Mercers' Wellbeing Evaluation Programme: final report

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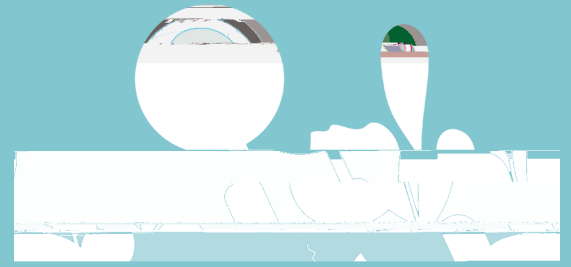
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Achievements

Wellbeing survey

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In-depth evaluation

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Capacity building

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Sharing between settings

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Achievements and outputs

Background and rationale

The policy landscape for children's mental health has shifted significantly in recent years. There is increasing recognition that educational settings like schools and colleges are vital for prevention and early intervention in mental health problems.

While a range of school-based mental health programmes exist, there are a number of challenges to identifying effective interventions suitable for rollout within schools and colleges:

1) There is mixed evidence for existing interventions, with only a few having compelling evidence of effectiveness.

2) Little of the existing evidence is accessible to schools and colleges.

3) Evidence that does exist is often based on studies carried out in the US or in other educational systems quite different from those in the UK.

4) Even with the most effective interventions, context and implementation have a huge bearing on effectiveness.

For these reasons, there has been increasing emphasis on the importance of evaluating programmes in situ to ensure that the approach adopted is actually helping to achieve the expected outcomes, with specific interest in the development of guidance for schools and colleges to help them measure pupils' mental health and wellbeing. However, currently there is little guidance about the approaches that schools and colleges should take, or how to extract learning from any information collected.

This lack of guidance around how schools and colleges should evaluate their own mental health practices is something that this Anna Freud Centre-led programme has been supporting Mercers' Company Associated Schools and Colleges to address.

This is the final report for work that was commissioned from October 2019 to October 2022 as a continuation of a previous three-year programme which ended in September 2019. This report will reflect the achievements of the second phase of this programme alongside that of the programme overall.

Aims of phase one of the programme

The initial three-year programme was commissioned by the Mercers' Company based on discussion with the Company's Associated Schools and Colleges who all shared concerns about the mental health and emotional wellbeing of their students and the need for further guidance around what they can do to bolster students' wellbeing and support those experiencing difficulties. In recognition

of this need, the Mercers' Company sought to commission independent evaluations of ongoing mental health support undertaken in a number of the Company's Associated Schools and Colleges. Recognising that this need was ongoing, the Mercers' Company extended this work further in 2019 to 2022.

Given the high degree of heterogeneity in approaches implemented by Mercers' schools and colleges, a layered but flexible approach was adopted (see Figure 1).

Achievements from phase one of the programme

There were four key achievements from the first three years of the programme:

The development of school- and college-based models for measuring wellbeing in schools

The measurement frameworks developed and used with Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges through the TMC /H3 <<1.5 (s)0.C /H3 < (am)-3 (ew) (mC)-2.1 /(1k1]1rTj 0

More opportunities for collaboration and shared learning

Many participating schools and colleges said that they particularly welcomed the opportunity to meet with others with similar priorities and interests across the Mercers' Company Associated Schools and Colleges. Often those involved in this kind of work within schools and colleges can feel isolated so these networking opportunities, as well as updates and presentations from the evaluation team and wider Anna Freud Centre, provide d crucial 'bigger picture' learning in the field of child mental health and wellbeing. Our workshops included updates on the programme, sharing wider learning (including new and upcoming results from other programmes) and guest speakers (to talk about new tools or approaches and th eir benefit to schools and colleges). The school and college staff stated that they enjoyed learning how other settings were implementing their interventions, sharing common struggles and how they overcame them. They also described benefitt ing greatly from hearing about new and upcoming results from wider programmes and listening to guest speakers.

