Bringing emotional wellbeing into the classroom

***Donna Hill** argues that the whole school approach to the wellbeing of pupils is more important than ever.*

For many children, the pandemic will have negatively affected their lives as they face social isolation, loss of learning, diminished physical health and a lack of routine or structure that brings a feeling of safety and order to their daily lives.

A significant number may not be consciously aware that the stresses experienced during successive lockdowns will have changed the way they interact socially, particularly for the very young. For some, dealing with groups of people outside the family unit will now trigger anxiety where none existed before.

Even before the pandemic, mental health and wellbeing was due to play a bigger part of a school curriculum but the events of the last 18 months have only served to underline its importance.

The annual Good Childhood Report 2020
The Children's Society

The average score was significantly lower for...

happiness with Life as a whole	happiness with Appearance	happiness with Friends	happiness with School

A number of issues can impact pupils' ability to successfully engage in education. Poor mental health, anxiety, and unhealthy relationships are key factors. A strong PSHE curriculum supports the well-being of children and young people, in turn, enabling them to achieve their potential. A growing body of research shows that pupils who are emotionally healthy do better at school.

The Children's society annual 'Good childhood report 2020', shows a dramatic decline in the mental health of young people. The data paints a gloomy picture of a decline of happiness felt by young people in key areas of their life. This must be addressed. There are numerous studies calling for immediate action to provide support to schools, putting education at the heart of the solution.

Currently the debate is raging around money being made available for recovery – we believe that this is a vital investment for the nation's future, and that PSHE funding must be at the heart of the programme.

"Pupils who are emotionally healthy do better at school"

As Dr Carol Homden, CEO of Coram and Chair of the National Autistic Society, says: "While we work to rebuild and recover out of the pandemic, the PSHE curriculum will be even more crucial in supporting children who have suffered learning loss and disrupted social relationships over the last year or more. And for children with a SEN diagnosis this is even more critical"

Children's wellbeing and their academic education shouldn't be seen as conflicting priorities – in fact research shows that they are integral to each other. The Department for Education recognises that "in order to help their pupils succeed; schools have a role to play in supporting them to be resilient and mentally healthy". (Department for Education guidance 2015)

This is further supported by the government's decision to embed Personal, Social, Health and Economic education in the school curriculum with the introduction of statutory Relationships & Health Education in September 2020 for Key stages 1 & 2, and Relationships, Health and Sex Education in Key stages 3 & 4. The DfE acknowledges that these outcomes are best delivered within the wider PSHE curriculum.

So how do schools ensure their PSHE provision meets the needs of their pupils?

PSHE education makes a crucial contribution to schools' responsibilities for pupil wellbeing. The impact, when done well, can be life-changing.

PSHE education supports a three-strand approach to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes pupils need to thrive as individuals and members of society. A values-based curriculum enables pupils to live healthy and fulfilling lives, secure in the knowledge that pupils have developed the skills and independence necessary to engage fully in an ever more connected and challenging world. Those of us who work in

education are privileged to be instrumental in building these foundations, to support lifelong emotional health and wellbeing.

Andre Bailey, Headteacher of Nightingale Community Academy, London said: "In good schools, where agreement around the personal development of children is well established, mental wellbeing and resilience are explicitly measured and taught. The tools and the language vary but the rationale is clear: children who can articulate their feelings, make mistakes and recover and build trusting relationships thrive. This cannot happen without school-wide processes that train staff to be more attuned to their own mental wellbeing and that of the children".

PSHE done well is not a fixed tick list of topics. It is a flexible resource, designed to help children and young adults navigate through their life. The Education Act 2002 requires all schools to teach a curriculum that is 'broadly based, balanced and meets the needs of pupils'. When a school is developing their intent statement for their PSHE curriculum it will reflect on these overarching key elements, their own school's values, balanced with the specific needs of their pupils.

A whole school approach to PSHE

It is widely recognised that a child's emotional health and wellbeing influences their cognitive development and learning as well as their physical and social health and their mental wellbeing in adulthood.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and Public Health England advises that all schools should be supported to adopt a comprehensive, 'whole school' approach to promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of young people.

Such an approach moves beyond academic learning but has been found to be effective in sustaining health benefits. Eight key principles underpin an effective whole-school approach and have been identified in Public Health England's 'Promoting children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing: A whole school approach' (PHE, 2015) as providing an excellent framework for building your whole school approach to wellbeing.

A whole school approach starts with the child.

Key questions to discuss:-

- What do we want for the children in our school?
- How do our values support our objective?
- How are we providing visible leadership to promote emotional health and wellbeing?

A mentally healthy school involves the school network working together. Collaboration between senior leaders, teachers and all staff, as well as parents, carers and the wider community. When delivered well, PSHE has a significant impact on all outcomes for pupils, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Now is the time to bring together the skills and resources in education to help schools bring emotional wellbeing into the classroom and into the centre of children's lives.

About the author

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