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# Mental Health in Schools

Whole School Approaches

**Minds  
Ahead**

# CONTENTS PAGE

<b>46* things that we do for staff well-being (*and counting)</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Staff Well-being at All Saints' CE VA Junior and Infant School, Halifax</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Retrospective Evidence of the Impact of Family Engagement in Children's development</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>A systems thinking investigation into the rise in mental health and wellbeing issues in UK secondary schools with particular reference to same-age systems: a call for more research</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Counting the cost? The impact of mental health and wellbeing when funding is short</b>	<b>37</b>

## 46\* things that we do for staff well-being (\*and counting)

**David Lowbridge-Ellis is Deputy Head Teacher of Barr Beacon School in the West Midlands.**

We started by making a list of 22 things we do for staff well-being. We got that far without really thinking too hard. Things like: never asking staff for lesson plans; minimalistic marking and data entry; no one covering more than once a half term; no expectation of answering email outside school hours.

We reached 46 by noticing the things we do without realising. See <http://www.barrbeaconschool.co.uk/46-things-we-do-staff-well-being/>

Working in a school for five days a week, it's amazing how much you start taking for granted. I was reminded of this very recently. Last week, we had another set of visitors in to take a look at how we approach staff well-being. We have developed something of a reputation for doing things differently in this area. There are some of these things are so ingrained into our school culture that it's sometimes hard to believe sometimes that they were new to us at some point. Having regular visitors means I regularly get to see our school through fresh eyes. It's a heartening experience.

Case in point: last Tuesday lunchtime. I was finishing lunch duty as usual. Leadership do lunch duty because it stops behaviour bubbling up. It's one of our 46 things, yet it was also one of the last to make our list because we've been doing it for so long we don't even notice how unusual it is.

I finished lunch duty by putting my hand in the air, as do we all. A hall-full of pupils then placed their hands in the air and the room fell silent, as it always does. Day-in, day-out, 5

days a week. Last Tuesday was no exception. A couple of seconds after putting my hand in the air, I could have heard a pin drop. The only difference last Tuesday was I could also hear someone whispering “what was that?!”. It was one of my visitors, sitting next to me open-mouthed, trying to process what they had just seen.

I explained why we did it: Why shout if you don't have to? It calms pupils down before they go to their next lesson so learning can start as soon as they walk into their after-lunch lessons.

There are other schools who do this of course. You may know of one. You may even work at one. Or this might be something you can't imagine happening at your school. You might not feel it's right for your place. And that's fine. The point is, if we stop and think for a few minutes, we can all make a list of 'things' we do for our staff well-being.

It's something I implore all Senior Leadership Teams to devote a little time to. Not only will it make you realise that you do more than you think you do, but it will also shine a light on aspects of school life which can be refined.

But it's not just a task for a Senior Leadership Team meeting. We have to ask the people who make the biggest difference to children's lives, lesson by lesson: the teachers.

I've spoken to lots of people in education who see 'staff consultation' as a formalised, bureaucratic exercise. For us, it's another one of those things we just take for granted because it happens every day when we ask our teachers things like: “So, is this working?” “Is there a way to save time with this?” “Why are we doing this again?” “Do we need to do it this way?”

At our place, we're proudly allergic to management-speak. Actually, that could be our 47<sup>th</sup> thing we do for teacher well-being: communicating like human beings by avoiding exclusionary jargon. In our school, acronyms are avoided and buzzwords are viewed with

suspicion. Which is why I almost winced as I typed 'Open-door Senior Leadership' as one of our 46 things. But we mean it: no concern is ever too small. Like any Senior Leader I'm never quite sure what concern will walk through my door next. It's what makes the job so exciting. My excitement is especially piqued when someone takes up my challenge of identifying anything going on in school that they believe to be a pointless waste of time. We walk it around the room, or the school: there's no better way of seeing what's-working-well/what's-not-working-as-well-as-it-could-be by going to see it in action/inaction (delete as appropriate).

Most of the time, teachers know what works and it's Senior Leadership's role to stay out of the way. It's the approach we should take to most things, only intervening when things look like they might be going awry. Don't get me wrong: our quality assurance systems are watertight. Our straightforward systems and policies mean no pupil is in danger of receiving a raw deal. But we trust teachers to decide the best approaches for their pupils – and for themselves.

At the same time, we need to be mindful that teachers are entirely capable of being their own worst enemies.

I spend more time helping teachers to do less work than more work. This is especially true of marking, which usually vies with behaviour for top position in any teachers' poll of 'what causes you stress?'

Marking was definitely the prime concern for our staff a couple of years ago. Despite everything we had done to reduce minimum expectations, teachers were still spending a ridiculous amount of time marking. I've already written several thousand words about this elsewhere (see below for links) and spoken at the DfE's workload events, so I won't go into this in detail here. Suffice to say, at Barr Beacon we are now spending a quarter of the time marking than we were two years ago. It's another of our 46 things: 'Give feedback however you think best policy, with the aim of spending no more than an hour on any class set of books/essays'. The biggest barrier to this happening? New teachers who join our school

thinking they have to martyr themselves, spending every waking moment with red pens in their hands.

Senior Leadership's job is to help teachers realise that martyrdom is not to be aspired to. Teachers need to do their jobs in whatever way suits them. Or, as one of our 46 things has it: "There are no prizes for looking busy or staying late." Give teachers permission to have a life outside of school. A refreshed teacher is always going to give the kids in front of them a better experience. That's why our 46 things ends with a list of stuff we do to not just 'work hard' but 'play hard'. Yes, I know that sounds a bit corny (management-speak alert!) but everything on that list is sincere. It's certainly how I live my life, so it's unreasonable to expect anyone I lead to do any differently. The best thing Senior Leaders can do for well-being, as with everything, is to lead by example.

Many of our '46 things' could be implemented by any school in any context (flu jabs and Zumba classes don't take up much space). A few could be implemented overnight (or however quickly reprographics can turn around Thank You cards). Some (like marking) are likely to be iterative. All 46, however, are now an integral part of our school culture. But they were all new at some point.

If we really want to take our teachers' well-being seriously, we need to look at where we are currently by speaking to them about their concerns. Much as we might not want to hear some of what they have to say, we need to hear it anyway. What they say might mean we have a lot of work ahead of us. But 'us' doesn't just mean the Senior Leadership Team. It's everyone's job. Get everyone's brains on the problem – from SLT to NQT (please forgive my momentary lapse into acronyms – it won't happen again).

We won't tackle teacher workload and well-being overnight but we can make a list, together, of what we've done already. And then we can keep adding to it.

We're part of the way there. Keep going.

We are indebted to John Tomsett, whose blog in December 2017 gave us the idea to come up with our own '46 things'. He also placed trust and culture at the top of his list. Although he 'only' came up with 26 things I would like to make it clear that this is not a competition: if you can come up with 66 (or more) then go for it. Some of ours are small, others very large. It's not the size of your list that counts – what counts is that you do all of the things on it.

You can read John Tomsett's original blog here: <https://johntomsett.com/2017/12/05/this-much-i-know-about-treating-teachers-well-and-helping-them-manage-their-workload/>

For more marking:

My blog for the Schools Students And Teachers Network (SSAT)

<https://www.ssatuk.co.uk/blog/cutting-marking-time-in-half/>

My blog for the Department for Education (DfE)

<https://teaching.blog.gov.uk/author/david-lowbridge-ellis/>

Coverage in Schools Week

<https://schoolweek.co.uk/school-where-staff-mark-how-they-like-gets-government-approval/>

For information about the DfE's workload events:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload/reducing-teachers-workload>

## Staff Well-being at All Saints' CE VA Junior and Infant School, Halifax

### Mark Sharp

Emotional welfare is a top priority for us at All Saints'. It is weaved through everything we do and every strategic decision we make. Our motto, '*Let it Shine*', is truly representative of the whole school community and we pride ourselves in the culture and ethos we've established.

The best thing for students is a happy, motivated staff. By ensuring they are well nurtured, stimulated and challenged in their roles, you are doing the best you can for your students.

