

Understanding Mental Health in Schools

Voice of the Pupil (VoTP) summary report
Factors impacting on mental health from the
perspective of young people

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Foreword



The prevalence of mental health conditions among children and young people has increased considerably in recent years. The promotion of good mental health and the well-being of pupils has long been a focus for school leaders in the North East of England who had become increasingly worried about the rising numbers of pupils who required support to thrive and learn well. Data from the North East's NHS mental health foundation trusts had also revealed a significant increase in referrals and hospitalisation for serious mental health issues.

Increasingly frequent national media reports about the apparent upsurge in serious mental health issues such as eating disorders, self-harm and anxiety, coupled with delays in children accessing support services had led to the creation by central government of the Children's Mental Health Champion in 2015. This was part of a £1.25 billion drive to improve mental health care and included a requirement that all schools should appoint a mental health champion.

Accordingly, the Healthy MindEd Commission was founded in 2016 under the auspices of Schools North East, a charitable Trust based in Newcastle upon Tyne, founded with the aim of representing and championing the work of all schools in the North East of England that strive to improve the life chances of children and young people. One of the main aims of Schools North East is to give a regional voice to school leaders about matters of concern and importance in an attempt to influence and inform policy makers.

The Healthy MindEd Commission was therefore set up to bring together a representative group of school leaders along with influential practitioners working within and alongside the education system to consider how best to tackle growing problems with children's emotional well-being.

The Commission's aims were:

'To improve mental health of children and young people by recognising its impact on them; and by enabling schools and associated services to identify, manage and mitigate the factors that underlie poor mental health.'

'To equip schools to empower children and young people to understand mental health and through increased resilience, to enjoy positive growth and development.'

As Healthy MindEd began to draw together evidence it became clear that the issues and solutions around children's mental health and well-being were being named and defined by adults. Little, if any, research had been done to listen to young people themselves and to hear what they had to say about their own concerns, protective factors and resilience. In addition, even less had been done regionally to assess whether national trends were actually replicated in North East school pupils' experiences and whether there were any specific factors that stood out or remained undiscovered in the regional context.

The Commission therefore set up a subgroup titled the Voice of the Pupil (VoTP) to engage with children and young people to establish their concerns; clarify what their experience was and that of their friends; the particular difficulties they identified and the causes; how they coped and the protective factors that helped them to be resilient.

The aim of the project was not only to represent the voice of the region's children and young people, but to be of immediate practical use to the participating schools to inform direct action that would positively affect better outcomes for young people.

The VoTP report is unique, both in its regional focus and because it is based on the experiences of young people within school settings. It reveals some of what is important to young people in relation to feeling positive and able to cope and achieve within their lives. In addition, it offers an approach for any school to use in order to understand and respond meaningfully to mental health needs within their own community and context.

Introduction



Schools North East would like to thank everyone who took part in the VoTP project. This includes Healthy MindEd Commission members; participating schools; the school professionals who facilitated the expression of pupil views and the children and young people who provided information about their experiences.

The contribution of the Royal Grammar School, Newcastle is also particularly appreciated as it was an important partner school, not only taking part in the project but also generously sponsoring and producing the training materials for each of the participants.

The VoTP project goals were :

- To develop a framework for engaging children and young people in reflecting on their mental health and the factors that influence it.
- To implement this at a scale that allows for the voices of children and young people to inform the findings of the commission as it reports at a local, regional and national level.
- To establish a values-based tool that schools can be trained to use directly to explore the factors that impact on the mental health and resilience of their children and young people, and to enable the development of action plans that are meaningful within those contexts.

Following a small pilot study to test the concept, address practical considerations and develop training materials, a call for participants was sent out through the Schools North East network to invite a wider range of schools to take part. This led to an overwhelming response from which a group of 21 primary and 13 secondary schools, including special and sixth form provision, was established to form the research group.

The group represented the full range of designation for schools at the time including academy, local authority-maintained and the private sector. From the outset this underlined that the scale and breadth of concern for children's well-being was universal, regardless of context or background.

The VoTP project aimed to gain insight into factors affecting the mental health of children and young people in the North East by enabling school professionals to facilitate the expression of pupil views and experiences through focus group discussion guided by a question framework reflecting the four elements of the World Health Organisation (WHO) mental health definition:

'Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes 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 his or her community'

World Health Organisation, 2005

Introduction



Key learnings included:

Young voices

- Young people talked about the impact and importance of relationships in all four of the mental health strands.
- Young people revealed that they would like to participate more in their lives, make positive contributions and be recognised as individuals.
- Young people regularly expressed a sense of pressure and strain in relation to the expectations others have of them.

