Emotional health and wellbeing (EHWB): What’s the ‘problem’?

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Introduction

In a climate where forms of mental illness including depression and anxiety are reported to have “taken over from unemployment as the greatest social problem in the UK” (CEP, 2006), the problematisation of emotions has rapidly snowballed, with interest in the role of emotions in personal, social and economic outcomes becoming increasingly ubiquitous in policy and elsewhere. With the proliferation of initiatives such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and the National Healthy Schools Programme (NHSP), we have witnessed the rise of an emotional needs culture where the emotional development of children and young people has become a national priority. Such initiatives responsibilise schools for the emotional development of our new generations, demonstrating not only the problematisation, but also the ‘educationalisation’ of emotions. As Lambeir and Ramaekers (2008: 442) suggest, “they [policy makers] seem to be spontaneously inclined to think that solutions have to and can be provided by educators”.

Within this context, this paper focuses on the findings from the initial stage of my doctoral research project which aims to explore how EHWB is constructed in education policy. At the centre of my analysis is the NHSP policy document Guidance for Schools on Developing Emotional Health and Wellbeing (DCSF/DH, 2007). I focus on the Government’s construction of EHWB through NHSP policy because of the widespread implementation of this initiative – as it states on the Healthy Schools website:

“In ten years the National Healthy Schools Programme has become one of the country’s most widely embraced initiatives in schools. More than 4 million children and young people are currently enjoying the benefits of attending a Healthy School”.

(http://www.healthyschools.gov.uk)

With the subjectivity of such a vast number of children and young people at stake (not ignoring the number of teachers and non-teaching staff also in these schools) it is vital to question how the NHSP problematises EHWB, and in doing so shapes and normalises particular policy responses.
In this paper I argue that NHSP policy not only portrays a general consensus that schools increasingly need to take stock of the emotional needs of their pupils, but renders EHWB as the performance of ‘appropriate’ behaviours, attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Framed within broadly individualistic psychological discourses of self, and within the managerialist discourses of school effectiveness and improvement, I argue that EHWB policy functions both as a technology to govern conduct and as a technology to surveil and inspect schools. Furthermore, despite ‘stress’ becoming “an essential part of the job” (Woods, 1998: 113), I argue that the EHWB of teachers is represented as marginal to that of children and young people in this problem representation.

Before exploring the construction of EHWB in the selected NHSP policy text I first outline my approach to policy analysis.

**Adopting a “What’s the ‘problem’?” approach to policy analysis**

In staging the question “What’s the ‘problem’?” in the title of this paper my aim is to draw attention to the importance of critically questioning policy in terms of “problem representations” (Bacchi, 1999). I adopt this approach because:

“It provides a way of studying policy which opens up a range of questions that are seldom addressed in other approaches: how every proposal necessarily offers a representation of the problem to be addressed, how these representations contain presuppositions and assumptions which often go unanalysed, how these representations shape an issue in ways which limit possibilities for change. It also offers a framework for examining gaps and silences in policy debate by asking what remains unproblematized in certain representations”.

(ibid.: 12)

In line with this, policy is regarded “not as a response to existing conditions and problems, but as a discourse in which both solutions and problems are created” (Goodwin, 1996: 67 cited in Bacchi, 1999: 2). Emphasis is therefore upon the effects of discourse, including the discursive construction of subjectivities.

Following a word count to identify key words and their collocations, the policy text was subjected to the following questions (adapted from Bacchi, 1999: 12-3):

- What is the problem represented to be (how is EHWB defined, who is responsible for it, what are they doing, and where is this taking place);
- what assumptions are made about EHWB and its causes and remediation;
- how are subjects constituted in this representation, and;
- who, what and where are backgrounded or omitted in this formulation?

