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Executive summary:

- This submission provides evidence for the inquiry into the role of education in promoting emotional wellbeing in children and young people.
- Specifically, it provides an overview of key themes in the literature on the role of schools in the promotion of positive mental health amongst children and adolescents.
- Additionally, it presents the findings from two empirical studies conducted in 2014 and 2016 by an interdisciplinary research team based at the University of Leicester and University of Sheffield.

Key Recommendations:

- The design of mental health interventions should be underpinned by a greater understanding of young peoples’ differing perceptions of ‘mental health’ and ‘social media.’
- More targeted mental health interventions are required to reflect the diversity of young peoples’ needs and backgrounds.
- Further research is required into how young peoples’ perceptions of technology and relationships may inform the use of the Internet/social media to encourage positive mental health.

Introduction:

This submission is made on behalf of an interdisciplinary research team based at the University of Leicester and the University of Sheffield. Drawing on expertise in the fields of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Media and Communication, Psychology and Sociology and being established in those respective fields, the team worked to examine the role of education in promoting emotional wellbeing in children and young people. Specifically in developing an understanding of how young people understand the concept of mental health, how they consider they can look after their mental health and the potential of social media.
Research background and evidence:

1.0. It is widely recognised that children and young people are not well informed about mental health (Dogra et al., 2012a; Pinfold et al., 2003; Ronzoni et al., 2010; Rose et al., 2007). Since young people spend a significant amount of their lives in school, school-based interventions are important in both the promotion of mental health and supporting children with existing needs (Weist & Murray, 2007). Schools can also have a positive impact upon the mental health of young people through the mitigation of some of the negative impacts of other social factors (such as adverse family circumstances, socioeconomic disadvantage). However, for some young people they can also be a considerable source of stress, worry and unhappiness (Dogra, 2010).

1.1. In recognising the role of schools in the promotion of positive mental health, some recent interventions have been developed. For example, Singletary et al. (2014) evaluated an intervention designed to improve young people’s understanding of good mental health as a key aspect of wellbeing. This involved 218 13-year-olds who participated in an interactive workshop about healthy eating, physical activity and mental health. Nearly all of the participants (100% before, 97% after) believed that being healthy meant being ‘physically healthy.’ Only 8% considered mental health to be a component of general health, which increased to 12% after the workshop. Significantly, many conflated mental and physical health when asked to describe the former, both before and after the workshop. Girls’ and boys’ responses were similar, but more girls considered social factors as being important, such as good social skills, friendships and social support, when they were providing descriptions of what promoted good mental health. Such findings are of major significance for targeting future interventions.

1.2 It is clearly important that research examines how schools and services can be better involved in the development of young people’s emotional wellbeing. Ofsted (2013) reports that young people show interest in learning about emotional health, but the existing school-based interventions tend to emphasise trying to increase mental health awareness to reduce stigmatisation (Mellor, 2014), or to tackle existing problems (Tennant et al., 2007). In order to increase engagement and better understand students’ needs it is also necessary to examine how young people actually understand mental health and what being mentally healthy means. Furthermore, it is essential that there is some focus on finding mechanisms to develop this understanding and provide emotional support to these young people. In other words, interventions that link mental health and education need a greater emphasis on the understandings of mental health held by young people to challenge any stigma and to promote mental health awareness. Through this approach we demonstrate that mental health is an intrinsic part of health and that mental health is not a binary state (that is it is not that you have or do not have good mental health, but it is a continuum). This enables mental health to be viewed in different ways and in ways that young people can relate to - for example as an individual pathology or disorder, or as an aspect of a relationship. Such perspectives have important implications for how this is tackled in an educational
environment and are relevant for the development of interventions that meet the needs of a diverse range of young people.

1.3 A recent report commissioned by Public Health England (2015) looked at various schools’ practices in relation to young people’s emotional health, and made key recommendations for improvements. These included listening to students’ voices, developing curriculum activities with targeted support, and fostering respect for diversity. It is therefore important to consider students’ own perceptions of mental health without a predefined agenda and assuming that because young people belong to a particular group their needs can be presumed (see Spencer, 2013). In other words, it is important not to impose an adult-centric position on what mental health means to young people and their perspectives should be valued even when those viewpoints challenge adult assumptions. It is important to acknowledge the different needs that young people may have, and recognise that these may need to be tackled in different ways through different strategies and interventions. For instance, young people of Indian ethnicity have been shown to have lower prevalence for mental health problems than white adolescents (5 vs 13%, respectively) (Dogra et al., 2012b). Therefore, potential research that asks subgroups of students about their understandings of mental health and wellbeing strategies may be useful to services and provide links for effective targeted interventions.

Key Findings

2.0 Our research team has conducted two important empirical funded studies to explore the issues associated with improving young people’s understanding of positive mental health. Furthermore, both projects aimed to better appreciate the mechanisms of promoting this awareness and support through platforms such as social media. The first project was funded by the Children’s Fund and the second project was funded by the Wellcome Trust*.

2.1 In the first study, we drew on a large sample of teenagers aged 11-18 years old (n=980) to understand how they define mental health, as well as how they prefer to learn about it. A study-specific self-administered questionnaire was used at two English schools (one in the East Midlands and the second in London), incorporating a combination of open-ended and fixed-choice items (Bone et al, 2015).

