

What Should Schools and Local Authorities do to Ensure the Wellbeing of their Pupils?

An average pupil will spend almost 8000 hours in school over the course of their journey through the education system (Cowburn and Blow, 2018), Schools, clessrly therefore, play an enormous part in the lives of children and younger people (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). As social institutions schools also perform a significant societal role; not only in the passing on of knowledge and skills, but also as one of the primary means of socialization, instilling in children the common norms and values which sustains social stability and solidarity (Giddens and Sutton, 2017, Durkheim, 1925). Talcott Parsons (1961) expanded on this functionalist perspective, suggesting that one of the principal functions of schools is to instil within pupils a core value of individual achievement, principally through competitive examinations and assessments, which are based on a universalistic, meritocratic values which contrast with the paticularistic standards within a family, and in wider society where it is widely believed that people, in general, achieve their positions through merit and ability rather than because of class, gender or ethnicity (Giddens and Sutton, 2017; Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Certainly, the principles underpinning education policy since the Education Act 1944 (Butler's Education Act) is that the education system represents a ladder, the successful ascent of which allows the pupil to enter, on equal terms, the competitive world of employment and societal rewards; in other words, the system is intended to be meritocratic (Mason, 2000). However, some, such as Mason (2000) argue that, in fact, schools are de-facto engines of social control, reinforcing social inequalities and therefore, adding to the pressures on disadvantaged children.

According to Cowburn and Blow (2018) this meritocratic, competitive approach within schools has consequences for pupils, adding to the multiple stressors that children and young people experience in an increasingly complex, interconnected world. Whereas childhood was once seen as an idealized time, it is now recognized as a period of increased stress and expectations (Cowburn and Blow, 2018). The focus on performance in assessments and examinations has led to a disproportionate impact on the wellbeing of pupils with 90% of head teachers reporting an increase the numbers of pupils experiencing anxiety or stress and 80% of young people stating that pressures around exams had negatively impacted on their mental health (Young Minds, 2018). Cowburn and Blow (2018) also state that referrals of children to specialist services, particularly Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has doubled since 2010, leading to the system being overwhelmed and unable to manage the number of referrals. Interestingly 70% of parents, consider that a school's performance in improving children's happiness is more important than the school's result record in examinations (Cowburn and Blow, 2018). The Report of

the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, *Mind Over Matter: A report on the step change needed in emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales* (s.62) states that “Attainment in schools cannot be achieved without wellbeing” and adds that “achievement should not be viewed through the prism of academic attainment alone, the success progress and development of children and young people must be viewed holistically, and include consideration of how emotionally healthy and confident they are as individuals.” (National Assembly for Wales, p.32). Schools therefore have an important role in the maintenance and improvement of children’s wellbeing, and since most schools are operated by Local Authorities the overarching policies and leading procedures will emanate from the relevant Council, which in turn takes into account Government education policy, and in some cases international policy.

Children and adolescents have many contemporary stressors as a result of societal and technological progress (Cowburn and Blow, 2018). For children, factors which build resilience, including independent outdoor play and independence in mobility, such as walking or cycling to school, have reduced as parents have become fearful and protective of their children due to exposure on the internet and digital television of rare but brutal crimes against children; increasing the time children spend on ‘screen time’ and on adult supervised activities, resulting in a resilience deficit which is fuelling an unprecedented rise in mental health problems amongst adolescents and teenagers (Haidt and Parensky, 2019). Globalization and the digitization of entertainment has resulted in many children spending hours playing alone on video games and watching digital media such as YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Skype; whilst much of this is innocent enough but there are identifiable negative aspects, including the internet’s addictive qualities, inappropriate content for children and adolescents, including pornography, and the ability to view, create and interact with online characters which are violent, abusive, sexist, misogynist and racist; values with which many children become associated, not being able to distinguish this digitally created world from reality, and exacerbated by permissive parenting and parental ennui (Rahpaymaelizehee *et al*, 2013). The Good Childhood Enquiry (2017, p.22), found that how social media is used varies between boys and girls, which may contribute to differences in subjective wellbeing between the genders; by the age of 12 however, the use of social media is ubiquitous with both positive and negative impacts on wellbeing, for example through being able to stay connected with friends outside of school, and through the potential for bullying or ‘trolling’. The aforementioned report, *Mind over Matter* concludes that 76% of girls and 85% of boys regularly exceed the World Health Organisation’s recommended limit on screen time of 2 hours per day (National Assembly for Wales, 2018, p23).

