

## **Why we need to measure student and teacher wellbeing in every secondary school in Britain**

Report prepared by The Gregson Family Foundation  
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### **Abstract**

#### **1. The UK performs poorly on most benchmarks**

Everywhere you look, it is clear that we are letting our nation's children down, with regard to both their wellbeing and their education:

**On wellbeing:** Mental health issues have steadily risen over the last twenty years; physical activity levels continue to decline leading to higher rates of obesity; and increasing numbers of vulnerable children are being excluded from school. The picture internationally is stark: the UK ranked 37<sup>th</sup> out of 48 countries for life satisfaction amongst 15 year olds, and our children are amongst the most anxious in the world.

**On education:** Uniquely amongst OECD countries, today's children in England are no more literate or numerate than their parents' generation. England now has the lowest literacy, and second lowest numeracy, rates of 16-19 year olds in the OECD as other countries have overtaken us. Even the university student cohort has relatively low levels of numeracy and literacy compared to other countries.

#### **2. A Happy Child is a Learning Child...**

Increasingly around the world, governments recognise that a Happy Child is a Learning Child. Finland, Estonia, Singapore (in a significant policy shift), Dubai and South Australia all give great weight to ensuring that children are satisfied with their lives.

The Dutch evaluate student wellbeing in every secondary school in the country as a primary policy measure and driver to improve academic standards. New Zealand has introduced a wellbeing budget, the first country to do so, using wellbeing rather than economic measures to allocate capital.

Research shows that a positive social context; more physical activity; good teacher support; and good parental support are all predictors of high child life satisfaction.

#### **3. ...and yet the UK continues to focus on academic attainment alone**

Ofsted, which regulates schools, is beginning to recognise the critical importance of student wellbeing. However, in its new framework published earlier in 2019, Ofsted made clear that wellbeing and related issues were not to be measured centrally. Wellbeing and life satisfaction assessment were to remain at the

discretion of the inspectors. The only measure by which Ofsted continues to objectively assess our nation's children progress is through academic attainment. This makes no sense.

#### **4. This is why we have to change...**

It is utterly unacceptable for any government to allow their nation's children to be so unhappy and to be educated so poorly. We are falling behind our peers and unless we address the issue, this trend will continue, and we will continue to fall backwards.

We need to think holistically across disciplines – mental health, physical activity, families and the education system itself all play their part. We need to stop looking solely at schools and – even then - only at academic results.

The future prosperity of the UK depends upon the wellbeing and education standards of today's young people. In an increasingly complex world:

- Better education (particularly numeracy and literacy) will ensure that young people get good jobs and become fulfilled citizens
- Better wellbeing, first as children and then as adults, will ensure that our nation will become more productive

Many of our international peers recognise this. It's time that the UK did too.

#### **5. ...and so, let's take the first step**

As a first and important step, the Gregson Family Foundation calls for an annual wellbeing survey in every school in the country to enable informed policy decisions to be made on the basis of how our nation's children, and their teachers, are feeling and what they are experiencing. Only by putting the welfare of the nation's children, and their teachers, at the heart of their education will we have any prospect of reversing these distressing trends.

They, and the country, deserve nothing less.

## **1. Introduction**

Guided by the pioneering work on wellbeing of Lords Gus O'Donnell and Richard Layard, informed by our experience of the Dutch education system and as long term supporters of the Sutton Trust for some fifteen years, we have felt for some time that there is an opportunity to look at the effectiveness of education in the UK in a more holistic way.

Five years ago, Lord O'Donnell chaired the Commission of Wellbeing and Policy. There were two striking conclusions relating to our nation's children, the first with regard to the link between wellbeing and academic attainment; and the second with regard to measuring wellbeing more generally:

- (i) "As you would expect, happier children learn better. There is no conflict, as some politicians believe, between improving child wellbeing and academic achievement. They are complementary."
- (ii) "If we want a society with better wellbeing, governments must have the data on wellbeing, and then use it. And so must individuals. The first task for governments at every level is to measure wellbeing – as it is for employers and for schools. This will show them how their population is faring – and the more comparable the data are, the more the scope for benchmarking."

Five years later, progress has been disappointing. The case for considering measurement to evaluate and improve both the wellbeing of the nation's children, and their academic attainment, is – if anything - stronger than before. This case is increasingly emphasised by related trends across the social fabric of the UK. These include the continuing deterioration in child mental health; the continuing reduction in physical activity (with high obesity rates, albeit flattening off); a rise in the number of vulnerable children being excluded from school; the proportion of people entering prison with poor literacy levels; and a squeeze on Government spending on education in the last decade. Some of these trends are summarised in Appendix 1.

Other countries appear to be recognising the importance of wellbeing in shaping policy faster than the UK. The most striking example is New Zealand which announced at the end of May that it would be the first country in the world to design its spending priorities around the wellbeing of its citizens. Government ministers are now tasked with finding collaborative ways to meet five wellbeing goals. The government will then measure progress on these outcomes and use the data to make future spending decisions. (Appendix 12)

Against this backdrop, the views of Ofsted with regard to education appear to be starting to move. The regulator announced in January 2019 a new framework which is consistent with the broader thinking in this note. In particular, an extract from their report reads: "the curriculum and the provider's wider work support learner to develop their character – including their resilience, confidence and independence – and help them know how to keep physically and mentally healthy".

However, it is noticeable that Ofsted specifically excluded the requirement for data to support their inspectors' judgements on these character issues. There is only one Ofsted criterion which is supported by data – and that is academic attainment. It could be argued that the very omission of evidence relating to other criteria reconfirms the sense that only one thing matters in the evaluation of, and therefore delivery of, our education system – and that is exam grades.

Ofsted has also recently recognised the relatively low levels of wellbeing of teachers in the UK, in a report in July 2019. Teachers' life satisfaction is lower than that of the general public (Teacher wellbeing at work in schools and further education providers, Ofsted, July 2019). It is clear that whilst there is much to be proud of in our education system, many improvements are long overdue. The only way to make positive change effectively is on the back of reliable data.

This note sets out the case to take concrete steps to measure child, and teacher, wellbeing systematically across the country. This will have a number of benefits, inter alia: greater weight will be given to its importance in the evaluation of the UK's education system; teacher wellbeing will be given more consideration; and future policy choices across other departments such as Health will be better informed. This additional data would complement, not replace, the current focus on academic attainment in our education system and enable inspectors, policy makers and politicians to make informed decisions. Our nation's children, and teachers, deserve nothing less.

## **2. Summary**

The UK ranks very poorly in international comparative studies on student wellbeing/life satisfaction and educational attainment. At the same time, studies point to a link between student wellbeing and attainment: "a happy child is a learning child". The summary conclusions from this third-party research is as follows:

- (i) The UK ranks poorly on both basic skills (section 3) and life satisfaction (section 4);
- (ii) UK students are much less vigorously active than other countries; this may be a contributor to lower wellbeing (section 5)
- (iii) The UK suffers from relatively high levels of student anxiety (section 6)
- (iv) At the national level, there appears to be little country correlation between subjective wellbeing and student attainment (section 7).
- (v) At the individual level, there appears to be evidence of limited (ie little) causal links between increased student attainment and resultant increased subjective wellbeing (section 8).
- (vi) To the converse, there appears to be some evidence (in a UK longitudinal study undertaken in Avon) of a causal link between increased subjective wellbeing and resultant improved academic attainment; a review of academic literature undertaken in 2016 concludes as such; and the Dutch clearly believe that this causal link exists (section 9).
- (vii) A number of countries focus on student wellbeing in schools (section 10). The picture is more fragmented in the UK with a variety of assessment methodologies available (section 11).

In order to make informed policy decisions in the future, the UK should start measuring student and teacher wellbeing systematically (as well as educational attainment, data for which is already captured). Proposed next steps are set out in the conclusion (section 12).

### **3. Basic Skills – Literacy and Numeracy**

- (i) England had the lowest literacy, and second lowest numeracy, rates of 16-19 year olds in the OECD (Source: OECD Survey of Adult Life Skills (PIAAC, 2012). Over 20% of this age group in England has low literacy levels; and nearly 30% has low numeracy levels. (Appendix 2).
- (ii) Young adults in England perform no better than older ones. So although adults approaching retirement age (55-65 year-olds) in England compare reasonably well with their counterparts in other countries, younger people are lagging badly behind their peers. (Source: Building Skills for All, A Review of England: OECD, 2016).

Other things being equal (including migration) this means that in time the basic skills of the English labour force could fall further behind those of other countries.

### **4. Life Satisfaction**

The UK has relatively low average life satisfaction among 15 year old students. It ranked 37<sup>th</sup> out of 48 countries; and 24<sup>th</sup> of 27 Western European countries. (Appendix 3).

The OECD identifies four elements as being predictors of high life satisfaction:

- positive social context;
- more physical activity;
- good teacher support; and
- good parental support.

Factors that the OECD indicate predict poor life satisfaction include:

- anxiety with schoolwork; and
- high internet usage.

More research is required on four of these six elements in a UK context. Some initial conclusions are starting to emerge from the Headstart programme (Appendix 16). However there is considerable research available on two, described below: physical activity (section 5), and student anxiety (section 6).

### **5. Physical activity and wellbeing in the UK and in an international context**

- (i) The OECD (PISA 2015) confirms that there is a clear positive association between physical activity and students' well-being outcomes (Appendix 4.1). This is supported

both by a November 2018 study by Prof Peter Clough (University of Huddersfield, Appendix 4.2) who notes that physical activity and wellbeing are linked; and also by other international studies and, most recently, the Sport England Active Lives Survey published in March 2019 (Appendix 4.3).

- (ii) UK students are considerably less active than those of other countries. The UK ranks 40<sup>th</sup> out of 54 countries in the OECD PISA 2015 survey. UK students who exercise vigorously number only 60% of the level of Iceland, the most vigorously active country. This may possibly be a contributor to the UK's lower wellbeing (Appendix 4.4).

In line with the OECD research above, it is arguable that the UK's relatively low levels of physical activity are linked to its low levels of life satisfaction.

## **6. Student Anxiety, life satisfaction and the UK in an international context**

On average across OECD countries, students who reported the highest levels of anxiety also reported a level of life satisfaction that is 1.2 points lower (on a scale of 0-10) than students who reported the lowest levels of anxiety. With regard to the UK, the most anxious quartile in the UK is more anxious than all but two other countries globally (Korea and Turkey) (Appendix 5).

With its high level of student anxiety, it is unsurprising therefore that the UK has such relatively low levels of wellbeing.

## **7. Correlation at the national level between student performance (academic attainment) and life satisfaction (or subjective wellbeing)**

There appears to be little correlation at the national level between student performance and subjective wellbeing. Some countries have high student performance and low life satisfaction (or subjective wellbeing) (notably Korea, China and Japan). Others have high subjective wellbeing and low student performance (notably Dominican Republic, Mexico and Costa Rica).

However some countries combine both – the OECD specifically identifies Estonia, Finland, The Netherlands and Switzerland. (Appendix 6).

It must surely be the aim of any government to seek to achieve both for its young people. The research in this paper indicates that the UK is falling behind on both measures.

## **8. Causality between student performance and life satisfaction**

According to the OECD, the causal relationship between student performance and subjective wellbeing is weak. In most countries, top-achieving students (those in the top 10% of the performance distribution) and low-achieving students (those in the bottom 10%) reported similar levels of life satisfaction. This suggests that there is little evidence that better academic performance leads to better life satisfaction (Appendix 7).

It should be noted that - across all countries and economies that participated in PISA 2015 - students with greater overall motivation (extrinsic and intrinsic) to achieve reported higher satisfaction with life, although there are downsides to extrinsic motivation (Appendix 8).

If the wellbeing of the nation's children is to be a key policy objective, but even if not, Ofsted's regulatory regime for schools is inadequate.

## **9. Causality between life satisfaction (subjective wellbeing) and student performance**

- (i) The OECD report does not seek to address the causality between life satisfaction and student performance. It does however note that they are linked.
- (ii) A Research Brief commissioned by the Department of Education and conducted by Gutman and Vorhaus (2012) looking at data from Avon in the ALSPAC survey concluded that children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social, and school wellbeing, on average have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school, both concurrently and in later years (Appendix 9).
- (iii) Richard Layard's book, *The Origins of Happiness*, also reviews the ALSPAC data and concludes that student wellbeing and student performance are interlinked. He concludes that child emotional health (wellbeing); behavioural; and academic attainment are all positively impacted by the quality of primary and secondary schools (Appendix 10)
- (iv) A review of academic literature by the University of Twente in the Netherlands in 2016 concluded that, in general, students with higher levels of psychological and emotional wellbeing also show higher levels of academic achievement. (Appendix 11)
- (v) The Netherlands believes there is causality between wellbeing and academic attainment. The Dutch consider that higher student performance is a direct outcome of higher child wellbeing (see below and Appendix 12.1).

There appears to be enough evidence that – at the very least – life satisfaction and academic attainment are linked. As a result, to measure attainment seems necessary...but not sufficient.