Luckily, our school is part of a successful cluster of schools that have invested energy on improving wellbeing of staff and pupils, with successful outcomes being met. Within the cluster, best practice and resources are shared to ensure all schools are working effectively. This high level of collaboration has impacted greatly on staff wellbeing through the vast CPD opportunities it has offered. It is crucial to invest in purposeful CPD. We offer INSET training, led by professional mental health experts, focussing on staff and pupil wellbeing workshops. Furthermore, we offer staff access to a life-coach and encourage staff to follow wellbeing blogs, such as [www.hugablog.co.uk](http://www.hugablog.co.uk). To further support CPD, we have established 'peer teaching teams' to develop teaching and learning standards and each term dedicate staff meeting time to 'reflection'. Here, teachers showcase 'What's going well?' and 'What can we do without?' and necessary adjustments are proactively made.

Moreover, one of our INSET days is dedicated to staff wellbeing, aptly named 'Wellbeing Day'. Here, all staff members are encouraged to spend this day doing something they enjoy, be it retail therapy, a trip to the local spa or a day out with the family. By providing staff with this extraordinary opportunity, we have automatically started/concluded a term on a high note – where the value of all our staff is first priority. It's also lovely to share photographs and stories from the 'Wellbeing Day' and create a staff notice board to share these memories. Alongside this, we have a staff 'Shout Out' display and whenever a staff member does something 'Wow' or helps someone with a task, the staff member writes a quick note of thanks and displays it for all to see. We have found that this has had a positive effect on confidence and self-esteem – staff, like pupils, deserve praise, too! At every opportunity, seek out staff and tell them how well they have done to instantly improve their day!

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Let your colleagues pursue exciting things to nourish their lives. Use Performance Management meetings to gain a deeper insight into the hopes for the future of your staff. Embrace learning opportunities within school (e.g. Masters, SLE and NPQ qualifications). By developing others, you are directly supporting their wellbeing.

We feel very strongly about promoting healthy lifestyles in school, thus, created a staff exercise session, led by our Sports Coach, at the end of each week. These sessions are designed around the needs of the staff and vary from HIIT workouts to Yoga! As a school that prides itself in the array of Performing Arts experiences we provide for the children (including a Musical Theatre group and a choir that have secured the opportunity to sing live on Wembley Stage in March!), our Musician-in-Residence has also organised a staff choir. This opportunity to enjoy music, away from the pressures of the career, has worked wonders on staff wellbeing and has helped create a supportive sense of community. The children love to see the staff singing, too, and the songs link wonderfully with the school's Core Values.

Our school's Leadership Team is very understanding and accommodating to the needs of the staff. Christian Values are instilled in the whole school community, so whenever it's necessary, the HR guidance is left to one side in the event of a staff member needing to have an emergency appointment, funeral of a loved one, a child's first nativity, amending a staff member's contact to suit changes in circumstance etc. At the end of the day, our staff members all have lives outside of school and as a school we celebrate this. It's the thought that counts, not the cost. It's all about being treated like a human being – a professional – who sometimes just needs an empathetic ear.

We would advise setting up a 'Wellbeing Committee'. The school's Governing Body has recently appointed a Working Party to lead on staff wellbeing, with representatives from all areas of the school. This has proved a successful way to monitor the impact of any changes without the pressure falling at the Senior Management's feet. Our wellbeing is also important.

We feel it is also important to encourage moments of celebration. Celebrating our Support and Office Staff in an annual celebration, providing staff awards alongside children's awards, organising end-of-term celebrations with a prosecco reception, topping-up the staff room with biscuits and cakes (once January is out of the way!), preparing a feast in the staffroom, sending flowers to staff for different occasions ... all simple, yet effective, ways to show appreciation. The Governors have recently agreed to alter the timings of some of the school

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holidays, too, so that our staff can enjoy a longer break in the Spring and even utilise the opportunity for a cheaper getaway with their family and friends.

Issuing regular staff surveys has allowed us to ease workload pressures. We've stripped-back the school's marking and feedback policy and the requirements for planning. We are firm believers in not 'doing things for the sake of it' or 'to tick a box' if there's no direct impact seen on the front line. This has led to improved time management. Also, placing restrictions to when it is acceptable to email staff directly on an evening/weekend has recently been introduced. We whole-heartedly believe that our staff were feeling pressured into having to reply instantly to an email at 10pm. We appreciate that teachers deserve lives, too, and some necessary headspace away from the job. This would not be accepted in any other career, so why in this one?

As a school, we are happy with the systems in place that promote staff (and pupil) wellbeing. It shines through our curriculum and everything we do. Having recently become a Strategic Partner of the Carnegie School of Education at Leeds Beckett University, we look forward to continually developing our practice and supporting the research of the future.

Mark Sharp

Headteacher

## Retrospective Evidence of the Impact of Family Engagement in Children's development

### Moira Hunt

This paper aims to evidence impact of family engagement in the context of practical application of research and theory. It recounts the experiences of a number of children who attended one primary school, in various year groups, between 2003 and 2014. Their parents were actively engaged by the school to become involved in their children's learning and development.

The work was undertaken on the basis of research carried out over two decades predominantly in UK and USA, which also influenced Government policy in education particularly in the years 2003 – 2010. It followed the introduction of a number of national initiatives e.g. Keeping up with the children and the Shared Reading programme, but did not follow any set guidelines.

*PTA UK 2016 Emma Williams*

*The research is unequivocal – parental involvement in their child's education improves outcomes. Parents are key partners and are also an important resource for schools. The critical role that Mums, dads and carers play in supporting their child's learning needs to be better understood and taken more seriously by the Government, by schools and by parents themselves.*

The work was essentially a response to a particular, school situation. It was a new school opening in an area of Bradford UK, which served 98% south Asian population and where there had recently been considerable unrest and 'riots'. The new school location was unpopular and the parent body as a whole felt excluded from the local, established primary school, which many of them had attended as children arriving in the country. This school had become over subscribed.

In this situation, there was a need to win over hearts and minds. This involved convincing parents that the new school had the expertise and commitment to teach their children and provide adequate physical and human resources. It also involved gaining the trust and confidence of the wider community.

*Goodall J et al. 2010 Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement. Department of Education*

*Schools, which successfully engage parents, make use of a broad understanding of parental engagement, and their parental engagement strategies accord with the interpretations and values of the parents they are aimed at. Parental engagement with children's learning is effectively supported when parents receive clear, specific and targeted information from schools.*

Every opportunity was taken to make the school building open and accessible. National funding from 'Extended Schools' was supplemented by funding raised by the school from community funding and the national lottery.

The activities, which were provided, included:

- Shared reading, sewing, painting, cookery, language classes other than English,
- Specific curriculum support e.g. phonics, maths
- Additional activities for children– after school sports / swimming / crafts / games etc also at weekends
- Parent workshops and classroom visits to support areas of the curriculum
- Family outings at weekends and holidays
- Parent classes e.g. Family Links where parents were encouraged to share common challenges and learn how to support their children emotionally and with positive behaviour strategies.

*Castro et al. 2015. Parental Involvement on Student academic achievement: A Meta-Analysis*

*The results show that the parental models most linked to high achievement are those focusing on general supervision of the children's learning activities. The strongest associations are found when the families have high academic expectations for their children, develop and maintain communication with them about school activities, and help them to develop reading habits.*

The school staffing structure included a full time and a part time post designated to work with parents and families. Parents and family members were invited to join in lessons, see visiting providers e.g. music and theatre performances, join in parties, go out on visits etc. A regular playgroup was established and workshops and coffee mornings were provided to enable mothers, particularly, to meet socially as many had very limited social contact.

Fathers were included and many attended school assemblies, celebrations and some specific activities with their children were provided e.g. construction activity sessions, sports sessions. Every opportunity was taken to support a holistic approach to parent and family involvement aiming to benefit all who were involved by building confidence and resilience to thrive within the education system and within the wider community.

The academic benefit has been demonstrated in the long-term achievement of pupils who attended the school. The following summaries of interviews with parents and ex -pupils after 14 years from the opening of the school tell a compelling story. The oldest sibling in each family entered the school in Year 2, when the school opened, after a disturbed experience in Reception and Year 1, which involved many supply teachers and very poor relationships between parents and school. All three families were registered on free school meals and would be regarded as 'disadvantaged'.

