

School well-being

Jagdish Kaur Barn shares some approaches to promoting positive mental health in schools

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as ‘a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community’.

So how can schools functioning in the current results-driven, high-stakes atmosphere of SATs, Progress 8 and Ofsted (and those are just the key drivers) create environments that nurture a state of well-being as defined above? For me, schools that are successful in reducing anxiety, stress and emotional conflict are the ones that look beyond solely supporting individuals and instead concentrate on enhancing school and home systems to create tailored approaches to suit their school community. Off-the-shelf ‘solutions’ are doomed to be consigned to the dustbin after the initial honeymoon period if thought isn’t given to how best to embed them in order to work for your school community. Before implementing initiatives, it is important to carry out a thorough and honest evaluation of well-being in your school. No point in introducing mindfulness or spending money on a nurture provision if it is not the right move for your school community at this time.

Evaluating the state of well-being in your school

It is important to reflect on the well-being of all members of the school community, including staff, parents, carers and the senior leadership team (who very often exclude themselves from taking part in this very important exploratory stage). Be *solution orientated*, not problem focused – I have never worked with a school where I was unable to identify practice that I thought was conducive to positive mental health, although some could not see it for themselves. Ask yourself the following types of questions:

- ▶ How do we provide our children and young people and staff with opportunities for down time in order to regulate their emotions throughout the day? Are our lunchtimes long enough? Do we have enough breaks? Are our lessons too long?
- ▶ How do we provide guidance and opportunities for our children and young people to develop and practise key life skills such as conflict resolution, reflective thought and resilience?
- ▶ How do we provide opportunities for our



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children and young people and staff to work in collaboration (instead of individually or in isolation) and how do we value creativity, individuality and divergent thinking – all powerful contributors to an individual’s state of well-being and connectedness?

- ▶ How do we show our staff that we value them as professionals who can be left to get on with the job? Do we value new ideas and dynamic practice?
- ▶ How do we encourage active contribution from families? Do we understand and work with the mental health needs of parents and carers?

The freebies

Changes to the way you promote and nurture positive mental health in your school do not need to cost anything. It is the collaborative and respectful relationships between teacher and pupil, and school and family that are key to success.

Look in the mirror

What do you see? A calm, happy, resilient member of staff or an anxious, tired, frustrated colleague? Think about the modelling each will provide to the pupils in your care – children and young people reflect back what they experience. The resilient member of staff is more likely to pause and reflect before responding in a respectful way, whereas the tired colleague is



more likely to be in fight mode (to use an analogy from attachment theory). To nurture, we need to feel nurtured; we cannot expect staff to provide a secure base in their classrooms if they themselves feel displaced.

There is no point in ramping up the behavioural sanctions for pupils in response to escalating disruption if the core of the issue is not addressed. Staff well-being is crucial to the relational approaches staff use to facilitate desired behaviour in their classrooms. The way staff are viewed by pupils as a result of the verbal and non-verbal language they use is why some members of staff are popular compared with others. It's not always the ones who are humorous and outgoing, it's anyone who thinks about how they are going to nurture their relationships with individual pupils in a particular class and is *consistent* and *fair* in their approach. This is something that pupils are generally very insistent on. Why? Because consistency and predictability mean they feel secure and grounded instead of insecure and displaced – it is the latter that leads to disruption and challenging behaviour. It is worth remembering that all behaviour is a form of communication, so what are your pupils communicating to you?

Are all staff on board?

Initiatives forced onto staff do not work; my advice is to take time to share the findings of an initial evaluation of well-being in school and to seriously consider the views of wider staff on the best ways forward. Blatantly ignoring staff concerns about time restraints and workload does not bode well for success. A buy-in by all staff will engender a consistent approach which is crucial to success. You could start small by introducing the approach or initiative in a certain Key Stage or department, or you could soothe any staff fears by proposing a pilot study.

'Take time to share the findings of an initial evaluation of well-being'

Relational approaches v shaming approaches – in school...

Quite simply, a relational approach is the way in which we read another's intent, and reflect and respond accordingly using positive language to acknowledge feelings that have led to the behaviour being displayed. *Facilitation of desired behaviour*, not management of undesired behaviour, is the way forward if you want to engender real change.

Take the following incident: *a pupil has come in from lunch on a hot day and has taken his tie off, unbuttoned his shirt and is encouraging peers to flout the uniform policy in the same way. How do you respond?*

A relational approach would be for the teacher to:

- ▶ *calmly and respectfully* acknowledge that it is hot and everyone would rather be in shorts and t-shirts but unfortunately school rules prohibit this for all (including staff)
- ▶ describe the desired behaviour that they would like the pupil to display and provide a chance for it to be shown, while at the same time calmly stating what the outcome will be if the pupil persists with the undesired behaviour
- ▶ suggest that the pupil take a minute to get a drink of water so that he can cool off in readiness for work

In this way the ball is in the pupil's court and he has been given a clear choice and, crucially, an *illusion of control*. More often than not the pupil will make the correct choice. This results in both teacher and pupil maintaining their state of well-being.

A shaming approach would be for the teacher to:

- ▶ angrily state that they will not stand for this behaviour and to make some derogatory comment about the pupil
- ▶ insist that the pupil leaves the class until he



- is dressed and give him a detention or other behaviour sanction.

The pupil has been provided with no choice and instead shamed in front of his peers, which results in the pupil wanting to shame the teacher back and reflect the teacher's fight mode. This results in both the teacher and pupil (and no doubt peers) becoming stressed.

...and home

Nurturing and promoting pupils' self-esteem and sense of well-being in school contributes to positive mental health. However, as we know, the home is a key player and it is important to promote relational approaches within this setting. This can be done through indirect approaches such as general open-door information sessions for parents and carers on how to support and nurture self-esteem in their children or a more personalised team-around-the-family approach. When the latter approach is used it is important to focus on shared desired outcomes and use a solution-orientated, respectful approach in order to encourage a process of change rather than one that is directional and general (instead of specific to individual family need).