Benefits of the project to schools

- Each school that participated gained a valuable analysis about the scale, themes and potential protective factors in place that were unique to their own context and school.
- Almost all schools pledged to use the VoTP method to regularly capture pupils' voices about mental health and well-being and participating staff were accredited as VoTP ambassadors.
- The value of the VoTP study was exemplified and validated most powerfully by the range of creative and practical steps taken by schools in development plans and school improvement planning introduced as a consequence of the project.

One example was the agreement by the governing body of a particular primary school that every class should have a class pet as its VoTP panels had highlighted the importance of animals in providing relaxation, companionship and support to pupils who were feeling vulnerable.

School and Commission recommendations

- Regularly to engage young people to develop understandings of what can be done to support good mental health and prioritise support for those who need it.
- To promote the idea of caring relationships as central to all interactions.
- To capacity build and work more closely with outside agencies.
- To develop an approach to curriculum delivery that ensures that tasks and tests are achievable, enjoyable and rewarding.
- To manage change and transition as this can be extremely unsettling for young people.



Methodology



The VoTP research process was based on enabling school professionals to facilitate the expression of pupil experiences through a series of planned focus group discussions guided by a question framework reflecting the WHO definition of mental health.

School leaders across the 12 local authorities constituting the North East region were invited to project briefing sessions following expressions of interest in the project at the Healthy MindEd conference in July 2016.

A framework for engaging children and young people in discussions about mental health was then developed and piloted between November 2017 and March 2019 based on the following key questions:

- How do children and young people understand mental health?
- What factors do children and young people identify as affecting their mental health?
- How can this inform the support offered to young people within school contexts?

The schools included in the wider research project following the pilot study comprised 21 primary and 13 secondary schools.

A total of 42 participant school leads were supported through two days of initial training in the delivery of focus groups, initial analysis and the development of action plans. This was followed by three smaller group locality workshops to enable analysis of the discussions, identify themes and allow further action planning.

For primaries, focus groups typically included a Year 1/2 cohort and a Year 5/6 cohort. For secondary schools, focus groups typically included a Year 7/8 cohort and a Year 10/11 cohort. The age range for participating pupils extended from 6 to 18 year-olds. All settings that submitted sufficient data ran two or more focus groups and the average focus group size was five pupils. There were 42 focus group discussions in 21 primary schools and 26 focus groups were held in 13 secondary schools.

Across the project and including pilot study data, more than 250 young people took part in focus group discussions.

Following the completion of focus group discussions, recordings, transcripts and initial analyses were provided by school leads for further review. At the end of this process, school and commission leads met to review the overarching findings and to propose recommendations on the basis of what had been discovered.

The study provided a clear sense of the common factors that seemed to influence pupil mental health and the research process itself was developed and quality assured by educational psychologists at Newcastle University and Durham Educational Psychology Service who also analysed the overarching themes and data that emerged during the project.

Methodology



Example focus group questions

Questions for the focus groups were developed to explore the four strands of the WHO definition of mental health as follows:

WHO definition strand	Example questions
Realising potential and abilities	<p>Tell me about times you are at your best. What does this look like?</p> <p>What sorts of things can influence you being at your best or developing yourself in the ways that you would like to?</p>
Coping with normal stresses	<p>What sorts of things change the way you feel day to day?</p> <p>What's the difference between a good day and a bad day?</p> <p>What helps in these situations?</p>
Working productively	<p>How good are you at getting things done?</p> <p>What sorts of things get in the way of you getting things done?</p> <p>Describe when you are working well/not working well?</p>
Contributing within community	<p>What is it like to be you?</p> <p>What is it important to know about you?</p> <p>When do you feel a part of things?</p> <p>When do you feel good about being you?</p> <p>What are you doing at those times?</p>

Section 1:

Pupils realising their own abilities and potential

Pupil accounts revealed that they enjoy and draw energy from being able to develop interests and abilities and they talked about how they were able to realise their abilities in ways that often revealed their personal interests and ambitions.

"I just love drawing people. I just love drawing in general. It makes me feel chilled out. It makes me emerge from my shell. My imagination just flows out onto a piece of paper or whatever."

"I just feel really good when I learn something new that I hadn't known before".

Experience of success in an area seems to support persistence when faced with setbacks and challenge in others. The opportunity to feel good about what they were doing was central to realising abilities, as was the enabling effect of a feeling of progress.

"Cause I never give up and I always keep trying ... I just get better and better every time I practice."

The opportunity to achieve and be involved underpinned the ability to develop skills but this was often undermined by other people's expectations and the experience of pressure to perform. A strong sense that opportunities for many young people beyond the academic were limited was also revealed by pupils.

However, young people often spoke of the importance of developing in other ways such as through sport and hobbies but expressed a feeling that their lives were constrained and scheduled in ways that made it hard for them to realise their potential.

"If ... I have to do loads and loads of writing and I don't have many ideas and we don't have really long ... I find that hard 'cos I either have loads of ideas or I don't have any."

