



Healthy Minds: Innovation in Life Skills Education

By Richard Layard, Lucy Bailey, John Coleman, Emma Judge and Ali McGuire

At a time of public concern about the health and well-being of young people, it is appropriate and significant that a new evidence-based life skills programme is being trialled in secondary schools in this country.

Public concerns, which include anxiety about increasing stress among young people, the pressures of social media, the impact of pornography, as well as reductions in services for young people, have all led to higher levels of disquiet about the mental health of teenagers. Coupled with this has been a growing awareness of the need for a greater focus on Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education. The Government has recently announced that Relationships Education (RE) and Relationships & Sex Education (RSE) will be made compulsory, and a consultation will take place later this year (2017) on how best to implement this policy change. The development of the Healthy Minds programme is highly pertinent in this context. It has a particular underlying theme relating to education for resilience, focussing on critical thinking and decision-making skills, and can be seen to address the concerns of policy-makers, teachers, parents and young people themselves.

Background

Between 2009 and 2011 the Paul Hamlyn Foundation funded a research project, based at the LSE, to review curriculum materials designed to cover the main elements of life skills education, and to highlight those which had a clear and demonstrable evidence base (Hale, Layard and Coleman, 2011). Using this research as a springboard, the authors then set out to design a research project using the evidence-based materials, to offer an innovative curriculum addressing the needs of young people in a modern world. Attempts were then made to seek funding for the major trial whose purpose would be to fully design the Healthy Minds



Curriculum and evaluate the effects on the educational achievements and well-being of the pupils involved. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) agreed to fund the project delivery and academic research outcomes, and the trial commenced in 2013.

The Healthy Minds Curriculum



The curriculum integrates 14 separate elements, which together go beyond the standard personal, social, health topics, to include elements on resilience, mental health, media literacy and parenting. The curriculum is designed to run for four years, starting in Year 7 and concluding in Year 10. The curriculum has been developed to be relevant to the different stages of adolescent development and to the reality of life for students in and beyond the school environment.

The curriculum is designed to ensure that every element:

- Builds on the previous material and takes into account student input;
- Offers realistic, age appropriate and relevant information;
- Encourages students to reflect and practise what they learn;
- Is taught applying a wide range of teaching styles;
- Is taught by trained teachers using effective learning aids and resources.

In terms of the materials for each school year the curriculum is designed around the following themes;

Year 7 – “Managing the world around me”

Year 8 – “Moving towards my future”

Year 9 – “Taking control of the decisions I make”

Year 10 – “The beginning of adulthood”

Further information can be found at www.healthymindsinschools.org

Implementation

As noted, the trial commenced in 2013, and involves a widely diverse group of 31 secondary schools, from across the UK including, Hertfordshire, Kent, London, Northampton, Oxford, Surrey and Wolverhampton. The evaluation, a randomised control trial, is designed in two phases including a wait-list trial. In other words some of the schools commence teaching the curriculum in one year, and the rest starting in the following year. All schools have the benefit of the Healthy Minds Curriculum, whilst also providing an in-school comparison cohort. The design allows a comparison between one cohort which has received the trial

The views of pupils offer clear support for this curriculum. One said:

“I think this should be in every school, because it helps you with every lesson”. Another put it like this: “We learnt empathy, like working with other people, understanding how they would feel”.

materials and another cohort that has not been exposed to this curriculum.

One Headteacher said:

“We are delighted to be part of the Healthy Minds programme. I am confident that this will have a direct and positive impact on our students as we support them to become effective learners, developing emotional resilience alongside their studies.”

There are two main evaluation outcomes. One has to do with academic attainment, whilst the other is related to health and well-being. Data from the students are collected in every year of the project, and given the large number of students involved in the study (approximately 11,000), a significant amount of data collection is involved. Final data collection will be in 2018, with the findings and reports being available in 2020. It is important to note that, apart from the empirical findings, this project is also delivering learning related to how to teach life skills in the reality of a complex school environment with severe restraints on resources.

An integral element of the project is the teacher training to ensure good quality teaching and learning of the curriculum materials. The charity How To Thrive (www.howtothrive.org) has led the training design and delivery, and has developed strong relationships with teachers. Not only has this led to the creation of a cadre of highly skilled and dedicated Healthy Minds teachers, it also has led to a sound understanding of how to embed curriculum of this type into mainstream education.

Conclusion

We believe that Healthy Minds can make a significant contribution to the enhancement of the curriculum in secondary schools. While we do not yet have the results of the empirical evaluation, our qualitative research shows that this curriculum is hugely popular with teachers and students. In summary:

- It is innovative and evidence-based;
- It covers a wide life skills curriculum;
- It addresses public concerns such as the pressures of social media;
- It is up to date and appeals to both schools and pupils;
- Most importantly it makes a contribution to the promotion of resilience, enabling young people to cope more effectively with the challenges they face in their lives today.

