

Katherine Weare

*Professor of Education, School of Education,
University of Southampton*

Michael Murray

Chief Executive, The Clifford Beers Foundation

Building a Sustainable Approach to Mental Health Work in Schools

ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a major challenge to mental health work in schools, and many initiatives started by well-meaning individuals and agencies fade quickly. This paper outlines some key actions that can be taken to ensure that mental health work is sustained, as well as introduced, in schools. These actions include demonstrating that mental health work meets educational goals such as learning and the management of behaviour, using a positive model of mental well-being to which it is easy for those who work in schools to relate, using mental health experts as part of a team, forging alliances with other agencies and working with a whole-school approach. Such approaches are more likely to meet the needs of people with more severe mental problems and provide a more stable platform for specialist interventions than targeted programmes. The paper goes on to suggest some practical steps to sustain work at the school level. These steps include assessing the current position, developing the vision, identifying the gaps, determining readiness and assessing the scene for change, securing consensus, planning the change, establishing criteria, and managing, evaluating and maintaining the change.

Keywords: mental health, schools, organisations, change, sustainability

The problem of sustainability

Considerable efforts are being made to develop work on mental health in schools, using the term 'mental health' as the banner. On the whole, the impetus for work on 'mental health' comes from people outside schools, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, children's agencies and those who have developed projects and programmes. Schools themselves rarely use the term 'mental health', or see mental health per se as among their priorities. The result is that those who wish to develop work on mental health in schools often see the goal as one of persuading schools to 'allow in' their favourite interventions and programmes, and often expect schools to find money to buy the consultancy, training and materials that accompany them. The decision from within to respond to such offers tends to come from leaders, such as school principals or local authority officials, who are usually both enthusiastic and ahead of grassroots opinion. Initiatives tend to be targeted at schools with problems, such as those in poor neighbourhoods or who are at risk of 'failing', students with problems and younger children.

Interventions generated by such an approach tend by their nature not to be sustained or sustainable. They are vulnerable to the feeling that schools often have, that they 'do not have time for such optional extras', and to be axed when the enthusiastic individual who brought them in moves on, or when the funding and the external interest die off, to be replaced by the next fashionable funded initiative. The result

is a great deal of wasted effort and disillusionment on the part of the external agencies, reinforcement of the attitude among teachers that mental health is not really central to educational goals and can be allowed to come and go without serious detriment to students' education, and a confusing roller coaster ride for students. Furthermore the lives of teachers, and of mainstream, older and achieving students remain untouched by work on mental health, which leaves their very real mental health issues unaddressed.

This paper will attempt to outline some of the key ways in which more sustainable approaches can be developed.

Demonstrating that mental health work meets educational goals

If mental health work in schools is to be sustained, it has been taken on by grassroots teachers and built into the mainstream activities of ordinary schools. To be motivated to do this, schools need to believe that mental health work can tackle their existing and lasting priorities. Mental health workers need to think through and demonstrate how what they have to offer can help meet the priorities of schools. School priorities include promoting the learning of all pupils, supporting the professional development of teachers, helping with the management of commonplace but difficult behaviour in a wide range of pupils such as disruption, lack of attention, aggression, bullying, depression and withdrawal, and tackling widespread under-achievement and raising standards, especially among boys, poorer children and ethnic minorities.

Mental health workers would do well to build bridges with schools through a joint interest in emerging scientific work on the emotional basis of learning (Jensen, 1995). Work on how the mind works is demonstrating that people cannot learn if they are stressed or upset, that effective thinking involves matters of value which are essentially emotional in origin, that the emotions themselves can be 'intelligent' in the sense that they are an important guide to what matters, and that people have different learning styles which we need to respect such as visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, holistic or atomistic. We need to work with those who are interested in such themes, sometimes presented under the headings of 'emotional intelligence' and 'emotional literacy', as such work provides a common platform for those who are interested in mental health and those who wish to promote learning.

Using a positive model of mental well-being

Mental health workers need to shift their model of mental health to one which schools and teachers find comfortable.