*Deforges, C and Abouchaar, A 2003. The Impact of Parental involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review.*

*In summary, the general impact of parental involvement seems to work in support of pupil attainment across all ethnic groups so far studied. Parental involvement, especially in the form of parental values and aspirations modeled in the home, is a major force shaping pupils' achievement and adjustment. The precise details of how values are conceived and expressed are located in the ethnic culture of the family.*

Safina came to school as the single parent of two boys with a daughter in a different nursery setting. She attended meetings for parents and after a short time was employed as a lunch time supervisor, initially temporarily and later permanently. Her language skills were poor as she had received no formal schooling in Pakistan. Her eldest boy (in Year 2) was lively, with little interest in learning. The younger boy was in the reception class.

She was employed as a cleaner and gradually became a respected member of staff and a positive link with a wary community. As time went on she also took on the roll of community caretaker for weekend and holiday activities that took place in school. Always hardworking and conscientious she eventually took on the roll of school housekeeper.

The younger children, now including her daughter, had a more positive interest in school and learning, the elder boy exhibited challenging behaviour throughout the primary years, although he was very likeable.

Meeting them again recently it was clear that Safina's association with school had influenced them all positively as they had moved on to the secondary phase. Her daughter described how they viewed school and respected school staff as a result of their mother's presence in school and also the reassurance that she was aware of their challenges and difficulties. She was not able to help them directly with much of their homework etc as she was still unable to read or write anything more than functional forms etc. However, her daughter also expressed very ably the balance between being supported and the need to become independent, to 'find your own way about' and be confident to 'find out what you need to know'. She told me of her brother's experiences of being bullied at school, his initial aggressive responses and his eventual decision to 'get his head down' and do well.

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All three young people have matured and achieved well despite many apparent disadvantages. The boys are both at University and work part time to support the family income. The older boy holds a joint mortgage with Safina for the family home. The daughter is in sixth form and has secured places in her universities of choice for September. Safina is grateful to the school for all the support her family received and continues to receive, she is also justifiably, exceedingly proud of her children's achievements.

Saima came to school as a young mother with her daughter in year 2 and her son in year 1. She enlisted in the volunteer group and became involved in many of the school activities. She was educated in Bradford but her own school performance was weak and it was as she attended courses and workshops at school that she began to be interested in taking her own learning seriously. As time went on and as her two younger boys grew she took a L2 course as a teaching assistant, initiated by the school in conjunction with a local college, followed by a L3 course. She initially found part time work and is now in full time employment in another local school.

She reflects positively on the years when she was involved in her children's school; the fund raising by the volunteers benefited the school and local charities and provided social contact. She also feels that it was this involvement that supported her children to succeed as they moved on. She spoke particularly of her eldest son who was identified as having learning needs. "Who would have thought it?" she laughed as she described his success in taking a level 3 qualifications in Electrical Engineering and securing a job with a utilities company.

Her other children have also done well. Her daughter is now in the third year of her degree course reading Behavioural Science and the two boys in year 8 and year 9 are both in their school's top assessment band and predicted to achieve well at GCSE.

The third parent is Shazia who also became involved in the early days of the work at the school and was a founding member of the volunteer group. She was a young mother with a

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son in Year 2, a son in Year 1 and a younger daughter. She expressed her warm gratitude for the welcome given to parents and the opportunities they were given to be involved in their children's learning and to understand what was expected of them. She contrasted this with the difference she found when the family relocated and her youngest, fourth child attended a different school. Her husband was also involved in the programme run for Dads and this helped him, coming into the country, to understand the school system and enabled him to support their children.

Her eldest son has secured a full time job after completing a 2 year apprenticeship in IT. She describes him as not very academic and too 'laid back' but with the resilience to hold down a part time job and be invited to take it up full time. The second son, always more studious, is now in his first year of a University course in Law. Her daughter is currently working at A Level after getting excellent GCSE results and the third son is also progressing well in school.

These are three examples of families who were statistically classified as disadvantaged. They are not the only success stories but are examples of those who, from the earliest days of the school's work, were involved in a wide range of activities and reflect on their own experiences as having positive impact on their children's experience of the education system when there was clear potential for disaffection.

These results were not immediately evident. They did not attend a reading course and boost their child's performance in 12 weeks! They gradually came to understand the value and importance of learning for themselves and their children and this has had impact far beyond an 'intervention'. It has had impact on them for life.

**References**

*Castro et al, 2015, Parental Involvement on Student Academic Achievement*

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*Goodall, J et al. 2010 Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement. Department of Education*

*Williams, E 2016 PTA UK and Parent Councils UK Join Forces to Promote Parental Engagement in Schools*

*Joseph Rowntree Foundation Analysis on Deprivation and Early Years 2016 'Life Chances Postcode Lottery'*

## **A systems thinking investigation into the rise in mental health and wellbeing issues in UK secondary schools with particular reference to same-age systems: a call for more research**

**Peter A. Barnard**

### **Abstract**

Schools find themselves in a time of significant but superficial change. These might be described in general terms as follows:

- Traditional stand-alone schools are being subsumed into school chains and multi-academy trusts (MATs).
- There is intense pressure on teachers exerted through a focus on improvement and intense accountability.
- The curriculum is narrowing in favour of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), sometimes with applied art or applied mathematics (STEAM).
- The demand for pro-social programmes is increasing (PSHE) amid concerns about social behaviour, dispositions to learning, and wellbeing (grit, resilience, a can-do mindset, and character).
- The need for higher test scores is driving both method (pedagogy) and purpose (gaming).
- There is a decline in both parent partnership and governance amid the breakdown of a disenfranchised community.
- An increase in deliverology style management including a silent cull of Headteachers.
- Problem with teacher workload, recruitment and retention, and funding.

All of the above are connected to a 30-year process of New Public Management which has seen schools and teachers increasingly viewed and measured as units of economic production. The one aspect of schools that hasn't changed in 150 years is the inherited same-age system. This system governs how schools operate and how the learning and teaching work is done; hence the description of change (bulleted) as significant but superficial. While the underlying management system used by schools hasn't changed, it has grown more and more complicated (not more complex) over time. There has been no

fundamental change to the same-age system of organisation employed by schools, a design construct considered benign. This paper suggests the opposite is the case.

From a systems perspective, the school is now an organisation under considerable pressure to up its game regarding performance as measured by high stakes testing; in effect, schools are being stress tested. Unfortunately, the 150-year-old same-age system designed to sift, sort, and batch –a process dependent on separation and limitation –still dominates management methodology and leadership. It was never designed for the challenges schools now face, and it is to the credit of schools and their staff that they are coping so well despite the use of such this received management model.

However, the collateral damage to the health of students and practitioners is increasingly evident and sufficient for government intervention. It should be expected that government, having spotted a problem that is adding to the crisis in the National Health Service, should intervene. It should also be expected that the means of intervention is one likely to increase complications and costs and this is precisely what is about to happen.

The focus of this paper is wellbeing, and the author claims no expertise in this area. However, many years of working with schools wishing to change from the traditional same-age system to a mixed-age system suggest that the blanket application of same-age organisational practice universally common in secondary schools, is a –perhaps *the* – primary cause of the epidemic of wellbeing and mental health issues schools are facing. This includes bullying, disillusionment, a retention and recruitment crisis, belonging issues, low morale, and many forms of mental illness among young people and staff including depression and self-harm. This might be described as the inadvertent collateral damage of the same-age system; perhaps the unintended consequences of an inability to grasp the essentials of systems thinking and systemic change.

To understand what is happening from a systems thinking perspective requires an examination of the school as a system, not its component parts. I explore the idea of two different approaches to school management and leadership from a systems thinking perspective. These organisational ideologies or systems are described in general terms by schools as follows:

- a) The same-age system is the dominant traditional and universal model where both classroom groups and tutor groups or homeroom groups are peer-based (same-age groups);

- b) The mixed-age system which schools call vertical tutoring (VT) describes a model where tutor groups are populated by students from across the age spectrum (mixed-age groups).

I shall refer to my own extensive experiences and research in supporting over 350 schools during their transition process from same-age organisation to mixed-age organisation, a silent transformation that has until now, flown mostly under the research radar. Extensive feedback from schools that have made the transition from a same-age system to a mixed-age system (Barnard 2010, 2013, 2015, 2018) reveals these two very different operational systems.

There is a third system, increasingly rare, in which all groups (classes and tutor groups) are mixed-age. However, high stakes testing by age has taken its toll of this model and research in this area appears to have decreased significantly. A fundamental purpose of this paper is to illustrate how these seemingly benign age-related changes determine larger system practices.