## **10. International examples of different approaches to student wellbeing and educational attainment**

There are a number of countries that focus on student wellbeing in schools. Some examples include:

- (i) The Dutch monitor, evaluate and act upon wellbeing self-assessments for all secondary school students. This gives rich data for comparison by school, city, region and nationally. The data is sometimes used to flag particular student issues. An example of the questions posed annually of Dutch students is attached in Appendix 12.1.
- (ii) Dubai now undertakes an annual city-wide survey of student wellbeing (Appendix 12.2)
- (iii) South Australia first identified student wellbeing monitoring as important in 2004. The executive summary of the initial review is set out in Appendix 12.3
- (iv) Singapore has concluded that for the next decade it needs to focus on the wellbeing of students as well as academic attainment. Government policies are moving away from parents

and students' obsession with grades and entry to top schools and want to put more emphasis on the importance of values. (Appendix 12.4)

- (v) In Finland, pupils in pre-primary, primary and lower secondary school as well as students in upper secondary school have the right to pupil and student welfare services (also known as student welfare). Pupil and student welfare is primarily preventive student welfare that supports the school community as a whole. In the school community, this means an institutional culture that includes collaborative activities and cooperation between the school and home as well as measures that promote safety. (Appendix 12.5)
- (vi) New Zealand announced in May 2019 that it will use government spending for the explicit purpose of improving certain social outcomes and intergenerational issues. Government ministers are now tasked with finding collaborative ways to meet five wellbeing goals. They are to support mental health, particularly among young people; reduce child poverty; increase support for Maori and Pacific Islander peoples; transform the economy for a low-carbon future; and boost productivity and digital innovation. The government will then measure progress on these outcomes and use the data to make future spending decisions. (Appendix 12.6)

It is clear that other countries are adopting wellbeing as a core policy objective, linking it in many cases to academic attainment. The UK is falling behind.

## **11. Wellbeing assessments in the UK**

- (i) The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has summarized the various strands of wellbeing assessment in schools in Appendix 13.1. There is currently no systematic wellbeing assessment undertaken across the country. ONS relies on the Annual Good Childhood Report published annually by The Children's Society;
- (ii) There are a number of independent software providers offering services to schools to assist with wellbeing assessments. Those that are known are set out in Appendices 13.2-13.4;
- (iii) A summary of the various strands of resilience training currently being undertaken in UK schools is set out in Appendix 14.
- (iv) The Centre for Economic Performance proposed, in June 2017, a questionnaire that could be used in schools in the UK. The analysis and recommendations are attached in Appendix 15.
- (v) This CEP note refers to the questionnaires used by the Headstart programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Three evidence briefings arising from Headstart have been released to date. The results of these, and a brief description of Headstart itself, are summarized in Appendix 16.
- (vi) The Departments for Work and Pensions, and Health and Social Care announced in November 2018 a Framework to support employers to voluntarily report inter alia, wellbeing in the workplace. An extract from the announcement is attached in Appendix 17.
- (vii) In the UK, The Children's Society undertakes sample testing annually of Child Wellbeing, which provides helpful national trend data. However, of necessity due to financial constraints, the sample sizes are relatively small. A summary of the policy recommendations from the 2018 Good Childhood Report is provided in Appendix 18. This advocates, inter alia, a counsellor in every secondary school and FE College; and a self-assessed wellbeing questionnaire rather than a more narrow mental health assessment by a carer.



The UK approach to wellbeing assessment of young people – whether in schools or elsewhere – is piecemeal. There is no holistic overview and the vision that our children’s wellbeing deserves.

## **12. Conclusion**

There is currently no systematic monitoring of subjective child (or teacher) wellbeing in the UK. This is an important gap. The new Ofsted framework does not go far enough and the UK is falling behind many international peers. This is a source of great concern for the future.

It is surely unarguable that there would be benefit to policy makers, local authorities, schools and parents in having access to national, and local, subjective child wellbeing data. Much work has already been done in the UK, from which valuable lessons have already be drawn, and can still be drawn, on how to undertake a systematic wellbeing assessment.

Accordingly, our recommendation is for a full national wellbeing assessment programme of both students and teachers, to be undertaken through schools. Discussions have already started regarding pilot wellbeing projects that could be undertaken in particular cities. Alternatively, or in addition, a pilot with one or more Multi Academy Trusts might also be helpful.

The UK has to get moving on this critical agenda or we will fall even further behind.

**The Gregson Family Foundation**  
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