They need to make clear that mental health is not synonymous with mental illness, and embrace the shift taking place in the world of mental health work to a 'salutogenic' view of mental health as positive emotional, social, spiritual and physical well-being. They need to move from a specialised approach to mental health which sees it as the province of experts who use obscure and frightening language and terminology, to an approach which sees mental health as the concern of everyone, including teachers and students, and presents itself in a language and terminology that are inclusive and normalising, such as 'emotional and social well-being' rather than 'mental health'. There is also a need to think through what is meant by mental well-being in the positive sense, and focus on the competences and strengths that underlie health, rather than on the pathologies of problems and illness. These competences and strengths include optimism, coherence, resilience and the ability to communicate effectively and make good relationships, which underlie both mental health and effective learning (Weare, 2004).

Teamwork

Mental health workers need to recognise that they cannot carry out all the work needed in schools on their own, and need to see themselves as experts, resource people, catalysts and facilitators for the work of others. Making this shift allows for the mobilisation of huge numbers of education and health professionals who can help to develop the contexts that promote good mental health, and work in a preventive way with large numbers of students and staff. Mental health experts can be used more efficiently, to support and advise these professionals and to deal with the (reduced) number of severe cases that remain. Making this shift can be challenging, as it takes time and involves mental health professionals giving up some of their power and being prepared to work in partnership, and sometimes compromise, with others who they may feel know less than they do in this area.

The need to work within a whole-school approach

We need to build approaches to mental health into existing and supportive initiatives that are currently working well in schools. In the development of innovative school health promotion programmes, significant emphasis is now placed on multiple-component and theory-based interventions (Parcel *et al*, 2000). Such approaches include changes in the environment designed to support organisational

changes and interventions that address change at the individual level (Parcel *et al*, 1989). In addition to curriculum approaches, these interventions are expanded to include such issues as the school environment, student, teacher and staff health, parental education and community reinforcement. This multi-component approach offers the opportunity to change the environment of the student while concurrently addressing students' needs, including knowledge, skills and self-efficacy.

Taking this a step further, the school is seen as a vital part of the wider community, in reaching out to and receiving support from parents and local agencies, in programmes that complement the efforts of the school to promote health (Nutbeam *et al*, 1991; Pollack, 1991). Using the school as a setting for mental health promotion is essentially a holistic approach or even an eco-holistic approach (Parsons *et al*, 1997), reflecting the inter-relationship of the parts in the whole process.

Some real examples of such holistic approaches now exist, and many have strong mental health components. In Europe the Healthy School/Health Promoting School approach is currently widespread and successful, and in most parts of Europe has emotional well-being, self-esteem and social relations at its heart. In the US there are many widely used and accepted programmes that are working well, using what is often called there 'universal' approaches, such as those that tackle violence or drugs and teach social skills and emotional regulation.

Shifting the focus of mental health work in this way, from individuals alone, or even from discrete projects alone, to focus on whole contexts and organisations allows us to work on the known principles that underlie both mental health and general school effectiveness, which promote both mental well-being and effective learning and behaviour management. The key principles include providing clear boundaries, building positive climates and warm relationships, encouraging listening, involving people, understanding behaviour not just managing or condemning it, and helping people to become more autonomous (Weare, 2000).

A school-based comprehensive approach to meeting the need for open and democratic schools is also receptive to new challenges and individual strategies, including a mental health promotion approach, and can be integrated successfully with the existing ethos and culture. Schools need to balance judiciously the needs of students, teachers and parents and in so doing can create sustainability. Schools need to understand fully that the principles and practices behind the development of a sustainable approach have moved well beyond the 'awareness and information' stage, and focus on the development of the skills and compe-

tences that help reinforce sustainability and create a supportive environment that helps to maintain and improve such a focus.

However, it is important to recognise that the holistic approach can present more difficult, challenging and contentious issues than individually focused, competency work. For example, in addition to building the individuals' capacity, a holistic approach calls for a change in social structures which, in turn, cannot be achieved without changing the hearts and minds of the individuals who inhabit them. Unless attitudes and values are re-assessed and refined, new programmes and interventions may be successful in the short term but simply revert to the situations they were designed to replace.

