

Being Heroes

**An exploration of the importance of
leadership in promoting mental and
emotional well-being in schools**

April 2006

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1. Introduction

During April, four open space events focusing on the importance of leadership and management in promoting mental and emotional health in schools, provided opportunities to discuss issues of concern, share ideas, exchange knowledge and consider future action.

Headteachers, school management team representatives, quality assurance officers (or equivalent) and other professionals worked together to create their own agendas for discussion, sharing practice and ideas for future development.

2. Purpose

There is a growing awareness in Scotland about the importance of improving and maintaining good emotional, mental health and well-being for all. In all settings, there is a developing enthusiasm for addressing mental health promotion, prevention, care and support. Ongoing contact, discussion and feedback with school staff and their partners, accreditation submissions to the National Endorsement Team and the National Health Promoting Schools Network indicate that this is particularly so within the school setting.

Through the National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being, the recent publication of *The Mental Health of Children and Young People: A Framework for Promotion, Prevention and Care* (Scottish Executive, 2005), and the development of local accreditation processes to support schools becoming health promoting schools, we have the beginnings of an emerging national strategic and coordinated approach to policy and delivery support around emotional and mental health and well-being in schools. This presents us with an excellent opportunity for progressing policy and implementation work across all Scottish schools in conjunction with local and national partners.

There is a wide range of projects, programmes and interventions underway and being developed, nationally and locally, in support of emotional well-being in schools. Some are local initiatives and partnerships for health promotion in schools and some are individual school responses to need. Others are on the basis of a health improvement commitment. It is important to build upon this work and learn from it.

However, through its work with national and local partners and from direct contact with school staff, the Scottish Health Promoting Schools Unit (SHPSU) has identified a number of issues that present barriers to progress and to ensuring all children and young people have access to appropriate and useful mental and emotional health promotion:

- wide variation in perceptions of emotional and mental health
- wide variation in how projects, programmes and interventions are planned and resourced
- monitoring and evaluation is patchy and inconsistent

- schools staff do not feel supported or report a perceived lack of knowledge and skills
- individual staff members are often working with an outside partner agency/ organisation and are very often operating in a 'stand alone' capacity. The work tends not to be integrated into the wider curriculum (formal or informal) or the ethos of the school.
- developing practice is often not sustained or sustainable
- school staff are also often confused by the range of resources and support packages available and unsure as to the most effective or relevant choices.

Widespread discussion and feedback indicates that in order to embed the promotion of emotional and mental health into the day to day life of the school, across the curriculum and into emerging quality assurance and accreditation systems, there needs to be increased dialogue with those who are responsible for leading and managing this process within the school system.

'Good leadership is critical to a successful school. Success comes from aiming high with the clear vision, ethos and communication that good leadership brings.'

Ambitious, Excellent Schools (Scottish Executive, 2004)

3. Aims

School leaders and managers were offered an opportunity to get together, discuss issues of concern, share ideas, exchange knowledge and consider future action for promoting mental and emotional well-being in school.

The events aimed to:

- provide space and time to listen, reflect and contribute to discussions about
 - why schools are so important in promoting mental and emotional health
 - how participants feel about mental and emotional health in schools
 - the importance of leadership and management in promoting mental and emotional health in schools
 - partnership and participative working
 - current and emerging practice.
- provide strategic partners who have responsibility for providing information and support to councils and schools an opportunity to listen to those in a position of leadership and management and to consider the issues and concerns raised in any future planning and action.

Information on current policy, practice and sources of support was also made available to all participants.

4. Methodology

What is Open Space?

Open space events have no keynote speakers, no pre-announced schedules of workshops, no panel discussions and no predetermined agenda. Instead, participants create their own agenda, centred on a particular area of common interest that provides the focus for conversation throughout the event.

Open space creates a vibrant, energetic, productive and fun environment. The most basic principle is that everyone who comes to an open space event must have some passion about the topic and be willing to take some responsibility for creating something out of that passion. No one person is in control and participants are led by their energy and interest.

A genuine open space event does not deliver content to participants other than basic instructions about how the process works. Instead, the open space principle is to view the participants as the content, trusting the process to draw out the experience and wisdom of those participating in the event.

How it worked

The focus for the events in April 2006 was the important role school leaders play in the development of mental and emotional well-being within the school community.

The agenda was set by participants who decided to convene conversations on matters of importance to them. Anyone who wanted to initiate a discussion invited others to join their conversation. Several discussions took place at the one time and the key points were noted and posted in a 'public' place where everyone could learn about the other conversations. All papers were gathered during each day and a report was produced and presented to each participant as they left the event.

5. Overview

Participants quickly engaged with the opportunity presented by generating a wide range of conversations that were of interest and concern, around an aspect of school life that is essential to its healthy functioning – developing and improving the emotional well-being of children, young people and school staff.

Over the four events a total of 36 different conversations took place (see section 6 for detail) and more than 600 key points recorded. This information was presented to participants in the reports produced on the day of each event.

