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# Summary Report: Promoting Emotional Health, Well-being and Resilience in Primary Schools

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# Introduction

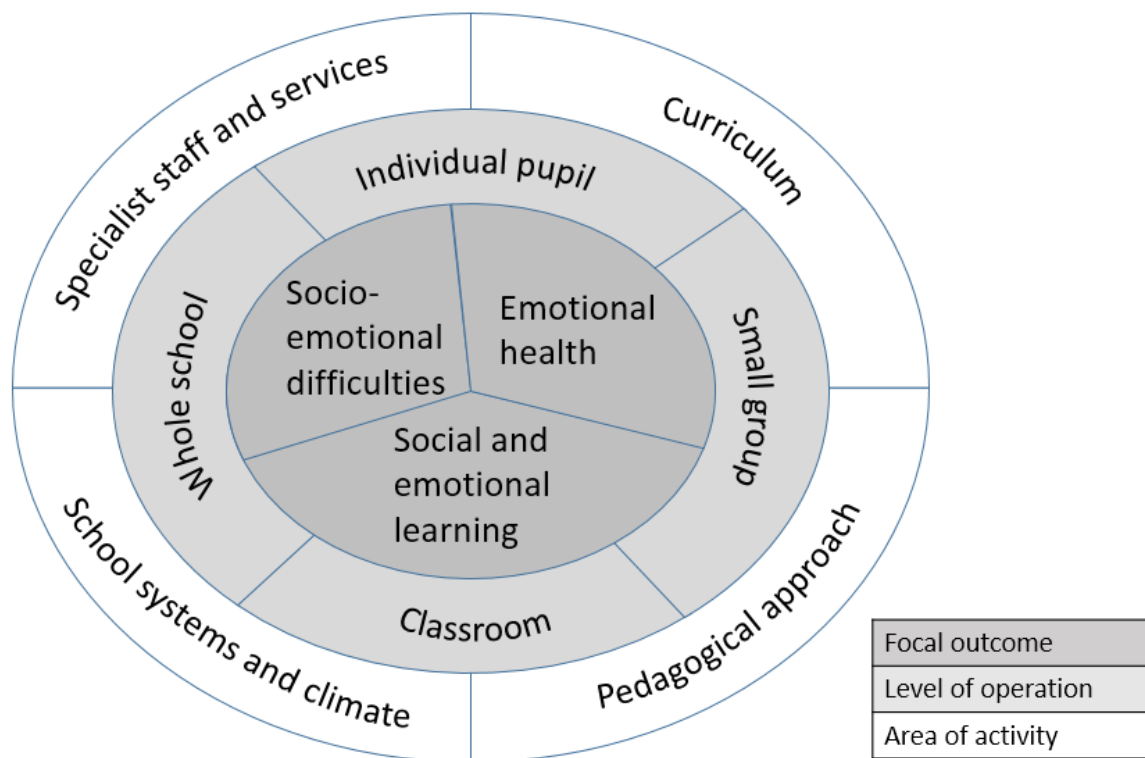
This report provides a synthesis of research and policy evaluations relating to school-based strategies to promote emotional health, well-being and resilience among primary school pupils (aged 4 to 11 years). Our overall argument is that school-based work in this area can be very effective, and that school systems need to be strongly connected with each other in order to translate the research evidence into sustained positive impacts. The key components of effective practice are summarised in the sections that follow, and the figure on p. 2 shows important elements within our integrated approach.

Research interest in this area has grown substantially in recent years. In this report, we pay attention to prevention and intervention efforts designed to reduce emotional and behavioural *difficulties*, as well as strategies to promote *positive* well-being. The report also relates to recent interest among policymakers in the notion of *resilience*. In line with other authors' formulation of this construct, we see resilience as a developmental process that is influenced by external social supports and can be nurtured within the family and other social contexts.

Research suggests that while work on emotional health and well-being is relevant to all pupils, some children are likely to have additional needs in this area. We can pre-identify sub-populations of children that are at greater risk of difficulties, including those from more socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, those who have been exposed to violence, trauma, and/or loss at home or in the community, those who are migrants or refugees, Looked After Children and others. In addition to highlighting such at-risk groups, individual children who are displaying early indications of difficulties may often be identified through formal or informal assessment processes.