During the last ten years, a significant number of UK schools have made the transition from same-age to mixed-age organisation (estimated at between 300-400 –there are no published figures), in parallel with schools in New Zealand and Australia where mixed-age systems are relatively common practice. The reasons for this shift are mostly unreported as are the lessons about system change that schools have learned during the process of transition. This paper is an attempt at recording the nature of the change process, the reasons behind it, the outcomes achieved, and what can go wrong without a sufficiently broad systems understanding of the change process (systems thinking) and its implications. The connection to the health of system participants will be highlighted.

This paper proposes that the same-age school is the inadvertent but direct cause of the decline in wellbeing. A key concern of this paper is to expose assumptions about both the same-age and mixed-age system using feedback from the many schools that have already made the transition.

### **Methodology**

I will refer to work undertaken over twenty years with hundreds of secondary schools located mainly in the UK. This in-depth work and research with schools teams and the generous

feedback they have offered have enabled a detailed view of how the two systems operate and what constitutes best and worst practices. Put together, the accumulation of school experiences and practitioner expertise provides an idealised system template for schools making the transition from one system to another, against which any school ideas and concerns can be tested and shared (table 1, below).

This close association with same-age schools in the field choosing to abandon the same-age model reveals strikingly similar system flaws, assumptions, and characteristics. This paper uses the narrative of schools that have made a successful transition to explain why same-age methodology is so damaging and why it should be abandoned. The research (below), stems from in-depth structured conversations with schools pre and post-transition and is loosely based on freezing, cognitive change, and refreezing (Kurt Lewin, 1890-1947) and ideas on force-field analysis. I also used the PDCA Cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act) of W. Edwards Deming as it developed between 1986-1993 (Moen, 2009).

A systems thinking approach is not concerned with separate system elements as such (e.g. curriculum, teachers, leadership, etc.) but with how the system is connected and the assumptions in use. This includes examining how and what information is gathered to make successful interventions and support for learning. This qualitative, phenomenological approach and use of case-studies involves observation, short open-ended questionnaires, in-depth structured discussions with key actors (the leadership team, parents, all staff (teaching and non-teaching), and samples of students undertaken both before transition and after).

The process usually begins with a structured conversation with the Leadership Team lasting three hours. The initiative to change springs from schools themselves and a realisation that the same-age approach seems unable to cope in current circumstances. Schools view this change very narrowly as a change to their pastoral system rather than the complete system change it is. The school is actually taking the first step towards a viable systems model (VSM). The structured meeting is an opportunity for the leadership team to explain the following:

- a) The school's current same-age system and how it works;
- b) The school's rationale and assumptions;
- c) The school's explanation for change and
- d) The school's ideas for organisational change including personnel issues gleaned from the school's research including any visits to other schools.

Significant on-going support was given to schools by telephone and email throughout the transition process involving personnel issues such as staff appointments and job profiles, system redesign, and process smoothing. Where possible, follow up research was undertaken following transition to gauge the degree of success and discuss any ongoing challenges and lessons learned. Many schools voluntarily offered encouraging feedback on their progress and in particular the positive changes to learning relationships in the school.

The transformation process is described using the narrative of actors as the means of analysis and the systemic phenomenon studied. Working with different stakeholder groups (actors) to ascertain system connectivity enables these group narratives to be cross-checked for validity and clarification of meaning exposing any same-age system assumptions. This allows the case studies to '...retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events such as ...organisational and managerial processes...' (Yin, 1994:13) and follows the interpretive research approach (Myers et al., 1998) and the ontological view of reality as a social construction. The paper intends to increase school understanding of social and organisational issues relating to whole system change and avoid collateral damage to mental health.

The school studies are categorized for the sake of this research as social information exchange systems whereby different groups are actively involved in a learning and teaching support process (a system). The school is seen as an organisation engaged in a process (Klein and Myers, 1999) where any restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are revealed. It is a *de facto* imperative that schools have a full understanding beyond intuition of both the same-age tutor system it is abandoning and the one (VT) it is designing and intends to operate as its new management system. This reduces the likelihood of the vestiges of existing same-age practice being carried forward into the new system. Schools see the transition as one that is liberating and one that offers greater scope for realising human potential (Alvesson and Wilmott, 1992: Hirschheim and Klein, 2012), in part through enhanced learning and support relationships arising from the collaborative potential of actors (parents, staff, and students). The research follows a systems thinking approach to enable ease of definition (below), a broad narrative, and the avoidance of reductionist approaches likely to divert attention from holistic change.

In summary, this paper shows that the conventional same-age system in use is not a benign construct but one that is causing considerable collateral damage and complications, and one that schools need to abandon.

## Keywords and Definitions

Systems; leverage points; self-organisation; same-age system; mixed-age system; tutors and tutor time; failure demand.

**Systems:** A system is taken to be a group of people who are '*connected in a way that results in a distinct pattern of behaviour over time*' (Meadows, 2009). This can result in a good or bad system regarding human outcomes, learning, and the goal of goodness. An ineffective system might follow the definition but still not work that well as a system if, for example, it gave rise to (say) bullying, poor outcomes, or loss of staff wellbeing. Others, (Wheatley, 1999) bring out a distinction. *Living systems* like schools should arise from a human need to connect and to ensure meaningful lives. Wheatley disputes whether schools can be called systems; this is because of their need to satisfy too many self-interest reducing any consensus regarding values and purpose. Stafford Beer (1988) cut to the quip with POSIWID (the purpose of a system is what it does). This may be interpreted as follows: if the system is one that is limiting, separational and makes people ill, then this is what the system does; this is the system's purpose! For simplicity Meadow's definition is used to embrace all schools as being (living) systems. Hence, reference is made to a same-age system and a mixed-age system regardless of their effectiveness and outcomes.

**A leverage point** in systems terminology is a place in a system where a small change can result in a domino effect across the organisation leading to fundamental change. It is possible to act on teachers for example, but keep the school as a collaborative system the same. A leverage point has to be a place that governs system behaviour. This paper, in the absence of other contenders including technology, argues that designation by age is the significant leverage point of system change in a school.

**Self-organisation** is a system's ability to adapt, innovate and build new structures; to evolve.

In simplistic terms, **the same-age system** is one where tutor groups are populated with students of the same age (peers). The **mixed-age system** (that schools call vertical tutoring or VT) is one where tutor groups are mixed by age according to the combined model discovered through best practice and set out in the table below. **The tutors are** taken to be the persons who accept general responsibility for the wellbeing and pastoral care of these groups in both systems. They see their charges every day, have pastoral and academic oversight, and share essential home-school liaison responsibilities.

**Failure demand** occurs when an issue or service to customers is not dealt with sufficiently or appropriately. I interpret this for schools as an inability to intervene or deal with social or learning problems when needed. This causes more reworking and support downstream and even beyond school causing costs to rise as demand increases.

### **Literature Review of Same-Age and Mixed-Age Groups**

I noted a sample of Ofsted Reports (Best, 2012) that make specific reference to VT regarding pastoral care most of which are positive. To date, VT has not, as far as I can glean, been mentioned in any Annual Report by HMCI of Schools and seems to be regarded as a minor pastoral change peculiar to some schools rather than the leverage point for systemic change indicated (table below). It is fair to conclude that there is very little in the way of UK research regarding mixed-age tutor groups apart from explanatory narratives offered by schools online. Because of this, I have resorted in part to US research where there has been a long tradition of mixed-age work focusing on the academic effects and challenges of same-age and mixed-age classroom groups.

I shall also reflect on my work with hundreds of schools over twenty years. This has involved intensive work with leadership teams, parents, staff and students regarding the transition from one system to another (Barnard; 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2018).

In the UK, schools organised on a mixed-age basis report increased benefits such as greater personalisation, family structures, and mentoring and leadership opportunities (Kent and Kay, 2016). The many Heads who still liaise with me describe the change (when done successfully and with systems care) as life-changing. They note that staff and students have welcomed the initiative and report advantages such as extended mixed-age friendship patterns, a decline in bullying and exclusions, an increase in mentoring and support, raised self-esteem, increased empathy and self-esteem, and a better atmosphere.

The importance of strong and weak-tie theory and practice (Granovetter, 1973) expressed in mixed-age friendship groups is seen as particularly advantageous by the schools I studied and with the many leadership teams with whom I worked.