Aims of the second phase of the programme

The first three years of this programme

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In-depth evaluations	Three to five	Four (including one that spanned both phases of the programme)
Briefings	Six (including at least two targeted at young people and one synthesising learning across the programme)	Seven (including at least two targeted at young people and one synthesising learning across the programme)

School and college engagement

At the start of phase 2, determined efforts were made to engage all Mercers' Associated Schoo7 02 ( )$ a3 (g)-3 ( )TJ0.00 0 Tw 15.(CEMC002 Tc 0.06.42Td[ch)-1.4l)

Table 4: WMF completion rates 2021

Educational stage	Number of settings	Number of students completing the survey	Completion rate (those that completed/were eligible to complete within these schools)
Primary	1	56	100%
Secondary	4	1969	77%
Further education	0	0[3]	-
Total	5	2025	

Workshops

Learning from the first phase of the programme suggested that schools and colleges engaged most with in-person workshops and one to one support from the evaluation team. Due to the coronavirus pandemic only three of these workshops were delivered in person. The online attendance at the webinars was strong, however, and informal feedback suggested that these were useful. The evaluation team were committed to delivering five workshops across phase 2. Due to an increased need for support and in response to positive feedback, nine workshops were delivered.[4]

Table 6: Phase 2 workshops

Focus	Format	Settings attending
November 2019		
Findings from 2019 surv n.1		

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June 2022		
Check-in: how are things going?	In-person	9
Sharing wider learning: traumatic bereavement and supporting refugee and asylum-seeking children		
Reflecting on the programme		

During the coronavirus pandemic, after discussion with the Mercers' Company and Associated Schools and Colleges, we moved the workshops online and shortened them to two hours. We prioritised space for discussion about the issues being faced and the sharing of learning between members of the group. We responded to requests for information and support where we could, for example sharing resources around traumatic bereavement, whole school approaches and emerging coronavirus research. Attendance during this period was lower than at other times as staff had limited time available but those that were able to attend found this support useful.

This series of workshops built on six workshops and four webinars delivered in phase one, including capacity building sessions and learning about co-production, staff wellbeing and whole-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

In - depth evaluations

Across the programme six in-depth evaluations have been conducted. Details of in-depth evaluations carried out as part of the first phase of the programme have been published elsewhere.

Learning outputs

The dissemination of emerging learning to a wider audience beyond the participating schools and colleges was a key focus for phase 2 of the programme and a total of seven briefings were commissioned and delivered as part of this work.

Table 8: Briefings produced and disseminated in phase 2

Outline	Target audience	Dissemination
Supporting mental health in schools and colleges (for parents and carers)		

setting and how they would be able to capture relevant evaluation findings in a
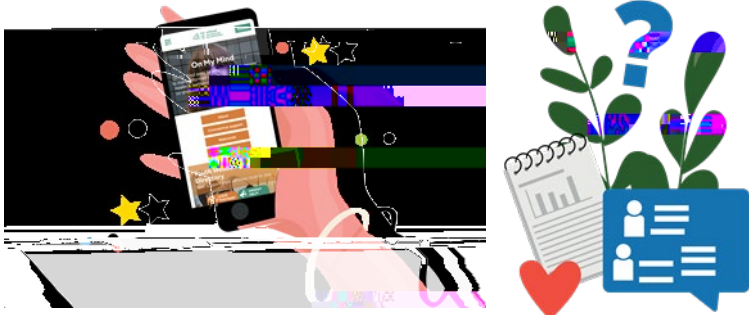
Reflections and learning

What the Mercers' wellbeing evaluation programme has achieved: A programme team perspective on its impact

Looking back over the last six years, there have been a number of achievements and points of learning, some of which have fed into adaptations made during the programme and others might inform the possible future direction of work in this area for Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges.

