
WHAT WORKS IN DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE AND WELLBEING?

Katherine Weare and Gay Gray, The Health Education Unit, Research and Graduate School of Education, University of Southampton

Introduction

In January 2002, the Department for Education and Skills commissioned Southampton University's Health Education Unit to undertake a study examining how children's emotional and social competence and wellbeing could most effectively be developed at national and local level and identifying those broad approaches which show most promise. The study involved a literature review, case study work in five local education authorities (LEAs) and interviews with professionals working in the field. The resulting report recommends action in a range of areas, all of which were identified in the research as being necessary in implementing an effective strategy at national and local level to promote children's emotional and social competence and wellbeing.

The report has a practical emphasis throughout, looking at the views and findings of evaluators, experts and practitioners in relation to effective practice in this area. It aims to reflect both the current national policy context and the issues that LEAs perceive themselves to be facing, both of which have implications for any future work in this area.

Methods

The research project encompassed the following stages:

- a review of the literature
- interviews with experts in the field
- case studies with five good practice LEAs.

The literature review was not a 'systematic' review in the sense that texts were not subjected to rigorous criteria for inclusion. However, the key databases were searched for relevant texts, and key organisations and individuals consulted for further suggestions. Particular use was made of selected systematic reviews. The experts in the field represent some of the major organisations and agencies working in the field of emotional and social competence and wellbeing. The LEAs were selected on the basis of recommendations by the project steering group, and the application of criteria to ensure diversity.

Findings and recommendations

1. Develop a common language

There is a wide range of terminology in use in the field and across agencies, which has implications for how this work is disseminated and promoted. In this report, the terms 'emotional and social competence and wellbeing' are favoured: 'competence' because the word implies knowledge, attitudes and behavioural components, which

can be developed in school and other settings; and 'wellbeing' because the word focuses on the important underlying contextual factors. Other key terms that are often used, and with which it is important to build bridges, include 'emotional literacy', 'emotional intelligence' and 'mental health'.

Given the range of terminology that is in use in the field, it would be helpful for DfES and the many professionals involved to develop a greater understanding and awareness of the range of terms involved, and work towards achieving greater commonality of terminology. To assist in this, it is recommended that the DfES, LEAs and schools use the following two clusters of terms to cover both environmental and pedagogic aspects:

- 'emotional and social wellbeing'
- 'emotional and social competence' In addition, it should recognise and make links with work which uses parallel terms, in particular 'emotional literacy', 'emotional intelligence' and 'mental health'

2. Find an appropriate strategic location for work in this area

The five case study LEAs took different approaches to locating work around emotional and social competence and wellbeing. One of the five used 'emotional literacy' as its main organising framework, strongly linked to behaviour support. The others embedded work in their behaviour support and National Healthy Schools Standard (NHSS) activities.

It is recommended that the DfES encourages other LEAs to use terms such as 'emotional and social competence' and 'emotional and social wellbeing' to describe their organising framework or at least to give such concepts high priority within other frameworks, and to link such work with behaviour and the NHSS. At the same time, DfES is encouraged to promote the view prevalent in the five case study LEAs that problem behaviour has

underlying social and emotional causes which need to be addressed in a holistic, environmental way rather than through approaches which focus on detection, containment, negative reinforcement and punishment. Linked to this, all the case study LEAs viewed work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing as integral to strategies to promote good behaviour.

3. Develop the evidence base

There is sound evidence from the literature, mainly from the US, that work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing has a wide range of educational and social benefits, including greater educational and work success, improved behaviour, increased inclusion, improved learning, greater social cohesion, increased social capital, and improvements to mental health. However, evaluation in the UK is not well-developed. There is a need for much more evaluation which uses controls where appropriate and, as a minimum, 'before and after' evaluation. It is recommended that DfES does more both to encourage and finance such evaluation.

4. Promote the benefits of work in this area

While there is a need to extend the evidence base, the report also found that more could be done to promote what we already know about the benefits of promoting emotional and social competence and wellbeing. This would help to develop practice in this area. It is recommended that DfES communicates the rationale for work in this area through guidance and case studies which emphasise the synergy between work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing, and more traditional educational goals of cognitive intellectual development and academic learning, as well as school effectiveness.