Song et al (2009) wrote:

The benefits (perceived and real) of the idealized model of the multiage program are many, including: helping to develop students' social, emotional, and verbal skills and self-esteem;

enabling students to learn at their own pace; building a caring child-centered and project-based learning environment; and improving student attitudes toward school and school work, which results in increased attendance, etc.

It seems that schools that have transitioned to mixed-age tutor time (VT) have avoided the perceived complications of mixed-age classroom teaching—now decimated by age-related testing—but have nevertheless reaped the advantages of social gains and improved learning relationships between actors offered through dedicated mixed-age tutor time. The advantages of multi-age approaches from social learning theory (Stone, 2009) include learning from children who are both novices and experts, developing intellectual and communication skills, encouraging co-operation, and leadership development and (presumably) a concurrent increase in self-esteem.

Some schools (untrained in systems approaches) decide to omit Y7 (11-12 yr. olds) from vertical tutoring arguing (and assuming) that they need a degree of protection. Most schools, however, include Y7 and claim these students to be significant beneficiaries of mixed-age grouping; even so schools should note that care has to be taken with numbers to avoid 'social insecurity' (Cornish, 2015). It is argued (Bronfenbrenner, 1970), that the concentration of same-age peer groups is a major factor in aggressive, antisocial, and destructive acts in the US. Similarly, Salmivalli's (2009) meta-review of peer-group bullying indicates that the classroom populated by same-age peers is not as safe as schools assume.

The group (i.e., classroom) in which bullying takes place differs from many social groups in an important respect: the membership is involuntary, which means that the victim cannot easily escape his or her situation. The other group members cannot just leave, either. Although students cannot choose their classmates, social selection processes (Kandel, 1978) take place within classrooms, resulting in cliques and friendship dyads that consist of similar others. (p. 116)

Even in mixed-age organisation, group membership is involuntary and has to be decided with considerable care, expertise, and knowledge of individuals. There is mounting evidence that bullying is very much a group process (O'Connell, 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton and Smith, 1999). Given that most schools as organisations are based entirely on peer group structures, it can be argued that this provides the perfect seedbed for bullying to occur. The question then arises as to why schools should choose to ignore research, social psychology, and child development, and continue to use the same-age system as the basis for communication, relational development, and organization. Any answer can only appeal to

a combination of tradition, misinterpretation, and assumption. The research strongly infers that same-age groups may be harmful to a child's development and certainly restrictive, and puts at risk the social and psychological development of young people for the convenience of testing by age.

Because mixed-age groups maintain their core relationships throughout schooling, it is suggested (Marler, 1976; Sherman, 1980) that this sense of belonging acts to promote prosocial behaviour and reduces aggression. Today, schools are under severe pressure to incorporate technical pro-social programmes covering wellbeing, resilience, grit, and character development within a curriculum already under pressure. The argument here is that these attributes and dispositions may be better accrued from mixed-age design. For example, schools in the UK are being trained to deal with mental health issues (effects) rather than addressing the same-age organisational cause, further complicating schools and leading to increased costs.

Part of this issue suggests that students are not being given the developmental opportunities they need in same-age schools. For example, children given leadership responsibilities for others assist the teacher and provide role models for others (Lougee and Grazino, 1985) indicating that ideas and dispositions involving character are better designed-in than added-on as programmes for perceived character deficits. William Miller (1995) of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District of Ann Arbor, Michigan, notes that "Educators have merely accepted the age-graded organizational structure as a way of doing things within the system of public education. As our society has changed, so must our schools."

The wide-ranging overview of McClellan et al (1999), notes that the interest in social behaviour is of importance because of its role in cognitive development (Rogoff, 1990; Tizard, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). While the dominant universal school model is the factory in form (Cuban, 1989), McClellan and Kinsey note in their overview of same-age and mixed-age classrooms that same-age structures are out of kilter with neural research:

...there is increasing evidence that this model is inconsistent with a wealth of recent research on the developing human brain (Caine & Caine, 1991; Huttenlocher, 1990; Kandel & Hawkins, 1992; Squire, 1992) and the kinds of educational strategies that bring about optimal learning and development. Ample research (see Ames, 1992; Johnson, Johnson, Johnson-Holubee, & Roy, 1984; Johnson, 1991; McClellan, 1994) demonstrates that children think more, learn more, remember more, take greater pleasure in learning, spend more time on task, and are more productive than in individualistic or competitive structures.

Many schools see mixed-age tutor groups as ideal preparation for the development of student leadership and mentoring. This is consistent with evidence (Fuchs et al., 1996) that in these groups students are more effective in facilitating cognitive growth in others and in helping others to solve problems (social and intellectual). In the research literature it is difficult to find a dissenting view with regard to the considerable social and cognitive advantages of mixed-age groups. While there is a debate surrounding the suitability and effectiveness of mixed-age classrooms (in a high stakes system), there was no contrarian view about the considerable social and learning benefits. The social and psychological basis for mixed-age groups is positive and unambiguous.

It is interesting to note that attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) is now included in some teacher training classes in the UK. To this, thought might be given to Bronfenbrenner's ideas on nested systems and his 'six principles', all of which support the mixed-age approach to child development advocated by the research above, and by those schools that have made a successful transition.

### **Research with Schools**

Concentrating on system elements cannot change the system but can make the system ultimately more moribund and unhealthy. This includes acting on teachers to improve performance, ideas like deliverology and appraisal, data dump assessments etc. This is because none of these are system leverage points. They are a means of making the same-age system at least appear to work. The same-age specification is a system lever because it sets in motion a system that continually separates and limits. It starts in the serendipity of tutor time where children find themselves in all kinds of social groups not necessarily of their choosing or suitable for them. This extends to parent partnership which is defined by the school to limit parental engagement not enhance it. One by one the links that should connect actors appear to be absent or malformed. Parents have five-minute slots with subject teachers using data sheets that help no-one other than to satisfy inspection and reporting requirements.

The mixed-age leverage point creates an entirely different management system. It connects players. During the last twenty years, I have been able to observe and work with schools on this transition process. In effect, many schools including my own, have undertaken field trials, evaluated success, made corrections, and re-trialled the mixed-age system. Those that have failed as systems have been abandoned and the features of the successful

iterations captured (table 1). The most effective VT models share the following characteristics (bulleted below) and schools that stray far from them experience problems (in effect, they fail to leave the same-age system behind and take vestiges of its assumptions and faults into the new mixed-age system).

- Tutor group size should be about 18, and there should be no more than four students from any particular age-group. (Why should tutor group size be 25-30? There is no reason!)
- Each tutor group has two tutors –a lead tutor and a co-tutor –using all staff (teaching and non-teaching). The leadership team and Headteacher should be tutors!
- Tutors do not teach programmes. In fact, the need for pro-social programmes reduces because empathy is designed in and bullying designed out.
- Heads of House are not pastoral secretaries but Heads of School and act as such.
- Tutor time is the 20 minutes before morning break, not at the beginning or end of the day (if possible).
- An academic tutorial is introduced for each child at critical learning times identified by the school. This is when tutor, child and parents meet at a convenient / agreed time for 45 minutes approx. to reflect on learning and strategies for support.
- To facilitate this, a data sheet must contain strategies (information) for improvement from each teacher as a minimum. These enable the tutor, parent and student to reflect on learning and also strategise to support progress (Team Child). Parents are engaged with learning and with a summative assessment process.
- The tutor is then in a position to support the child in tutor time personally and by engaging older students.

This is a complex system as opposed to a complicated one and schools may think this increases workload. In fact, what it does is massively reduce failure demand (obstacles to learning that need extra work); it connects the system to more of itself. When children feel looked after and a sense of family, collaboration and community return to the school, wellbeing improves. In essence, our young people do not have a character problem, and neither do they lack grit and resilience; they merely require a system that genuinely cherishes them and supports their learning needs. VT corrects this and depends upon collaboration to be effective. Empathy is designed in as is citizenship.

Any system incongruities and assumptions must be exposed if the same-age system is to be unlearned. System examination of the pre-transition model involves following the experiences of actors (their reality) as they interact with the system. These are compared with the leadership team's assumptions regarding how the same-age system operates and the purposes claimed for the school. The result is the left-hand-side of Table 1 below. The RHS of the table is a design brief gleaned from schools that have made a successful, often life-changing transition.

