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## **The Pinkie Resilience Project: Enhancing Equality, Boosting Wellbeing and Realising Potential in Scottish Schools**

### **Main Objectives and Context**

What factors help to determine well-being in young children? How do children develop levels of psychological resilience that allow them to overcome stress and adversity? To what extent are well-being and resilience critical to student achievement and future success? These key questions were addressed by the Pinkie Resilience Project, which brought together international experts in education, psychology, the arts, social work, policing, sport, government, nutrition, architecture, paediatrics, education policy, epidemiology and history to 1) discuss how well-being and resilience have been nurtured in different historical and geographical contexts; 2) determine how schools best support well-being and nurture development; and 3) select interventions to test in a pilot project based at Pinkie St Peter's Primary School (PSPPS) in Musselburgh, East Lothian.

This project sought to find ways to apply research findings in the areas of child mental health, education and child development to a very specific setting: a primary school. A gap often exists between academic research on child well-being (broadly defined) and what schools can actually do in practice. By bringing academics from a wide range of backgrounds together with school staff, we were able to troubleshoot potential interventions and determine which had the most potential. Underlining the project was the assumption, borne out in both research and experience, that a wide range of often disparate factors impact upon an individual's mental health. These may be based in socioeconomics (malnutrition; inadequate housing; minimal opportunities for sport and creative activities); the family (abusive and stressful home environment; ineffective parenting styles); the community (unsafe neighbourhoods; gang violence; minimal community cohesion); the environment (pollution; not enough time spent outdoors and in natural environments); and the school (lack of inclusive policies; minimal time for exercise and the arts; too much focus on standardised assessment at the expense of nurturing well-being).

PSPPS is a large school which educates children at pre-school and primary levels. Much like the rest of Musselburgh, which has higher levels of free school-meal entitlement, looked-after pupils, pupils with disability, social work referrals and children on the child protection register than expected for its population (Musselburgh Area Early Years Profile, East Lothian Council), students at PSPPS have varying levels of deprivation. Such socioeconomic disparity is

representative of East Lothian and Scotland itself. This project is geared toward finding ways to reduce these inequalities, enhancing the opportunities of all children.

The major objectives of the project were:

- 1) An international, interdisciplinary symposium where a wide range of historical and contemporary interventions aimed at boosting well-being and resilience in young children will be discussed.
- 2) A workshop involving most of the participants to develop and troubleshoot the interventions.
- 3) The development of a pilot project (s) to test the effectiveness of resilience strategies.
- 4) An ultimate, long-term objective would be to reduce PSPPS referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

### **Insights Gained from the Project**

There were many insights gained or reinforced by the project, which have inspired both interventions in PSPPS and future research ambitions. First, the project reinforced the idea that well-being and resilience are determined by a wide array of factors. Our symposium featured 18 speakers, each of whom emphasised a different factor (see appendix for symposium programme). This represents both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, it means that there are many ways of improving child mental health; on the other, it can be difficult to select the best intervention for a particular school, or for an individual child. One of the research projects that is envisioned to succeed this project (an oral history of child mental health) will be designed to delve even deeper into these issues. After much consultation PSPPS staff decided to focus on three themes that were stressed throughout the symposium - attachment; communication; and empowerment – and design interventions that revolved around them. Central to all of these themes is finding ways to build stronger connections between schools and the communities in which they exist.

Second, the project re-emphasised the need for better integration of health, welfare and education services in terms of both policy and practice. Our symposium and workshop represented a unique and rare opportunity for many education, welfare and health professionals to communicate with each other about how best to help children. Rather than working at cross purposes, services in these areas need to work together, often in a physical sense, but at very least in terms of developing integrated policies and practices for improving child mental health.

Finally, the project encouraged many participants to take a step back and consider the very purpose of school. Is a school's success best measured by the number of students it graduates into university? Or should we be more nuanced and longitudinal in our approach, and base a school's success on how successful its students are a decade or more after graduation? Perhaps even more important is to develop a better sense of how children perceive their school experiences. What is the meaning of school for children and how should this inform

educational policy and practice? A number of the research plans emanating out of this project will attempt to tackle such questions.

## **Outcomes**

The outcomes of this project will be divided into pilot projects that will be put in place at PSPPS in order to enhance child resilience and well-being; and future research projects.