Sustainability in a holistic context can be achieved only by forging creative alliances (Dunphy *et al*, 2003). If we wish to create open and democratic schools, it is essential to work with teachers on issues pertinent to the transfer of control and to educate students and parents on how to participate in a meaningful and responsible manner, if the new agenda is to be sustained. Working as part of a team in such generic approaches may again involve some loss of status for mental health professionals, but it is a sacrifice well worth making if it leads to a genuinely sustainable approach to mental health in schools. A more fundamental problem which all health promotion work, including that on mental health, needs to address is that, in addition to working with individuals, it is also necessary to address the social issues at the root of mental health problems. Such problems are inevitably deep seated and political in nature (Townsend *et al*, 1992). They include poverty, social inequality and discrimination in its many forms, and addressing these structural problems is a core component for schools wanting to promote the mental health of their students.

Meeting the needs of people with more severe problems

It may be thought that to make these shifts to salutogenic, universal approaches, we will 'sell out' the needs of those with acute mental health problems in favour of supporting the well-being of those without, and the needs of the whole organisation over those of the vulnerable individuals within it. However, if well planned, the opposite can be the case. A holistic, 'joined-up' approach provides an essential backdrop of overall provision to meet the needs of pupils with acute mental health problems, who, we know, do better in a whole-school, mainstream approach (Stewart-Brown, 1998). Mental health professionals can then help set up

specific targeted approaches for individuals who have severe problems, and tackle more difficult issues such as suicide, anorexia and major violence. If we have this backdrop of universal provision, much less effort will be needed to carry out this targeting, as many cases and problems will have been prevented, the infrastructure to respond will be in place already, and there will be a supportive context to which people can return which will sustain the changes we have helped them to make rather than undermining them again.

Special interventions on mental health

Again, taking this holistic approach does not mean that we cannot also push forward programmes to promote mental health; indeed, with such an approach they are more likely to be accepted and sustained. Once we have the overall supportive context in place, it becomes more appropriate and feasible to set up projects with a specific focus on mental health. The successful MindMatters approach in Australia is a good example of this. This whole-school, comprehensive approach, which looks specifically at mental health, was able to be so successful because it had the well-accepted Health Promoting School approach to build on, which had already tackled the whole context of the school and made it supportive to mental health as well as physical health. It has now been taken on by mainstream classroom teachers, who are working on some quite specialised mental health problems, such as suicide, depression and stigma, in the context of mainstream schools. This is sustainability without any loss of focus on the main issues involved in mental health.

Developing a sustainability approach at the school level: practical steps

There has been a shift in perspective on the relationship of government to education. Traditionally governments have attempted to promote compliance in schools, focusing on sanctions for failing to meet minimum standards as a provider of education services. However, in some parts of the world there is now the beginning of a shift from a 'command and control' approach to an organisational ideology to provide a sustainable environment committed to the provision of educational excellence, equitable social practices, autonomy and the full development of individual student potential. With this perspective, the school accepts responsibility for contributing to the process of renewing and upgrading human knowledge and skill formation in both school and community. It adopts a strong and clearly

defined ethical position based on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, for example including students, parents, teachers, the wider community and government to pursue equitable social practices and the development of the students' potential. Developing a sustainability programme in this new paradigm requires an undertaking to introduce a transformational approach in the school environment. In essence, this means re-inventing the school ethos by creating an image of a desirable future school community, dramatically different from the present one.

Undertaking transformational change

According to Dunphy *et al* (2003) there are a number of essential steps to undertaking such a transformational approach.

Assess the current position

The initial step is to assess the current reality of the school. This is done by identifying the core cultural values and entrenched patterns that control much of the activities in the school. It is also essential that all involved in the process recognise that the basis for effective change depends on widespread consensual agreement about the current reality. In order to achieve this consensus, key stakeholders - teachers, parents, students, etc - must be fully involved in the initial consultation and decision-making process. Numerous studies have also demonstrated that the level of participation of parents and the community in any intervention has great influence on its success (Durlak, 1995; O'Donnell *et al*, 1995; Durlak & Wells, 1997).

Develop the vision

Transformational change presents the opportunity to rethink the *raison d'être* of the school and creatively to construct future scenarios. A vision must be elaborated for the most likely scenario but parallel versions can be included as best and worst cases. The central challenge is to unleash the imagination of stakeholders, both internal and external, so they can collaborate in creating a vision that breaks out of existing cultural assumptions to create a prototype for a truly sustainable and sustaining school.

