

# Mental Well-Being and Behaviour in Schools: Promoting Links Between Evidence and Practice

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## Aims

This project aimed to improve the links between research and practice on mental health issues in schools. By consulting with research end users it aimed to improve the passage of evidence into practice and to generate new research questions and themes for analysis which were salient to practitioners and policy makers. The project is based around findings from a Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) study conducted by the Rowan Group which looked at the ways in which schools support children whose mental health problems result in poor behaviour<sup>1</sup>.

Within the overarching aims, the specific objectives were:

- To hold a stakeholder seminar with policy makers from education, health and the voluntary sector.
- To use the seminar to embed research findings firmly into the context of current practice.
- To produce a concise report of the research, for practitioners and policy makers.
- To disseminate the research findings in a widely accessible way.

## Methods and key findings

Thirty-two people were present at the stakeholder seminar, including three members of the research team. Twelve held posts in education, such as education psychologist, head teacher, inclusion manager, behaviour support manager, counsellor and lecturer in education. Five representatives of the health sector held strategic and operational posts in school nursing and school-based health work. Eight representatives of children's charities or voluntary sector mental health charities were present. Additionally, three representatives of the Scottish Executive and one PhD student attended the conference.

The seminar, held in Perth, began with presentations of key research findings by members of the Rowan Group, followed by discussion groups which identified the implications of findings for practitioners. The main findings focused on the responsibility of health promoting schools to take ownership of mental well-being of pupils through whole school health promotion, and by developing targeted interventions for those experiencing, or at risk of developing, mental health problems. The effect of existing school structures and cultures (such as curriculum, discipline structures, pastoral care and teacher pupil relationships) on well-being were discussed, drawing on examples from case study work which had tackled some of these issues. The importance of developing a shared understanding of mental well-being through partnership with pupils, parents, and workers from a range of other agencies was highlighted. Significant barriers to effective partnership in schools were identified.

Debate focused on the need for culture change within schools, to be achieved in the following ways:

- through interagency working
- through enforcing accountability
- through training and support
- through curriculum change
- through emphasis on teachers' own mental health
- through work with children and parents.

A later presentation examined the links between research, policy and practice, identifying dissemination as a two way process shaped by the participants of the research. It raised the issue of what must be done to give rise to real change, looking particularly at how teachers learn and what is likely to influence their practice.

<sup>1</sup> Shucksmith, J., Philip, K., Spratt, J. and Watson, C. (2005) Investigating the links between mental health and behaviour in schools. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/76169/0019851.pdf>

Subsequent group discussions explored ways in which the research findings could be disseminated in ways that might impact upon policy and practice. Participants suggested that publications should be accessible, short, and broken down into smaller topics. They requested that the strategy be multi-faceted, aiming at different target groups, e.g. parents, young people, various practitioner groups, managers and policy makers. It was felt that demonstrating the relevance of findings to Scottish Executive policymakers would raise the profile of subsequent publications. Additionally, it was suggested that the Rowan Group should maintain close links with voluntary organisations and other bodies with an interest in mental well-being, and should publicise the work through professional magazines and websites linked to mental health issues.

## Outputs

The points made by the participants during the second discussion session informed the subsequent dissemination process by the Rowan Group. In addition to a number of traditional academic conference presentations and articles written for academic journals, the group have also delivered two outputs deliberately targeted at practitioners. The first, examines the relationship between schools and families around issues of mental well-being and has been published by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships in their research briefing series. The second is an article to be published in the peer-reviewed journal *Pastoral Care in Education*, chosen because of its position on the interface between research and practice, and its wide practitioner readership. In addition, as a result of suggestions made by participants, the team undertook a variety of dissemination activities, with written articles appearing in local, national and educational press, and several interviews in the broadcast media. The project was also highlighted in the Mental Health Foundation web newsletter.

## Conclusions

The funding provided by this project has helped the research group to publicise the issues associated with mental health and behaviour in schools in a range of outlets. The views of policy makers and practitioners provided an important quality check on the findings from the project and provoked deeper thinking on several practice issues. Moreover it assisted the Rowan Group in strengthening its links with the policy maker and practitioner communities in this field, and in developing more insightful thinking into the whole process of meaningful and interactive dissemination. All of these will have implications for the future work of the research group on this topic.

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