School staff perspectives on approaches to mental health promotion

Experiences of delivering universal approaches in English primary and secondary schools

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Introduction

Funded by the Department for Education, Education for Wellbeing is one of England's largest research programmes for school-based mental health interventions. The aim of the programme was to evaluate pioneering ways of supporting the mental wellbeing of pupils.

The programme was split into two trials: AWARE (Approaches for Wellbeing and Mental Health Literacy: Research in Education), tested in secondary school settings, and INSPIRE (INterventions in Schools for Promoting Wellbeing: Research in Education), tested in both primary and secondary school settings (see AWARE Impact Findings and INSPIRE Impact Findings for more detail). Recruitment was conducted in three waves (2018, 2019, 2022).

This briefing reports findings from a qualitative investigation across the two trials. It explores school staff members' experiences of all five interventions in Wave 1, all delivered on a universal basis as part of the Education for Wellbeing programme: Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM), Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing (SSW), The Guide, Mindfulness-based exercises, and Relaxation techniques. Other briefings relating to this programme can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-for-wellbeing-programme-findings.

Facilitators to implementation identified by staff members across the five interventions and across primary and secondary schools were: seeing the benefits; perception of fit with school context; ease of implementation; consistency and security; and taking responsive action. Barriers to implementation were: not always seeing the benefits; varying engagement; issues maintaining relevance and interest; differences of opinion; and struggles with time and space.

The Study

The Sample

Each primary school selected up to two classes from Years 4 and 5 (age 8-10) and each secondary school selected up to three classes from Years 7 and 8 (age 11-13) to be involved in INSPIRE. Each secondary school selected up to three Year 9 (age 13-14) classes to be involved in AWARE.

All five interventions were delivered over a four-month period during the spring term of 2019 (January to April). YAM was delivered by trained YAM instructors and helpers (external to the schools' staff teams). Mindfulness-based exercises, Relaxation techniques, SSW, and The Guide were delivered by trained school staff. Prior to the start of the interventions, school staff received a half-day training session in late 2018 in the case of Mindfulness-based exercises, Relaxation techniques or SSW, or a full-day training session if allocated to The Guide. Training sessions were led by the Education for Wellbeing intervention development team. At the training, school staff were invited to express interest in their school being a qualitative case study school for Education for Wellbeing. Schools delivering YAM were also invited to express interest in being a qualitative case study school.

Of the schools that expressed interest in being a qualitative case study school, 20 schools were selected to achieve equal representation across interventions and trial hubs, as well as variation in contextual factors (including level of current mental health support and barriers faced to providing support, as measured through the trial's usual provision survey). The final case study sample consisted of three primary schools and one secondary school delivering Mindfulness-based exercises, three primary schools and one middle school delivering Relaxation techniques, two primary schools and two secondary schools delivering SSW, four secondary schools delivering The Guide, and four secondary schools delivering YAM. 19 of the schools were co-educational, state-funded schools, whilst one was a privately funded, single-sex secondary school.

For each case study school, the school key contact was asked to arrange interviews with up to three staff members who had been involved in intervention implementation (such as a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) and two classroom teachers). 60 members of school staff took part in the evaluation. The majority of school staff were interviewed separately, but staff in six instances were interviewed together (2-3 per focus group) due to school timetabling difficulties. 10 staff members worked in schools delivering Mindfulness-based exercises, 14 in schools delivering Relaxation techniques, 11 in schools delivering SSW, 15 in schools delivering The Guide, and 10 in schools delivering YAM. Across the schools, 12 staff members were SLT members, 20 were

senior teachers (e.g., Personal, Social, Health, and Economic education (PSHE) Leads), 20 were classroom teachers, and 8 were non-teaching staff (e.g., teaching assistants).

Data collection

School staff members received information sheets and gave written informed consent to join the focus groups. The Education for Wellbeing evaluation team explained that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw any time, and discussions would be kept confidential, except when there were apparent safeguarding concerns.

The interviews and focus groups (approximately on average 30 minutes in length) took a semi-structured format and were conducted by the Education for Wellbeing evaluation team typically in private rooms at participants' schools during the mid to late stages of the interventions. The interviews and focus groups explored three main areas relating to the interventions: staff members' experiences and opinions, suggestions for improvements, and perceptions of impact. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The areas of research interest outlined in the interview topic guide (topic guides available in the Technical Report) were used as categories to which relevant extracts of the transcripts were systematically coded, taking a 'top-down' approach initially to analysis. Categories included: facilitators to implementation, barriers to implementation, suggestions for improvement, and perceptions of impact. Then, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) approach to thematic analysis, the data coded to each category were recoded, taking a 'bottom-up' approach to analysis, which involved applying codes (labels) to transcript extracts describing their content. Similar codes were then grouped into themes within each category. Themes were defined, refined through team discussions, and repeatedly checked against the data to ensure that they were sufficiently representative of the contents of the dataset. As a final step in our analysis, we explored any potential variation between themes in terms of schools' levels of current mental health support and barriers faced to providing support, as measured through the trial's usual provision survey.

Results

Facilitators to implementation

Seeing the benefits

Enjoying and engaging

A majority of staff members (at least 50% of participants across the interventions) noted that students seemed to be enjoying and engaging with the interventions. They had observed that students liked trying out different techniques in Mindfulness and Relaxation sessions (e.g., breathing exercises or mindful colouring), and watching videos and taking part in interactive activities (e.g., discussions, role plays, and creative activities) in The Guide, SSW, and YAM.

> *"[The videos are] up to date, they are contemporary, it shows people of a similar… a bit older actually, but usually of a similar age to them, in difficulty, or you know, dealing with mental illness. And the pupils are really wrapped up in it. I mean, you can see them watching and pondering and thinking about it."* (The Guide)

Similarly, a majority of staff members voiced their own positive views on the interventions, including enjoying delivering the interventions: *"I enjoy giving them that time to think"* (Mindfulness-based exercises). Factors contributing to staff buy-in included staff members perceiving benefits for their students, recognising in general the importance of supporting students' mental health, and having support or oversight from more senior school staff members.

> *"I do support it, I think it's a really good thing to do. I think kids keep needing to be reminded who they can go to and what's out there to help them and that it is okay to sometimes feel the different feelings that they feel. Whether it's they are happy, or they feel unsafe."* (SSW)

Having time to calm down and reflect

Staff primarily at schools implementing Mindfulness-based exercises or Relaxation techniques had found that having a regular timeslot for the interventions in the school day had helped students to feel calmer, behave better, and feel more ready to learn, as it gave them time to calm down and reflect: *"I do see that after the Mindfulness, they're more willing to engage with learning. They've calmed down from the previous outdoor activities they've been doing at lunchtime"* (Mindfulness-based exercises). This was the case on a whole-class basis, as well as for students with specific needs (e.g., anxiety) and demographic characteristics (e.g., boys).

Staff at schools implementing YAM, The Guide, and SSW also highlighted the time for discussion and reflection that the interventions had provided for students: *"Just having the time, I think, to discuss things, and kids to reflect on things is really important, and I think The Guide has allowed the staff to do that with the children"* (The Guide).

Encouraging conversations

Staff primarily at schools implementing The Guide, SSW, or YAM felt that students had a new opportunity through the interventions to discuss and share knowledge and personal experiences related to mental health with each other, as well as with staff: *"I think it's been really, really beneficial and I do hope the school continue with it because it's been an opportunity for these children to talk about things they perhaps wouldn't necessarily talk about"* (SSW). Staff felt more aware of the issues affecting students and felt that students were more able to ask for support for themselves or others: *"We've got a big team to handle the issues, it's just that we weren't maybe aware in some cases that there were things going on"* (YAM).

Increased knowledge and awareness

A minority of staff members (fewer than 50% of participants across the interventions) reported noticing increased knowledge and awareness among staff and students about mental health and wellbeing, including coping skills and the sources of help and support available for young people: *"Most lessons were really good. I came out of it knowing a lot more. The kids did, it was pitched about right in that some kids knew about it before they came in. Some didn't"* (The Guide).

Perception of fit with school context

A majority of staff members reported that the interventions fitted with their schools' ethos and culture, for example in terms of their efforts to promote student mental health and wellbeing in general and their willingness as a school to try out new programmes. This meant that the interventions often complemented what schools were already doing or filled a gap in support: *"It's a free resource for us and to help as many pupils as we can and it's another tool that we've got at our fingertips now"* (Relaxation techniques).

A majority of staff members also highlighted ways in which the implementation of the interventions fitted well with the school day or timetable. They spoke about finding a regular slot for Mindfulness-based exercises or Relaxation techniques practice (e.g., after breaktime or lunch at primary school and during tutor time at secondary school), and inserting YAM, The Guide, or SSW into schools' existing PSHE slot in the timetable: *"If we didn't have PSHE, then I don't think anything like this would happen"* (YAM).

