

# Teaching resilience in schools



by Nicola Bacon, The Young Foundation

For the past three years, the Young Foundation has worked with the IDEa and three local authorities - Hertfordshire County Council, Manchester City Council and South Tyneside Council - as well as Lord Richard Layard from the London School of Economics (LSE), on the Local Wellbeing Project. During this period, "wellbeing" has moved to the forefront of public policy, with all the main political parties exploring how government can help its citizens to be happier.

## Finding practical ways to increase wellbeing and resilience

At the local level, the Local Wellbeing Project has spurred innovation and fresh approaches to priority issues, and has generated a body of learning about how national policies can be taken forward. The biggest element of the project has been its work in schools through the UK Resilience Programme (UKRP) with 11-12 year olds (year 7s), aimed at increasing children's emotional resilience and coping skills. Evidence from the 2009 interim evaluation of the UKRP, funded by DCSF, shows that it has helped some

of the children who struggle most with school.

The Local Wellbeing Project aimed to find practical - and replicable - ways to improve residents' wellbeing. The emphasis was on subjective wellbeing: how people feel about the quality of their lives and their day-to-day experience. In the early stages we scoped the evidence suggesting that local government intervention can increase wellbeing, and mapped this onto the local partners' priorities. Themes that emerged included work in secondary schools, targeting children going through the recognised stress point of the primary to secondary transition.

The interest of the local authority partners was in wellbeing and emotional resilience, and whether boosting these could improve achievement and classroom behaviour. It also reflected a growing concern about the number of children lacking the basic coping and life skills that enable them to concentrate, learn and benefit from their school experience. Although the UK government spends more on children than the OECD average, a 2009

European Union study ranked the UK 24th out of 29 European countries on child wellbeing.

Bringing a US model to the UK The search began for international examples, and the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), developed and tested by Professor Martin Seligman and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, was chosen as the most robust and well-evidenced approach. This was used as the template for the UKRP. Partner authorities funded the work from a number of different sources including neighbourhood renewal funding and children's mental health budgets.

In the academic year 2007/08, 2000 students in 22 schools took part in the programme. Teacher training is "manualised" – with set content for each session. This means that there can be consistency between different teachers. It is taught over 18 hours in groups of up to 15 students.

UKRP aims to improve the emotional resilience of 11-13 year olds by building important life skills to enable them to deal constructively with daily problems and challenges. The curriculum focuses on cognitive and social problem-solving skills, assertiveness, negotiation and relaxation. Children learn to apply what they learn to real-life examples.

Impact on children and schools The DCSF-funded evaluation of the UKRP found a significant positive impact on depression and anxiety levels. This effect was larger for girls than for boys, for children who had lower initial scores for depression and anxiety, and for those who had not met the target levels for key stage 2 in their exams.

For our three partner local

authorities, introducing the programme has been challenging. There were initial suspicions about the value of teaching "happiness", and some early press interest centred on the cost of sending teachers to the US to train (although this was for the first tranche of teachers only and was carried out in their summer break). There have been inevitable problems caused by teacher turnover, and some schools have taken to the programme more enthusiastically than others. The three authorities are taking the work forward in different ways, rolling out training to new schools, in some cases adapting the original materials in order to meet local needs.

UKRP has proved most successful in schools where a critical mass of teachers have been trained and where senior staff have bought into the approach. UKRP supports schools to meet their statutory requirements to contribute to pupil wellbeing, introduced in 2007. It sits comfortably alongside SEAL – the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme – strongly promoted by the government and compulsory for primary schools. UKRP targets individuals through a series of interventions, whereas SEAL focuses on the whole-school ethos.

The wider potential of resilience training The Local Wellbeing Project has shown that increasing wellbeing is an effective strategic aim for local government, that it can spur innovation, and has resonance in very different authorities with different populations and political control.

There is enormous potential in resilience training programmes to help people improve the strengths and

capabilities we all need to manage our own lives. Programmes similar in approach to UKRP could be developed for older teenagers or primary school children, as part of worklessness programmes or as an element within a package of support for vulnerable families, young people leaving care or teenage parents. Resilience – people's ability to bounce back in the face of adversity – is a critical asset for a society coping with the long-term impacts of recession.

*The Local Wellbeing Project's report [The State of Happiness: Can Public Policy Shape People's Wellbeing and Resilience?](http://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/reports/the-state-happiness-january-2010) is available at [www.youngfoundation.org/publications/reports/the-state-happiness-january-2010](http://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/reports/the-state-happiness-january-2010)*

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