

Reflection on key issues facing contemporary education

There are many key issues facing the educational system today, ranging from mental health in young people to the use of current technology in classrooms. Some of the issues in schools have only recently come into focus, whereas others have been around for a longer time and are more complex. Many issues cannot be solved quickly due to their complex nature and it is important that these receive a thorough assessment. Throughout this assignment, I will focus on the two key issues; the Mental Health and Wellbeing of a child and the problems that can result from larger class sizes. I will discuss the issues they cause, not only to the pupil, but the teachers also. I will use my own experiences to reflect on what I have come across in the educational system whilst on placement and the effects of these issues that I have seen and experienced.

Mental health, described by the Lexico dictionary, is "A person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being". There is a wide spectrum of mental health disorders including, behavioural disorders, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and many others. It can have a biological component, being passed down through generations but can also be brought on by a person's environment and the different aspects that can occur in our everyday life. (Lexico dictionaries, 2019) Well-being is described by the Lexico dictionary as "The state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy". A person's well-being is linked to their mental health, if a person is not happy or healthy in their life it can cause problems. If these problems are not then solved then the persons mindset and emotional well-being can turn into a mental health issue which can stay with them for life. Although mental health problems can be managed medically with tablets and therapy, it is better if the issue can be identified before it manifests into something larger. (Lexico dictionaries, 2019)

One of the main issues that schools are focusing on is the Mental Health and Well-being of their students. This is an important issue, with mental health issues being on the rise in younger people. Over the past 2 years, in a survey of over 8,600 school leaders, teachers and support workers, 83% said they had witnessed an increase in the number of children in their care that suffered with mental health issues. There have been reports of self-harm, anxiety, depression and in more extreme cases, suicide. (Weale, S. 2019).

In 2004, there was a survey conducted and it found that 1 in 10 children aged between 5-15 had a mental health disorder (behavioural, emotional or hyperactive) and in the recent 2017 statistics it shows it has risen to 1 in 9. This study has shown that there has been a rise in emotional disorders, which includes depression and anxiety, which has risen to an increase of just over 2%. Across the whole group 1 in 12 were believed to have an emotional disorder. This increase is forever growing as many children are being overlooked and their emotional distress is being put off as disruptive behaviour or just an off day. The age and gender gap statistics show concerning evidence that the amount of children with mental disorders is increasing rapidly. It is shown that girls are more likely to have a disorder between 17-19 and boys were more likely to show signs between the younger years. In this group of

children and young people over 52.7% of women had reported to self-harm or even as far as attempting suicide. (Mentalhealth.org, 2018)

A child's educational years are a vital part of their life, with a key role in determining their future awareness of wellbeing and coping strategies. Mental disorders can lead to many academic problems, such as poor attendance, difficulties with academic studies, poor social integration, trouble adjusting to school, problems with behaviour regulation, and attention and concentration issues. This leads to much higher dropout rates and lower overall academic achievement, as well as specific academic and social problems associated with various disorders. (Columbia university, 2017).

With children spending a majority of their time in school, educators are given the priority to look after a child and ensure that they have a supportive environment. Teachers have an important role in supporting a child's emotional wellbeing and schools should provide children with opportunities to improve their own wellbeing that they could carry into their futures. They also have an important responsibility to be trained and able to determine early signs of distress in the mental and behavioural aspect of the child. (Gov.co.uk. 2017). This has been reflected in research, with Dwyer finding that school-based prevention and intervention practices have become crucial for helping to reduce mental health issues and stop them from affecting children's learning and social development. (research gate ref)

Educational psychologists assess children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and help to improve the way they learn and encourage them with support that they need. They are vital in supporting vulnerable children and improving their wellbeing. Nearly four in five educational psychologists say that little to no staff means children no longer have access to a fair educational system. A survey that interviewed educational psychologists in 29 local authorities in England found that around 60% of openings were unfilled and around 87% reported there were a reduced amount of working hours to staff. When questioned who they thought were less likely to access a psychologists help, 25% answered children who were not in school and 14% thought children who were in poverty. Sarb Bajwa, chief executive of the British Psychological Society, said: "This study adds to the growing evidence that many vulnerable children and young people are struggling to access the services they need." This shows that educational specialists are seeing these issues and are realising that children are not getting the best education support that they deserve. (Ward, H. 2019)