Identify the gaps

At this stage the main aim is to identify the difference between the outputs from the two previous stages. Such differences provide the information needed to position the

school where it is now and where it aspires to be - that is, the gap and over what time span the gap may be closed. As transformational change is always a political process, a central theme of the process is to build active support among constituent groups from within the school so as to persuade all major stakeholders of the benefits to be derived from the proposed change.

Determine readiness for change

For those actively involved in the earlier stages of the process it may well appear that the school is poised and ready for change. However, as the planning stage gives way to intervention the effects in an ongoing organic system that has a compelling logic of its own can present a huge challenge. Even formal authority has limited validity in such a transformational change. Leadership, at all levels, not management, is the critical element in the process. Success depends ultimately on emotional contagion across the living networks of human relationships that make up the school. There must be a compelling intellectual agenda for change, but this is not sufficient to transform deeply entrenched behavioural patterns built up over years of repetitive action. Stakeholders are people, and people have feelings, hearts and spirits. The agenda for change must also appeal to people at both emotional and spiritual levels.

Assess the scene for change

Before embarking on the transformational process the school must address three additional issues to create a climate for change:

- awareness of the need for change
- identification of a change leader(s)
- assembling the resources required to undertake the change process.

When creating an awareness of the need for change, it makes sense to start with those people and groups who are already aware of and committed to the changes proposed. In today's education system there are articulate advocates for sustainability in school mental health programmes, and many who are impatient for change. Likewise there are those who are aware but reticent and waiting for encouragement and clear opportunities before becoming involved. The awareness-building programme can usefully engage these people by bringing them together into groups and identifying the potential that they can, individually and collectively, bring to the change process. We must not under-

estimate the contribution such groups can bring to influencing informal networks that operate throughout the school. Such influence can in turn spread ripples of awareness throughout the whole school community.

The external environment can also be used to heighten awareness and promote a transformational drive. The more the school community is given access to leading thinkers and programmes for sustainable mental health promotion programmes, the more compelling is the case. Lectures, site visits and so on all help build up an irresistible case for change and an intellectual agenda for desired vision.

However, awareness, ideals and aspirations alone will not suffice. Effective change programmes require leadership and resources. Leaders and change agents are vital and required at all levels of the school community. It is important to bring these people together as a task force appointed to create a practical agenda for change and to win the commitment of all parties to attaining the agreed vision. Such a task force should comprise people with diverse perspectives and expertise, as the more broad and inclusive the task force is, the more likely it is to promote sustainability in its own right. Where staff representatives are in place, they should be represented at the most senior level possible in the task force. Accountability should run from the chair of the task force to a senior manager such as the school head, otherwise the exercise will be futile. Commitment from the top is a prerequisite for success.

Even the best leaders cannot accomplish effective large-scale transformational change without the necessary resources of personnel, time and finance. Managing a large-scale change programme without adequate facilities can only lead to failure. Appropriate resources to manage the programme must be identified at the outset.

Securing consensus

No matter how urgent it may seem to move the programme forward, it is essential to ensure that it meets the felt and expressed needs of stakeholders as the necessary base from which to move forward. Joint ownership is the base platform on which sustainability can be built.

Planning the change

The critical questions to be answered at this stage include:

- What is our goal?
- How long will the change programme take?
- What resources are required?

- What are the critical gaps in our expertise that we need to develop?
- Where will resistance occur and what targets should we set?
- How will we evaluate the change? Do we have baseline data?

At this stage in the process, it is always helpful to try and identify positive role models for change from other schools; site visits are useful in making assessments.

It is also important to ensure that the goals of the transformational programme are integral to the overall aims of the school and not simply an add-on. The support of key stakeholders is vital, and they need to appreciate fully how the outcomes of the programme add value.

Establish criteria

If the transformational change is to contribute in a significant way to the core business of the school and to the well-being of the wider community, we need to establish targets or performance criteria, such as improved academic performance. At the earliest possible stage the benefits to be derived by the different stakeholders must be clearly identified in a real and tangible framework.

