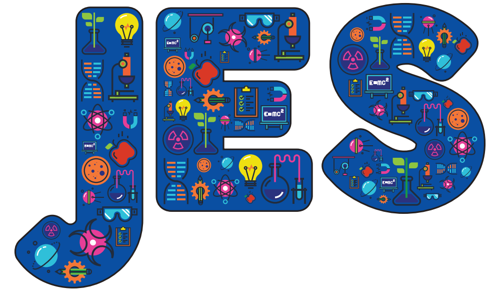
A theoretical reflection on the contributions that scientific enquiry and school leadership make towards a whole school culture of good wellbeing



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Abstract

Research recognises the need and benefit for schools to promote a culture of good wellbeing (Department of Health & Department of Education: a Green Paper, 2017), particularly in the light of stretched resources supporting young people's mental health (Young Minds, 2017). Specific programmes in schools benefit pupils, promoting social emotional development (Howard et al, 2017), with a whole-school approach to mental health and a culture of good wellbeing impacting positively on pupil progress, with long-term benefits (Public Health, 2015). Appropriate leadership strategies support the establishment of a culture of good wellbeing (Teasley, 2017). Pupils' development of the skills of enquiry, taught via science education (National Curriculum, 2013), enables them to 'take appropriate actions that affect their own wellbeing' (Harlen, 2010). A scientific enquiry skills-based approach promotes pupils' engagement and curiosity (McCrory, 2017) across the whole curriculum (National Curriculum, 2013), facilitating development of a whole school culture of good wellbeing.

Keywords: Good wellbeing, leadership, science education, enquiry skills, whole-school approach

'Children's and young people's emotional health is increasingly being recognised as important, not only in its own right, but because emotions play a significant role in learning' (Blake *et al*, 2007).

Over the years that have passed since this was written, concerns regarding young people's mental health and wellbeing have continued to grow (Department of Health and Department of Education: a Green Paper, 2017). Both within daily school interactions and through national media reporting (Guardian, 2018), it is evident that young people are finding the challenges and stresses of their daily lives troubling (Young Minds: Wise-Up Report, 2017). According to a survey carried out by NAHT in May and June 2018, schools have found that, due to the continuing cuts in funding, *'it's now harder to resource the support required to meet the needs of pupils with SEND than two years ago'* (Hall, 2018). A report by the National Health Service on the Mental Health of Children and Young People in England (2017) noted that emotional disorders had become more common in 5-15 year-olds, with a rise from 4.7% in 1999 to 5.8% in 2017. It goes on to state that, among children with mental health disorders, around one in five reported waiting over six months for contact with a mental health specialist, with the *Young Minds Impact* report (2017) noting a wait of nearly ten months until the start of treatment. This report goes on to point out that, of the portion of NHS budget spent on mental health, only 8% of it is spent on children. This published data suggest that the problem outweighs the resources available at present. Merrell and Guelder (2010) recognise this woeful lack of adequate resources available to effect appropriate intervention, and suggest that Social Emotional Learning (SEL), a focused programme of activities and learning opportunities designed to help develop the understanding, recognition, expression and regulation of pupils' emotions, provides an alternative approach for delivering preventative classroom-based mental health services that will reach all students.

The Scottish Government Policy Guidance (2018) also recognised that a positive whole-school

culture and ethos or climate was a key feature in the promotion of wellbeing and mental health across the school community. This is strengthened by the incorporation of three key aspects: safety, engagement and environment, which promote and sustain positive relationships in their communities.

The guidance (Scottish Government Policy Guidance, 2018) also demonstrated that, where schools were achieving higher outcomes than expected from the catchment area, positive relationships and pupils were involved meaningfully within their schools. A study carried out in Australia, (Dix *et al*, 2012) noted strong links to support this idea, commenting that schools that implemented positive mental health initiatives improved pupils' *'socio-emotional competencies and, in turn, academic performance'*. An engaging environment that offers active participation plays a protective role in relation to physical, social and emotional health, and enables young people to thrive academically (Glazzard, 2018). Science education via scientific enquiry (McCrory, 2018) leads the way with the provision of this type of learning environment, encouraging curiosity, active participation, reasoning and problem-solving.

