

Resilience, confidence and self-belief; foundations for good learning

A NET Occasional Paper

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This paper is part of a series that sets out principles and practice that NET considers should underpin an aspect of our education system. The paper arises from a national social and emotional skills development programme for children in key stage 1, run by the Trust.

BACKGROUND

Raising the age at which young people can leave formal education is welcome but lengthening the period of compulsory education does not address the fundamental problem of equipping children for learning:

'All children starting year 6 this month will continue in education or training to age 18. Primary schools have a vital role to play in making a success of this historic change, not just in ensuring an effective transition from primary to secondary, but in ensuring that all young people have the foundations on which to build a successful secondary education and the aspirations to continue in learning even before they arrive in secondary school'

(Letter from Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families to Primary Headteachers, September 2008).

England will soon have one of the longest periods of compulsory education in the developed world, not because of the raising of the leaving age to the European norm, but because children start their formal education younger at the age of 4.

At this age children may not have reached some developmental milestones, lack the necessary skills and understanding to benefit from an early start school, and are therefore, educationally already at risk, as acknowledged by the Secretary of State:

'We also want you to give children extra help early on if they are in danger of slipping behind ... 21st century schools have wider responsibilities...we [the government] are looking to you [primary schools] to promote your pupils' well being in the round.'

There are significant benefits of an early start and this paper considers how, with careful support, children can be helped to prepare themselves for learning at the beginning of primary school. For if they do not, they will 'slip behind' and may experience behavioural and mental health problems requiring more difficult and costly intervention as they get older.

ISSUES

There is a growing realisation, arising from studies of child development, that children's mental health is not just a health issue; it is an important educational one as well. ^[1]

Successful learning takes place when children have positive self-esteem, a strong self-belief, a sense of self-efficacy and confidence:

'A child's state of mind and self-perception have a significant impact on the willingness and ability to concentrate and to learn' ^[2]

Schools take great care when admitting pupils to identify those with special needs and put in place or facilitate the continuation of any interventions or specialist support. For example, children with physical disabilities, with statements of special needs or for whom the statementing process is appropriate, children from families receiving support from social services and children with particular aptitudes and talents. Children who have learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD) or who are identified as gifted and talented (G & T) are accorded high priority as visible evidence of schools meeting the diverse needs of their pupils.

In most schools, the majority of children in key stage 1 display emotional and conduct behaviours that are considered acceptable in that they do not unduly impact upon others, and therefore lessons can proceed as planned.

However, within this group are children who teachers and learning support assistants realise are not fully engaged in learning. They may be characterised as having low self esteem, shyness or lacking interpersonal skills. The underlying causes are varied, but unless emotional behaviour is addressed and they develop appropriate social skills, conduct may deteriorate and learning will be impeded. In most schools there is little available support for children not displaying a high level of difficulty and a gap with peers will open that is very difficult to close as they move up through the school system.

With early identification, and support to help develop self confidence and self belief, children can become equipped for learning and enjoy successful school careers.

PRINCIPLES

- **Schools have a wide ranging role in ensuring that 'Every Child Matters'.**
- **Emotional behaviour impacts upon conduct and learning.**
- **Identifying children whose emotional and behavioural conduct presents barriers to learning can be difficult in a busy classroom.**
- **Schools need to facilitate staff development and make appropriate organisational arrangements for pupils.**
- **Delaying intervention allows inappropriate behaviours to develop and an achievement gap to open.**

PRACTICE

6s&7s is a programme initially commissioned and piloted in 2000, by a Primary Care Trust in Birmingham concerned about children's mental health. The programme has subsequently been developed. It is now run by the National Education Trust and includes a diagnostic tool, a full training programme for school staff, published resources and ongoing support for schools. A brief summary is given below. Details are available at www.net6s&7s.net

6s&7s is a small group programme designed to enhance the emotional development and social skills of children aged 6 and 7. It is particularly valuable for children lacking self-confidence or who have difficulty in making relationships. It helps children develop resilience and improves their self-esteem. Children learn to relate to others and to feel secure in forming effective relationships with their peers and adults in the school setting so that they become independent and confident learners.

Schools identify children who have a low to medium level of difficulty in enjoying and making the most of school life. A diagnostic tool that assesses a child's emotional, behavioural and learning conduct helps determine which children will benefit and confirms the suitability of the programme for them. This may include children who are at school action or school action plus. Children who have a statement of special educational needs or who are on the autistic spectrum are likely already to have significant additional support within school with extra resources and regular reviews and interventions by education and health professionals.

Many schools use the SEAL programme or other nurture groups such as 'circle time'. Staff in schools running 6s & 7s alongside other programmes state that 6s & 7s is complementary to them as it meets the additional needs of children described above. 6s & 7s has the added benefit of staff having two full days of high quality training as well as a support package in place for them.

The 6 & 7s group meets for a tutorial at the same time and place for 6 consecutive weeks for 45 minutes at a time. The purpose of the tutorials is to raise pupils' self esteem, develop empathy, to learn to listen, share thoughts, how to question, to share feelings, self control and to stand up for themselves effectively and appropriately. The emphasis is on activity, positive interactions, giving and receiving praise and role modelling. Tutorials are not curriculum related. At the end of every tutorial each pupil receives an individual letter or certificate to say what they have contributed and achieved, as agreed by their peers, to take home to their families.

Full training and support is given to schools and staff, along with a resource pack containing full details of the programme, plans, and templates.

IMPACT

6s & 7s is currently operating in 65 schools within 6 local authorities. This will increase year on year as regional centres become established.

Ongoing evaluation consistently shows lasting benefits to participating children. The financial investment required is modest and the withdrawal time from class for pupils is short.

Further evidence of the effectiveness of 6s&7s comes from headteachers requesting a similar programme for other age groups and, in particular, younger children ie Early Years. They do not consider that the EYFS goes far enough in ensuring children are emotionally and socially prepared for school.

The 6s & 7s programme makes a major contribution to achieving the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes developing happier, healthier, more confident children who are better prepared for learning at the outset of their school lives. Children become more resilient, better able to resist doing what they are not comfortable with, more tolerant and less vulnerable to bullying.

The school community as a whole benefits from

- an improved learning environment for all children in the classroom;
- the training programme leading to enhanced skills and professionalism of Teaching Assistants and Learning Mentors;
- a reduction in subsequent mental health and behavioural problems, and consequent financial savings from a reduced need for later, more difficult and costly interventions.

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¹ Hartley-Brewer E, Institute of Public Policy Research, London, 2001

² Sylva K, School Influences on Children's Development Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry Vol 1 pp 135-170, 1994