

Young Person's Wellbeing Champion Project

Introduction

This was a 9-month, small scale project looking at pupil participation in school & college settings and in respect of the Somerset Wellbeing Framework. This work was supported by a professionals steering group consisting of partners across young people's mental health and education.

Whilst the pandemic presented some challenges, this work began with the creation of the Student Voice Group in March 2021 where 7 students were put forth by invited schools to make up the core Student Voice Group for this project. These students provided a key insight into the main challenges and pressures facing students regarding mental health and pupil participation. Key issues from within the group were identified to be included within the toolkit.

The group also created their own survey, sending it out to over 60 schools resulting in a large group student response, providing this toolkit with fair research and evidence.

Teachers from 6 schools also gave input on mental health and student voice within schools, providing valuable voices combined with student input, helping to create a realistic, insightful list of recommendations.

To create a well-rounded approach and representative toolkit, evidence from a range of voices was collected. Outside of the Student Voice Group, evidence was gathered from staff at 6 schools and colleges, the 2BU Taunton group, Diverse Young Somerset, Black Lives Matter Taunton, Somerset Youth Parliament and two surveys run by students as part of the Student Voice Group, recording over 1000 responses.

Young people's voices have been an influential part of creating this toolkit and have been listened to, valued, and involved in all matters. This project embodies the standard of pupil participation suggested for a whole school and college approach.

Background

In 2017, it was reported that 1 in 9 young people aged 5 to 16 years old were likely to have a mental health disorder.¹ Emotional disorders including anxiety and depression were most common amongst young people, present in 1 in 12 of 5- to 19-year-olds². Emotional disorders were also the only category of mental health disorders to have increased since the last national survey on young people's mental health in 2004. This demonstrates that mental health issues characterised by anxiety, worry, depression, sadness, and low self-esteem were already increasing before the Coronavirus pandemic began.

For marginalised voices especially, mental health disorders are more prevalent. 34.9% of young LGBTQ+ compared with 13.2 % heterosexual cis-gender young people suffer with mental health issues and the number is also higher for BME students, those who come from lower-income households, those who have parents with mental health issues, and many other young people who face adverse situations. Issues around inclusivity and equality correlate with an increase in mental health problems; it is important to be mindful when discussing young people's mental health to think of who may be at increased risk and why.

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a clear increase in mental health issues amongst children and young people. Now, 1 in 6 young people aged 5 to 16 years old are likely to have a mental health disorder, this statistic increases to 1 in 5 for the older age category, 17 to 22 years old. From this national survey, the estimation for Somerset is 3 in 30 young people are likely to have a diagnosable mental health disorder.³

Since March 2020, young people have faced instability in education, health anxiety, limited social interaction, worry and uncertainty. 5 out of the 6 schools engaged within the project reported, upon students returning to school in March 2021, they had seen more social anxiety, general anxiety, a lack of resilience and an unwillingness to make mistakes.

No one knows what young people are experiencing more than young people themselves and pupil participation is essential for hearing this. Allowing pupils to share their opinion and experiences within a supportive school environment reinforces value and respect for young people.

¹ Surveys, M., 2018. *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [PAS]* - NHS Digital. [online] NHS Digital. Available at: <<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

² Surveys, M., 2018. *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [PAS]* - NHS Digital. [online] NHS Digital. Available at: <<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

³ <http://www.somersetintelligence.org.uk/mental-health-cyp/>

Project aims

- Research the use of pupil participation and create a toolkit to sit within the Somerset Wellbeing Framework supporting schools and colleges to develop pupil participation as part of a whole school or college approach to emotional, mental health & wellbeing.
- Gather information from across schools on the implementation and use of the Somerset Wellbeing Framework: Pupil Participation principle from a young person's perspective.
- From above schools, form a group of volunteer students to be the core student voice group for the project. This would include discussing their experiences of mental health support in their education setting, pupil participation, what worked well and what could be improved through pupil participation.
- To gather a fair representation of student voices, considering age range and marginalised voices who are at greater risk of mental health issues such as LGBTQ+, BME and SEND students.

Implementation

- The initial project plan and timeline had to be revised due to 2021 Covid 19 lockdown restrictions. This meant schools were unavailable for face-to-face engagement. However, it was possible to overcome initial challenges and ensure a project with pupil participation and youth voice at its core.
- Initially the project was focussed on promotion, including a promotional poster, press release and direct contact with Somerset schools and colleges.
- A mix of colleges, secondary and primary schools at varying levels of engagement with the Somerset Wellbeing Framework were contacted with 7 confirming availability to support and engage with this project.
- 7 students from 4 of the schools made up the student voice group. The SVG engaged with regular virtual meetings and offered feedback and support on the toolkit resources and documents.
- The Student Voice Group created their own Pupil Participation and Mental Health Support survey, adapted from an existing model. The survey was sent out to over 60 schools in total.