Mental health funding is sparse and it is causing many issues for children and their teachers. Without having access to a counsellor or some form of psychologist, a child can be disregarded and not receive the full assessments needed. A spokesperson for the DfE voiced that ' they know the critical need for psychologists, which is why they are expanding funding to resources such as increasing trainees from 160-206 hopefully by September 2020.' Without any additional help, schools will keep down-falling and children will be worse off than ever, if nothing is implemented then the numbers will quickly rise causing even more issues in the future. (Ward, H. 2019)

One key issue schools had to deal with was investing in lower level intervention, training and support, due to lack of funds and gaps in education. Also, there are

many issues with trying to find time for staff to promote good mental health, with limits to training and access to resources. Allowing staff to train in mental health and inclusive approaches can help a student to engage with a staff member more personally. This is because it improves the teachers ability to respond appropriately to distressed students, making them more likely to return for further help and guidance.

There is the possibility for staff to devote time outside of lessons to children e.g. after school clubs, or one on one during lunchtimes and breaks, however this has the potential to affect their own wellbeing and their ability to maintain a health work life balance. An alternative to this could be to allow students to skip a class to access a support group instead, however this could then detriment their academic achievement. In mainstream schools, the Ofsted performance and assessment framework was seen to prioritise academic achievement over other concerns such as well-being. However, it can be argued that emotional wellbeing influences a child's academic success and achievement, helping them in their future. In today's education system, some suggest that there is too much stress on academic achievement and achieving the highest level of success, especially in exams. Over 80% of young people say 'exam pressure has a significant impact on their mental health'. (Cowburn,A., & Blow,M. 2019) Schools must ensure they follow guidelines and demonstrate a positive attitude towards exams and tests, to ensure that they do not create pressure that is detrimental to their students.

In the UK policies such as the Children's Plan 2008-2020 to Promoting the Emotional Health of Children and Young People (2010) both determine that teachers, youth workers and many others, do not have the correct knowledge to be able to apply it to children and young people in schools which in turn means they are not able to support them. By not having any understanding of this knowledge the professionals are failing to recognise when a child needs additional help. (Turner, W. 2014) The Department for Education (DfE) carried out two surveys, one at the end of year 2015/16 and another at the beginning of 2016/17 do have an understanding of what schools are doing to promote mental health and wellbeing. Around 71% of schools that receive funding find it extremely difficult to set up mental health provisions, this is especially concerning in mainstream schools. Many schools that were interviewed were concerned as they are made to give from their own pocket towards funding counselling and other mental health support. (Camden, B. 2017)

A child's mental health and wellbeing can stem from many things, their home life may be a big issue and it will impact on their behaviour, learning outcomes and attendance. A study performed by Burke in 2011 called;- The Adverse Childhood Experience and Toxic Stress: A Public Health Crisis study, found that children who would experience 3 or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were way more likely to experience failure academically, attendance and behavioural problems each one performing worse than the last. (Access, O. 2019) It is crucial that a teacher is able to notice unusual warning signs from students and be able to distinguish the difference between mental health and well-being. A child may just be in turmoil over their parents separating or a death in the family, whereas another child could be depressed and suicidal over physical or emotional abuse in the household. Having a counsellor or someone they know to speak to, a child can in turn be able to prevent

themselves from having emotional pain turn into a mental health problem. (Access, O. 2019)

Planning ways to overcome mental health and focus on the well-being of children need to be implemented in all areas of education. The Welsh Government set up a social educational framework for children between 7-19 years old, which issues schools to plan out a programme which is broad enough to reach the needs of each individual in a classroom setting. This piece of framework is known as Personal Social Education (PSE) in which the teachers and students can interact and ask questions to any issues they have. Being at Key Stage 4, the framework educates about the factors that can affect mental health and emotional well-being. This lesson is essential as it can help to manage the emotions of the child and helps to encourage their self-esteem and confidence. Also, they can focus on life in general and help them to cope with stress, conflict, change and especially loss. The PSE 'Association has published support documents for schools in Wales, including teaching about self-esteem and mental health issues.' (House of Commons, 2018)