The Good Childhood Enquiry (2017) also found that in comparison with earlier enquiries, which began in 2005, children's happiness is in decline and that multiple experiences of disadvantage are associated with negative aspects of children's wellbeing (Children's Society, 2017). The enquiry (p.19) found that subjective wellbeing is highest amongst those 10 to 17 years old, with 3% to 12% being unhappy with one or more aspects of their life. Girls tend to be less happy with their friendships and appearance whilst boys tended to be less satisfied with their schoolwork. As Erikson (1968), however, points out, whilst adolescence is seen as a specific time of stress as young people cope with enormous changes in their lives due to hormonal changes following puberty, and social changes such as spending more time with friends and others within their peer group, and less time with their parents, such changes are normative in the process of identity formation. Schools should, therefore, not assume that such stresses are symptomatic of mental health issues, but as a developmental norm in adolescent pupils and support their pupils accordingly (Eysenck, 2004).

Multiple disadvantage due to poverty is correlated with lowered perception of wellbeing in children and with lower educational achievement (Moore *et al*, 2015). Familial circumstances such as poverty, smoking, poor diet and chronic alcohol consumption can lead to the absorption of these negative coping strategies leading to copying and repetition of this behaviour; there is an identifiable correlation between early childhood development and health inequalities (Moore *et al*, 2015). In families in poverty, many children attend school without having consumed breakfast, even when breakfast is provided free by the school, and meals provided at home may be lacking in nutrition due to the consumption of cheaper or ready meals, leaving many pupils too tired to concentrate on lessons (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). Furthermore, the parents of many children eligible for free school meals do not take advantage of them because of the stigma associated with claiming (BBC, 2018; Rock, 2012).

Schools, of course, have a duty of care to their pupils. The most basic of these lies in Common Law and dates from the Nineteenth Century when in 1893 the High Court held that when pupils were in the care of teachers, the teacher was acting *in loco parentis*, and therefore "the schoolmaster is bound to take such care of his pupils as a careful father would" (National Union of Teachers, 2013, p3). However, case law has evolved to recognize the professional status of teachers and what is reasonable in the circumstances (National Union of Teachers, 2013). In addition to Common Law obligations, Parliament, and the devolved governments have placed statutory obligations on a wide range of bodies, including Education Authorities, and on schools and their governing bodies to safeguard and protect the welfare of pupils. This includes an obligation under the Children Act 1989 to assist local authority social services

departments in enquiries into cases of potential child abuse; and under the Education Act 2002 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including taking steps to protect children from significant harm (National Union of Teachers, 2013, p.9). Harm has a broad definition, and is identified as “ill-treatment, or the impairment of a child’s physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development” (National Union of Teachers, 2013, p9).

Welfare is seen as synonymous with wellbeing and the benefits of governments and local authorities in promoting the circumstances whereby the happiness of citizens, including children, is promoted is clear (Heins and Deeming, 2015). The wellbeing of children and adolescents has become an increasing focus for governments, local authorities and educational establishments and their governing bodies. Consideration will be given to the response to this focus by the Welsh Government, a specific local authority, Carmarthenshire County Council and how this is translated into policy and practices in a local authority school in Carmarthenshire, Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth.

The Welsh Government has published several reports and strategic documents on wellbeing in children and young people; *Everybody’s Business: a report on suicide prevention in Wales* (2018), *Mind over Matter: a report on the step change needed in emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales* (2018). In addition, in 2015 the Welsh Government enacted the world’s first law specifically aimed at the wellbeing of future generations with the *Well-being of Future Generations Act* (2015). This Act is far reaching, impacting on many public bodies which are required to consider the impact on sustainable development of their day to day activities (Future Generations Commissioner, 2019). Local Public Service Boards are required to draw up and publish a local Well-being Plan for their area which takes into account local circumstances and needs, and to consider ways to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of the residents within their locality (Future Generations Commissioner, 2019). Carmarthenshire Public Health Board published its first Well-being Plan in May 2018 (Carmarthenshire Public Health Board, 2018).