The following words from one of the principals interviewed during a further study clearly bring the message home: *'We found that happy kids and contented kids, and kids who know how to interact better with one another, are much better learners'* (Slee *et al*, 2009). This illustrates that positive engagement and interaction via science enquiry can provide successful learning. In addition, the Public Health England report (2014) argues that positive links are made between the inspection framework's key judgements and pupil health and wellbeing, and attainment. The briefing highlights the value of schools promoting health and wellbeing as an interwoven aspect of a school effectiveness strategy. It goes on to champion a whole-school approach (Glazzard, 2018) going beyond the learning and teaching to one that includes all aspects of school life: the culture, ethos and environment, and a broad curriculum to include development of attitudes and skills about health, wellbeing and partnership with families and the community.

Education is about far more than the acquisition of subject-based knowledge (White, 2011), and a curriculum that promotes human flourishing supports the provision of a whole-school approach, which includes the development of attitudes and skills that promote fulfilling lives (Reiss, 2018). The aims-based approach to the teaching of science argues that *'school education should equip every student to lead a life that is personally flourishing and to help others to do so, too'* (Reiss & White, 2014).

Developing a science curriculum founded on an enquiry-based approach (McCrory, 2018), guided by the principles and big ideas of science education (Harlen, 2010), provides the opportunity to develop skills and attitudes that foster informed decision-making and subsequent actions that affect personal wellbeing as well as that of society and the environment. This whole-school approach is advocated as a means to enhance the health and educational outcomes of the pupils and is supported in the NCB's (Stirling & Emery, National Children's Bureau, 2016) *Resources for Leaders*, which indicates that schools using this ethos and approach have improved individual and school performances. Morris (2015) supports this thinking and considers that a school that is truly committed to caring for those in its community must by default be committed to the development of excellence. They would care about outcomes for all and therefore aim for the best.

Recent studies have indicated that performance can be further enhanced with the implementation of positive mental health initiatives (Dix *et al*, 2012). The SEAL (Social Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme was an example of such an initiative, which offered schools a programme to assist with the development of a positive culture promoting good mental health. It was introduced to primary schools in 2005 by the Department for Education and Skills, and provided a comprehensive, whole-school approach to the social emotional skills that were understood to support effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance and emotional wellbeing. The SEAL programme was designed to be delivered in three 'waves of intervention'.

The first wave was designed to help create a climate and ethos within the school in which social and emotional skills could be effectively promoted. The programme utilised the five domains proposed

in Goleman's (1995) model of emotional intelligence. These are: Self-awareness, Self-regulation (managing feelings), Motivation, Empathy and Social Skills. This first wave was evaluated as part of the Behaviour and Attendance Pilot (Hallam *et al*, 2006), and they found that it *'had a major impact on children's wellbeing, confidence, social and communication skills, relationships, including bullying, playtime behaviour, pro-social behaviour and attitudes towards schools'* (Hallam *et al*, 2006).

The second wave involved small group interventions for children who are thought to require additional support to further develop their emotional and social skills. The purpose of these interventions was to facilitate their personal development, explore key issues in depth, practice new skills in a secure environment, develop ways of relating to others and promote reflection.

The final wave of SEAL involved 1:1 intervention with those who had not benefited from waves one and two, providing targeted support. Some of these children may include those at risk of or currently experiencing mental health issues.

A more recent initiative offering a similar three-phase programme is Thrive, which began by supporting around 60,000 children across the UK in 2013. *'Thrive is a systematic approach to the early intervention of emotional development need in children and young people so that differentiated provision can be put in place quickly by the adults working most closely with the child or young person'* (Thrive, 2015). This initiative is based on an integrative approach to emotional and social development underpinned by four areas: the neuroscience of emotional development, attachment theory, the importance of Arts and creativity in emotional development, and child development models. The Thrive work is grounded in some of the current scientific developments in neuroscience (Hughes *et al*, 2012), which have yielded significant insights into the working of the brain and nervous systems and their development.