Personal, social and health education (PSHE)

Although this is often structured in secondary schools, in my experience it can be a hit and miss affair in primary – especially Year 6, even though this is a crucial time of life for children transitioning onto the first rung of the ladder towards adulthood. Like other curriculum areas, PSHE needs to be planned carefully to provide a continuous learning journey from early years topics such as 'making friends' to 'understanding and managing low mood' and 'healthy body image' in later years.

Managing exam stress used to be the preserve of Key Stage 4 but the pressure of end of

'Children as young as six years are revealing anxiety about being tested'

Key Stage 2 (and now end of Key Stage 1) assessments means that children as young as six years are revealing anxiety about being tested. Continuous SATs practice contributes to this and ultimately could lead to pupils doing less well once they get to May. A balanced approach is key, with direct teaching on understanding and managing stress – what does it look like (physiologically, behaviourally and emotionally) and how to overcome it (reframing thoughts, exercise, meditation). Preferably it is an approach which ensures that the stresses of the professionals relating to accountability are not passed on to the children they teach.

Resilience

We all need to experience success and a feeling of achievement in order to develop a positive construct of self. This feeling of self-esteem supports development of intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy and persistence so that in the face of challenge we have the resilience to persevere and learn from the process of doing – a growth mindset. Of course, these skills rely heavily on understanding, managing and expressing emotions (emotional literacy), which is difficult if you have not had early opportunities to develop the building blocks due to adverse circumstances such as trauma, poverty and abuse. Support should be targeted at identifying the missing blocks and providing the necessary skills and understanding. However, too many well-meaning interventions don't live up to their promise due to lack of time given to making abstract concepts concrete through activities such as role play, modelling and commentary. It is essential that the wider staff team (and parents and carers) understand the programme and desired outcomes so that pupils can be supported to generalise skills learnt in group work to real-life contexts experienced in the classroom, playground and home.

Spend wisely – think pastoral

During these times of austerity schools may feel that savings can be made by reducing staff providing pastoral support but this is a false economy. Class teachers can do much to prevent and alleviate stress and anxiety and engender a state of well-being in their classrooms. However, for some children and young people this is not enough and this is when a good pastoral team can provide small group or one-to-one support or a place of sanctuary to flee to in order to regulate and re-establish an inner equilibrium.

Think carefully about what your school community requires – will trained learning mentors suffice or are the needs of your pupils and families such that more specialist support like a therapist or psychologist is required? When exploring therapeutic support think carefully

BUSTING THE TERMINOLOGY

Emotional literacy: the ability to understand and manage your feelings, listen to others and empathise with their emotions, and to express your emotions productively.

Motivation: an awareness of the drive to succeed and grow, self-determination.

Resilience: the capacity to recover quickly from setbacks and adapt well to change.

Self-efficacy: a belief in your ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task.

Self-esteem: confidence in your own worth and abilities and pride in yourself.

Well-being: a state of being where you feel comfortable, healthy and happy.

Stress: a state of emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances.

Anxiety: a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something.

Low mood: an aversion to activity that negatively affects your thoughts, behaviour, feelings and sense of connectedness.

about whether verbal or non-verbal approaches are best, for example a school with a high level of pupils new to English may find art therapy more suited to their needs. Similarly, play therapy may not be culturally acceptable to some minority ethnic communities who place a high value on early formalised learning and view play as less relevant.

It is also important that any therapeutic professional you work with is willing to engage with parents and carers, as well as to feedback to staff and support them in enhancing the classroom environment to complement work carried out in therapy. An outside agency coming into school and working in isolation once a week or less can provide a false illusion of meeting need, as this is no doubt true in the short-term but not sustainable in the long-term. Maintenance over time is key and it is important to use robust baseline, post-intervention and follow-up (normally three to six months later) assessment and evaluation measures to ensure that you are achieving the desired outcomes.

Training

Don't jump on the bandwagon! Before committing to training, think about whether you have the staff to dedicate time to plan, implement and review

the initiative you are buying into. Approaches such as mindfulness may sound easy to introduce but in reality they need the support of all staff to truly have a whole-school impact and need commitment and drive to ensure that they are practised and employed daily. Similarly, a nurture provision may look like the way forward but successful ones are viewed as part of the fabric of the school (like a class) and have dedicated staff who are not pulled away to help with school trips or to cover staff absence.

In summary

Supporting the development of positive mental health in schools is not an easy task but, with the right preparation and planning, it is hugely rewarding and a powerful catalyst for change in all areas.

- ▶ It is important to initially explore and map the needs of your whole school community before thinking about ways forward.
- ▶ The next step is probably the hardest as it relies heavily on changes to the ethos of the school, with all staff reflecting on the relational approaches employed in school (with each other, with pupils and with families) and the influence of these on mental health.
- ▶ Off-the-shelf approaches and programmes rarely work unless adapted to your school's specific needs and crucially embedded into the school system. They need to reflect the school ethos. Think carefully about the time and resources required (human, financial, space) before committing to an initiative.
- ▶ Think about how you will measure the success of strategies and approaches and look to long-term sustainability and maintenance.

'Think about how you will measure the success of strategies and approaches'

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Useful information

- ▶ Boing Boing: www.BoingBoing.org.uk
- ▶ Mindfulness in Schools Project: www.mindfulnessinschools.org
- ▶ National Children's Bureau (2015) *What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools?* www.ncb.org.uk
- ▶ YoungMinds: www.youngminds.org.uk/ The very thorough information on developing academic resilience is well worth a look.