A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Aims

A general consensus exists among Member States that gaining academic knowledge on its own is not enough for young people to play a role as active citizens and face the socio-economic realities in their lives, in order to avoid inequity, poverty, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion. In the 21st century, education needs to go beyond narrow sectoral goals such as academic achievement. In addition, it should contribute actively to the health and well-being of children and young people, whose mental health needs are becoming more evident and demanding. The recent European Commission communication on the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025 (European Commission, 2020) has set in motion a collaborative process to determine how schools can address the learning and socio-emotional needs of their students – in particular, those children who encounter difficulties – and how they can provide students with a balanced, high-quality, education that sets them on a trajectory towards an active, productive and healthy life. This report is in response to such initiatives and to the recognised need for schools across Europe to prioritise and actively promote the mental health and well-being of school children within safe and inclusive contexts. More specifically, it seeks to review the international literature on the promotion of mental health and well-being and the prevention of bullying in schools. In addition, it seeks to develop a theoretical framework to guide the way in which the whole-school system, in collaboration with the community, can be mobilised at various levels to promote mental health and well-being. The report makes recommendations for the effective implementation of a systemic, whole-school approach to the promotion of mental health and well-being and the prevention of bullying in schools across the EU. This report adopts a systemic, whole-school perspective that emphasises the importance of interacting subsystems within and beyond particular individuals and settings.

Methodology

The methodology used in this report is focuses primarily on the use of secondary data regarding the promotion of mental health and well-being in schools. A review of the international literature, particularly more recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses and other key studies in the area, was carried out to determine the impacts of interventions on student outcomes, as well as identifying effective processes. The review focused on a number of specific areas such as literature on Health Promoting Schools, as well as social and emotional education, the prevention of mental health issues, school climate and bullying. We also carried out an in-depth analysis of specific aspects of the whole-school approach such as universal interventions, classroom climate, whole-school ecology, resilience and targeted interventions. Our findings with regard to each of these aspects are presented in separate chapters. Furthermore, we undertook a search for initiatives and examples of good practice, as well as projects in Member States aimed at promoting mental health and well-being and the prevention of bullying in schools. Reference has also been made to EU policy documents, previous NESET reports in the area, such as 'Strengthening social and emotional education as a core curricular area across the EU' (Cefai et al., 2018) and 'How to tackle bullying and prevent school violence in Europe' (Downes and Cefai, 2016), as well as the School Educational Gateway platform and relevant EU-funded projects. This review served to build a theoretical framework to guide how schools can adopt a whole-school approach to promote the mental health and well-being of their members in an effective and sustainable way.

Evidence for a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being

Despite current research having certain limitations of, evidence from the various reviews and meta-analyses of studies nevertheless indicates that school-based interventions to promote students' mental health and well-being are more likely to be effective if they are organised as part of a systemic, whole-school approach. Provided they are implemented

well, are integrated into the fabric of the school context, and are sustained over time, whole-school interventions have a more positive impact on student outcomes than individual components such as standalone programmes. A whole-school approach mobilises the various resources of the entire school community – including the voices and active engagement of students, staff, parents and professionals – in a collaborative effort to promote the mental health and well-being of everyone in the school community. When implemented well, whole-school interventions have a positive impact on a range of mental health, social, emotional and educational outcomes. These include an increase in mental health literacy, social and emotional competences, positive mental health and well-being, and prosocial behaviour, as well as a decrease in mental health symptoms and problems such as depression, anxiety and substance use, anti-social behaviour, violence and bullying. The promotion of mental health also helps to challenge negative views of mental health issues, leading to a reduction in stigmatising behaviour. Various reviews have also reported an impact on members' commitment to the school and a greater sense of belonging, as well as enhanced learning motivation and academic achievement. Such impacts are a key factor in preventing early school leaving, and increase the likelihood of successful post-secondary education and enhanced career prospects. Lastly, whole-school interventions in relation to mental health and well-being have a strong positive impact on children who are at risk or have mental health needs, thus serving to promote resilience and reduce socio-economic inequality.