We note that work in this area can have a range of orientations, encompassing mental health approaches focused on therapeutic responses to emotional difficulties, educational approaches focused on school systems and pedagogy, and others. We suggest that the diverse array of school-based practices can be situated within a three-dimensional wheel with the focal outcome on one disc, the level of operation on another disc, and the area of activity on a third disc, as shown below. We are aware that the research evidence may not necessarily map onto current practice on the ground in schools, but we believe that both can be scrutinised in the context of this conceptual framework. In our research synthesis, we travel along a spectrum from targeted support for individual pupils with identified difficulties through to holistic approaches to developing integrated school systems.





## Emotional Difficulties

Many of the randomised control trials in this area focus on cognitive-behavioural therapy approaches designed to support children showing signs of anxiety and/or depressive symptoms. Various studies have yielded promising results showing the positive effects of such work, but overall there is not a very high number of school-based indicated interventions for primary school children showing sustained effects using robust designs. Similarly, although some specific prevention approaches designed to reduce the likelihood of emotional difficulties have been found to have significant positive effects, these are not found consistently and may not be sustained over time. Nonetheless, impressive sustained impacts can be observed in some schools even if the overall impact of prevention programmes across all schools is not consistently positive. This raises questions about the range of factors that could influence when and in what contexts strategies to prevent or reduce emotional difficulties are likely to be most successful.

Many authors writing about the nature and impact of mental health work in schools have highlighted the need to consider the extent to which initiatives designed to promote well-being relate to the functioning of the whole school community, rather than being limited to a set of

curriculum lessons/activities and accompanying resources. However, the evidence also suggests that multi-component implementation may be particularly challenging because of the number and complexity of school systems that need to be addressed.

We note that across the wide range of mental health issues that a young person could face, a wide variety of intervention approaches may need to be considered. One approach to intervention for children with emotional difficulties that is of particular relevance to the Welsh context is the work on school-based counselling. In the reported studies, counselling has helped children to become more confident, enhance their learning and self-esteem, improve their relationships and exhibit reduced peer problems, and feel happier and safer at school. However, these encouraging and promising findings are often based on designs with inadequate experimental control, meaning that reductions in problems or increased positive outcomes cannot be conclusively attributed to the counselling received. It should be noted too that the impact of counselling interventions depends on a variety of contextual supports and effective embedding in school systems.

A variety of other specialist staff and services are also recognised to play a potentially important role in reducing or preventing emotional difficulties, although the research evidence again points to complexities that mean it is difficult to make definitive predictions about the impact of introducing any given staff role or service into a school. Unfortunately, we simply do not have compelling evidence to conclude that the positive changes identified in the numerous testimonials and small-scale research studies are actually causal effects of the specialist staff and services, over and above changes that happen as a result of other experiences. Perhaps more importantly, we have not yet systematically explored the extent to which the work of the specialist staff and services can be woven into a broader framework of whole-school approaches to promoting emotional health.

## Social and Emotional Learning

We now have a compelling evidence base regarding the impact of school-based work in promoting social and emotional skills development. A number of major reviews show significant effects of this social and emotional learning (SEL) work on a variety of outcomes beyond the social and emotional skills themselves, including lower emotional distress, fewer conduct problems, and improved academic achievement. Many SEL programmes have a universal curriculum element, involving specific lessons designed to help children learn and develop their social and emotional skills. In a number of cases, this universal curriculum element for all children is accompanied by much more targeted work (e.g. small-group

activities, parental engagement) designed to provide additional input for individuals displaying particular profiles of difficulty.

Notwithstanding the overall positive effects of SEL work reported in the literature, we note that there is no guarantee that introducing SEL programmes in a new school will generate positive and sustained impacts on outcomes for children. It is challenging to effectively roll out and scale up even theoretically sound and well-researched SEL programmes to large numbers of schools facing the everyday constraints and pressures of contemporary education. A key consideration in the SEL literature is the extent to which universal or targeted learning opportunities for skills development go beyond standard classroom, small-group, or individual teaching activities. In particular, we are faced with the challenging question of just how SEL skills can be modelled, practised, and reinforced in the everyday, routine interactions of children, not just in school but at home and in the wider community.

SEL approaches lend themselves very well to a *positive* framing of prevention/intervention work, because the focus is on building the skills that enable children to thrive. One particular line of recent interest revolves around the integration of SEL work with contemplative practice and mindfulness. There are early research indications that such approaches can have positive effects in the primary school years. This work is still at a preliminary stage and needs considerable further research, particularly in terms of integration with other strategies within schools.

We note that in recent years, there has been a particular interest among UK policy-makers in the notion of building character. Many 'character' outcomes, rather than being fixed dispositions, reflect underlying skills that can be – and often are – explicitly targeted by SEL programmes. Research suggests that a key focus in this area must be the shaping of a supportive and responsive school climate, complemented by a pedagogical approach that fosters the development and practice of SEL skills throughout the curriculum.

## Aggressive Behaviour and Bullying

SEL approaches have frequently been deployed with the aim of reducing aggression and antisocial behaviour among pupils. However, these form just a part of a much wider body of work on school-based strategies to reduce conduct problems and to tackle bullying. Research reviews of this broader body of work have shown that both universal and selective/targeted programmes designed to reduce aggressive behaviour have overall significant effects. In fact, some studies have yielded significant differences between intervention and control groups



many years after the intervention, implying long-term, sustained effects. However, it is difficult to make confident statements about the impact of school-based work in cases involving chronic and severe conduct problems.

The research reviews have also suggested that results for multi-component programmes are less encouraging in comparison with more focused interventions, but this again may relate to the challenge of effectively implementing work that bridges across multiple school systems. Research on anti-bullying programmes shows that while this may be a complex and difficult task, it is likely to be a crucial one. Going far beyond reactive sanctions for the bully and support for the victim, recent evidence suggests that effective anti-bullying work simply cannot rely on single focused interventions. Instead, effective preventative work needs to permeate the school climate by bringing together parents, teachers, pupils, school policies, physical environment features etc. in a coherent way.

## Integrated School Systems

We now have many important sources that have collated and rated the evidence regarding the large number of programmes available to schools, and these databases are freely available for policymakers and school staff to consult. However, we know that the real-world success of intervention and prevention efforts cannot be attributed to any given programme *per se*, but rather to the way in which the programme is implemented and embedded in a school that is coping with an extensive set of daily demands and priorities. Thus, the introduction of a given multi-component programme into a school in itself is likely to be insufficient for bringing about the desired whole-school changes. Indeed, without careful planning, commitment, and consensus across stakeholders, there is no inevitable advantage to a whole-school approach. We argue that school-based work on emotional health, well-being, and resilience needs to be situated within an integrated school systems approach where it is *connected* with – rather than *competing* with – other school priorities.

Work on emotional health, well-being and resilience must extend beyond merely delivering a set of lessons in class, if we are to avoid an approach where the work is seen as ‘something else’ that schools need to do. Virtually all of the programmes, initiatives and strategies we have described in this report can and should be systematically connected with wider school systems, structures, and procedures that also promote academic achievement, attendance and discipline. In fact, where schools effectively deploy SEL, mental health and resilience strategies to promote a sense of school connectedness (involving positive relationships and a sense of community) this can also be expected to create the conditions under which school priorities regarding discipline and achievement can also be met.



Particular pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning throughout the curriculum have a role to play in nurturing school connectedness and thereby enhancing behavioural discipline and academic achievement. For example, there is an obvious connection between SEL and the development of the skills needed for pupils to work with each other in groups, which is so often the context for learning in primary schools. In addition, there is a sound basis for situating work on emotional health and well-being within the context of pedagogical practices that support pupil autonomy and self-efficacy through promoting greater pupil choice and focusing on mastery of learning tasks rather than performance outcomes and social comparison goals. Thus, work on emotional health, well-being and resilience is unequivocally *not* a peripheral add-on to primary education, but rather must be viewed as lying at the core of effective teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

Research shows that schools matter greatly in terms of children's emotional health, well-being, and resilience, as well as their academic achievement. The effects can be long-lasting and can be an important part of supportive and protective processes, perhaps especially for those who are at particular risk. However, our synthesis also demonstrates that supporting children's emotional health, well-being and resilience effectively in schools requires thinking and practice that treat the task as complex – that see the school as a web of connected systems that impact on young people. In response to the key questions identified at the outset of this report, we believe the research gives rise to the following conclusions:

- Do primary school children require support for emotional health and well-being at school beyond provisions already available via existing policies and strategies for supporting families in Wales?
  - *Yes, the evidence clearly indicates that schools have a valuable role to play in identifying and meeting the needs of pupils with respect to emotional health and well-being. School-based activities have the potential to make significant and lasting positive impacts on young people's well-being.*
- If so, what initiatives, preventative strategies, and intervention approaches are likely to be most effective in addressing such needs?
  - *A variety of high-quality and evidence-based programmes provide excellent guidance and resources for supporting school-based activities in this area, and these are collated and rated in several existing databases provided by organisations such as Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Early Intervention Foundation (EIF), KidsMatter Primary, and Blueprints*



