Well-being programmes in schools might be doing children more harm than good

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Apocryphal depictions of an unprecedented crisis in young people's mental ill-health and their general vulnerability have been accompanied by increasingly alarmist claims that only schools can address this social

"ticking time bomb".

There have been calls, including in an article on The Conversation by Rachel Dodge, for schools to appoint heads of well-being. Yet there is little evidence that programmes aimed at improving children's emotional well-being are having any impact.

Over the past two decades, these unchallenged mantras have produced a plethora of expensive government-sponsored initiatives such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning strategy for primary and secondary schools, the Penn Resilience programme, the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies programme (PAThS), alongside a huge growth in programmes for resilience, "mental toughness" and "mindfulness".

Once reserved for those diagnosed with specific mental health conditions or behavioural problems, supporters of such approaches claim that it's essential to teach emotional well-being to all children and young people. Skills such as emotional expression, empathy, resilience, determination, self-esteem and mindfulness, hope and humour, have become a non-negotiable foundation to combat a widening array of deep-seated problems – from teenage pregnancy, obesity and poor parenting to mental ill-health, unemployment and low educational achievement.

Where's the evidence?

Such claims often come from those with vested interests in a lucrative market of expensive, externally delivered programmes for pupils and students, training courses for teachers and classroom assistants, and endless "how-to" guides for teachers and parents.

Yet there is no evidence that interventions produce any real short-term, let alone long-term, benefit in either impact or transferability. My own

forthcoming research has found that some of these interventions actually have negative effects. In general, the research field is fragmented, one-sided, inconclusive and methodologically flawed.

Emotional well-being, mental health and character are defined in increasingly vague and fluctuating ways. For example, interventions such as the PAThS programme teach children that merely having "uncomfortable feelings" requires an explicit psychological "strategy".

Yet, as the chief medical officer argued in March 2014, constant elision of "mental health" and "well-being" in policy, research and practice hinders both the proper assessment of the extent of mental ill-health and clear evidence for effective intervention. Some historians argue that it's impossible to claim with any degree of certainty that young people's mental health has declined significantly over time.

Vested interests

My research with Clare Rawdin at the University of Birmingham has shown that the methods used to generate evidence to show the impact of school-based well-being programmes are also flawed. We argue that there have been no large-scale, independent and systematic evaluations of any of the main programmes. Instead, supporters cite reviews of existing studies and small-scale evaluations. These are often carried out in self-recruited schools, led by researchers already disposed to some sort of interviewing or surveying of teachers who are similarly well-disposed. This makes it impossible to isolate any effects attributed to a particular programme from the impact of a school's overall climate or ethos.

Further flaws arise from self-report measures that aim to translate the highly complex and fluctuating social and emotional traits into simple ranking scales. Questionnaires seek teachers' perceptions of an

intervention's impact, often narrowing their judgement of pupils' overall social and emotional learning to motivation and self-esteem. Supporters present psychological and emotional capacities as if they are things that are consistently revealed in behaviour. They also treat subjective accounts of emotional and mental state as reliable. They are neither of these things.

When some pupils and parents give positive responses if they are diagnosed with emotional and psychological conditions, this is treated as synonymous with "impact". So too is simple enjoyment. For example, Rawdin's forthcoming research shows that children and teachers welcomed a series of expensive, externally-delivered "positive psychology" training days in a secondary school as a diversion from the tedium of normal school life.

These problems, together with inconclusive and partial evidence, have failed to stop calls for wider roll-out, more regular use of a programme or better fidelity to its principles and methods. Bias towards advocacy and confirmation and overstating findings are therefore widespread, sometimes in the face of evidence that interventions may be counter-productive for some children.

Programmes may be counter-productive

Research has also revealed both a lack of impact and negative responses from children and young people. These range from indifference, compliance or oblivion that participants are in a programme at all, to rejection of activities for being intrusive, mere behaviour training and, occasionally, "brainwashing".

Outside these research studies, there are emerging signs of increased sensitivity to "uncomfortable feelings" and stressful situations. This suggests that, far from developing resilience, attempts to teach emotional

well-being actually exacerbate young people's perceptions of adversity and risk so that even everyday challenges create circular expectations of a need for emotional support. It is perhaps no coincidence that university counselling services are reporting unprecedented student demands for help.

Problems of labelling also appear when children who stay silent are categorised as having "esteem issues", repressing emotions or simply being disruptive. Yet they may prefer to remain silent during supposedly "voluntary" classroom disclosures, or are unable or unwilling to learn "anger management" or choose other ways of dealing with problems. In general, it's too easy to deflect bigger social and educational problems onto individuals deemed to have "emotional issues".

Perhaps in thinking of alternatives to largely pointless, possibly harmful interventions, we should take more account of views from pupils that Dodge alludes to in her article. Their well-being should come from the core business of education: a stimulating, enriched, challenging curriculum and extra-curricula activities.

Source: The Conversation