An integrated framework for a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in the EU

Based on our analysis of the current literature, and in view of recent EU policies, communications and reports, this report presents an integrated framework for a whole school approach to mental health and well-being, with interventions at curricular and contextual levels, integrated universal and targeted interventions, and the involvement of the entire school community. The framework consists of three components: a set of principles informing the framework; key elements at classroom, school and intersectoral layers; and sustainability processes that support the whole-school approach. The concentric elements of the framework revolve around students, facilitated by interventions at the classroom and whole school layers, supported by the whole school staff, peers, parents. In addition, there is an intersectoral layer that focuses on collaborative, targeted interventions supported by the local community and external professionals and agencies. Each of the layers is circular and influences and contributes to the other layers. Overall, the framework focuses on universal mental health and well-being for all school children as a major goal of the school, complemented by additional targeted interventions for students at risk, as well as those with mental health needs. In addition, the framework also focuses on the education and mental health and well-being of the adults who work with school children, namely the teachers and parents. The three main components of the framework include the following constituent elements

- Key principles: a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being is informed by the following principles: the rights of children and young people to physical and mental health, quality education, protection and participation; holistic education and development; a systemic, whole-school perspective; inclusive and equity-driven; culturally appropriate interventions; a bottom-up, participative approach; health- and strengths-based; relational; multi- and trans-disciplinary; addressing adults' mental health and well-being, including teachers.
- Key elements:
  - o Classroom layer – universal mental health curriculum, classroom climate; teacher education and mentoring;
  - o School layer – school climate, safe spaces, student engagement; active parental engagement; staff well-being and mental health;
  - o Intersectoral layer – targeted interventions; partnership with professionals and agencies; partnership with the local community.

- Key sustainability processes – quality implementation; participatory and flexible approach; support from local, regional and national authorities.

Recommendations

In view of the evidence supporting the social, emotional and academic benefits for children and young people of mental health promotion in schools, and considering the increasing mental health needs of children and young people across Europe, we make the following recommendations for the effective promotion of mental health and well-being and the prevention of mental health difficulties in European educational systems.

1. **Mental health promotion as a mandatory key learning goal in 21st-century education**

   In line with the policies currently being developed by the European Commission for on the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025, a supporting Communication should secure mental health and well-being as a major educational objective across the Members States, integrated into the curriculum and supported by a whole-school approach. Such an initiative is supported by the emergence of consistent evidence that schools can effectively promote the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents and prevent the emergence of mental health issues, at critical periods during their development. It also resonates with the rights of children and young people to physical and mental health, quality education, protection and participation, and would help in the realisation of the corresponding Sustainable Development Goals. Lastly, evidence is also emerging which shows that efforts to promote mental health and well-being in school produce substantial economic returns.

2. **Mainstreaming mental health and well-being into the formal curriculum and pedagogy**

   A strategic approach aimed at encouraging schools to broaden their agenda to include mental health and well-being as a key learning objective, is to emphasise its inextricable links between academic learning, curriculum design and pedagogy. Teaching practices that foster connectedness and a sense of belonging, a constructivist collaborative pedagogy involving active student engagement and culturally responsive and inclusive practices, and role-modelling of social and emotional competences, are building blocks for both academic learning and social and emotional competences and well-being. These practices fall within the remit of all school teachers, and placing an emphasis on such 'mainstream' practices may help to reduce resistance to mental health promotion on the part of teachers, providing a 'royal road' to the prioritisation of mental health promotion and well-being in schools.

3. **Adapting the metrics of school success to prioritise mental health and well-being**

   Another important way to encourage schools to prioritise mental health and well-being and provide a more balanced and meaningful education is to increase the currency of mental health and well-being in education. Education systems need to support the change towards 21st-century schools and the positive development and well-being movement by expanding the metrics they use to evaluate school performance. Including students' mental health and well-being as a common indicator of a school's effectiveness and success will ensure these aspects will feature prominently in the school's agenda. Evaluation, however, needs to be formative, inclusive and systemic, and must avoid labelling, ranking and comparisons. This shift in educational priorities also requires the development of educational evaluation systems that are endorsed by the governments of Member States.

