

Editorial

THIS ISSUE of *Educational and Child Psychology* focuses on the development of psychological wellbeing and resilience in children and young people and the factors that promote this. Wellbeing is defined as a positive and sustainable condition that allows individuals, groups, organisations and nations to thrive and flourish. It also encompasses resilience, the ability to cope well in the face of adversity and maintain a positive sense of self (Huppert, Baylis & Keverne, 2005). The study of wellbeing and resilience is emerging as a powerful tool for professionals working with young people to help them develop social, emotional and academic competence and to assist in our ongoing battle to prevent youth depression, self-harm, antisocial behaviour, violence and substance abuse.

The focus on wellbeing and resilience incorporates the study of the social-environmental factors that act as protective processes for young people as well as an exploration of how to develop helpful personal skills and attitudes. This focus draws on the key principles that underpin the positive psychology movement (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) the positive youth approach (Damon, 2004), critical psychology perspectives (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2006) and resilience research (Benard, 2004; Rutter, 1999). All these approaches recognise the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that affect many children in various ways but also share an optimistic perspective for optimising authentic wellbeing for both individuals and their communities. This orientation asserts that all children have the potential for 'good' and are motivated to pursue a 'good life', and also that transactional exchanges between the child and the many systems in their lives (such as their family, peers, school, neighbourhood and

socio-political context) play a role in a child's development. This is in contrast to the medical or disease models that focus on identifying and treating difficulties within the individual.

Evidence that the medical or disease orientation is still alive and well (excuse the pun) is found in Ruth Schmidt Neven's paper. She conducted her research with seven different professional groups working with children and found that professional constructions of children's behaviour were still predominately based on pathology and deficits. These professionals included psychiatrists, psychologists, health workers and teachers and they framed childhood problems predominantly in medical and bio-behavioural terms. Schmidt Neven linked this framework to a philosophy of despair and a culture of complaint. She identified two key discourses: the parent-blame discourse and the professional-as-victim discourse. Blaming parents included the professionals' reference to the propensity of the families with whom they worked, to describe their children in overwhelmingly negative terms. A great concern is that the professionals felt disempowered by their organisations to make a significant difference for the children in their care.

Amanda Bateman and Amelia Church also highlight the problems that can arise when children are stigmatised as antisocial at an early age within an educational context. They state that these negative stereotypes become widely known and reinforced amongst peer groups that, in turn, can encourage further social negativity towards the stigmatised child. To counter such negative stereotyping they encourage both practitioners and researchers working with young children to identify and develop the positive attributes that all children possess.

One goal for this issue of *Educational and Child Psychology* is to include theoretical and/or research papers that offer strategies to empower professionals working with young people. Schmidt Neven outlines five elements intrinsic to professionals' promotion of childhood wellbeing rather than pathology. In their paper Andrew Richards, Ian Rivers and Jacqui Akhurst adopt Seligman's three pillars of happiness, or wellbeing, to develop a school curriculum to promote positive interpersonal qualities in year seven students. These qualities include empathy, social acceptance and fairness, developed in eight lessons delivered by class teachers within the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum. Their project was an innovative approach dealing positively with the pervasive problem of school bullying. School bullying has been shown to have long-term negative psychosocial consequences for the children who bully, the children who are targeted, their classmates, and the whole school community. Given the short term nature of Richards *et al.*'s programme, the reduced level of bullying and the small increase in pupil wellbeing identified in their results hold promise for future curriculum-based wellbeing interventions.

In a similar vein Danuta Chessor reviews her research in developing such interpersonal skills as empathy, and conflict resolution. This programme, which took place once a week over four weeks, targeted a specific group of Year 8 girls who were engaged in relational bullying. As Richards *et al.* observed, the pupils in Chessor's study demonstrated improvements in both interpersonal skills and in having a more positive sense of self. Both studies highlight the potential of enhancing pupil wellbeing by embedding the teaching of social-emotional skills in the school curriculum.

Comprehensive reviews of the components of school-wide programmes to develop pupil wellbeing have demonstrated that programmes that focus on explicitly teaching a wide range of social-emotional

skills that are embedded in the curriculum have a greater chance of success than those that target only one set of skills such as social skills (Devaney *et al.* 2006; Greenberg *et al.* 2003). As Richards *et al.* acknowledge in their paper, programmes have a greater chance of success in the longer term when they address the whole school rather than targeting one group or one year level. Multi-year programmes allow pupils to revisit key concepts and skills at different stages with age-appropriate curriculum resources, which means that social-emotional competencies and understandings are more likely to be learned.

Sue Roffey's paper provides a thought-provoking overview of the dynamic and symbiotic relationship factors that can enhance young people's connections to their school, and promote social-emotional wellbeing throughout the school community. There is good evidence to indicate that social capital not only impacts on wellbeing but also on school effectiveness (Bond *et al.*, 2001, Horsch *et al.*, 2001) so the quality of relationships must be a concern for all educators. Roffey uses an eco-systemic framework to deconstruct the mutually influential processes between different parts of the school system that establish and maintain positive changes in relationships, and to explore ways in which schools might develop as emotionally literate communities. Valuing the social and emotional wellbeing and potential of all pupils was a central finding, as was a focus on teacher wellbeing.

Emotional literacy is also the focus of Sheila Burton's paper. She outlines the role of educational psychologists in the training and support of emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs). This innovative programme aims to help targeted children and young people develop their capacity to deal with the many emotional challenges that they face. Early evaluation indicates that not only is student wellbeing and engagement with learning enhanced but that staff in the target schools are more aware of the emotional aspects of learning and become more

skilled themselves in meeting the needs of vulnerable students.

Following the theme of professionals working with others to improve young people's wellbeing and resilience, Mala German, in her role as educational psychologist, works with other professionals and refugee parents to facilitate the refugee parents' wellbeing and their children's wellbeing. Her collaborative work is underpinned by a focus on these parents' strengths and resilience and by the positive principles of shared learning and respect. She describes three action research projects with positive outcomes for all involved.

The positive psychological approach, the positive youth approach, critical psychology and the resilience research all highlight the importance of young people's educational-social-environmental context in the development of their wellbeing and resilience. This is not to deny the existence of genetic factors. As Rutter (2002, p.2) states, 'Although genetic factors play a substantial role in the origins of individual differences with respect to all psychological traits ...even a heritability as high as 90% does not mean that changed environmental conditions could not make a huge impact'. The papers in this edition challenge us to pose some interesting questions. What is the role of the educational psychologist, teacher, health professional or other professional in working with young people? Should the goal be to guide young people to fit in with their educational-social context or to try to change the educational-social context so that it better meets their needs?

In her paper, Maria Gascon-Ramos makes the point that the wellbeing of deaf children is determined not so much by their ability to hear but by their access to the deaf community and the nurturing and congruent culture that this provides. This paper challenges any 'normative' notion of wellbeing by emphasising the need to genuinely value and provide for difference.

Rhonda Craven and Herb Marsh's paper challenges the 'bad press' that a focus on building young people's self esteem has had

in recent times (eg Baumeister *et al.* 2003; 2005). Craven and Marsh counter the critics by suggesting that many self esteem studies have adopted too narrow a conceptualisation of self esteem and do not recognise the multidimensional nature of the construct. Their paper encourages practitioners or researchers who are implementing preventive strategies with young people to simultaneously enhance their skills and the related specific domains of self-concept across key drivers of life potential (for example reading, mathematics, school engagement, pro-social behaviour).

The final paper by Toni Noble and Helen McGrath provides a framework for bringing positive psychology into action to actively enhance wellbeing in schools. Their *Positive Educational Practices* (PEPs) framework offers educational psychologists new directions for working with individual pupils, groups or whole schools to design and implement a preventative wellbeing model. This model outlines five foundations: social and emotional competency, positive emotions, positive relationships, cognitive and character strengths and meaning and purpose. Noble and McGrath synthesise a wide range of evidence-based school practices to suggest how the framework foundations can be achieved.

This issue of *Educational and Child Psychology*, then, offers both theoretical frameworks and evidence-based practices to help professionals to develop the wellbeing and resilience of children and young people. These practices go beyond the remediation or prevention of pupil problems (whether they are social-emotional or academic problems), through the zero point of no problems, to the goal of facilitating wellbeing. The facilitation and promotion of young people's wellbeing is seen as acting as an effective buffer against subsequent psychosocial stressors. These practices highlight the importance of the educational-social context in which the child participates. Such work is also seen as empowering for the professionals working with young people.

We thank all contributors and reviewers for their efforts. We also acknowledge the valuable work of many other colleagues who submitted papers. We anticipate that you will enjoy reading the different articles in this issue, and we are confident that they offer ideas to inspire and facilitate your own work

in enabling young people and school communities to flourish, and the potential for wellbeing to be realised.

Sue Roffey
Toni Noble
Phil Stringer

References

- Baumeister, R.F., Campbell, J.D., Krueger, J.I. & Vohs, K.D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1).
- Baumeister, R.F., Campbell, J.D., Krueger, J.I. & Vohs, K.D. (2005). Exploding the self-esteem myth. *Scientific American*, 292, 84–92.
- Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. San Francisco: West Ed.
- Bond, L., Glover, S., Godfrey, C. Butler, H. & Patton, G.C. (2001). Building capacity for system-level change in schools: Lessons from the Gatehouse Project. *Health Education and Behaviour*, 28, 368–383.
- Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *ANNALS, American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, January, 13–24.
- Devaney, E., O'Brien, M.U., Resnik, H., Keister, S. & Weissberg, R.P. (2006). *Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional Learning (SEL)*. Collaborative for Social, Academic and Emotional Learning, Chicago: University of Illinois.
- Greenberg, M., Weissberg, R., O'Brien, M., Zins, J., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H. & Elias, M. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through co-ordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, 58, 466–474.
- Horsch, P., Chen, J. & Wagner, S. (2001). The responsive classroom approach: A caring, respectful school environment as a context for development. *Education and Urban Society*, 34(1) 365–383
- Huppert, F. Baylis, N. & Keverne, B. (2005) *The science of wellbeing*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Linley, P.A. & Joseph, S. (2004). *Positive psychology in practice*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Noble, T. (2006). Core components of a school-wide safe schools curriculum. In H. McGrath & T. Noble (Eds.), *Bullying solutions. Evidence-based approaches to bullying in Australian schools*. Pearson Ed.
- Prilleltensky, I. & Prilleltensky, O. (2006) *Promoting wellbeing: Linking personal, organisational and community change*. New Jersey: Wiley.
- Rutter, M. (2002). Nature, nurture and development: From evangelism through science toward policy and practice. *Child Development*, 73(1), 1–21.
- Rutter, M. (1999). Resilience concepts and findings: Implications for family therapy. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 21, 119–144.
- Seligman, M.E.P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5–14.