Our key findings were that:

1. Overall, most students understood mental health in terms of personal attributes (44%) or disorder (31%);
2. There were no significant associations between age, gender or ethnicity for defining mental health and what factors lead to good mental health;
3. In terms of maintaining good mental health older students were more likely to identify relationship as a support and a stressor;
4. Male participants were less likely than female counterparts to say they wanted to learn about mental health, believing they had no need to do so as they tended instead to relate it to personal relationships;
5. White students were less interested in learning about mental health than Indian students;
6. 39% students wanted to learn more about mental health
7. Younger students (that is those under 14 years of age) preferred school-based learning to online.

2.2 We live in a digital society where social media is an increasingly viable vehicle for raising young people’s awareness of mental health issues. Adolescents are a group well known to engage frequently with the internet and social media (Patchin and Hinduja, 2001), consequently a range of research has focused on potential negative emotional issues such as cyberbullying (Kwan and Skoric, 2013), involvement in flash-mobs (Seo et al., 2014), and online abuse (Staksrud et al., 2013). However, social media also has potential for providing mental health information (Nicholas et al., 2004). Despite this potential, researchers and policymakers are only just starting to grapple with the possibilities of social media in mental health interventions. While it is clear that young people favour using social media to communicate with their peers (Pfeil et al., 2009), there is limited information about this as a platform for mental health awareness and promotion; although there is some evidence from work with young adults in colleges and universities (Gonzales and Hancock, 2010) that it can be employed successfully to these ends. In our initial study, questions about the use of social media and mental health produced some mixed results. Overall, students said they preferred not to use social media to learn about mental health, however Indian students were most likely to want to use it. On the basis of the core findings from this study a second study was conducted in order to interrogate these broader issues in further detail and more specifically to examine the potential efficacy of using social media to promote mental health awareness in young people.

2.3 Our second study was predicated on the recognition that it is fairly common for young people to use the internet to seek out information about sensitive health issues as a private source of information (Selkie et al., 2011). Accordingly, we conducted six focus groups with young people from schools in the UK, two with teachers and two with mental health professionals from CAMHS. These exploratory, open-ended focus groups examined the extent to which social media might be a useful way of providing mental health awareness, mental health promotion and mental health support to teenagers. The young people in this study voiced contrasting understandings of mental and emotional health, and identified potential negative effects that social media might have on emotional wellbeing. Like the term mental health, ‘social media’ was understood in different ways, with virtual worlds mentioned alongside social networking platforms. They emphasised the importance of having someone to talk to face-to-face and, on the whole, were sceptical about the role that social media could play in providing this kind of help. In contrast, teachers felt that the anonymity afforded by social media may facilitate help-seeking when stigma was acutely experienced. They felt responsible for supporting the emotional wellbeing of children, but lacked the time, training opportunities and resources to do so. Mental health professionals also stated that mental health promotion requires more funding and central supports to be effective, regardless of its platforms. These contradictory views may reflect the wish for teachers not to
be burdened with supporting young people without having appropriate support to do so. Little was mentioned about how schools as a whole approached the issue of mental health.

**Overall Conclusions**

3.0. It is evident that there is a need to address the understandings of mental health from young people’s perspectives as they generally view it within a pathological framework or position it as intrinsic to personal relationships. It is only by taking a child-centred perspective that we can develop effective and targeted interventions to improve mental health. In developing these interventions, the diversity of understandings and relevance of ethnicity needs to be recognised; this is particularly crucial in a multicultural society such as the UK. One mechanism for promoting mental health awareness that can be inclusive for young people is the use of social media, but such platforms do also have possible negative impacts on mental health because of issues such as cyberbullying, grooming and interference in sleep hygiene. Although it provides an anonymous way for young people to search for information our data illustrated that on the whole they did not have a preference for this route. Teachers however were more optimistic about this method. It is clear that we need more evidence about the possible barriers for presenting mental health psychoeducation in this way and how they may vary among different groups of young people.

**Key Recommendations:**

4.0. Findings from our two studies indicate that policymakers should consider targeted mental health interventions in schools, and should research the potential roles/barriers of the internet and social media in promoting mental health among young people. Specifically, it would be useful for policy makers to consider more carefully the role of social media in promoting mental health, but recognise that not all young people elect to search out health information in this way. Long-term possible benefits relate to improved preventative strategies within schools, improved emotional wellbeing in children and a more aware young population.

4.1. The findings from our research were consistent with earlier work in which through short local workshops, the current authors found that children offered a range of ideas of what being mentally healthy meant (Dogra et al., 2012b; Sviridzenka et al., 2014). Brief training workshops appeared able to produce small but positive changes in the mental health knowledge of young Nigerians (Bella-Awusah et al, 2014). Clearly, this sensitivity to a diversity of understandings of mental health is an area that could be pursued further in the context of a multicultural society such as the UK.

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Social media and adolescent mental health: A preliminary qualitative exploration of the potential use of social media for promoting mental health and wellbeing among 12-18 year olds.*
The Children’s Fund award; PI: Nisha Dogra
Promoting positive mental health in young people via social media

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