It has been known for many years how important attachment is for the building of a healthy stress regulatory system (Bowlby, 1982) and that play and creativity are vital for healthy emotional development in children (Sunderland, 2007). Thrive uses a developmental framework to clarify the connections between emotional and social development, behaviour and learning (Illsley *et al*, 1998). Alongside this, Thrive online assessment and action planning tools help to develop secure stress management systems and improved foundations for emotional resilience (Sunderland, 2003).

Although the SEAL and Thrive programmes provide a clearly structured approach for emotional and social development in schools, a pilot study of the SEAL programme in the UK (Hallam *et al*, 2006) found that it was most likely to be implemented successfully when the school leadership was committed to it, where staff valued its principles, and where there was sufficient time for preparation and training. Where the programmes met with resistance, reluctance or scepticism, the success of such programmes was impeded.

So it would seem that the implementation of a specific mental health programme in school offers recognisable, beneficial outcomes, but that to implement it successfully, a positive culture in which it can flourish has to be created. It falls to the school leaders, primarily the Headteacher, to promote the value of a 'Growth Mindset' (Dweck, 2012) approach within the community of the school to support the development of a culture of enquiry-based learning using science as a vehicle.

Ofsted recognises that the most effective science teachers develop curiosity as a priority, with the 'working scientifically' requirements of the National Curriculum supporting a culture of enquiry. This in turn encourages a relational view of learning, promotes links between science and other areas of learning, including PSHE, and encourages a love of lifelong learning (McCrory, 2017), thus supporting the promotion of a culture of good wellbeing throughout the whole school. *'It can be argued that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture…'* (Schein, 2008). Successful cultures have leaders who know how important schools are to children and want to make them the best places that they can be.

Cultures that have a clear focus on pupil learning and that foster high expectation for all students in turn focus the work of staff members and generate a motivation to learn. Where there is a strong educational mission coupled with a sense of

community, social trust amongst staff with established customs, values and a shared commitment to school improvement, schools move forward successfully in all aspects (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Deal and Peterson also comment on the resultant '*group sense of efficacy*' (a belief that they could become better) that such schools can develop (2016). Their work promotes an overriding sense that developing a professional culture is at the heart of any successful school.

Professional learning communities have been recognised as having the following features: a collective sense of purpose, teacher influence in decision rituals, concerted effort linking instruction to purpose, shared dedication to unremitting perfection and a sense of shared responsibility for student learning (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Research in this area also firmly links the central role of cultural elements to school success (Newmann *et al*, 1996; Moll *et al*, 1992).

Leading a professional learning community requires an open-minded leadership approach and cannot simply be achieved using an 'old frame' of leadership '*characterised by a charismatic individual in a high status position, directing many others*' (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009). The 'new frame' suggests a more productive alternative where the leadership is viewed '*as activity, both individual and shared, influencing and serving others, taking initiative and making decisions for the greater good, whilst modelling learning and being sensitive to context'.* Research about more distributive forms of leadership and the part these play in the successful development of schools suggests that this approach has merit (Bennett *et al,* 2003; Harris, 2004).

This approach can be a challenge to senior leadership, as it shifts from the traditional view of those with titles, positions and experience bringing about change, to teacher-led change. Frost (2017) suggests that this process requires a high level of trust in teachers and support staff, humility on the part of the senior leaders and alignment of leaders and staff to ensure that the power wielded by the leaders is used to support the work in the school.

Two key factors play a significant role in the success of this type of leadership: agency and moral purpose: '*Having a sense of self, encompassing particular values and cultural identity, and being able to pursue self-determined purposes and goals through self-conscious strategic action'* (Frost, 2006) or, indeed, the ability to make a difference. Leadership for learning is based on moral principles, is positively benevolent and is based on values that support learning and guide our leadership.

The recent research emphasises that there is a recognised need for schools to provide opportunities to promote, support and guide our pupils towards a culture of good wellbeing via the whole curriculum, where science education can lead the way; that pupils benefit significantly where there are specific programmes in school to address social emotional development and support good mental health, such as Thrive and SEAL; and that the appropriate choice of leadership strategies and whole school approaches to promote a curriculum of enquiry and cultural development, introduce and develop whole school programmes, and ultimately implement change, are key to successful outcomes and the delivery of a culture for good wellbeing.

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