5. Prioritise work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing

Many of those working in this field believe that a higher priority should be given to the promotion of emotional and social competence and wellbeing at national, LEA and school level. At the same time, DfES is urged to acknowledge the perceived tensions between any future work in this area, and the feelings of some LEAs and schools that they are already under great pressure and would find it difficult to take forward new initiatives.

It is recommended that DfES undertakes a survey of LEAs to find out what is currently happening in terms of emotional and social competence and wellbeing, and for the production of case studies of good practice to inspire LEAs and schools.

6. Take a holistic approach

There is strong international evidence to suggest that a whole school approach is vital in effectively promoting emotional and social competence and wellbeing. The case study LEAs favoured an approach that focuses on the whole school and is aimed at all pupils, combined with a complementary focus on the needs of those with behavioural and emotional problems.

It is recommended that the DfES encourages the use of whole school approaches, makes strong links between work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing and the work of the NHSS and other holistic approaches, and encourages LEAs and schools to do the same. This is likely to require explanation of what is meant by a 'whole school' approach, given the limited definitions that are currently in evidence.

7. Ensure coherence, teamwork and the involvement of parents and community

Coherence, teamwork and a multi-professional approach at national, LEA and school level appear to be prerequisites for effective work in this area. However it also appears to be the most challenging aspect of practice. Successful LEAs have brought together a wide range of agencies to work within an overall framework on specific initiatives, such as the production of guidelines, responses to school based problems, and various strategic interventions. It is recommended that the DfES encourages all LEAs and schools to bring a range of relevant agencies together to work within a coherent framework which is meaningful to all, to work on practical strategies to promote emotional and social competence and wellbeing, good behaviour and mental health. In addition, it would be helpful to produce case studies of successful multi-agency practice, and the involvement of parents and communities, to inform and inspire LEAs in addressing these challenging areas.

8. Start early and take a developmental approach

There is strong evidence, and a strong consensus among the case study LEAs, that initiatives need to start early, target early and take a long term developmental approach. A holistic approach does not preclude targeting or special provision, and it is recommended that the DfES encourages schools and LEAs to identify those with problems early and target them quickly, in a flexible, low key, non-labelling way as part of the broader whole school approach. Schools need to do more work to find out where people are starting from and target specific help swiftly (the parallel DfES project on measurement and assessment will be helpful in identifying tools and strategies to do this). Secondary schools appear to be less likely to work on emotional and social competence and wellbeing and there is a need for a special drive to help them do

more in this area.

9. Create appropriate environments

There is evidence that the school environment is the largest determinant of the level of emotional and social competence and wellbeing in pupils and teachers. In general, an environment that enhances competence and wellbeing is one that fosters warm relationships, encourages participation, develops pupil and teacher autonomy, and fosters clarity about boundaries, rules and positive expectations. It is recommended that the DfES and LEAs encourage schools to develop such climates, and ensure that they work in emotionally competent, participative and clear ways with them, in order to encourage professional autonomy.

10. Introduce explicit teaching and learning programmes

There are a number of effective programmes to promote emotional and social competence, which have a useful place within a wider supportive environment. There is clear evidence on the principles that underlie these programmes, for example teaching behaviours and skills explicitly and in participative and empowering ways, using a step by step approach, generalising to real life and making use of using co-operative group work and peer education as well as whole class approaches. It is recommended that the DfES encourages the use of explicit programmes and provides curriculum guidance that outlines these key principles. Ideally this would include some recommended materials, examples of lesson plans and schemes of work, and ideas for curriculum development.

11. Promote teachers' competence and wellbeing

There is good evidence that teachers cannot transmit emotional and social competence and wellbeing effectively if their own emotional

and social needs are not met. At the same time, there are indications that teachers feel very stressed at present.

It is recommended that schools who are embarking on work in this area focus on teachers' emotional and social needs as part of the overall programme. At the same time, teacher education in this area is vital, and it is recommended that DfES commissions an audit of provision and encourages the development of more courses on the promotion of emotional and social competence at postgraduate, in-service and continuing professional development (CPD) level.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR456) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB456) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Anna Stolk, DfES, Level 2T, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

Email: anna.stolk@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills