ABSTRACT

This paper is a case study about a Local Authority whole school staff pilot wellbeing programme (PWP) based on the reflexive practice (Schon, 1983) journals and records kept by the school staff wellbeing manager (SSWM) who conceptualised, coordinated and implemented the initiative and who is also the author of this paper. The paper is written as a first-person narrative. All identities have been anonymised for ethical reasons. The purpose of the paper is to tell the story of this intervention and how the people involved (author included), and the schools that participated, were affected by their involvement. Also how what was learned from the episode could be usefully put into practise in other schools. Over the past twenty-five years a continual rise in accountancy thinking as applied to education in the form of pupil standardised testing and assessment and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection of school standards etc along with continual pressure to implement latest educational thinking, has contributed to increased demands on school staff. Simultaneously, school leadership and teaching have gradually come to be regarded as highly stressful professions. The PWP was about looking at what people in school could do to help themselves maintain their health and wellbeing on a day to day basis. In particular the focus was on investigating individual perspective and personal accountability and offering opportunities for people to explore and practice methodologies that could support more positive behaviour. The issues across the schools were complex and manifold and the approach in each case was tailored and nuanced according to the emerging needs of the organisation involved. The PWP was important and unique because its scope was fully inclusive of all school staff (professional, support and maintenance) and participation was voluntary. Research had shown that prior to the PWP, school wellbeing interventions had tended to be compulsory and confined only to professional staff. The effects of the PWP intervention are on-going, which was the aim of the work, but some of the methodologies introduced, in particular solutions focus (Rhodes & Ajmal, 204) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) have in some instances become integrated both individually and collectively in daily practice in school and continue to beneficially shape the culture of these organisations.

Keywords: Accountability, Environment, Responsiveness, School, Wellbeing

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AUTHOR CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The pilot wellbeing programme (PWP) was conceptualised, designed and developed, managed and coordinated, delivered, monitored, evaluated and documented throughout, by the author of this paper. The author specialises in using place and space to enhance working and learning practices; has worked in education, training and development for over thirty years and is a qualified manager, teacher, trainer, coach, mentor and consultant; is a published author and presenter/speaker and school governor. During the period of the PWP intervention the author occupied an educational advisory position.

I collaborated with other stakeholders before and during the PWP but ultimately, (due to economic constraints) responsibility for the intervention was mine as is the way in which I have reflected upon it and recorded it. Some subjectivity within the paper is therefore unavoidable. My own reflexive practice (Schon, 1983) and action learning (Marquardt, 2002) impacted continually on the PWP process, which in turn influenced my own behaviour and reflections upon it. I am the author - the teller of the story - and play a key role within it too.

BACKGROUND

The PWP emerged as a result of recognition by a Local Authority (LA) School Improvement Partnership (SIP) of a need for a coordinated Authority-wide whole school staff wellbeing approach. While pupil wellbeing had come to the fore via a number of high profile central and local initiatives, staff health and wellbeing had not enjoyed the same emphasis, although many school leaders recognised the irony in asking teachers to deliver wellbeing messages to children before having had the opportunity of experiencing the same messages themselves.

Until this point SIP involvement in school staff wellbeing had tended to be implicit, the incidental side effect of other interventions, furthermore many felt it was not the place of the SIP or LA to become involved in wellbeing issues. Due to my role within the SIP, I was aware of this situation and had long challenged it without much success. However, stress and anxiety in school amongst both teaching and non teaching staff and headteachers (HT) was now being openly and increasingly cited as a reason for sickness absence. Powerful work, too, was being published on stress in the workplace including Dame Carol Black’s review of the health of Britain’s working age population, Working for a Healthier Tomorrow (Health, Work and Well-being Programme, 2008). The Government’s prompt cross party response to this in their document Improving Health and Work: Changing Lives (Health, work and Well-being Programme, 2008) detailed several new initiatives and acknowledged that, ‘Schools are an important place where we learn about ourselves and our aspirations as well as the expectations of others, not only through the curriculum, but also through interactions with other children and adults,’ ie children could assimilate some of the habits of personal wellbeing exhibited by their role models (school staff) through regular exposure to good quality adult behaviour.

This was important because it was official acknowledgement of the wrap-round interpersonal impact of schools on pupils and became a means through which to introduce wellbeing into the staffroom. In the case of this LA, the PWP was the intervention of choice with which to begin more strategic work on school staff wellbeing, which by now had reached ‘criticality’ (Per Bak, 1996), interpreted here as the tipping point from which wellbeing had shifted from minority ‘alternative’ thinking into mainstream educational thinking. I could see this shift in my own work; where several years earlier my suggestions for introducing more personal-professional wellbeing themes into the LA Inset (In Service Educational Training) programme had been dismissed outright, gradually, incrementally, they had become more acceptable to the point where they were now being acknowledged as forming part of the SIP’s portfolio of services.
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