



How could effective measurement of wellbeing support a whole school approach?

On Tuesday 22nd June, the Education Policy Institute hosted a webinar in partnership with Policy@Manchester on pupil wellbeing. The panellists were Natalie Perera (Chief Executive, Education Policy Institute), Professor Neil Humphrey (Sarah Fielden Chair in Psychology of Education, The University of Manchester), Sarah Hughes (Chief Executive, Centre for Mental Health) and Evelyn Forde (Headteacher, Cophthall School). The following notes summarise the discussion that took place.

There were concerns around children and young people's mental health long before the pandemic hit in March 2020. Indeed, national restrictions have impacted some young people with mental health issues even further and we have seen the worsening of existing inequalities. Data is showing that **children from poorer backgrounds, those with SEND, pupils from BME groups, with health problems and those in the LGBTQ+ community experienced inequalities long before the pandemic** – these existing inequalities have only worsened.

Professor Neil Humphrey, when discussing the #BeeWell project at The University of Manchester, highlighted that young people are central to a whole school approach. The project will survey pupils once per year for three years (2021 – 2024) across the Greater Manchester area to measure their sense of wellbeing and mental health. The project has gathered the voices of tens of thousands of young people and is driven by their perspectives. The results will be aggregated to provide feedback to schools and community organisations who will then receive support from the project's partners to implement positive change.

Evelyn Forde spoke of her experience of having to triage pupils to get the best support in her school. Like Professor Humphrey, she highlighted that issues such as depression, anxiety and problems with body image were already present pre-pandemic and have simply been exacerbated. Some pupils will naturally also have anxiety around returning to school and being within the building itself after learning from home for so long. Of course, assessments and testing can add to anxiety too.

Evelyn spoke of **dwindling budgets within schools and high accountability measures in place which make it difficult for leaders to make positive wellbeing changes**. She emphasised that funding must come directly to schools rather than to local authorities as leaders know the needs of their schools and pupils best and will therefore be in the best position to make decisions on funding.

According to EPI research in 2020, the attainment gap had already stopped closing before the pandemic. Families are facing pressures such as food poverty and employment instability which are then passed onto pupils. This in turn means that some pupils do not have high levels of engagement and support from parents.

The aspirations of young people have been shaken during the pandemic. It is vital that we support young people during this period of transition in order to avoid an increase in the numbers of young people NEET, more CAMHS referrals or a rise in children in criminal justice system.



Sarah Hughes challenged us **to consider whether our education system is designed to get the best results for children** and to reconsider what a ‘whole school approach’ actually means. Children can be very vulnerable, and 1.5 million children will need extra support. While the majority of children will not need interventions, children are not thriving in the way they should be in the current conditions.

Sarah discussed how she believes **mental health support services need to be expanded so that schools are not tackling the issues alone**. It is important for practitioners to keep these issues at the forefront of debate and to listen to the data when deciding on interventions. Along with the other panellists, Sarah agreed that the pandemic has just shone a light on these issues and that the pandemic has simply provided additional evidence of what schools need.

It is also important to remember that attainment and wellbeing are related. There is a strong evidence base that suggests they are interrelated rather than an either/or choice.

The wellbeing of teachers and school workforce must also be a key consideration. Teachers can get lost in the system but it is important that schools and communities have a supportive ethos. Evelyn Forde suggested some simple changes that school leaders can implement for their staff, such as having a wellbeing room or putting on a breakfast occasionally. This could have a positive knock-on effect on teacher recruitment and retainment. Evelyn also highlighted how schools need more support to train teachers, so they are better equipped to help young people with their mental health and wellbeing.

Speakers were asked to **discuss the role of data in measuring wellbeing**. Professor Humphrey explained how the #BeeWell project tracks a number of measures of wellbeing: sense of optimism, hope, emotional experiences, relationships with other people and experiences in schools.

However, we need to make sure that any data used by schools is robust and that schools know what to do with the information and how to interpret the data. One suggestion was to ask school and college leaders what data they would like to see and what would be most helpful.

One audience member **questioned how to best balance behavioural issues with supporting young people’s mental health and wellbeing**. Speakers agreed that exclusions should be the absolute last resort. Schools are there to support young people’s wellbeing and provide positive experiences. Evelyn Forde emphasised the importance of strong communications between parents and schools. While there may be a need for behaviour and exclusion policies in schools, it is important for staff to be mindful of what that young person is walking into school with on particular days. It is important for every child to have a pair of eyes on them so they are well looked after.

Teachers need training on how to recognise signs of mental health or wellbeing issues, rather than just behavioural issues or children being disruptive. Sarah Hughes encouraged us to consider **how an inclusive curriculum can benefit wellbeing**.

The Centre for Mental Health have asked for a moratorium on school exclusions. Schools are a safe environment, and we don’t want to displace students from that. Research in Tottenham and Birmingham showed that young, BME men were more likely to be excluded and did not feel



represented in the curriculum. It is difficult for them to feel engaged when they do not feel represented.

Evelyn Forde encouraged a pause on Ofsted inspections, which could cause more teacher recruitment and retention problems in schools. Evelyn asked that schools are given an opportunity to broker relationships with community leaders and given time to embed practices and policies to support young people.

Speakers highlighted the need for a multi-agency approach to education and wellbeing and particularly highlighted the need for a better relationship between health and education agencies. Similarly, local governance around health and wellbeing needs to include education.

When asked if the government were to fund one thing on children and young people's wellbeing, what they would choose that thing to be, speakers gave the following answers:

- Sarah Hughes: social justice through fighting poverty;
- Professor Neil Humphrey: support for fostering young people's relationships;
- Evelyn Forde: comprehensive facilities in every school.