Whilst being in placement, I was asked to help out with a child that struggled with an extreme behaviour disorder. He could not sit down for more than two minutes and the teacher would constantly have to ask him to sit back down, in which he either ignored or obeyed momentarily to then start doing again. He was brought into class a few weeks late into the term so he did not understand how carpet time worked, or how to sit and learn. He was just concerned on playtime and that was all he wanted to do; he did not like to be told what he could and could not do. There was two teachers and myself in the classroom, and even with all that help the teacher still found it difficult to teach the child, as she needed to also have a lot of one-on-one time to the other pupils, as they were only young. In the end, the teacher suggested we take the child to an appropriate end of the classroom so he could still see carpet time, yet give him something he found interesting. This way he would be intrigued and want to go sit on the carpet as he felt he was missing out. He was given his own decision and he freely joined carpet time, although he did like to keep standing up he was still learning and did not feel excluded from the other pupils.

The management of this situation was important as had this child been completely excluded from carpet time and his peers for a prolonged period, it could have triggered a pattern of constant exclusion as this is often the 'easier' option. It was key that the pupil was allowed to still view carpet time and have the option to return as this allowed him to still be integrated with his classmates, a important factor in a child's wellbeing. The management of this situation allowed this problem to be quickly resolved which meant that there wasn't a prolonged time to allow these negative behaviours to become more permanent patterns.

Another important issue in modern education is large class sizes. This ongoing problem has quickly shown that it has the potential to cause for concern. Classroom sizes not only put stress on teachers, but also children who need extra help. Within the last few years funding cuts have forced schools to upsize classes in secondary school across England. Figures released by the Department for Education show that 62% of secondary schools had larger classes than the previous 2 years. (Adams, R. 2018) Larger class sizes can mean less support for children, as there will be less on

one. Teaching assistants are not able to be employed, meaning more children not being seen too and issues missed. There can be shown proof of this from head teacher Sam Greasley in Awel y Mor Primary School in Port Talbot, who believes that in recruiting another teacher for their reception class, the children will be able to work closely with their peers and help each other to learn to the best of their abilities.

The legal limit of children per classroom of 5-7 year olds was 30, until around 2 years ago. Classes rose from 4,280 to 10,010, when the apparent 'baby boom' hit. (TES, 2019) Since the School Standards and Framework Act, which became law in 2001, it is unlawful to have more than 30 children in one class unless there are understandable circumstances. In 1999, the proportion of pupils in classes of 30 had increased to 14%, while around 22% of the pupils were in a class of over 30 pupils and around 64% were in classes with lower than 30. Schools could have been finding ways to implement the reduction in class sizes before the legislation was put into practise. After the legislation being imposed, the distribution changed. In 2002, pupils in classes of 30 increased to over 25%, and a high of 13% with classes of 29. Also, classes of less than 30 increased to 73% whilst classes in over 30 had fallen to 1%. This could be due to the fact that once the legislation was released, the legal limit of 30 per classroom had to reduce the classrooms in which exceeded over due to this being deemed unlawful. (Gov, 2011) "Rising average class size at Key Stage 1 between 2002 and 2008 class size has led to an increase in classes with 30 pupils, the maximum allowed, rather than producing over-sized classes. The distribution in 2008 shows that 31% of pupils were in KS1 classes with 30 pupils, while in 2010 that percentage had increased to 41%. In 2008, the percentage of pupils in classes of less than 30 fell to 67% while those in classes of less than 26 fell to 32%. These percentages continued to decrease to 57% and 23%, respectively, in 2010." (Gov Statistics, 2011)

There has been attempts to manage this problem, through additional financial support. In the BBC News, the Education Secretary Kirsty Williams reported that in January 2017 £36m would be available to schools in order to hire more teachers and build more classrooms. Up until April 2018 only £1.3m was released to schools and teachers were concerned that with their already stretched budget, that this would make a minimal difference. This fund was available to schools who had 29 or more children in their infant classes, it also would be brought to schools with the highest amount of free school meals, below average outcomes and high levels of children with special needs or language barriers. (BBC, 2017)

Although, having a Teaching Assistant can cause detrimental stain on a child who has special needs as they have a more specific guideline that needs to be followed by someone who could be more experienced. An example of this is from a teaching assistant in Newcastle, who talks about her experience where a child is being disruptive and causing issues in the classroom. She tells the boy to stop but he turns to her and shouts that she hit him and he was going to tell on her. This TA started to worry and was scared the boy would be believed over her and she would lose her job. After a while this started to impact on her health and cause it to deteriorate. Many assistants believe they are given too much work in a short space of time and their 'duties' are that of a wide range of tasks from as little as sticking work in books to organising and looking after children on school trips. (Connelly, A. 2016)

The overcrowding issues in schools is increasing ten fold, with the rise in population and the lack of funding it means class sizes are growing tremendously. Derrick Meador in ThoughtCo. says "In an ideal world, class sizes would be capped at 15-20 students." Although, unfortunately this is not the case many classrooms are usually greater than 30 and sometimes even going as far as 40. This situation is something that teachers are going to have to find solutions to rather than believing it will go away, as it seems it is still a growing issue. Overcrowding in classrooms can be very stressful, frustrating on all teachers, even those with the most effective training. Over sized classes is something schools are struggling with as they have to keep their doors open to an ever-growing era and underfunding. Many issues that can arise in mainstream schools including teachers being unable to do one on one teaching and teach in small groups on a regular basis. Problems that can stem from this are students struggling to maintain the up keep of work, average and below students being unable to keep up with advanced children and then in turn this can hinder their learning potential. This is because average and below average students need a slow, no distraction teaching method and the advanced children need a faster paced lesson and can sometimes deal with disruptiveness as they can switch off. (Meador, D. 2019)

Whilst being on placement I came across issues as a result of an overcrowded class. There were 30 children to one teacher which is allowed, yet I found that with the teacher, myself and even with another teaching assistant, it was still difficult to give ample time to each child that asked for help. I was informed by the teacher beforehand that two of the children had behavioural issues and they were separated in the classroom and outside due to their problems. I found that as soon as they were alone and I had a one on one reading lesson with them outside of the classroom their behaviour appeared calm and they wanted to learn. One of the children, although extremely confident in the classroom was shy when it came to one on one of reading as he was quite far behind for his age. This can also link to the mental health and well-being of a child. The child in particular was extremely keen to learn, he was loud and confident trying to spell out words, yet as soon as other children came out laughing and joking, he became withdrawn and shy muttering his words to me quietly. When going back to the class the teacher explained to me that his family was waiting to see if their child had ADHD or another disorder, yet it could take months or even years to figure this out.

From this experience, I saw the direct impact that class sizes can have on pupils. It can become an intimidating space, particularly for those with behavioural issues. It can also affect teachers as they feel too thinly spread across their pupils and cannot give the attention that they feel each child deserves.

Overall, as you can see from above, although there are legislations and preventions in place for both mental health and well-being and classroom sizes, there are still many issues that take a long time to solve. Sometimes cases cannot even be solved, and they can only have plans put into place to try to help decrease these issues. Mental Health is becoming an increasing factor as the years go on, whether this is due to having better resources to find out problems or we as a society are putting too much pressure on our young people and children. The rise in mental health is becoming a severe issue in schools. And they are often stemmed from either issues at home which is very hard for a school to deal with, or they are issues in a school

that are not being dealt with properly. The government funding seems to be a large proportion of why children are being overlooked and it seems that all the funds being given out are not even touching the surface of the issues faced. Also, with classroom sizes this problem is another issue with funding but also needs to be monitored by schools to see the importance of why a smaller class can benefit each student and themselves.