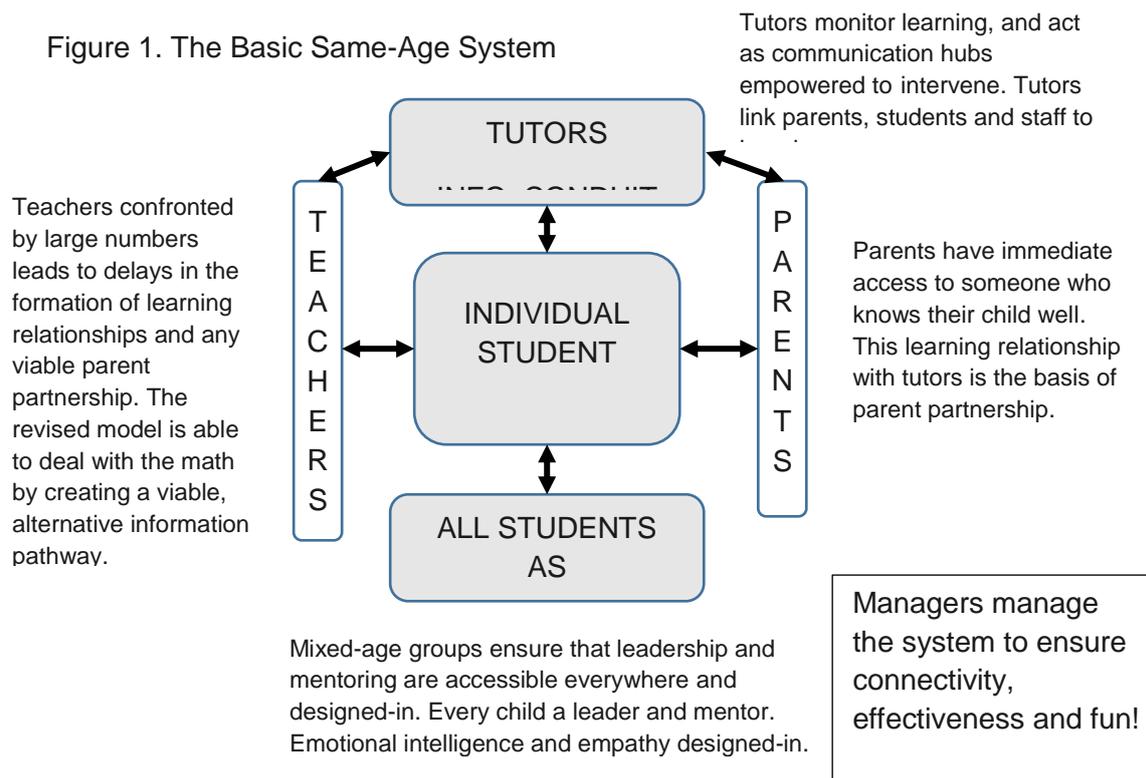
**Table 1. Research into Same-Age and Mixed-Age Systems (Barnard, 2018).**

COMPLICATED STRUCTURES	COMPLEX STRUCTURE
<b>Same-age organisational base (linear)</b>	<b>Mixed-age organisational base (non-linear)</b>
Low student leadership opportunities	Every child a leader
Low mentoring opportunities	Every child a mentor and mentee
Learning relationships slow to develop	Learning relationships formed immediately
Disobedient of child psychology	In line with child psychology
Values assumed (logistics driven)	Values-driven (driven by individual need)
Tutors and tutoring as low status	Tutors and tutoring critically important
Peer group pressure sometimes negative/risky	Groups balanced by mixed-age, supportive
Information-out system	Interconnected communications
Tutor isolated from learning process	Tutor as the communications hub of learning
Data sheet reporting	Reports rich in strategies for improvement
Variable emotional/spiritual intelligence	High EQ (empathy) and SQ designed-in
Low co-construction and personalization	Co-construction & personalization designed-in
High on rules, referrals, procedures, meetings	High on problem-solving at source
Non-ecological, emergent, self-organising	High innovation, self-organising, emergent
Command system, top-down	Leading from the edge; servant/leadership
Weak parent partnership; added-on	Strong parent partnership designed-in

Emphasis -formative assessment for Learning	Formative & extended summative assessment
High potential for bullying / poor behaviour	Low potential for negative behaviour
School causal in mental health issues	Child psychology designed-in and supported
High need for add-ons / fixes & programs	PSHE designed-in via networked relationships
High in management inefficiency and cost	Self-organizing and efficient. Lower costs.
Low on information and flow	High information traffic and flow
Command-and-control approach	Systems thinking approach

NB It should be no surprise that the same-age system is not coping well with increased demand. Rather than connecting to more of itself, it is disconnecting. This is creating a loss of belonging and collaborative learning relationships. Management ideas from industry add to the disconnectedness focusing on managing teachers and changing leadership rather than managing the system. As problems accrue, so the school has to resort to pro-social programmes (all it knows) but this adds to complications and costs. Time diminishes. The mixed-age system reconnects the players (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. The Basic Same-Age System



### The Narrative of Schools Pre-Transition.

Schools considering a mixed-age transition are already having doubts as to the effectiveness of Year or Grade systems (same-age structure). Schools report having to be confident on two matters needed to make a successful transition from a same-age system to a mixed-age system. The first is to fully understand the same-age system in use and why it doesn't work in the way assumed. Without this understanding, the same-age system cannot be sufficiently unlearned which means vestiges of failed ideas and received wisdom are carried forward often with disastrous consequences. Here are examples:

- Only having a single tutor per group;
- Not reducing tutor group size and having too many students (5+) from a given year group;
- Allowing too much choice to students re friendships; (causes problems and not necessary)
- The failure of the senior staff and leadership team to return to tutoring;
- Giving tutors pro-social programmes to teach;
- Giving too much time to the tutor period (20-25 minutes per day is sufficient);
- Placing tutor time at the start or end of the day;

## Leeds Beckett University

- Not changing the assessment and reporting system to engage parents, students and tutors.
- Believing the school is changing the pastoral system alone.
- Not training and enabling tutors to take interventions and decisions.

The risk of error is high! All of the above undermine collaborative and supportive learning relationships or delay their formation. These are matters of wellbeing and mental health and far from the psychology of Bowlby, Bronfenbrenner, and Maslow.

Second, schools must have clarity regarding the mixed-age system they are about to implement and its design principles (above); e.g. how parents are engaged, the assessment information needed by actors; how information flows; how power moves to the organisational edge; how the tutor becomes the centre of learning; how the school self-manages and learns; how interventions occur; how a House is like a school (nested system) etc. This is a complex system built on trust and responsibility.

Without exception each of the hundreds of school leadership teams with whom I've worked made the following claims (true beliefs) when in same-age mode:

- We rate our valuable partnership with parents highly.
- We genuinely care about our students.
- We believe in the students' voice.
- We support form tutors.
- We send home useful information about student progress.
- We abhor bullying and have strategies to ensure it doesn't happen.

### **The Case of Parent Partnership**

Schools truly believed these things until confronted with the voices of students, parents, and how the same-age system works (an essential part of unlearning). In every case, parent partnership had been undermined by simplification (trying to control complexity rather than engaging it). Data-sheet reports gave parents insufficient information besides being misleading to learners; strategies for improvement were absent. This is incongruent with research. My own research revealed that above all, parents wanted someone in the school who knew their child well, someone they could talk to.

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A recent survey of 7,200 public schools by Rice University showed that only 34% of parents were satisfied with family and community engagement. 46% of parents reported satisfaction with school communication; 45% said parent-teacher conferences suit their schedules; 44% said that schools explained clearly how their child is graded. Parents rated family and community engagement as the primary driver of satisfaction with their child's school. Family and community engagement in learning outweighed the views of principals who assumed good teaching and extra-curricular activities were highest among parent demands. The report concluded that parents are anxious to be actively involved and engaged and the need for collaboration and belonging was high. (Source: Collaborative for Customer-Based Execution and Strategy Benchmark. K-12 School Study, Rice University, 2017).

It was possible for a child to go through each and every one of the same-age schools visited without ever sitting down with someone who knew them well, with parents/carers present, to discuss useful information about their learning in a supportive manner with unlimited time. I could find no evidence that the systems used by schools (rolling counselling and mentoring, closure days for consultation, subject evenings) worked sufficiently well or had the EQ needed. Same-age schools do care but are unable to express care as a supportive learning and teaching system should.