"And sometimes I feel like I'm not at my best when everybody else gets the answer but then I don't. Then I feel like 'Ah I'm the dumbest kid ever' and its not very nice."

Developing abilities and potential was almost always described within the context of relationships that created opportunity, provided support and encouragement and enabled young people to feel noticed and valued, which further encouraged them to develop themselves.

"I feel at my best is when I am with my friends. It makes you feel like you can do stuff."

"I practice and I want to be like my mam. I'm going to get the same job as her."

"I also feel important when I help me Nana with the garden, and like ask to help her when I want to go down my house for an Xbox ... I don't want to leave her by herself."



Pupils coping with the normal stresses of life



The experience of stress was common across both primary and secondary pupils' accounts. This ranged from boredom to acute discomfort and feelings of being overwhelmed.

"I just feel as though something's going to happen and I'm basically daydreaming. My mind just goes crazy I just feel like crying. It's weird nothing happens ... its just my mind."

"I feel constantly I can do better as a person. I can do better academically, and as a person it makes me feel down."

Stressors all contributed to a sense of threat and commonly related to:

- Relationships (getting on with others, family arguments, well-being and loss).
- Lack of control (time, technology, activities and situations, food, people, resources).
- Performance pressure (academic, a culture of comparison).
- Physical/Sensory (tiredness, discomfort, space, noise and disruption).

Stress was moderated by professional and outside help (such as that provided by teachers, counsellors or the local church) and actions taken by pupils themselves. However, relationships and social interaction provided the main foundation for coping.

"Well our teacher makes a joke or something, then it encourages us ... when I'm doing good work ... he gets really happy and things ... and I feel better."

"If you choose the people you want to be with you can be more yourself, because you know they'll accept you and you can be who you want to be."

Many pupils had clearly developed an impressive range of actions to take when stressed. These included:

- Taking time and space to rest and recover.
- Using distraction.
- Talking or spending time with others.
- Spending time with pets.
- Physical activity.
- Using cognitive strategies (positive thinking, problem-solving, applying learnt strategies).

Having control and autonomy at times of stress was often referred to as important in coping, especially by older pupils who were more likely to expect themselves to be personally resilient.

Younger pupils wanted to be cared for by adults who could anticipate and meet their needs, while older pupils wanted to be cared for but also listened to and accepted by others. The impression given by the majority of pupils was that they preferred support to come from those around them through the creation of environments that enabled them to achieve and contribute, rather than from professionals or outside agencies.

Although this research did not explore the effectiveness of the various strategies, accounts suggest that professional assumptions about what works and for whom may be too generic and that support strategies need to be tailored to the individual.

"I find that sport helps. It is a kind of stress relief ... from exams, especially coming from exams, and home life and school."

"Fresh air helps me. My stepdad walks the dog and sometimes I go with him."

Section 3:

Pupils working productively and achieving

Research findings indicated that *working productively and achieving* is a natural extension of the *realising abilities and potential* strand of the discussions but is focused explicitly on specific tasks and in particular on academic work in school or for homework.

Being able to work productively and achieve related to the interplay between pupils themselves, other people within their immediate environment and the task at hand.

Relationships and social interactions apparently created environments that could be either enabling or disabling when working productively and achieving and related to:

- Getting on with others (the degree of belonging and respect; concerns about falling out; the balance between being socially comfortable and able to focus).
- The impact of others (the stress that can come from a sense of pressure or judgement; the degree of support available from others).
- Recognition from others (the opportunity for reward or explicit appreciation of achievement and effort).
- Concern about others (the impact of loss or worry about the well-being of a close family member).

Pupils regularly described feeling uncomfortable about their social environment and how this can disrupt achievement. However, there was clear evidence across the age ranges of pupils wanting to do well and take responsibility for getting things done, but that pressure of expectations and a described culture of comparison creates stress and anxiety.

Three task factors were found to influence pupils' ability to work positively and achieve:

- Expectation/self-belief in relation to a task.
- Autonomy and choice (the degree of freedom to approach a task in their own way).
- Feelings and motivation in relation to a task.

Tasks were frequently evaluated in terms of:

- Can I do this ? (Achievability).
- Is it interesting ? (Stimulating and engaging).
- Is it worth doing ? (Completion likely to be rewarding in itself).

"You've got to force yourself to want to do it. If you want to get the high grades you've got to push yourself."



Section 4:

Pupils contributing to their communities

Pupil accounts revealed a number of interconnecting elements that affected young people's ability to contribute to their communities.

Relationships clearly played a large part in enabling or disabling contribution while supportive relationships both at home and within communities were needed by young people in order for them to contribute meaningfully.

"My sister's got autism, she tries to hurt my family. It's hard to do stuff."

"Well I have a sense of responsibility when I am looking after my Nan and Grampy ... this makes them happy and then I'm happy and it's nice."