References

- (n.d.). National Center for Mental Health Checkups at Columbia University. Retrieved 24 November 2017. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324532491_The_WHO_World_Mental_Health_Surveys_International_College_Student_Project_Prevalence_and_Distribution_of_Mental_Disorders
- (2011, January 1). Introduction to the case study practice illustrations. Gov.co.uk . Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634731/Practice_example-Whole_organisational_approach.pdf
- (2018, April 19). 'Class Size' Grant Funds 80 Teachers. BBC News. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/uk-wales-43824042>
- (2018, December 1). Mental health and wellbeing in schools Summary. House of Commons. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2018-0265/CDP-2018-0265.pdf>
- (2019, January 1). Well-being | Definition Of Well-being In English By Lexico Dictionaries. Lexico Dictionaries | English. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/well-being>
- (2019, January 1). Mental Health | Definition Of Mental Health In English By Lexico Dictionaries. Lexico Dictionaries | English. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/mental_health
- (2019, July 20). Class Size and education in England evidence report. Gov statistics . Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183364/DFE-RR169.pdf
- (2019, May 1). The Big Question: What Is The Ideal Class Size?. Tes. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from <https://www.tes.com/articles/big-question-what-ideal-class-size>
- , M. (2018, November 1). What New Statistics Show About Children's Mental Health. Mental Health Foundation. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/what-new-statistics-show-about-childrens-mental-health>

Access, O. (2019, July 13). What Can Schools Do To Spot And Avert Mental Health Issues?. Open Access Government. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/schools-mental-health-issues/56640/>

Adams, R. (2018, March 8). School Class Sizes In England 'rising Due To Funding Cuts'. The Guardian. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/education/2018/mar/08/school-class-sizes-in-england-rising-due-to-funding-cuts>

Camden, B. (2017, May 1). Funding Cuts Block Mental Health Support In Schools. Schools Week. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/schoolsweek.co.uk/funding-cuts-block-schools-from-delivering-mental-health-support/amp/>

Connelly, A. (2016, July 5). Stresses & Strains Of Being A Teaching Assistant. Education Support Partnership. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from <https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/blogs/claire-renn/stresses-strains-being-teaching-assistant>

Cowburn , A., & Blow , M. (2019, July 19). Wise Up: Prioritising wellbeing in schools. (S. Brenna, S. Brennan, D. Moss, M. Bush, R. Ellison, & T. Madders, Eds.) Young Minds . London. Retrieved July 19, 2019, from <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1428/wise-up-prioritising-wellbeing-in-schools.pdf>

Meador, D. (2019, July 1). What Teachers Can Do To Combat An Overcrowded Classroom. ThoughtCo. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/teaching-in-an-overcrowded-classroom-3194352>

Reinke, W. M., Goel, N., Puri, R., Herman, K. C., & Stormont, M. (n.d.). Supporting Children's Mental Health in Schools: Teacher Perceptions of Needs, Roles, and Barriers. Researchgate. Retrieved July 18, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Keith_Herman2/publication/232530831_Supporting_Children's_Mental_Health_in_Schools_Teacher_Perceptions_of_Needs_Roles_and_Barriers/links/5453e7da0cf26d5090a5537c.pdf

Turner, W. (2014, April 15). ERIC - EJ1085740 - Enabling Undergraduates To Put Into Practice Learning To Support Emotional Well-Being For Children And Young People, International Journal Of Emotional Education, 2014-Apr. Eric. Retrieved July 18, 2019, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=Mental+health+and+well-being+in+education+&ft=on&ff1=locUnited+Kingdom&ff2=pubJournal+Articles&id=EJ1085740>

Ward, H. (2019, January 1). Vulnerable Pupils 'struggling To See Educational Psychologists'. Tes. Retrieved July 20, 2019, from <https://www.tes.com/news/vulnerable-pupils-struggling-see-educational-psychologists>

Weale, S. (2019, April 16). Mental Health Of Pupils Is 'at Crisis Point', Teachers Warn. The Guardian. Retrieved July 18, 2019, from <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/17/mental-health-young-people-england-crisis-point-teacher-school-leader-survey>