*for Healthy Youth Development. However, recent trials show that even where the evidence base for a programme is very strong, there is no guarantee that introducing the programme will generate positive and sustained impacts on children. As well as careful planning of exactly how new activities will be implemented, we argue for the embedding of approaches to social and emotional learning within wider school systems and the broader pedagogical approach to teaching and learning across the curriculum.*

- Can clear and robust criteria be created in order to identify those primary school children who are most likely to be at-risk or vulnerable with respect to difficulties in experiencing well-being?
  - *Children who are supported by the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales (those eligible for Free School Meals, and Looked After Children) are at greater risk of developing difficulties in this area, along with those who are known to have experienced or been exposed to trauma, loss, or violence at home or in the community. In addition, evidence suggests that school-based staff are already making sound assessments of the needs of vulnerable children, but good professional development and sharing of practice regarding both formal and informal assessment methods can help staff to identify children who are displaying early indications of difficulties, in terms of both acting-out characteristics (aggressive-disruptive behaviour and other conduct problems) and internalising characteristics (social withdrawal and anxious/depressed patterns). Some though not all children experiencing such difficulties may be formally identified as having special educational needs.*
- Are certain approaches to prevention and intervention particularly important for supporting the emotional health and well-being of such identified children?
  - *Children who have been identified as having specific difficulties in this area can be supported by both the universal provision within the school as well as more targeted therapeutic intervention/prevention work. Both can include specific activities to promote the social and emotional skills that underpin positive behaviour and emotional health, and can fruitfully involve the participation of families. The activities of specialist staff and services can be effectively directed at supporting identified children through both universal and targeted activities, but rather than focusing on remediating problems of individual pupils in isolation, this work should be integrated with the wider school systems, policies and pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning.*

## Recommendations

1. Our overarching recommendation is to develop a carefully planned and well-supported approach to SEL that is integrated with core pedagogical principles and situated within a connected school.

### ***Planning and support***

2. Establish a prominent and well-supported national steering group to guide the development, planning, and ongoing implementation of work on social and emotional learning (including all recommendations below), comprising senior policymakers and service leads in Welsh Government, Estyn, and local authorities, as well as head teachers and senior leads in schools, specialist practitioners, and researchers.
3. Ensure that this steering group has a clear, bidirectional channel of communication with senior individuals/groups who have explicit responsibility for coordinating this work at a local level, both in local authorities and in individual schools.
4. Ensure that the steering group examines the needs arising from, and professional development implications of, any adapted approaches for school leaders, staff and other professionals.

### ***Social and emotional learning initiative***

5. Commission robust and detailed research to describe and analyse past and existing school-based strategies in Wales to promote emotional health and well-being and to reduce conduct problems and bullying, in order to illuminate specific barriers to, and facilitators of, effective whole-school implementation.
6. Develop, plan, implement, and commission an independent evaluation of a Welsh initiative on social and emotional learning that is designed to support emotional health, well-being, and resilience.
  - a. The principal focus should *not* be on developing an entire new SEL curriculum or creating new teaching resources, since many evidence-based programmes with high quality resources already exist.
  - b. Rather, the focus should be on identifying and piloting *specific* strategies for integrating universal and targeted evidence-based SEL work, strategies for engaging families, broader school systems and core pedagogical principles (see below).

### ***Connections with school systems and all stakeholders***

7. Provide guidance to schools and their governing bodies on accessing, funding, and using evidence-based strategies to promote health and well-being in primary schools (collated



in existing online databases), as one of the core Areas of Learning in the revised Welsh curriculum.

8. Following a cost-benefit analysis, and with support in the next phase of the Welsh Government's Rewriting the Future programme, continue to promote the use of a proportion of funds generated by the Pupil Deprivation Grant for universal and targeted activities that address the social and emotional needs of children who are eligible for free school meals and/or Looked After Children.
9. Investigate and analyse in detail the current use and cost of specialist staff and services in Welsh schools, and provide guidance on how different kinds of specialist staff and services can play a role in a broader, integrated SEL initiative that engages all teaching and support staff, families, and the pupils themselves, as well as in targeted work to support pupils who are exhibiting difficulties.
10. Provide guidance to schools on the use of formal and informal assessment methods to inform teacher judgements about pupils who are likely to be at risk of difficulties in emotional health and well-being, recognising that the results of this work can inform universal as well as targeted work.
11. Ensure that every school has a member of the senior leadership team with responsibility for coordinating whole-school work in this area, including integration and alignment of relevant policies, professional development opportunities and well-being support for staff, engagement with families and the wider community, and efficient links with external professional services.
12. Support schools in making links between work in this area and other existing policies and practices.
13. Provide guidance and support to schools in order to foster continuing professional development work in this area.
14. Consider the establishment of a cluster of Welsh schools for systematically developing the above work on connecting and integrating school systems, so that the details of good practice in this area can be collated and shared more widely.

