

Ready to learn?

A qualitative investigation into what Key Stage 2 children say contributes to their subjective well-being and facilitates their learning in school, and the development of an instrument to capture change in this domain.

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An overview of the research

In November 2009, considerable interest was generated by a study day of the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists (NAPEP) on evaluation of outcomes of the work of Educational Psychology Services (EPSs). Following this, my service requested that I investigate this area during my training placement, as a topic for my doctoral research.

A review of the literature and professional networking sites (for example, EPNET) revealed that although many services at the time were considering or actively seeking valid and reliable 'tools' to evaluate services, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, in practice, few were undertaking evaluation systematically, and those that were did not feel confident that they were doing it well. While a number of services were regularly collecting data on how much service (quantity) they were delivering, to whom and in what ways, and on the subjective experience for a range of service users, few were focussing on outcomes, and even fewer were measuring these in any systematic way (Norgate, 2010). My service was one of those that already collected data on delivery in terms of quantity and subjective quality, and they had just introduced Target Monitoring and Evaluation (TME) (Dunsmuir, Brown, Iyadurai and Monsen, 2009), as a goals-based approach to informing service delivery, and a way of recording consultation and engagement with children, families and schools. While this was a positive step towards more systematic evaluation, it was noted that a missing dimension was what the children themselves felt about the outcome of engagement with an EP, and whether they felt that things had been improved in domains that were significant to them.

While there was considerable interest in hearing children's voices driven by international agreements, legislation, policy initiatives and research, a review of the

literature suggested that engaging with children in meaningful ways, and eliciting valid views, was a challenging endeavour. This was particularly true for certain groups of children and young people; those with additional needs, particularly those with profound and multiple difficulties or severe language difficulties, and also for the youngest children in the pre-school and primary years.

The two research studies presented here aimed to begin to redress that balance. I chose to focus on the collective voice of local children aged 7 – 11 years in Key Stage 2 (KS2), in mainstream primary schools, and of all abilities, including children with additional needs at all three stages of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. My reason for this was to ascertain the views of ‘typical’ children in mainstream education, so that they might be better understood by adults (presented in Paper 1), and in order to produce a general measure (presented in Paper 2), which could later be modified and refined, as appropriate, for other groups, for example, younger age groups, or children with more significant difficulties.

Paper 1 briefly reviews the literature on hearing children’s voices, some of the difficulties encountered in this enterprise, and approaches that have been proposed to overcome these, including attempts to actively involve them in decision making and research about issues that affect their lives. The findings of a selection of studies, which have explored what children and young people have identified as being important factors in their school lives, are presented. The qualitative research study that follows is informed by this review of the selected literature. The approach is informed by ‘positive psychology’, with an explicit focus on ‘what works’, while not denying or ignoring what children say does not work for them.

Forty primary school children in Key stage 2 were interviewed using a range of approaches. The children were recruited from local schools with differing demographics in the South West of the United Kingdom. The research approach was pragmatic, and adopted a critical realist perspective and mixed methodology. A thematic analysis was carried out to explore children's understandings of what helped them to learn at school (Paper 1), and these understandings were subsequently used within a realist approach to develop a tool co-designed with the children (Paper 2). The approach was also inductive, being driven by the data rather than theory. The aim was to put the children at the centre of the research, not just as participants, but as collaborators and co-constructors of the interpretations made of their 'talk', and of the subsequent design of a 'tool' to facilitate helpful conversations about what they might like to change, and to subsequently measure any impact of interventions.

The interview data were analysed using a thematic approach, and the findings were discussed, modified and validated through focus groups with the original interviewees. A thematic network or 'map of the child's-eye view' is presented. A descriptive reading of three emerging topics; academic competence, social competence and social recognition, is offered and discussed, and exemplified by original quotes from the children. (Due to the word limit, additional descriptive analysis is presented in the appendices). Finally, at a deeper level of analysis, two overarching themes, 'competence' and 'connectedness' are suggested as having emerged from the data. The results of the thematic analysis are linked to previous research, and it is proposed that, while this is only one possible reading of the data presented, there are significant resonances with data collected for children and young people across cultures and age ranges. Therefore findings may tentatively be

generalised beyond the local culture. The implications of the findings for EP practice are discussed.

In Paper 2, the previous study is used to inform the design of a measure to assess children's satisfaction with their school life, in terms of issues that are important to them. Current literature on evaluating outcomes in EP services is briefly reviewed. This is followed by discussion of a selection of the measures currently available which target aspects of children's life in schools, and the advantages and drawbacks of using these in evaluation. Finally, I discuss why it might be advantageous to view school life from the perspective of children's subjective well-being or 'happiness', and review evidence from experimental research, within a positive psychology framework, and particularly the 'Broaden-and-Build' Theory of Positive Emotions (Frederickson, 2005).

Subsequently, the thematic network, created in Paper 1, was used with four focus groups of the original interviewees, to design items for an instrument to assess subjective satisfaction with school life; what makes them 'happy' and 'ready-to-learn' in school. The children were included in every step of the design, including; choosing and wording the items (guided by frequency data and the range of topics and themes identified in Study 1), choice of the rating system, instructions for completion and layout, and naming of the instrument (the 'Ready-to-Learn' Scale).

Following piloting and minor modification, the 'Ready-to-Learn' Scale was administered to an opportunity sample of 344 children from the four participating schools over the summer term of 2011. Principal components analysis on the data generated a six factor solution, interpreted as six sub-scales: school competence ($\alpha = .81$), social competence ($\alpha = .80$), academic competence ($\alpha = .78$), distress and

discomfort in school ($\alpha = .68$), environmental support for learning ($\alpha = .70$), and acceptance and recognition by adults ($\alpha = .80$), with an overall scale reliability, $\alpha = .92$, and a 95% confidence interval of 17 (16.72). The scale now requires further validity checks and standardisation, but is offered as a useful instrument for initial engagement with children in this age group. It provides a focussed and enjoyable approach to identifying areas which a child would like to change (which are important to children themselves, and not specified by adults), and allows possible interventions to be negotiated with the child. It also provides a pre and post intervention measure that may be particularly helpful in capturing and quantifying change in social and emotional targets, which may be harder to operationalise and measure, as part of a comprehensive evaluation process. It is now being subjected to ongoing evaluation in practice. Current use in practice suggests, however, that it may prove most useful as an interview tool in exploring the school experience with children.

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