WMF survey

For those that engaged with it, the WMF survey proved a useful basis for understanding the mental health and wellbeing strengths and needs of their students. Results have been used to consider areas of strength and difficulty relative to other schools and have been used in leadership team discussions to inform how support and resources might be allocated for areas of particular need. Several schools have reported that survey feedback has also been a tool that has enabled them to raise the profile of mental health and wellbeing with senior leadership teams and boards of governors. Several schools have also expressed a wish to continue the survey in future years.

The survey approach proved slightly more challenging for colleges, where the size of the student population and the nature of the communications and contact time with students made this approach more difficult to implement. The approach taken by some colleges was to select a subset of students to survey either year - on - year, or before and after specific interventions. This made participation much more manageable.

Sharing learning from Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges with wider populations has supported the increase in use of such measurement tools in schools and colleges nationally. For example, the approach taken to wellbeing measurement was shared with over 1,000 school - based professionals during a Schools in Mind [8] event, as described above.

In - depth evaluation

There has been good uptake throughout the programme of the in-depth evaluation offer. While these evaluations, by their nature, are small - scale so do not lend themselves to generalisable conclusions, they have provided helpful insight for those providing this support about what seems to be working, what

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[8] https://www.annafreud.org/schools - and -colleges/

the children and young people have found helpful, and how the support might be improved. While it is important to select evidence-based interventions for use in schools, this does not guarantee that the intervention will be successful in other setting

issues each day without space to think beyond them –   and also provided the opportunity to hear what had worked in other settings.

What the   Mercers'   wellbeing evaluation programme

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Choosing resources

Staff wellbeing	Prioritisation of support that tackled issues of staff wellbeing at a deeper level, e.g., better supervision and staff development, was important rather than wellbeing activities that were sometimes seen as superfluous.
Funding	Continued funding is needed for wellbeing lead roles and the interventions that have been shown to be working, incl uding school counsellors.

What can the programme say about mental health and wellbeing interventions in schools?

Evidence tells us that a range of school -based interventions can promote wellbeing and support the prevention of mental health problems. Common feature s of effective interventions include those based on building social and emotional skills or those based on cognitive behavioural principles, those delivered by professionals or trained teachers, those delivered over a series of sessions and those design ed to be engaging and interactive. [910] However,

- x Mental health First Aid training for school staff in a secondary school
- x A m ulti -strand well being intervention in a primary school (including class- based teaching and a buddy system)
- x .b mindfulness sessions for college students
- x Learning mentors in a secondary school
- x A targeted mindfulness intervention in a primary school
- x Em otional Literacy Suppo rt Assistant (ELSA)   mentors in a primary school

While each of these evaluations involve relatively small numbers of children and young people, which make it difficult to generalise findings to other educational settings, they do demonstrate the feasibilit   y of schools and

importance of this in the development of a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Another key aspect of the programme has been considering how the voice of children and young people can be prioritised in planning support for mental health and wellbeing. In particular, in hearing from young people about what they find useful and what can be improved, as demonstrated through the in-depth evaluations, and in terms of discussing wellbeing survey findings and how these can be used to understand students' strengths and needs. [14] Our experience is that when schools do rollout wellbeing surveys, students often get missed out of discussions around the findings and how these might inform support offered in school, so our guidance developed through this programme gives schools practical tools to engage children and young people in this process.

Conclusion and reflections

Over the last six years, a lot has changed in the lives of children and young people and the impact on mental health and wellbeing is well documented. Schools and colleges are committing significant effort to ensuring they support the emotional needs of their students as well as the educational needs. Mercers' Associated Schools and Colleges are an excellent example of this commitment, with clear examples of targeted and whole-system support provided. We hope this report demonstrates how additional support for schools and colleges can encourage the sharing of good practice and encourage the improvement of support provided.

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[14] Evidence Based Practice Unit. (2022) Engaging students with wellbeing survey findings. EBPU briefing note. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence_based_practice_unit/files/Mercers'engagingstudentswwellbeingsurveyfindings.pdf

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