Part 1: Emotional Wellbeing, Gender and Young People
Fiona Shelton (United Kingdom)

1. Introduction

Emotional wellbeing is described as being important in young people. Good social, emotional and psychological health is said to help protect young people against emotional and behavioural problems, violence and crime, teenage pregnancy and the misuse of drugs and alcohol (Adi et al. 2007).

The positive association between learning and wellbeing has been shown to be longitudinal – predicting change from childhood to adolescence. Arguably, children’s learning and enjoyment in primary school predicts their later wellbeing in secondary school, with some gender differences. According to governmental research in the UK, for boys, learning in primary school has the strongest influence on behavioural aspects of their later wellbeing, whereas for girls it is more predictive of social wellbeing (Gutman et al., 2010).

One of the complexities in defining wellbeing and childhood wellbeing in particular, is that these are widely used concepts but which have a weak theoretical basis (Statham and Chase, 2010). And despite considerable academic and policy interest in wellbeing to date, the concept of wellbeing is difficult to determine. It has been described as ‘intangible, difficult to define and even harder to measure’ (Thomas, 2009: 11), and as ‘conceptually muddy...[but] pervasive’ (Morrow and Mayall, 2009: 221).

In addition, a further complexity can be drawn from those who contend that the human spirit is diminished through the ‘dangerous rise in therapeutic education’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). To this end competing perspectives will be considered in the ensuing discussion, to raise awareness, find safe ways of working with young people and consider what the evidence presents and suggests as effective approaches for working with young people in relation to their emotional wellbeing.

2. Nourishing the ‘self’ or diminishing the human spirit?

In recent years, there has been a plethora of governmental intervention in the development of young people’s wellbeing in school in different countries including amongst others: The United Kingdom, Sweden, The Netherlands, Spain, the US and Germany. In the UK, this has taken the form of ‘Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning – SEAL’ implemented by the Department for Education and Skills (2006) in both primary and secondary phases of education. SEAL (2006), focuses on five social and emotional aspects of learning: self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills, based on the theoretical stance of Goleman’s (1996) five components of emotional intelligence.

The stimulus for the development of the SEAL resource was the growing evidence base from the US on the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) on a range of areas
including school achievement, and government’s wishes to draw together preventative work on mental health and work to tackle behaviour issues in schools (Gross and Ballantyne, 2006). The school environment was chosen for these types of intervention, because as a context of learning, it has been found to play an important role in children’s social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing (Gutman and Feinstein, 2008).

Gross and Ballantyne (2006) explain that SEAL, like most of the existing US programmes, has its basis in research on the affective competencies variously described as emotional intelligence or emotional literacy (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) popularised by Goleman (1996) in long-standing experimental psychological research on empathy, social problem-solving, anger management and in cognitive-behavioural theories (Bandura, 1986; Kendall, 2000).

Cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains of learning are described as tightly integrated aspects of human learning (Bloom and Krathwohl, 1956; Griffith, 2006; Jantan, 2009). Adkins (2004) suggests that many institutions focus only on the skills and knowledge domains and in more recent years, many educational professionals have shied away from the affective domain because of its complexity. The affective domain, developed by Bloom (1956) considers the importance of individuals taking responsibility for themselves as learners. Bloom argued that cognitive and psychomotor domains alone do not result in effective learning. In fact, Sylwester (1995) argued that emotion and logic are intrinsically linked and that both should be considered in the process of learning. By separating emotion from logic and reason in the classroom, he states

‘We’ve simplified school management and evaluation, but we’ve also then separated two sides of one coin—and lost something important in the process. It’s impossible to separate emotion from the other important activities of life. Don’t try.’ (Sylwester, 1995: 72, 75)

The Government Office for Science (2008) describes wellbeing as

‘... a dynamic state that is enhanced when people can fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society.’ (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008: 10)

Fundamental to this definition is the idea of wellbeing being a dynamic state. Consequently, rather than being static, wellbeing emerges from the ways in which people interact with the world and others around them at different points in their lives. Being happy should not necessarily be an expectation here, since elements of anxiety, sadness, conflict and anger are sometimes to be expected in life. But being able to apply strategies and learn how to cope in challenging circumstances is part of understanding one’s own wellbeing.

However, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) put forward the case that the ‘dangerous rise of therapeutic education’ is damaging to the intellectual growth of young people they state that:

‘In Britain, diverse concerns are creating an ad hoc array of therapeutic interventions to develop and assess attributes, dispositions and attitudes associated with emotional
wellbeing, alongside growing calls to harness subject content and teaching activities as vehicles for a widening array of affective outcomes.’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009: 371)

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) oppose the teaching of these elements of personal development in schools and argue that the breakdown in emotional development is a reflection on society, education is impaired as a result of the range of interventions introduced into compulsory education in the United Kingdom.