Conflict with siblings along with loss and parental behaviours could undermine relationships and opportunity. However, secondary pupils reflected the powerful benefit of friends, family and school professionals acknowledging their contributions.

"It helps if you know people are seeing you are doing well and recognising it."

Although opportunities to contribute meaningfully were often described as being quite limited, a sense of identity emerged from the experience of being able to contribute and from the relationships that supported this. Being able to contribute lays a context for developing a sense of belonging at home and at school and supports a general sense of well-being.

"I feel like I've got responsibility and an opportunity to actually do something."

"It makes me feel important to know that we're responsible doing jobs."

Among secondary school pupils the sense of identity was more fluid and reflective of changing social contexts, as was a sense of self-worth within a given context. The desire for control over this was apparent as was the conflicting need to fit in. Considerable stress and anxiety arose therefore, as a result of the perceived expectations pupils felt others had of them in all areas of their lives.

"Being a teenage girl is very hard ... You have to look your best, you have to be the best, you have to have the best shoes, designer clothes..."

"I always feel anxious. I feel people are looking at me and they'd be like, yeah she's lonely and got no friends."

Actions taken by participating schools



Participating schools took a range of actions following from the VoTP project, both common steps and actions tailored specifically to their particular setting.

In signing up to participate in the study school leaders had undertaken that each school professional taking part would have time to carry out the work and would also have access to senior leadership teams and governing bodies to present their findings.

Furthermore each school had to publish a VoTP school action plan with steps that school leaders agreed to take throughout the year following the project's end.

The development plans that participating schools produced commonly focused on:

Improving opportunities for pupils to feel valued and able to contribute

- By the creation of community 'jobs' and development of peer support approaches.
- By reviewing reward systems and behaviour policies to emphasise relationships, effort and positive interactions.

Curriculum and learning

- Redesigning voice-informed PSHCE.
- Introducing resilience programmes that normalise and educate about mental health.
- Developing resources and teaching strategies for managing pressure and stress and reducing the 'culture of comparison'.

Facilitating the building of strong relationships

- By introducing friendship programmes.
- Redesigning social spaces and teaching of games.
- Introducing extended 'stay and play' clubs for children and parents.

Ensuring supportive environments

- By creating safe spaces; managed transitions and recovery time.
- Extending creative opportunities.
- Seeking pupil input to review and design shared spaces.

Staff development, confidence and connectedness

- Organising CPD and awareness-raising events focused on mental health and the importance of listening.
- Reviewing roles and maximising the use of tutor time.
- Promoting ideas of 'staff parenting' and raising awareness of common stressors.

Pupil voice and participation agendas

- Reviewing pupil engagement in voice/participation agendas and ensuring these are a regular feature in developments.
- Establishing an annual review of mental health informed by pupil views.

Conclusion



School and commission recommendations

Healthy MindEd commission Chair Prof. Dame Sue Bailey has referred to the VoTP study as 'unique' and has said that 'it represents the most important body of evidence about children's own views about their mental health, well-being and resilience ever carried out in the UK'.

This ground-breaking research, as well as including school perspectives and being directly focused on the experiences of young people in a regional and school context, has revealed the many practical ways in which young people are already managing their 'body budgets' and the importance of relationships, agency and rest and recovery in achieving this.

The project also revealed factors within school environments that affect mental health along with low-cost/no-cost actions that schools felt confident to commit to taking in response to these.

Recommendations in detail for future action include:

- Regularly engaging with young people to develop understandings of what can be done to support good mental health. This can be achieved through focus groups; PSHCE and targeted workshops on relevant topics.
- Capacity building through professional development for school staff; outside professional supervision/support for staff and the introduction of support for parents.
- Developing an approach to curriculum delivery that ensures tests and tasks are enjoyable, rewarding and achievable by managing pressure talk; appreciating effort; avoiding comparison and judgement where possible and remembering the importance of creativity, rest and recovery.
- Prioritising support for those who need it, remembering that young people often prefer to receive support from people they are familiar with.
- Working more closely with outside agencies as part of a joined-up mental health system.
- Considering technology as something to help young people manage their day-to-day lives as well as recognising the need to manage it when it is having an unhelpful impact.
- Managing change and transition, which can be extremely unsettling for young people.

Finally and perhaps the most significant recommendation that arose from the project was the necessity to promote the idea of caring relationships as central to all interactions. 'Slow down, show interest, notice, listen, relate'.

Most importantly overall perhaps, the research process empowered key adults in the lives of significant numbers of young people to see beyond medicalised and disempowering concepts of mental health and to take everyday actions, which have the potential to normalise and support conversations with young people about this key area of lived experience.

"When people listen, I feel important. I feel good and like I can cope. Not everyone listens, most people don't. Some people listen, some people don't."