4. Adopting a systemic, whole-school approach

School-based interventions aimed at promoting students' mental health and well-being are more likely to be effective if they are organised within a systemic, whole-school approach. They also need to be implemented well, integrated into the fabric of the school context, and sustained over time. A whole-school approach mobilises the various resources of the whole school community, including the active engagement and voices of students, staff, parents, professionals and local community, in a collaborative effort to promote the mental health and well-being of the entire community. Universal interventions are complemented by a whole-school ecology framework that is embedded in the culture and ethos of the school and supported by targeted interventions for students at risk of, or experiencing, mental health issues.

5. Relatedness and connectedness at the heart of mental health promotion

While structures and policies are essential tools to facilitate the implementation of a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being, they need to be framed within an ethic of relatedness and care. A sense of belonging and connectedness, fostered by respectful, caring and supportive relationships among and between the various school members, creates healthy spaces in which individuals can growth and thrive. Such an environment will also help to prevent unhealthy practices at the school that might compromise the mental health and well-being of school members, such as peer bullying, coercive classroom management based on fear and punishment, unequal or unfair treatment, as well as undue pressures on students to achieve, leading to stress and anxiety. Similarly, such an environment works as an antidote against stress and burnout among school staff.

6. A bottom-up, participatory, approach, including a representative student voice

In line with European schools' culture of autonomy, empowerment democracy and ownership, a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being needs to adopt a bottom-up, participatory and flexible approach that fits the ecology of the school and local community. A bottom-up approach also helps to ensure that any initiative is culturally appropriate and addresses the diverse needs of the school population. It will also be an investment in developing interventions that are feasible and relevant to the local context. Teachers, students, parents and the local community must be actively involved in the planning and implementation of programmes and initiatives. The active involvement of parents and the local community will ensure that interventions are relevant, appropriate and adapted to the local context –. and thus, parents and the community will be more likely to adopt them. A strong and meaningful student voice is also vital, in order for students to identify with and 'own' the interventions. This includes co-designing of materials, participation in the delivery and implementation of interventions, participation in decision making, and contributing to peer interventions. It is important that the student voice is representative, and incorporates the voices of marginalised and vulnerable children.

7. Developing a mental health and well-being curriculum for school children across Europe

All school children, from the early years to high school, need to be exposed to a curriculum that equips them with the resources and competences they need to take active steps to maintain their mental health and well-being, as well as those of others. Such a curriculum should includes social and emotional education, resilience building, and mental health literacy (including addressing stigma and prejudice), and should be adapted to the context and needs of the school. It may be integrated into other existing, related curricular areas, and make use of existing practices, expertise and resources. Such adaptations may make it easier for the mental health to find its way into the curriculum, but care must be taken to retain a focus on the promotion of

mental health and well-being. Further practice-based research should be undertaken with European schools as key partners, to develop a mental health and well-being curriculum that has a European identity. The funding of such collaborative projects by the European Commission has been instrumental in encouraging school staff and researchers to work together towards this goal, and should be further strengthened.

8. **School-based intersectoral support for students with mental health needs**
Mental health is a multifaceted phenomenon, and schools need to work with other sectors and agencies to provide targeted interventions for students who are at risk or experiencing difficulties, starting as early as possible. Close intersectoral collaboration with health services, mental health agencies, social services and other related services and agencies, will ensure schools can address the mental health needs of students using a transdisciplinary, cross sectoral approach that includes parents and students themselves in the decision-making process. It is essential that these intersectoral interventions are as accessible, responsive, appropriate and equitable as possible. The key role of schools in mobilising and coordinating support for students and families also ensures that services are more accessible and destigmatised, and can be linked with other types of support available at the school.

9. **A strategic focus on the mental health needs of vulnerable and marginalised students**
Students exposed to risk, disadvantage and marginalisation are at greater risk of developing mental health problems. These include children coming from low socio-economic status (SES) or migrant backgrounds, as well as children exposed to abuse, violence and bullying, and those who have experienced other forms of trauma. Students who attend high-achieving, competitive schools may also be at risk of mental health difficulties due to academic pressure, high expectations and fear of failure. Schools are in a unique position to prevent the onset of mental health issues and to address the mental health needs of vulnerable students through preventive and resilience-building interventions at a critical time, before these problems become more complex and chronic. Such interventions need to be implemented within an inclusive setting, to avoid labelling and stigmatisation. This strategic focus will be instrumental in strengthening the role of schools in promoting equity and equality.