Ease of implementation

Ease of delivery was seen as a facilitator to intervention implementation by a majority of staff members. Intervention brevity (for instance the short-term nature of YAM, SSW, and The Guide, or the requirement of up to five-minute Mindfulness or Relaxation sessions) was in turn a facilitator to ease of delivery. In this context, staff also highlighted the benefits of the training that they had received to deliver the interventions and the lesson plans or manuals that they had been given to follow.

> *"Once you've got the manual and you've practised them and you've had a go at them yourself, I think it's just easy to use. So any… you could leave it for somebody covering your class and they could quite easily be able to follow what they had to do."* (Relaxation techniques)

Staff mentioned working together with colleagues to plan, practice, and deliver the interventions, and in the case of YAM, referenced the advantages of having sessions delivered by an external professional: *"We wanted the sort of the presented sessions because in some ways we felt, well that's the way of getting the most out of the programme like this"* (YAM).

Consistency and security

Staff primarily at schools delivering Mindfulness-based exercises and Relaxation techniques indicated that ensuring that intervention sessions happened consistently and regularly was important to maximise impact and student engagement: *"The consistency to make sure that the children know it's going to happen day in and day out, it's not just a one-off that we're going to forget about and then pick it up later"* (Mindfulness-based exercises).

Staff at schools delivering Mindfulness-based exercises, Relaxation techniques, and SSW also felt that consistency and familiarity (of both the intervention format and the staff member delivering the intervention) had contributed to students' perceptions of the interventions as a safe space: *"Week in week out we're having those same conversations. We're reassuring them that this is a safe place, you can talk about things"* (SSW). Staff at schools delivering YAM mentioned that these perceptions could also be influenced by the sessions being led by an external professional, for example because students may feel more able to speak openly to someone from outside of the school environment.

Taking responsive action

Having the flexibility to make adaptations as needed to the intervention format and content was described by a majority of staff members as a facilitator to intervention

implementation. Staff made adaptations according to students' needs and preferences, and to ensure that the interventions fit in with the school day, such as when they had a shorter slot than needed within which to deliver the intervention sessions: *"You, sort of, cut or bring out the most important information, and you make sure that comes across and they understand that"* (The Guide). Staff described including new activities (e.g., mindful walking) and resources (e.g., music, visual aids for imagination exercises) to add variety and aid delivery in Mindfulness and Relaxation sessions: *"I've added pictures because I found when I was asking them to picture their thought in a cloud, again, most, half of the class I knew that would be quite challenging to picture it"* (Mindfulness-based exercises). In terms of SSW and The Guide, staff mentioned adding more small-group discussion exercises and video clips, and giving students copies of resources to annotate.

> *"I'd found the video that we could play. I just feel you need something to kind of grab their attention […] and then we'd split up into groups and then we'd report back. And you need to do a lot of that I think to keep the pace going."* (SSW)

Flexible delivery from staff members' perspectives was also a balance between allowing students to opt out of sessions and activities if they wanted to, but also encouraging them to join in where possible or be respectful of others who were participating: *"I've said to them, 'If you ever think you can't take part in a Mindfulness session, you are welcome to step outside', and that's happened once, that's it"* (Mindfulness-based exercises).

Barriers to implementation

Not always seeing the benefits

A minority of staff members reported that they had not always noticed any impact of the interventions on students or voiced their perceptions of the limitations of impact, such as in terms of its transiency or lack of universal appeal: *"It does work for some. Some are still not, I'd say, some children still don't totally engage with it. But that's fine and that's up to them"* (Mindfulness-based exercises).

A minority of staff members also commented that YAM had brought up subjects that were 'too close to home' for some students, such as those with existing mental health difficulties, or felt that The Guide had introduced topics or activities that could lead to low mood, anxiety, or discomfort: *"That was the big thing that it could happen to anyone, because there's an element of fear in some of them, like could we get this?"* (The Guide).

Staff at schools implementing YAM also alluded to a sense of feeling *"disconnected"* from the intervention because they were not allowed in the room during sessions and did not

have access to the intervention content. From their perspective, this limited schools' ability to build on the support that YAM had provided for students.

Varying engagement

A majority of staff members noted variability in students' engagement with the interventions. Boys and younger students were sometimes observed by staff to engage less with activities. This included, for example, misbehaving, not being able to focus, or not joining in with activities.