For those who facilitated and participated in the four events, the variety and quality of the conversations was inspiring and informative. The information shared is also of value and importance to the partners involved in leading mental and emotional health promotion work at national level. Keeping the importance of leadership and management as the overarching theme, a number of other broad themes emerged over the course of the events. Of these, three emerged repeatedly across all the conversations as described here in summary form.

Culture change/ethos/school environment

- The need for long term vision, commitment and leadership in order to develop an ethos and value base in schools that focuses on relationships and respect and supports everyone in the school to understand their own feelings and those of others and to be able to talk about them.
- Improving communications in all aspects of school life and allowing time to listen, reflect and develop knowledge and confidence in using emotional intelligence.
- Developing value systems in schools appropriate for today and facilitating greater meaningful participation of children, young people, parents and staff.
- The creative use of the built environment to facilitate quiet areas, the provision of therapies and increased flexibility and sharing of space. Schools need to become emotionally safer places for children and adults.

Staff health and well-being

- Staff well-being is a priority in the development of health promoting schools. The role of schools and school staff is changing and impacting on how staff feel and function on a day to day basis.
- The well-being of staff will make or break how a school can promote mental and emotional well-being.
- The provision of feedback to staff, opportunities to discuss and work through difficult and complex issues and the development of a culture of respect would increase motivation, reduce resentment and build a climate of openness.
- Organising ways for staff to work together in an open way, discuss issues, find solutions as a team and try different ways of working.
- Those in positions of leadership can empower staff to handle emotional issues and seek solutions.
- Headteachers need to be supported and given opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

Resilience

- Children and young people go through a process of self-definition as they develop and learn and schools have a vital role in supporting them to develop the resilience and motivation to deal with and learn from life's knocks and challenges and to develop the ability to make supportive relationships.
- Resilience and confidence can only be promoted if time and attention is given to developing trust and positive relationships.
- Supporting school staff to consider their attitudes, to build knowledge and skills and their own resilience is essential to this.

Open space is one approach to 'opening the space' for people to reflect, question, converse and to find confidence, ideas and answers around developing emotional well-being in schools. Feedback received through evaluation of each event strongly suggests that for most participants this was a creative and productive way of working

and many intend to find ways to use this approach in their respective schools and are seeking support to do this.

6. Themes

Over the four events a total of 36 conversations were convened representing the range of issues and interests of participants. These fell into broad themes which are detailed as headings below. The conversation titles are listed underneath.

Leadership and management

- *Making sense of and managing initiatives*
- *The impact of staff dynamics on emotional health in schools*
- *Complexity in the school community*
- *Mental health and well-being of headteachers – support challenge*
- *The changing role of the teacher*
- *Is paperwork killing feelings?*

Changing/developing culture, ethos

- *Creating a culture of empathy and well-being*
- *Creating a culture of honesty and respect*
- *A value system for the future*
- *Inter agency working*
- *Quiet space*
- *Consistency in approaches and strategies when dealing with children*
- *Emotional health during transitions*
- *Peripheral benefits of complementary therapy*
- *Spiritual and emotional well-being - can you have one without the other?*

Staff health and well-being

- *How do we support staff health and well-being?*
- *Promoting health and well-being of school staff*
- *Supporting staff through crisis*
- *Staff well-being – the nuts and bolts of supporting them*
- *Staff health and well-being*

Resilience

- *Resilience – what is it? Promoting resilience*
- *Promoting resilience in schools*
- *Toward a whole school approach to building resilience*

(Issues about resilience came into many conversations)

Practical needs

- *What is a mental health promoting school?*
- *What is mental health?*
- *Practical strategies for developing mental well-being*
- *The whole school approach*
- *Sharing good practice*

Supporting vulnerable children

- *Supporting vulnerable children*
- *Practical strategies to support ‘identified’ children*

Parents

- *Involving parents in emotional health issues*

(Issues about parental involvement came into many conversations)

Measuring impact

- *The impact of physical activity on mental health*
- *What evidence can a school produce in order to prove it is a health promoting school?*
- *Measuring the impact of what we do in promoting emotional health and well-being*

7. Action

The open space events were part of ongoing work SHPSU and partners are taking forward to support the process of embedding mental and emotional health promotion in Scottish schools, and to give us an opportunity to listen to the ideas and issues of people with leadership roles in schools.

What we heard and what was captured in the reports from each event has provided a basis for further developments. We plan to:

- maintain contact with those who attended the events
- share the summary report with partners in the Scottish Executive, the National Health Promoting Schools Network and other relevant organisations
- produce information describing the importance of developing resilience among children and young people and ways to help achieve this
- trial and evaluate innovative methodologies and approaches that ‘open the space’ within schools which enable school staff and pupils to build self and collective awareness of mental and emotional health and well-being and the learning and skills required to maintain and sustain this, for example, appreciative inquiry, action learning, open space technology.

8. Acknowledgements

The Scottish Health Promoting Schools Unit would like to acknowledge the courage and openness of the 134 people who participated in these events and for contributing their expertise and views to the ongoing development of mental health and emotional well-being in schools.

We would also like to thank partners from NHS Health Scotland, the Scottish Executive Education Department and HM Inspectorate of Education who helped to plan and organise these events.

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