### **Recommendations:**

1. That systems thinking is incorporated into all university leadership programmes and teacher training.
2. That schools reconsider same-age v. mixed-age systems as a matter of urgency.
3. That further research is conducted into those schools that follow the system guidance (above) gleaned from successful mixed-age schools.

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# Counting the cost? The impact of mental health and wellbeing when funding is short

Jonathan Beckett

## Abstract

This qualitative research underlines the importance of the knowledge of mental health and wellbeing in a time in which funding to schools and social care has been cut.

Rates of referrals of suspected mental health issues are increased and some staff felt as though they did not have the knowledge to recognise or help those suffering with mental ill health.

This work highlights the specific need for more funding and increased awareness and training in mental health. In the wake of cuts and enhanced pressure will undoubtedly mean increased numbers of young people being referred to mental health provision, which is already overstretched. Moreover, this work argues for a revision of whole school policies and practices to promote positive mental well-being, seeking to nip issues in the bud, provide a referent point of contact and support those in distress.

**Key words** Mental health; wellbeing; funding; Special Educational Needs.

## Introduction

The move towards increasing mental health awareness in schools has come out of reports that more needs to be done in schools to help the most vulnerable students (Young Minds, 2017). One of the most salient issues at present is the lack of sufficient funding; in particular, the difficulties headteachers are facing with managing the day-to-day running of schools with deficit budgets. Consequently, the allocation of provision for mental wellbeing

can be side-lined in place of ensuring a sufficient number of teachers are available and some resources are deployed. Ross (2017) writes:

*Cash-strapped schools are cutting mental health services such as counsellors and pastoral provision as they try to cover funding gaps, two influential groups of MPs have said.*

Pells (2017) notes the extremity of the situation at present; that research suggests that even in four-year olds there are signs of mental health issues. Moreover, of those surveyed in the article, Pells notes that staff reported seeing signs of mental health issues in over one third of primary aged children.

The pressure that many students are facing from the moment they begin school has appeared to increase year on year and deepen and be entrenched (Dunford, 2017). The introduction of the New Curriculum in 2014, with a deeper focus on rigour and academic success has left some students open to feeling unsuccessful. At both primary and secondary level, pupils and students appear to be placed under excessive stress and some suffer detrimental effects as a result of this. Weale (2017) notes that primary SATS tests have contributed to what is viewed as 'high stakes' formative assessment for academic success or failure. Some pupils reported panic, sleeping disorders, losing eyelashes, anxiety disorders and tearfulness. In secondary education, as well as primary, Stone (2015) notes the over-emphasis on terminal exams and 'constant testing' likening schools to 'exam factories', which has contributed to increased student mental health issues. Furthermore, the comparison of grades between peers and the pressure to perform can lead to significant stress levels (Kyndt, 2017). This is clearly manifest in the recent English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and the introduction of the new grading system for those at Secondary school; making the highest grades, the ultimate accolade, but in the wake of this leaving many disillusioned and open to exam stress and potential mental ill health. Hamilton (2017) argues that the new GCSE is another new initiative which adversely affects both schools and students. Moreover, schools may be measured to be successful or not on account of their grades and the confusion over the conversion of the previous grades to the new grades is ambiguous. Consequently, students may feel the need to work even harder and push themselves to excessive levels, resulting in detrimental effects on their health. In light of these matters, it could be argued that more money is needed to manage the mental health issues faced by many students (Adams and Marsh, 2017).

Despite the need for more funding and specifically trained staff to help those with mental health issues, student awareness of mental health and how to help themselves and others is crucial. Howard *et al.* argue (2017:37):

*Teachers who do not have any specialist mental health and well-being training can be left to feel ill-equipped and lacking in confidence to identify and deal with a huge range of mental health and well-being issues being presented by children and young people in their everyday teaching lives.*

Investing in early intervention appears to a positive way of reducing the potential for mental health issues to reach crisis point. Thus, 'prevention is better than cure'. Moreover, training a range of staff in holistic development – looking at the whole person rather than seeing for example, attainment, behaviour and attendance in isolation, is an important aspect of pastoral care. Staff should also be trained in what to look for in mental health and know where individuals may access help and where they can be sign-posted to.

The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust (CWMT) in Berkshire is a charity set up after the death of a young man, Charlie Waller, who tragically took his own life after suffering from severe depression. CWMT helps train staff in the signs of depression and the comorbidity of other conditions as well as providing a support network for those suffering with mental ill health. By ensuring both staff and students are aware of the symptoms and where to access help, this will inevitably help reduce the number of individuals suffering. It will also empower practitioners to be pro-active in promoting positive support techniques to help those with the susceptibility to worsening mental health.

In addition, the most pertinent issue appears to be the stress of examinations and tests placed on young people today. Moreover, as noted above- 'prevention is better than cure'; although eradicating all forms of assessment would not be viable, the over-emphasis on grades and academic success can lead a sizable number of individuals developing mental health issues. I argue that steps need to be taken to balance the curriculum to a less narrow approach which honours creativity and the love of learning, without feeling the need for 'evidence' all the time and without the cyclical iterative assessment in which both staff and students feel evaluated against, creating unnecessary pressure, which is not conducive to positive mental health and wellbeing.

### **The study: Methodology**

This study involved interviewing twelve members of school staff across a range of schools in the South West. The interviews were open -ended and sought to ascertain ideas about child mental health and wellbeing. The second round of interviews consisted of interviewing three members of a social work team and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The third set of interviews involved asking four students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) namely dyslexia - for their perceptions of the education system and whether or not they felt pressurised by some of the demands placed upon them.

The life story approach provided the opportunity for participants to share their experiences. Moreover, 'All human beings are storytellers' (Fivush, 2017:243). 'Storying' through unstructured interviews allowed participants to share their views in relation to mental ill health, funding in schools and any perceived pressures upon school aged children and what might be done about it. Moreover, according to Lewis (2011) stories are made textual and help understand the lived world and help make sense of a range of factors within their lives.

Although narrative research has been critiqued for its subjectivity (Atkinson, 2010), it offers what is useful to the qualitative researcher – a biographical account of personal experiences (Erben, 1998). Within these experiences, the experiences of individuals can be placed within a broader social, political and cultural context to make sense of them (Giddens, 1991).

### **The study: Data collection and analysis**

The data demonstrate the overwhelming emotional burden young people were faced with, especially in relation to 'hothousing' students for examinations and to meet academic expectations. Moreover, one interviewee stated how she had seen an increase in mental health issues due to a range of factors. However, she was concerned about the amount of stress that was being placed students in schools.

*She stated: 'I'm greatly worried about what we are doing to our young people, those with and without dyslexia, dyspraxia, ASD, ADHD and the comorbidity of other conditions. The government has placed immense pressure on us to do well and yet pulled all the vital funding. Those with SEN I feel are affected the most, we just don't have the time and resources to invest in them. I have seen people in tears, anger and even violence ... occasionally suicidal as so mentally affected by having to access a curriculum they cannot actually access. The tools for unlocking the curriculum have been reduced to such a point*

*and support networks are minimal. I hope something will change before it's too late- however what we know is that the change often happens reactionary and is often not proactive, trying to avert disaster.'*

This respondent noted that cyclical impact of reducing services due to funding shortages- creating difficulties funding staffing and provision and in the wake of this- trying to manage the brewing calamity. For example, small group social skills for those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) has been cut and those with ASD do not have the same level of support for them to practise and manage social-communication skills- a significant area of difficulty for those with ASD (Heydt, 2017). An interesting point was that they felt that more money would not come until things reached a crisis point. Without further funding, the increased number of mental health issues may increase due to students being placed under stress without sufficient support in place.

Another responded that the number of referrals to mental health practitioners had nearly doubled in the last five years. Moreover, at least three quarters of those interviewed highlighted that they felt the system at present was over stretched and monetary issues had a significant part to play. One interviewee stated how funding was *at breaking point* '*... we are running at a 40K deficit and we have made all the cuts we can ... there really is nothing else we can save on.*'

The enhanced numbers of those with depression and generalised anxiety disorder had increased in one of the schools and CAMHS was seeing '*a lot more people*' than they had done in past years. These referrals included students who were severely stressed and those with anxiety issues, especially in relation to managing school work and preparation for examinations. Some of those seen by the school and CAMHS included those with SEN. A further point made by one of the participants was the distinctive lack of money for training and the subsequent knowledge of the signs and symptoms and the referral process. These salient issues underline the importance of the injection of further resources and rapidly training staff to be able to make referrals, signpost and support those who may be suffering with mental ill health.