Effective leadership will also have an important part to play. Not all decisions can be made through participative means. Certain issues, such as safety, are non-negotiable. The executive team should take a leadership stance and set criteria early in the programme for which issues are to be made by executive decision and which can be made participatively, that is, where individuals, stakeholders and/or their representatives will be encouraged to influence and determine decisions.

Managing the change programme

Launching the change programme can be a risky endeavour, and success is very dependent upon careful preparation, however time-consuming it may appear.

There is extensive literature on managing a change programme, and it would not be practicable to try and rehearse such a topic in detail here. However, it is important to recognise that the success of any change programme depends on the participants' having a clear grasp of the vision, a good understanding of their role and a genuine willingness to contribute to the process.

In most cases, particularly in a school, the introduction of change is more likely to be effective with a participative style of managerial behaviour. If stakeholders are kept

fully informed of proposals and encouraged to be personally involved in implementation, there is a greater possibility of genuine ownership (Mullins, 1999). A significant advantage of participative change is that, once the change is jointly owned, it tends to be long-lasting (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988).

Evaluate and maintain

In a dynamic world change is ongoing, and schools may ossify unless they continue to change to meet new social and political demands. It is therefore essential to continue monitoring and further growth after initial aims have been achieved. There will be changing stakeholders, new government policies and emerging interests to be addressed, and these all call for a school that is able to meet the challenges of sustainability. As success becomes apparent, the school is better able to contribute to a developing climate of political and community support for the enhancement of human capability.

Address for correspondence

Please address correspondence to: Professor Katherine Weare, The Health Education Unit, Research and Graduate School of Education, University of Southampton, United Kingdom.

Email: Skw@soton.ac.uk

References

- Dunphy, D., Griffiths, A. & Benn, S. (2003) *Organizational Change for Corporate Sustainability*. London: Routledge.
- Durlak, C. (1995) *School Based Prevention Programmes for Children and Adolescents*. London: Sage.
- Durlak, C. & Wells, A. (1997) Primary prevention mental health programs for children and adolescents: a meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology* **25** (2) 115–52.
- Hersey, P. & Blanchard, K. (1988) *Management of Organizational Behaviour*, 5th edn. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Jensen, E. (1995) *The Learning Brain*. San Diego, California: The Brain Store.
- Mullins, L. J. (1999) *Management and Organisational Behaviour* 5th edn. London: Pitman.
- Nutbeam, D., Haglund, B., Farley, P. & Tillgren, P. (1991) *Youth Health Promotion: From Theory to Practice in School and Community*. London: Forbes.

- O'Donnell, J., Hawkins, J., Catalano., Abbot, R. & Day, E. (1995) Preventing school failure, drug use and delinquency among low income children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* **65** 87–99.
- Parcel, G. S., Kelder, S. H. & Basen-Engquist, K. (2000) The school as a setting for health promotion. In: B. D. Poland, L. W. Green & I. Rootman (Eds) *Settings for Health Promotion: Linking Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Parcel, G. S., Simons-Morton, B. G., O'Hara, N. M., Baranowski, T. & Wilson, B. (1989) School promotion of healthful diet and physical activity: impact on learning outcomes and self-related behavior. *Health Education Quarterly* **16** 181–99.
- Parsons, C., Stears, D., Thomas, C., Thomas, L. & Holland, J. (1997) *The Implementation of the ENHPS in Different National Contexts*. Canterbury Centre for Health Education and Research. Canterbury: Christ Church University College.
- Pollack, P. (1991) *Kids in Action: A Community Development Approach to Children's Health*. Toronto: Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre Press.
- Stewart-Brown, S. (1998) Public health implications of childhood behaviour problems and parenting programmes. In: A. Buchanan & B. Hudson (Eds) *Parenting, Schooling and Children's Behaviour*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Townsend, P., Whitehead, M. & Davidson, N. (1992) *Inequalities in Health*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Weare, K. (2000) *Promoting Mental, Emotional and Social Health: A Whole School Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Weare, K. (2004) *Developing the Emotionally Literate School*. London: Sage.
- Wells, J., Barlow, J. & Stewart-Brown, S. (2003) A systematic review of universal approaches to mental health promotion in schools. *Health Education* **103** (4) 197–220.