10. **Involving the whole school community in tailoring interventions to prevent bullying**
Involvement in bullying increases the risk of mental health problems among victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Interventions to prevent bullying should thus be implemented in all schools, within a whole-school approach, by means of priority actions at the level of universal prevention. Joined-up actions aimed at selective and indicated prevention also need to be implemented, targeting at-risk groups and individuals, to increase the effectiveness of interventions. The selection and implementation of interventions and their components need to be tailored to the specific needs of individuals (e.g. adolescents, minority groups), schools, and the community and geographical area. This process requires an assessment of the bullying phenomenon in the school/area in which it occurs, combined with constant monitoring of both the programme implementation and the work of the large network that connects the school with experts, political leaders and other members of the community. School staff and parents should be also targeted by interventions, and their roles in programmes should be strengthened. Students' voices needs to be actively listened to, and their active involvement in a developmentally appropriate manner.

11. Prioritising the education of teachers in mental health and well-being

Teachers are the primary delivery agents of mental health interventions – not only of universal interventions and, in many instances, selective interventions – but also by providing support to students with mental health needs as part of an intersectoral, transdisciplinary team. Adequate teacher education in mental health promotion, at both initial and continuing professional development levels, is crucial to the success of mental health promotion in schools. National frameworks for both teacher education institutions and educational authorities need to outline the key educator competences necessary for the effective delivery of mental health and well-being in schools. Teachers require education not only in delivering mental health interventions at classroom and whole-school levels, but also in engaging in relational, child-centred, collaborative and constructivist pedagogy, as well as in their own social and emotional competence and resilience. Mentoring programmes, professional networks, learning communities and collaboration platforms provide collaborative learning environments in which teachers can share and improve their practice in mental health promotion. Professional development needs to be organised with the teachers themselves, according to their needs.

12. Addressing the mental health and well-being of adults working with children

The mental health and well-being of adults such as school staff, parents and carers has a direct impact on the mental health and well-being of students, and should therefore be targeted for intervention. Teachers need active support from local authorities, the school administration and their colleagues to deal effectively with the challenges and stresses of their profession, and to take care of their health and well-being. Similarly, schools not only need to encourage parents to share responsibility and collaborate actively with them in mental health promotion, but should also empower them in parental education and support them in taking care of their own health and well-being.

13. Strengthening evidence and evidence-based practice

Most of the reviews examined for this study underline the various methodological limitations of the studies, and emphasise the need for more rigorous research to provide stronger evidence on the effective promotion of mental health and well-being in schools. The need for more evidence is particularly evident in relation to multi-layered and complex whole-school approaches, which pose particular challenges in terms of implementation and sustainability. Further research is also recommended on the ways in which the formal curriculum and pedagogy can facilitate and optimise both mental health and academic outcomes. Evidence is also lacking, particularly in the European context (in contrast to North American and Australian contexts), with regard to which universal, selective and indicated interventions work, and for whom. Rigorous evaluation of existing and developing interventions in European schools would strengthen the evidence base and provide schools across Europe with a repertoire of evidence-based interventions from which to choose and adapt according to their needs. Such evaluations must, however, include local interventions that have been developed and implemented in European schools. Providing a stronger evidence base for school-based mental health promotion would also make it easier for the promotion of mental health and well-being to make deeper in-roads into educational systems across Europe.

The recommendations above entail widespread and significant changes in the way education systems are conceived, designed and operationalised. As such, they may encounter resistance from educational authorities, school staff and parents, who may find their understandings, expectations and sense of identity being challenged. A combination of legislation, advocacy, policy development, education and training, and the provision of multi-level support and intersectoral collaboration, would thus be required to empower schools to engage in this transformational process through a bottom-up, participatory approach.