### ***Integration with pedagogical principles of good teaching and learning***

15. Include the SEL initiative to promote emotional health, well-being, and resilience as a central part of the Welsh Government response to the recommendations of Donaldson's (2015) review of the curriculum, particularly with respect to the focus on health and well-being as a core Area of Learning, and the identified pedagogical principles regarding intrinsic goals, active and personalised learning, social and emotional development, and collaboration.



16. Work in partnership with Estyn and teacher training providers to ensure that role of SEL in promoting health and well-being as well as good teaching and learning in general is fully recognised, in terms of both the development of the workforce and the overall school accountability structures.

## Overall implications

We recognise that our synthesis of the research and our recommendations pose significant challenges for policymakers and schools, especially as we have not taken the approach of simply recommending a specific programme or set of programmes for a major roll-out. It is also important to acknowledge the difficult ‘what next?’ question in the face of our cautions that even strongly evidence-based programmes may not necessarily generate sustained positive impacts in large-scale trials. In response, we would like to stress the very significant potential benefits of adopting our recommended approach to **systematically mapping out, planning, delivering, and evaluating an integrated school systems approach to social and emotional learning.**

We believe that our review and synthesis of the evidence support positive conclusions about:

- the importance of school-based strategies for promoting primary school children’s emotional health, well-being and resilience;
- the potential benefits of evidence-based programmes and activities for supporting children’s social and emotional learning and thereby promoting well-being, reducing mental health difficulties, reducing aggressive or antisocial behaviour and even improving academic learning;
- the key role of school staff, including those in specialist roles as well as the general workforce of teaching and support staff, in providing this support both directly to children and through engaging with families;

*and, crucially,*

- the value of systematically planning and tracking how school systems – across academic learning, behaviour/discipline, and well-being domains – can be integrated and connected with one another in order to ensure that work on emotional health, well-being and resilience is not competing with other priorities.

This final point goes far beyond vague supposition about how schools could or should be working. The Common Inspection Framework for primary schools in Wales (Estyn, 2015) currently includes evaluations not only of well-being outcomes but also key aspects of leadership, partnership working, resource management and quality enhancement. We also

can identify the components of a successful integrated approach, as presented in the figure on p. 2. Specifically:

- *each* focal outcome (reducing socio-emotional difficulties, promoting emotional health and supporting SEL)

needs to be addressed in relation to

- *each* level of operation (whole school, classroom, small group and individual pupil),

and all of these need to be considered within

- *each* area of activity (curriculum, pedagogy, specialist staff and services and school systems and climate).

However, we need more centrally supported but locally delivered work in Wales on exactly *how* school leadership and management processes can be changed and developed in ways that will specifically support the many good strategies and activities in this area. **We argue that rather than simply selecting one or more programmes and rolling them out, what is needed now is a carefully and comprehensively supported initiative that enables schools to plan, deliver, and review different ways of taking forward work in the area of children’s emotional health, well-being, and resilience.** The literature does not point to one particular programme that would, in itself, guarantee a coordinated strategy across all of the different focal outcomes, levels of operation, and areas of activity involved in this work. Therefore, any initiative will need to define, implement, and test possible models for achieving this kind of coordination. Such work can be taken forward with a selected pool of schools, supported by relevant experts, and overseen at the national level. The Welsh Government’s plans for the implementation of the curriculum reform could provide the structure for such an initiative.

We see this as a crucial and fundamentally *educational* challenge; we now have the benefit of an extensive evidence base from psychological and health perspectives regarding potentially beneficial school-based programmes and activities, but the business of ensuring that school systems are well positioned and integrated to accommodate and derive benefits from such programmes is far from complete. Our recommendations provide a preliminary roadmap, to be discussed and operationalised by Welsh Government, for tackling this challenge.

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