Wellbeing is subjective concept and there is no umbrella definition; Cowburn and Blow, (2018, p3) utilises the definition of the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “a state of wellbeing 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 contribution to her or his community”. Two components of psychological wellbeing can be distinguished which are relevant for assessing wellbeing in children; evaluative wellbeing, which is satisfaction with life and hedonic wellbeing, which is associated with feelings of

happiness or sadness. A third component, eudemonic wellbeing, which concerns a sense of purpose or meaning in life, becomes relevant as children mature (Steptoe *et al*, 2015; Children's Society, 2017, p9).

Since 2004, Welsh Government policy on children has been based on the principles of the 1990 United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Welsh Government, 2018). The Convention is an internationally binding agreement which establishes four general principles which are aimed at dignity respect for the development of children; the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, right to life and the right of children to be heard (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2019). UNICEF states that 'All children, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, background or circumstances, have the right to a quality education' (UNICEF, 2019). The Welsh Government issued a strategic policy document in 2010, 'Thinking Positively' aimed at supporting schools and early years learning providers in promoting children's health and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2010). This document sets out a 'whole school approach' to the promotion of emotional health and wellbeing of pupils. The focus is on building resilience in children to cope with everyday situations and traumatic events such as bullying, bereavement, loss and separation, relationships, substance abuse and domestic abuse (Welsh Government, 2010). The document required schools to consider their current policies in the light of its recommendations, however schools are not required to develop new or bespoke policies (Welsh Government, 2010).

As stated above, The Children, Young People and Education Committee of the National Assembly for Wales issued a report in April 2018 titled 'Mind Over Matter; a report aimed on the step change needed in emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales; (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). This report concurs with the conclusions of Cowburn and Blow (2018) that pressure on pupils has increased along with the level of mental distress in children, and similarly that a whole school approach to well-being is required which should be promotional and not interventionist (National Assembly for Wales, 2018 p.36). It also agrees with the *Everybody's Business* report on suicide prevention that teachers are not mental health professional and that training is required to enable education professionals to identify and assist children suffering mental distress (National Assembly for Wales, 2018).

Mind over Matter (2018) makes four recommendations for schools; in summary these are: to embed well-being into the national curriculum, the measurement of wellbeing is to be a priority within the school inspection framework, a review of the various mental health and well-being projects being undertaken to inform a national approach and development of the Samaritans programme on "Delivering Emotional Awareness and Listening" (p.40).

Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth is a Welsh medium secondary school located in Cefneithin in Carmarthenshire. In examining the website of Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth (www.maesygwendraeth.org), it is clear that the focus of the school is on academic achievement and maintaining a 'Welsh ethos'. On the website homepage there is no direct reference to pupil well-being although there is reference to pupils' "moral, spiritual and physical development (maesygwendraeth.org). The school does publish a policy document on "Healthcare Needs". However, the only reference to pupil well-being is within a section detailing the school's legal duties under section 21(5) of the Education Act 2002 which is a requirement to promote the well-being of learners (Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth Healthcare Needs Policy, 2017, p.1).

In conclusion therefore, whilst schools have a legal obligation to promote the wellbeing of their pupils, this well-being is being negatively affected by pressures associated with the drive for academic excellence through competition, and novel stress factors such as social media and the use of video games. New approaches are required which are based on an all school approach which is promotional rather than reactive. Education professionals will require training to understand and respond to pupils' well-being needs. Many external factors affect the well-being of children and young people, including issues of multiple deprivation and the modern tendency to restrict children's freedom due to parental anxiety. There is stigma associated with claiming free school meals which impacts disproportionately on the poorest parents and children. Schools and local authorities should aim to maximise take up of free school meals, to find ways to challenge the stigma associated with claiming and consider universal provision of free school meals. Public bodies, including local authorities are required to consider the impact of their activities and to work to prevent problems such as poverty and health inequality. Public Health Boards are required, under the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) to publish a Well-being Plan detailing how they will improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of the residents in their area.

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