## **Pilot Projects**

### 1) Pinkie Puppets

One of the overarching themes that emerged during the project was the importance of both communication and attachment in fostering resilience and well-being in children, including very young children (2-5 years old). Students need to know that they can communicate openly with teachers and other school staff, and this is predicated on attachment, that is, the deep, enduring bond of trust that develops between two people. The challenge, therefore, is how to build attachment and facilitate effective communication in children, especially the very young. One potential answer is to use puppets as an interface for communication. In order to pilot this idea, all school staff have been trained by Puppet Animation Scotland (<http://www.puppetanimation.org/>) to use puppets as a communication tool. By using puppets to facilitate communication, it is hoped that both better attachment and communication can be achieved. This is particularly expected to be of benefit with children who may be experiencing difficulties in their home life or relationships. The effectiveness of this intervention will be assessed with the view toward rolling it out in other schools.

### 2) Room 13 - Radio Pinkie

Another insight gained from the project involved the importance of bridging the gap between schools and the communities in which they exist. Since the Dunblane massacre and related tragedies, many Scottish schools have become both physically and socially disconnected from the community. In order to foster better ties between school and community – as well as provide students with valuable skills and experiences – PSPPS is planning to launch a radio version of Room 13. Room 13 International (<http://room13international.org/>) is an arts-based project that began in Fort William. It empowers students to set up their own art room that they manage and fund themselves. Radio Pinkie is based on the same empowering principle, but with radio, rather than art, as the medium. Students will be trained by veteran radio producer, Chris Smith, to research stories, conduct interviews, edit audio and produce radio podcasts that touch on events at PSPPS and Musselburgh. These podcasts will be distributed via email and social media throughout Musselburgh.

## **Anticipated Future Research Projects**

### 1) Dr Iain McClure

## Scientific Evaluation of Resilience Interventions

Although some of the benefits of resilience interventions are difficult to measure, there are ways of assessing physiological changes that indicate improvements in well-being. One example is the use of measurement of salivary cortisol levels in intervention groups (eg Pinkie Puppets) and controls to measure degree of physiological change over time. McClure expects to be able to spend up to one day per week seconded to Pinkie School to test some of the interventions in this way.

### 2) Professor Robbie Gilligan

#### The Pinkie 'Meaning' of School

School is widely understood as a powerful institution in children's lives, second only to the family. While this wider holistic view of school experience is increasingly recognized, there is relatively little work done on the child's perspective on school, of the child's experience of school life, of the meanings children construct about their overall school experience.

What is proposed here is a particularly distinctive study of children's experience of and meaning-making about primary school as an institution in their lives. The idea is to conduct an 'exit interview' as children prepare to leave P7 to head on to secondary school. The 'exit' is from primary school as a phase in their life, rather than the exit from Pinkie. Thus, the purpose of the study is *not* to evaluate the particular school through the children's eyes, but to gain access to how they see *school life generally* as an influence in their lives – what has 'school' meant to them looking back.

The timing of the interview would allow children to reflect on their take on the *cumulative experience* of seven years of primary school ( in Pinkie and elsewhere, where relevant for certain children), to identify how they characterize the experience of school overall, what they see as pivotal experiences in their own journey through school life, and what they see as positive or less positive influences on that journey. This latter point would allow the child to reference influences beyond the school gates, although that is not the primary focus of the study. Children would be given explicit permission to reference wider influences, and such references would be acknowledged but there would not be significant probing of such references.

### 3) Dr Matthew Smith

#### Oral history of child mental health

Historians of health and medicine have long struggled to understand health history 'from below', that is to capture experiences of health and illness from ordinary people at different times and in different places. Capturing the experiences of children is especially difficult. Oral history interviewing is one way of overcoming this obstacle. Smith hopes to attain a small grant from the Wellcome Trust to pilot an oral history project that would ask parents, teachers and, ultimately, P7 children at Pinkie School about their experiences of well-being and emotional difficulties. This pilot, if successful, would be rolled up as a longitudinal oral history project. The interviews would not only help to assess the interventions made at Pinkie, but would serve as a resource for future researchers.

## **Key Recommendations**

- 1) Promotion of well-being, resilience, attachment and other components of positive mental health has to be a core activity at Scottish schools in order to prevent mental ill health and to help children reach their academic and emotional potential.
- 2) Schools need to integrate in meaningful, mutually-beneficial ways with the communities in which they exist.
- 3) Educational services also need to be better integrated with health services, welfare services, policing and charities in order to facilitate better mental health promotion.
- 4) Mental health is multi-faceted and has to be understood as such in order for effective mental health promotion. It is important to recognise all the various factors that contribute to mental health, but also identify the aspects that schools are best placed to effect.