

Evidence-based practice in schools

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Overview

- Introduction
- School-based promotion of emotional wellbeing
 - Example: SEAL
- Some key issues for EBP in education
- What works?

Introduction

- Schools increasingly involved in attempts to promote emotional wellbeing amongst children and young people
- Increasing pressure from central government and OFSTED for schools to:
 - Use evidence-based practice
 - Collect evidence that demonstrates that their practice is effective

Introduction

- School-based promotion of emotional wellbeing...
- Every Child Matters
- Healthy Schools
- Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE)
- Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)
- Targeted Mental Health in Schools (TaMHS)
- General distinction between universal (for everyone) and targeted (for pupils at risk) approaches

Example: SEAL

- SEAL is a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that are *thought* to underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, and emotional wellbeing (Department for Education and Skills, 2005).
- It was introduced in primary schools in 2005 and is currently being implemented in secondary schools (DiES, 2007).
- At the time of writing, approximately 60% of primary schools and 15% of secondary schools are thought to be making use of the SEAL resources

Example: SEAL



What do we mean by 'evidence-based practice' in education?

- Davies (1999) suggests that EBP in education operates at two levels:
 - Utilising evidence from world-wide research
 - Establishing sound evidence by systematically collecting information about a given phenomenon
- Traditional, positivist view of 'evidence' has predominated

The cart before the horse

- 'Top-down' influence is inescapable...
- However, the extent to which certain policies are evidence-based is questionable
- For instance, SEAL guidance talks of 'overwhelming evidence' in favour of social and emotional learning programmes
- Recent systematic review (Adi et al, 2007) of this area did not point to overwhelming evidence
- "Educational policy in this area has outpaced the science on which it is ostensibly based" (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, p.163)

The policy implementation cycle

- 'The pace of government-led innovation has outstripped the capacity of schools to respond' (Coffield et al, 2007)
- New policy initiatives are implemented with alarmingly little 'breathing space' in between them
 - e.g. Secondary SEAL launched September 2007, TaMHS launched April 2008

Whose perspective should be prioritised?

- Range of stakeholders
 - e.g. children, staff, parents
- Low concordance rate between stakeholders
 - e.g. primary SEAL ELAI measure
 - staff-parent correlation = 0.33
 - staff-pupil correlation = 0.37
 - pupil-parent correlation = 0.21
- Some studies using triangulated outcome measurement report positive outcomes from one source (e.g. pupils) and not the others (e.g. staff, parents)

Whose perspective should be prioritised?

- School-based SEL programmes (whole school or targeted) more likely to impact upon outcomes in school than at home
 - Generalisation of skills?
 - Involving parents?
- Views of children are desirable, but these *tend* to be the least reliable
- Also, involvement in programmes may increase sensitivity to change
 - e.g. ratings of difficulties may increase as they become more aware

Other key issues

- Fidelity!
 - The tussle between rigidly following guidance and adapting to meet specific school needs can impact greatly on evaluation outcomes
- Efficacy vs. effectiveness
- Tendency to view RCTs as unworkable in education, particularly at policy level
 - But this has proven to be a myth (Tymms et al)

What works?

- NIHCE review of universal approaches – Adi et al (2007)
- *Strong* evidence to support programmes such as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), which include a significant component of teacher training and offer a prolonged, relatively intense skills teaching element (e.g. up to 60 classroom sessions)
- There is *reasonable* evidence that long term programmes that cover social problem solving, social awareness and emotional literacy, in which teachers reinforce such principles in all their interactions with children, can be effective in the long term;
- Evidence relating to truly 'whole school' approaches was limited to five studies, with each providing some indication of *probable* positive impact;
- Those studies where effect sizes were calculated indicated small-medium effects on outcome measures.

What works?

- NIHCE review of targeted approaches – Shucksmith et al (2007)
- Considerable consensus that multi-component interventions, which offer a mix of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), social skills training, attribution training, and training of teachers and parents in reinforcement and discipline, are the most effective content of interventions;
- Most interventions offer weekly (or twice weekly) sessions to pupils. A few studies have examined brief interventions (defined as 8-10 weeks), but these have only been shown to work well for certain groups of children - the vast majority of interventions last longer than 1 year;
- Interventions are typically delivered by psychologists – school staff are rarely utilised, other than when they are asked to rate children's behaviour and wellbeing;
- Under certain conditions (e.g. delivered late in primary school career, taking place in communities already under stress), interventions treating troubled pupils using small group work may produce adverse effects.