

Workshop: Action for Happiness in Schools

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Introduction

Action for Happiness and the National Children's Bureau are considering a new initiative to encourage a greater focus on happiness and well-being in schools. This initial workshop brings together headteachers, expert practitioners and others with related interests. The aim is to test the appetite for such an initiative and to begin its development together. This paper explains the thinking so far and includes a set of questions to be discussed at the workshop.

Background

Action for Happiness (AfH) is a movement of people committed to building a happier society. It was launched in April 2011 and already has around 15,000 members from over 100 countries. Members make a simple pledge: to try to create more happiness in the world around them through the way they approach their lives. We support them in doing this by providing practical ideas and materials which draw on the latest scientific research on happiness and well-being. The movement is backed by a network of partner organisations and leading experts from fields such as psychology, economics and social innovation. The movement is trying to encourage a shift in values and address the paradox that, despite being far wealthier as a society, we are no happier than we were five decades ago.

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) has a strong interest, and extensive experience, in programmes of work to improve the well-being of children and young people. NCB is a key partner organisation for the Action for Happiness campaign and together the two organisations are now considering launching a new **AfH Schools** initiative. The aim would be to encourage and support mainstream schools (both primary and secondary) in placing a greater focus on happiness and well-being in their ethos and activities.

The issue

The case for an AfH Schools initiative mirrors the rationale behind the overall AfH movement. In the UK, children's lives are in many respects better than at any time previously. They are more educated, better connected, and have ever increasing access to technology. Despite this, there are major causes for concern about how our children experience their formative years, and a pressing case for tackling this as a matter of priority.

The decades from the 1970s to the late 1990s saw a substantial increase in the proportions of young people suffering emotional difficulties and exhibiting difficult behaviour.¹ A recent UNICEF report paints a picture of more broken and fewer cohesive families in the UK than in other countries in Western Europe. The UK's young people are less likely to remain in education as they get older, and more likely to take risks with alcohol and drugs.²

Mental health problems are increasingly prevalent amongst children and young people in the UK. Research suggests that 20% of children will experience a mental health problem in a given year, with 10% of 5-15 year olds suffering at any given time.³ Such problems often affect other areas of a child's life, and there is a strong correlation with mental health difficulties being experienced later on in adult life.

The vital role of schools

As headteachers and their colleagues are well aware, schools are in the position both of experiencing the day-to-day reality of these issues, and of being vital in combating them. Schools are well placed to support many of the dimensions of children's lives which have been shown to be important for long-lasting happiness and well-being, including creation and maintenance of strong friendships and other relationships, adoption of healthy and positive lifestyle choices, development of emotional resilience and acquisition of values which give meaning and purpose to life.

Although a child's familial context has the single biggest impact on his or her mental health, it is increasingly clear that schools' approaches to promoting good emotional health also play a very important role. The most successful approaches to social and emotional learning have been found to be those that address the ethos and culture of the whole school and employ a universal approach to promoting good mental health rather than focussing on illness.^{4,5}

Some schools have also been trialling and implementing innovative approaches to increase well-being, such as the UK Resilience Programme (UKRP), training in mindfulness and values-based education. Although further research and development is required in some of these areas, particularly in a school context, early evaluation is promising.⁶

Despite this emerging picture, only a relatively small number of schools have so far adopted effective, evidence-based practices in relation to happiness and emotional well-being. We would like to explore how we can support and encourage wider use of these approaches – together with the development of innovative new ones – through an AfH Schools initiative.

Our vision is for a movement of schools explicitly placing happiness and well-being at the heart of their ethos and culture, and proactively sharing their approaches with others.

Q1: Do you share this vision for a potential AfH Schools initiative?

Underlying principles

At a time when national education policy is increasingly focused on academic standards, an AfH Schools initiative would need to be underpinned by a clear set of principles that could be adopted by participating schools and practitioners.

We suggest three underlying principles to support such an initiative:

- (1) We need to equip all children with the capabilities they need to live happy, successful lives and to make a positive contribution to society. It is therefore essential that they develop strong social and emotional skills and acquire solid values.
- (2) Being at school should be an enjoyable, positive and rewarding experience for all involved, including pupils, staff, parents and the wider community.
- (3) Focussing on happiness and well-being can help to improve attainment and academic excellence, by increasing levels of enthusiasm, trust, confidence and resilience.

Q2: Are these the right key principles or are others required?

Components of an AfH Schools Initiative

Our initial idea is that an AfH Schools initiative could include three main components:

1. **Knowledge hub.** Working with relevant experts, the initiative could establish a central hub of knowledge in order to highlight the latest research on evidence-based approaches and case studies of practice (both national and international) that is proving effective in improving children's happiness and well-being.
2. **Connecting people.** By creating a movement of schools with a shared vision, the initiative could also help schools connect more effectively with practitioners and experts in the area of happiness and well-being. This could include creating online communities to develop and share ideas, organising events and workshops for participating schools, or providing new opportunities for training and discussion.
3. **National campaign.** Being connected with the nationwide Action for Happiness campaign, the AfH Schools initiative could provide ideas and branded campaign materials for use by participating schools. These could be used to inform discussions with pupils, staff and parents, and to raise wider awareness within the local community of the actions being undertaken by the school.

Q3: Are these the right components for an AfH Schools initiative?

What participating schools would be expected to do

Just as the AfH movement centres on members making a pledge to take action to create more happiness, so we would expect schools to **sign-up to the initiative** in an explicit way. This would involve a commitment on the part of the whole school community to address issues around increasing happiness and improving well-being.

We would then expect participating schools to **take practical steps** to increase happiness and well-being, drawing on knowledge and best practice shared by being part of the initiative. For example, this might include:

- Working with pupils, staff and parents on redefining the school's purpose and vision;
- Developing and implementing a 'Happiness and well-being' policy; or
- Introducing new evidence-based programmes as part of the curriculum.

Participating schools should also commit to **playing an active role** in the scheme, by contributing to the knowledge hub, sharing their experiences via case studies and curriculum materials, getting involved in relevant events and workshops and by acting as advocates and champions for the initiative.

Q4: Are these the right expectations for participating schools?

Next Steps

This paper has set out our initial thinking around what an AfH Schools initiative might look like. If there is an appetite to progress with such an initiative, then these ideas will require further development. We would therefore like to bring together a **working group** – and broader community for consultation – in order to assist us in this development.

We would hope to hold a second workshop event, including a broader range of headteachers, in the autumn term, and then progress towards a launch later in the year. Depending on the details of the proposed initiative, NCB, AfH and/or other relevant organisations could then seek specific funding to support implementation and roll-out of the scheme.

Q5: Would you be interested in participating in the working group?

Thanks

Many thanks for your interest in the AfH Schools scheme and for taking the time to participate in the initial workshop. Your time, views and ideas are greatly appreciated.

References

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6. Challen, A.R., Machin, S.J., Noden, P. and West, A. (2010), *UK Resilience Programme Evaluation: Second Interim Report*: DFE, Research Report DFE-RR006.