At least a quarter of those interviewed suggested that the new curriculum and the associated academic pressure had impacted them adversely; noting that the overall pressure of higher standards had increased students perceptions of success. One respondent noted: '*We have been under such pressure as a school and the observation by senior management and the expectations to do well. It's quite overwhelming and people are just burnt out and those who*

*are not quite honestly, just keeping their head above water and coping – like running on empty.*’ These points express some of the immense magnitude of pressure schools and the individuals within them feel by the burden to perform when standards are increased. It also seems untenable to continue to place demands upon schools and colleges when faced with cuts to budgets. A specific aspect of the cuts is the reduction of teaching staff and non-teaching staff, such as support teachers and teaching assistants. These staff are vital in assisting the students who may have dyslexia and other educational or psychological needs. For example, one school made a number of teaching assistants redundant and shared one teaching assistant between three classes, in place of each class having an attached assistant. Those with dyslexia are likely to need re-enforced instructions, broken down into stages (due to working memory issues) and assistance with reading for purpose in ascertaining the pertinent aspects of a text (due to difficulties they may have with reading and processing) (Pavey, 2016). These children now are likely to find accessing and keeping up with the class difficult, as the teacher cannot be reasonably be expected to work with one or two children every lesson in a large class cohort.

Four of the respondents noted that for those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) the difficulty of accessing a curriculum, in which they may not be able to read the course materials, is compounded by being put under more pressure to perform in assignments and, particularly in exams. These remarks were echoed by the students themselves who noted that the indicative nature of dyslexia was being penalised by a system so pressured and geared towards academic success by examination:

Respondent one stated: *‘I can’t understand the work we are doing; I find reading all the stuff really hard.’*

In these sentiments the student notes the complexity of the texts they are required to read and learn from. Moreover, one of the key aspects of dyslexia is difficulty in reading and assimilating information.

Respondent two noted: *‘I don’t like exams, the whole thing of assessing you based on a few exams- years’ worth of work, just crammed into some exams, which is all based on memory work ... the ability to regurgitate facts and quotes and theories; I just can’t remember it all.’*

Respondent three argued: *‘I think the whole idea of having to remember stuff and to do well in exams for your job and future is just stupid.’*

In these sentiments the notion of assessment through examinations is challenged as a way of assessing an individuals' ability to memorise concepts and theorems.

Respondent four suggested: *'The work we have to do is really hard, some of my friends and class mates are ok at this type of work but I'm not. Some people seem to put in little work and find exams easy and do well – I don't! Also, the classes are big now, in the class we have 32 and getting help is difficult.'*

These sentiments underline that those interviewed struggled with the curriculum approach, assessing a significant amount of learning on a terminal examination; which suits some students but may not auger well for those who find 'memory work' and timed conditions conducive to performing well and associated positive wellbeing. More support for those with additional needs clearly needs to be made and a revised way of assessing students with additional needs seems to be a positive way forward. The funding cuts have also contributed to what interviewee four stated, the increased class sizes, which has ramifications for the accessing of support for those without specific one-to-one teaching assistant support.

Finally, all the interviewees agreed on the importance of addressing the mental health needs of young people. One particular point was made: *'we really have to get to grips with the issues students are facing. Exam, exams and more exams is not the solution, nor is it really a good measure of success. The mental health issues in English schools needs serious work and we need to cash to invest in these lives otherwise the consequences are going to be catastrophic.'* Although each participant noted differing priorities to address this, all agreed that the funding crisis could not be a sustainable solution to the long-term employment and retention of staff in schools. All agreed that a review of exam focused learning was needed as this could be counterproductive for some students' welfare. Equally, a significant proportion of the respondents noted that training and experience in looking for signs of mental health was of vital importance in tackling the rise in cases of mental ill health in schools. One of the most important ways advocated was through strong, high quality continuing professional development. All of which cannot be achieved without money to employ experienced staff and those willing to train in mental health and wellbeing.

### **Implications for education and social work**

The intertwined nature of education and social work are evident, especially in light of the issues raised within this research. The key recommendations I would underline is the liaison

between schools, CAMHS, social services and other mental health support organisations in order to identify and work effectively with those who are evidencing or appear likely to manifest signs of mental ill health. Schools could ensure that students with SEN, in particularly SPLDs, such as dyslexia, are catered for and additional support is implemented to help make up for deficits in memory and processing skills as well as reading and writing speed and ability. Schools may also consider employing staff who are trained to mentor and support students both academically and pastorally; some schools and colleges are employing counsellors to help promote more positive wellbeing and provide opportunities for students to discuss pressing issues. Learner mentors equally enable students a sounding board and may be the first port of call for helping prevent mental health issues escalating (McIntyre et al, 2013).

The contact between social work practitioners and schools is vital and ensuring staff have access to rapid referrals if required. The ability to signpost learners onto resources and support networks is important in alleviating some of the stress of working in both schools and in social work. The Time to Change internet site notes the importance of schools 'Spending some time 'off timetable' on mental health has positive impact on all areas of school life' (Time to Change, 2017). Moreover, the use of their resources and the creation of other materials is a positive way of tackling both ignorance and potential stigma attached to mental ill health. In addition, open discussion, dialogue and debate on mental health will, as Tomsett (2016) notes, dispel misconceptions and help individuals' to be more tolerant and accepting of mental ill health.

The sharing of intelligence and resources is most necessary in the day of austerity and joint, inter-professional working is a fundamental aspect of success, whilst campaigning for more funding to help the needs of the most vulnerable students – those with educational and psychological needs. Moreover, Davey and Bigmore (2009:76) write:

Regular meetings with other agencies ... proved conducive in enabling me to share knowledge and experience and, equally importantly, to listen to the experiences of other agencies regarding service delivery....

These opportunities of collaboration provide opportunity to share resources, not duplicate workload and combine efforts to help both in schools and in social work practice. This is

particularly important when dealing with vulnerable persons' affected with mental ailments and those with SEN and SpLDs, as getting right their need to access help and support can literally be a lifesaver (Schneider and Crombie, 2012; Fristad and Goldberg-Arnold, 2012). Howard *et al.* (2017:28) argue:

With reports such as Public Health England (2015) indicating the worrying levels of children who are currently suffering from mental health and well-being issues, it would seem more important than ever that a concerted effort is made by schools to support children and young people who are affected by such issues.

There is a need for developing programmes to challenge the stigma of mental health, to openly speak about issues arising from discussions on these topics and plan sessions on how to promote positive well-being and support peers, colleagues and others who may be facing mental distress. This will begin with senior leadership developing and embedding policies and drivers to build an ethos which supports those with mental ill health and works to encourage deliberation on these pertinent and perennial issues. An example of this was seen in a school which promoted planned sessions and wellbeing days for both the staff and students, focusing upon healthy living, positive wellbeing, eating, diet, exercise, talking therapies, counselling and support of others and how to refer someone to support services. Such a beacon of excellence if rolled out across other schools could provide the basis for the well needed and timely support that present indicators point to.

### Summary

Although this work is small-scale qualitative thick description of opinions in the South West of England, there are a number of issues raised which are illuminated by the data gathered, offering a level of generalisability. Moreover, intensified demands without the money to employ experienced staff and offer training on mental health and wellbeing seems myopic and does not augur well for the future. A number of respondents noted the detrimental impact the cuts to schools was having both on those with and without SEN. Students suggested that the system at present, tests their memory and ability to perform in tests rather than other aspects of knowledge. It is also clear that the current pressures placed upon young people has intensified over the years, especially since the introduction of new curricular materials and assessment. Many reported levels of stress and the increased

referrals to CAMHS are testament to this. It appears that schools need more specifically targeted money and that young people can be supported by those who are well trained and know how to cater for their needs most effectively. However, the most pertinent issue is the need for a review of both the way in which the curriculum is examination and standards focused with attached significant pressure and the review of the funding in schools.

*Ethical approval.*

*All actions performed in studies involving human participants (interviewees) were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or the national research committee.*

### **References**

Full references are available on request.