of 24 (Kessler et al., 2005). In the UK, the mental health of children does appear to be worsening, with more children experiencing clinically impairing anxiety or depression than ever before (NHS Digital, 2018).

The data doesn't tell us exactly why children appear to be experiencing increasingly poor mental health. The rise in mental health issues may be because, as a society, we are better at talking about and assessing mental health problems. It may also be because of other factors, such as increased usage of social media, school and exam pressure, or the effects of austerity. What is certain, however, is that there is a greater need to understand children's mental health over time to get a better feel for what may be behind the causes of mental health issues and, just as importantly, what promotes good mental health in children.

The link between wellbeing and learning

The increase in mental health issues in children is also concerning because of its potential impact on their learning. Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties are more likely to be excluded from school or leave without any qualifications (Parry-Langdon, 2008). Conversely, children with higher levels of wellbeing do generally appear to achieve better academically (Gutman and Vorhaus, 2012). Although there are many factors outside of a school's control that affect the wellbeing of the children they teach, they can still have an impact on improving their pupils' wellbeing (Public Health England, 2014).

We should also not forget that learning and being engaged in their studies are innately good for children's wellbeing. Learning new things is one of the 'Five ways to wellbeing' (Government Office for Science, 2008) and plays an important role in developing good mental health.

The link between emotional health in childhood and future happiness

Promoting pupil wellbeing is more than just helping children to achieve better academically. A child's wellbeing could be the key to their future happiness. Longitudinal research suggests that a child's emotional health at the age of 16 is the strongest predictor of adult life satisfaction, and that primary school teachers can have an effect on the emotional wellbeing of their pupils that can last five years or more (Clark et al., 2018).

Given that good mental health and wellbeing are linked to better learning outcomes and future happiness, there is a strong case for primary schools to prioritise the promotion of wellbeing as a key strategy.

Criticisms of a focus on wellbeing in schools

Of course, any approach to education that deviates from a traditional model is not without criticism. Some critics see specific programmes and interventions to foster pupil wellbeing as a problem, and claim that this type of 'therapeutic education' is dangerous and anti-educational (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008). Furthermore, a recent report (Centre for Education Economics, 2018) cites an American study that asked students to carry around a pager and record their happiness levels when it beeped. The study found that students were least happy at school and while doing homework, and happiest the rest of the time. Because other studies show that attending school and doing homework raises attainment, the study concludes, 'There appears to be an achievement-wellbeing trade-off at a very general level in the education system: if pupils do not attend school, or do any work, they are unlikely to learn anything – but they may be happier.'

However, there do not appear to be many supporters of wellbeing-focused education, if any, who argue that a pupil's

happiness should be prioritised to the detriment of their studies. Supporters would argue that when children are healthier and happier in schools, they tend to focus more, get on with their peers better and learn well.

Emotionally literate schools

The schools that most effectively promote good mental health and wellbeing do so by adopting a whole-school approach (Weare, 2006). These schools are sometimes referred to as being 'emotionally literate' and they are typically strong in four keys areas:

1. Positive relationships are the heart of the school and they have an inclusive and supportive culture
2. There is a strong sense of purpose and shared values and ethos; everyone in the school community is pulling in the same direction
3. There is a sense of autonomy and independence so that members of the school community feel that they are in control of, or can influence, important aspects of their lives
4. They have high expectations of all children and there are clear boundaries and rules.

Emotionally literate schools recognise that the complete experience of school life contributes to the emotional wellbeing of everyone who learns and works there (Weare, 2006).

Whole-school approaches to developing wellbeing

Below is a list (not exhaustive) of some of the approaches that primary schools are adopting to promote pupil wellbeing:

- **Physical activity:** Regular physical activity is a core part of developing and maintaining good physical and mental health. But the vast majority of children in England do not get the recommended minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day (Townsend et al., 2015). Therefore, in addition to providing two hours a week of high-quality PE lessons, lots of primaries take part in the 'Daily Mile', where all children jog or run for up to 15 minutes every day. This can improve children's mood and attention (BBC Teach, 2018), as well as increasing children's fitness (Chesham et al., 2018).
- **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is a type of mind training that helps children to develop their awareness, in the present moment, of what's happening inside of themselves and externally, with an attitude of kindness and curiosity. One recent meta-analysis of mindfulness-based interventions with young people showed significant positive effects, relative to controls, for the outcome categories of mindfulness, executive functioning, attention, depression, anxiety/stress and negative behaviours (Dunning et al.)



Not only can schools have a major impact on children's emotional health and wellbeing, but this can also lead to better educational outcomes

al., 2018). However, more research is needed in this area and any benefits should not be oversold.

- **Training in resilience:** Some programmes in schools aim to develop children's (and teachers') levels of psychological wellbeing by teaching them the skills of resilience and accurate thinking. For example, Bounce Together run a programme for primary schools aimed at 9- to 11-year-olds, based on the Penn Resilience Programme, an evidence-based intervention originating from the University of Pennsylvania in America. An impact review of the programme showed significant improvements in children's anxiety and depressive symptoms, along with improvements in behaviour (Challen et al., 2011). The benefits only lasted in the short term, so it's likely that these interventions need to be re-taught and the skills practised regularly for longer-term benefits to be maintained.
- **PSHE:** Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) is a non-statutory curriculum subject that develops the knowledge, skills and attributes that pupils need in order to keep healthy and safe in modern Britain. Well-delivered PSHE programmes have an impact on both academic attainment and non-academic outcomes for pupils, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged (PSHE Association, 2017).

- **Mental health lessons:** The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF) have created a 'Schools In Mind' network (annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind), and mental health charity Heads Together have created a website hub at www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk. Both websites contain a bank of resources with lesson plans and animations that help teachers and children to talk about mental health.

Conclusion

The growing mental health problems among young people in the UK, coupled with the lack of access to specialist treatment, mean that the focus is turning to schools for solutions. This approach has its critics, who argue that it risks ever-greater scope creep in the role of teachers and schools, with them becoming responsible for support that should be provided elsewhere. However, there is good evidence that shows that not only can schools have a major impact on children's emotional health and wellbeing, but that this can also lead to better educational outcomes, as well as an increased chance of these children growing up to be adults leading happy and satisfied lives. More schools are seizing this opportunity to positively impact their pupils' lives in more than just traditional outcomes, and it will be interesting to see how this plays out in the long run in terms of levels of mental health, wellbeing and attainment.

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