They argue that the emotional self becomes the subject of learning because children are no longer seen as able to cope with education. They describe a ‘diminished self’ who finds exposure to uncertainty and adversity threatening to the integrity of the self and inhibiting of it. This ‘diminished human subject’, argue Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) is coming to dominate ideology about schooling, curriculum content, teaching activities and assessment. The problem posed by this stance is that needing more and more emotional support to learn at all, is that children will only learn what is personally and emotionally relevant to them and children will shielded from and will avoid the difficult subject knowledge and process of learning itself.

Importantly, one of the points raised, relates to emotions in the classrooms, which acknowledges that teachers encourage children and young people to express their emotions – so long as they are the right emotions – so ‘empathy’ and ‘compassion’ are acceptable, whilst ‘anger’ or ‘hatred’ are not (Hayes, 2012). Hayes is not against exploring emotions, but believes they should be explored at a safe distance through literature and the arts, where they are indirect and allow for reflection on self without diminishing the human spirit, or adopting a therapeutic approach to education.

Humphrey (2013) contends that social and emotional learning is particularly useful for children from challenging backgrounds, as they are more likely to be ‘under stress’ and need help. He endorses the variety of ways it can be implemented in schools, in formal lessons using scenarios and role plays, though extra-curricular work such as school councils, and in peer mentoring and anti-bullying campaigns. He further suggests that learning of this nature is decreasing in schools, with more emphasis on knowledge as the government endorse the testing regime which currently dominates education. In fact the current State Secretary for Education, Michael Gove has publicly announced that

‘Schools should focus much more on the core activity of imparting knowledge. Children’s wider development is best enhanced through extra-curricular activities such as schools clubs and societies but not through ‘teaching’ life skills or well-being... Schools should be institutions that are primarily or even exclusively about learning and should not be required to engage in the wider delivery of children’s or community services.’ (Gove, RSA Speech, 2009)

However, Humphrey (2013) argues that evidence shows that social and emotional learning in primary schools can have powerful effects on attainment, discipline and mental health.

3. Gender Differences
Evidence suggests that there are key differences in boys’ and girls’ emotional development particularly during adolescence. In a large-scale study, Chaplin and Aldao (2012) reviewed data from over 21,000 participants of males and females, focusing on emotional expression from birth to adolescence. The findings suggested that girls internalised their emotions more than the boys, but they also displayed more positive emotions. For example, whilst girls outwardly expressed more cheerfulness and joy, they tended to have higher rates of anxiety and sadness than the boys. An assumption often made is that girls express themselves more effectively than boys, this evidence suggests that whilst girls may have the vocabulary to do so, what they express may not be how they really feel, but they have developed mechanisms to suppress emotions that may be perceived as inappropriate in social situations.

Whereas the findings relating to the boys, suggested that boys were more likely to exhibit anger and aggression than girls. Interestingly, these variances were only evident when the children were in the presence of strangers, when they were with their parents, the children expressed a wide range of emotions, making the gender differences virtually non-existent. The conclusions Chaplin and Aldao drew, were that children may feel more comfortable with parents and may feel free to express all of their emotions. In social settings, children and girls particularly, may feel the need to conform and therefore may not freely express their true emotions, leading to internalising behaviours.

Additionally Chaplin’ and Aldao’s research suggests that adolescent girls have higher levels of shame than boys. Shame and guilt are defining features in several psychological problems, including those of depression, self-harm, and eating disorders. Recommendations suggest that educators and clinicians working with teen girls should focus these emotions. A further disturbing finding was that boys felt more joy than girls when they were afforded the opportunity to taunt or tease another individual. Because this could behaviour could lead to an increased risk of boys engaging in bullying and aggressive behaviour, developing greater skills of understanding and empathy could be a focus for work with boys. Stereotypes that are not helpful for boys’ and girls’ emotional wellbeing are those that have expectations around gender-type behaviours; boys being expected to be ‘brave’, ‘strong’ and ‘tough’ and girls needing to be ‘protected’, ‘kind’ and ‘sweet’. More effective strategies are those round treating young people in the same way; we all need to develop empathy, to be brave and to be kind - regardless of our gender.

4. Conclusion

Despite these findings it is important to be able to identify which expressions are normal and which are signs of concern, not all young people display these behaviours and it would be wrong to assume that all young people will find themselves in these difficult situations. What is clear is that teens can benefit from some discussion about emotions, identifying how they feel in certain situations and adopt strategies to overcome them. It is also important to bear in mind that all emotions are valid and that it is not useful to try and prevent young people from being honest about their feelings, but rather that they
are helped in terms of how to cope with these feelings, rather than suppressing or ignoring them.

This does not mean adopting a therapeutic approach to education, but does mean providing opportunities to explore emotions and the impact they can have on relationships and in social spaces. This can be done through role-play, theatre, literature and music where young people can explore behaviour and emotions from a safe distance, with the opportunity for self-reflection.

References


Hayes, D. (2012). Be a ‘Know it all’ not a lifelong learner

http://www.spiked-online.com/site/article/12959/