> *"We've probably found that some of the sessions Year 4, maybe aren't quite old enough for. Not in terms of the content being inappropriate but in terms of having a maturity level that really allows them to explore things in depth."* (SSW)

Staff also felt that some students who struggled more academically or who were known to have attention, focus, or comprehension difficulties could find engaging with the interventions more challenging than others:

> *"[…] they're the ones that have struggled most with focusing on their breathing. And they're the ones that either would feel conscious of what they're doing or can't sustain their concentration of it for the five or 10 minutes."* (Relaxation techniques)

Staff suggested that, for example, delivering the interventions to smaller class sizes or using simpler language could be helpful. However, staff primarily at schools implementing Mindfulness-based exercises or Relaxation techniques also noted that initial silliness or giggling among students when the interventions were first implemented often abated over time.

Issues maintaining relevance and interest

A minority of staff members discussed how sometimes the intervention content could feel repetitive, not interactive enough, or less relevant to students' own experiences or contexts: *"There is a bit in the middle where you, basically, run through the disorders, and it's the same after, the same, same, same"* (The Guide). This could make it challenging for staff to maintain interest for students. Having a wide variety of activities was felt to be important, including lots of different techniques in Mindfulness and Relaxation sessions and more practical or interaction-based activities in SSW and The Guide.

Differences of opinion

A minority of staff members described mixed opinions within their teams about the interventions, with some colleagues feeling more sceptical or negatively towards the

interventions: *"There are also staff that feel it's… um… not going to make… a barrier has already gone up, 'It's not going to make a difference', 'It's a bit of a waste of time'"* (Mindfulness-based exercises). This meant that while intervention delivery was a priority for some staff, it was not for others, which made its implementation inconsistent.

Intervention delivery was sometimes felt to be more difficult when staff did not have prior knowledge or experience in this area, or training directly from the intervention developers: *"They kept saying, 'I'm [a curriculum subject teacher], we don't do this in [curriculum subject], you couldn't be asking us for anything more different than what we do'"* (SSW). Staff also suggested that the intervention training sessions could include more examples or demonstrations of activities, and more time to practice delivery.

Struggles with time and space

A majority of staff members spoke about the issues that they had experienced in terms of finding the right time and space at school for the interventions. Spatial issues included difficulties booking a large room each week for YAM to be delivered in and finding that movement-based activities in Mindfulness-based exercises and Relaxation techniques were not always feasible within classrooms.

In terms of timing, staff varied as to whether they had too much time within which to deliver the interventions, which meant that they had to supplement the sessions with more activities, or too little time, which meant that they had to condense information or activities: *"I kind of shorten down revisiting what we did the week before"* (SSW). The latter was alluded to primarily from staff at schools delivering SSW or The Guide, and was often due to the short nature of the slot that they had been allocated in the school day for the intervention, such as 40 minutes instead of an hour. Indeed, staff indicated that it was not always easy to fit the interventions into the busy school day or timetable. Sometimes, in the case of YAM, students were having to regularly miss lessons in core subjects: *"I think the very fact of having a regular disrupted session week-on-week is the very aspect that would be stopping somebody from doing it again, because it's quite intrusive to the timetable"* (YAM).

Staff also mentioned their own competing priorities and lack of time, which had affected the ease of implementation of the interventions. This included not always having time to attend intervention training sessions, adapt lesson plans, or to plan effectively for sessions: *"It was just unfortunate that we couldn't make the dates to actually go and, sort of, see The Guide and how we should present it, and get a little bit more teaching guidance"* (The Guide).

Conclusions

Facilitators to implementation identified by staff members across the five interventions and across primary and secondary schools were:

- Seeing the benefits

- Perception of fit with school context

- Ease of implementation

- Consistency and security

- Taking responsive action

Barriers to implementation were:

- Not always seeing the benefits

- Varying engagement

- Issues maintaining relevance and interest

- Differences of opinion

- Struggles with time and space

Together, the qualitative findings highlight the need for consultation with school staff members about what would work best within their individual settings in terms of intervention implementation, including their training and support needs. In general, to be successful, the findings suggest that interventions need to be easy and flexible to implement, have noticeable positive impact, and consist of interesting, relevant, and dynamic content.

Implications for delivery

Schools should be careful when implementing any new mental health programmes, ensuring to monitor outcomes to assess benefits and also to check if any groups are negatively impacted. The qualitative findings presented in this briefing highlight the need for consultation with school staff members about what would work best within their individual settings in terms of intervention implementation. This includes discussion of school staff members' training and support needs. In general, the findings suggest that school-based interventions need to be easy and flexible to implement, have noticeable positive impact, and consist of interesting, relevant, and dynamic content.

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