



Supporting Emotional Wellbeing in Schools in the Context of Austerity

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Executive Summary

Supporting Emotional Wellbeing in Schools in the Context of Austerity



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Executive Summary

Background

Schools are increasingly being seen as hubs for supporting the emotional wellbeing of young people (Department for Education, 2015b; Sharpe et al., 2016). Examination of the literature that focuses upon emotional wellbeing and education illustrates the myriad of significant social determinants that interact when considering successful outcomes (Raffo et al., 2009; World Health Organization (WHO), 2014), with poverty being found to have detrimental effects on both mental health and academic attainment. Further, previous research documents the various impacts of austerity, and austerity related social policy, on emotional wellbeing and education (e.g. Winter, Burman, Hanley, Kalambouka, & McCoy, 2016). To account for the broad range of interacting factors, it is therefore important to adopt a systemic and ecological conception of wellbeing and education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Such an approach encourages us to see issues, such as the bridging of education and mental health services, within their contexts and as situated in various social systems.

The Research Study

This report summarises the findings of a research project, undertaken by staff within the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester, which explored the way in which schools support the emotional wellbeing of their pupils. Consistent with the systemic perspective noted above, it specially focuses upon the impact of the current social and political climate of 'austerity'. Four key research questions were addressed:

1. What types of professionals are supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils in schools?
2. How well supported and trained do staff feel when facilitating pupils' emotional wellbeing?
3. (a) What activities do professionals undertake when supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils? and,
(b) What reasons do members of school staff give for engaging in activities that support the emotional wellbeing of pupils?
4. Do professionals believe their work has changed as a consequence of the wider context of austerity?

Three secondary schools in Manchester were selected as case study schools to take part in this study. Senior management in these schools were asked to identify members of staff (both those employed by the school and those from outside organisations) involved in supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils. These individuals were then invited to take part in semi-structured interviews focussing upon the topics noted above. In total 29 members of staff were interviewed for the study. The interviews were then reviewed for commonalities and key themes.

Findings

The findings indicate that a wide variety of staff are involved in supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils in schools. Participants reflected a range of staff roles, including teachers, senior management, counsellors and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs). One respondent told us that, in the current context of austerity, the 'pastoral scaffold' at their

school had shrunk, indicating that they were unable to employ as many staff who had a specific pastoral focus than they were able to do previously. Many participants talked about the range of professionals having narrowed given the cuts to external services which used to support the emotional wellbeing of young people, for example Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and youth clubs.

Participants reported that they believe they are doing an increasing level of challenging work supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils', with little training in this area beyond that focused on safeguarding.

Various activities are undertaken by schools to support the emotional wellbeing of young people, including whole school approaches and specific targeted interventions such as counselling. Notably, in relation to the activities undertaken, our findings suggest that school staff often think about many of their interactions with students as being focused on supporting emotional wellbeing, outside those 'formal' interventions. For example, participants described 'being there' for their students, building relationships, and being available to listen as all being important forms of action to support emotional wellbeing within the scope of their role.

An increased pupil need for support was described by participants, and this was attributed at least in some part to austerity and the broader social and political climate. For example, the overwhelming majority of school staff we spoke to told us that they saw an increasing number of young people who required some support in this area, and that the particular mental health needs they are seeing are increasing in terms of complexity. Participants did not attribute this increase wholly to socio-political issues. However, austerity was suggested to be increasing the level of deprivation experienced by families and communities, and participants spoke about the negative impacts of welfare reform and other social changes, such as the outcome of the recent EU referendum, on pupil wellbeing. Alongside this reported increase in need, participants told us about their perception of a decrease in resources: they talked about the reduced level of funding available to schools and the impact of the way in which services, such as educational psychology support, are no longer funded by the Local Authority but bought in using school budgets. Additionally, there was a significant amount of worry and distress reported about the loss of resources like CAMHS. These external services have historically provided greater support for pupils who were seen as having more complex needs, and school staff were therefore more able to refer pupils in need to these professionals to gain additional support with issues related to mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Given the perception of a decreased resource to serve an increased need, and the ways in which school staff reported engaging in a large amount of informal support work for emotional wellbeing, an important finding of this work was that school staff are shouldering a significant emotional burden which is perceived to be increasing. In short, school staff reported feeling like they needed to do more with less, and with less support. Many examples were shared of staff hearing distressing stories and witnessing challenging situations as part of their role within education, and participants reported feeling worried, upset and anxious as a result of the emotional work they engaged in. As noted above they told us that they had limited training to support their work in this area. Whilst they saw supporting emotional wellbeing to be inherent to work within education, they suggested that the scope of this work had broadened and that they no longer felt like education

professionals, but social workers or counsellors. Internal to the school, participants felt well supported and believed that others understood this work was vital to their roles (and how much they were required to do). However, they also felt tensions externally, with Ofsted assessments being perceived as heavily weighted towards academic support rather than pastoral care, and the perception of the UK Government's lack of understanding of the 'on the ground' situation in schools in a context of austerity being prevalent.

Recommendations

Whilst acknowledging that broader changes to austerity politics are realistically required in order to address many of the issues raised by our participants, and that this study was relatively small-scale in nature, we make several recommendations on the basis of our findings. These are as follows:

- National health and education policies need to take a joined up approach. They should clearly articulate where the remit and boundaries of school practitioners' roles in addressing emotional wellbeing begin and end. Ideally, broader systems should be examined so as to ensure that schools are fairly assessed on what they are being asked to do within the communities that they serve. Ofsted should therefore appropriately recognise the significant amount of work that staff do to support the emotional wellbeing of young people, and its associated importance within the role of education, and take this into consideration more consistently within assessments of school provision.
- Senior management should pro-actively reflect upon the culture that they are promoting within their schools. Specifically, the support for school staff (teaching and other professional groups) who are engaging in a significant amount of emotional labour should be considered. Clinical supervision should be supported and broader training should be provided for staff, focusing on issues such as mental health awareness, basic counselling skills and risk assessment. Further, additional training around issues related to the likely impact of austerity upon children, families and communities would also be of benefit for example on issues such as welfare reform and housing. Senior leadership teams may also be in a position to lobby Government and wider macro systems about the 'on the ground' experience of schools and school staff in the context of austerity.
- As there is already an abundance of good practice occurring in schools, it is recommended that professionals supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils should network and share resources. Whilst such networks are already in existence (e.g. Schools in Mind) this research indicates that sharing resources related to the impact of social and political forces, such as austerity, upon emotional wellbeing would be a useful focus of this work.
- Finally, professionals who are actively engaged in supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils should engage in their own supportive reflexive activities. For example, peer supervision networks and groups might be established to provide emotional support for staff. Such groups, which are commonplace in psychological practices, can promote reflexive practice and potentially support staff in coping with the emotional labour associated with such tasks.

Acknowledgements

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