In this paper I offer my interpretation, in the form of a critical discourse analysis (CDA), of the NHSP policy construction of EHWB as a ‘problem’.
EHWB policy as a technology to govern conduct

This policy document defines EHWB using an assemblage of broadly psychological constructs: “EHWB is known by a variety of terms including emotional literacy and mental wellbeing”, “self-esteem” (12 instances), “self-efficacy” (1 instance), “confidence” (21 instances) and “resilience” (6 instances). Arguably, each of these constructs evokes a highly individualistic notion of self, positing EHWB as an individual psychological state. EHWB is further individualised through the representation of emotions as skills: the term “skills” (78 instances) permeates this document as does the “SEAL” acronym (50 instances) – an initiative developed for the purpose of promoting social and emotional skills. For each of the criteria for EHWB (there are 9 in total) this document recommends “How SEAL can help”. In advocating the promotion of emotional skills as a key part of the ‘solution’, this document constitutes particular children and young people as ‘lacking’ the skills deemed necessary for positive EHWB, labelling them as “vulnerable” (15 instances) and “at risk” (7 instances).

Arguably, by representing the ‘problem’ as one of individual psychological lacks this policy document promotes the “psychologisation of social tensions and conflicts” (McDonald, 1999: 217). A focus on individual skills rather than social inequality carefully situates and pathologises the individual as the source of change, and it is in this way that I argue EHWB policy functions as a “technology to govern conduct” (Rose, 1996: 12) – as a distinctive form of governmentality.

Within this policy formulation structural-economic explanations are clearly backgrounded, with “poverty” (3 instances), “disadvantage” (absent) and “inequality” (1 instance) largely omitted from the text. Where poverty, for example, does feature it is presented not as a cause of poor EHWB but as an outcome. In this problem representation educational achievement is posited as “the most effective route out of poverty” with EHWB championed as a means to improve educational outcomes. Ominously this limits ‘solutions’ to individualistic approaches, leaving inequality at the structural level unchallenged. By responsibilising individuals for emotional ‘problems’ this policy directs action away from social change and toward the pursuit of individual self-improvement; children and young people are encouraged to focus inward, and to think, behave and feel in particular ways. As Harris (2007: 5) asserts, competency models such as this “ensure that individuals collaborate in the implementation of personal rather than social agendas”.

I concur with Ecclestone (2007: 467) that we must “resist the ways in which old notions of deficiency and individual pathology are appearing in new emotional guises”. Pupils labelled as ‘disaffected’, for example, are widely conceived as being emotionally unhealthy, with low self-esteem posited as one of the main causes of disaffection and problematic behaviour (see Sanders and Hendry, 1997). Here we need to question the extent to which disaffected pupils are emotional unhealthy and to consider whether some ‘problematic’ behaviours may in fact be healthy reactions to multiple forms of deprivation, or schooling experienced as oppression (see Corrigan, 1979).
This policy formulation not only locates emotional ‘problems’ within individuals, but also normalises emotional development according to standardised measures. By setting “standards for learning and development” this document constructs a one-size fits all approach with little regard for cultural differences and differences in the material conditions of children and young people’s lives. For example, EHWB is problematised largely in terms of “behaviour” (47 instances), with the prevention of “unacceptable behaviour” and “bullying” (48 instances) becoming bound up in the rationale for EHWB promotion. By proposing that certain behaviours described as “positive”, “appropriate” and “acceptable” be promoted through clear behaviour policies, this policy document normalises a particular set of values and in doing so fails to acknowledge alternatives. Here we need to consider who decides what counts as acceptable and appropriate, and what powers children and young people from all different backgrounds have to influence or change these definitions. If we are to avoid constructions of EHWB that may prove disadvantageous to certain groups of children and young people we must recognise that the appropriateness of emotional displays will depend on culturally specific gendered, racialised and classed definitions of the term, within multiple and changing social contexts. In privileging dominant cultural norms, this problem representation demonstrates what Burman (2009: 141) refers to as “the suppression of variation (in emotional response), which endorses conformity and consensus and denies actual struggle/conflicts of interests”.

EHWB policy achieves its status as a technology to govern conduct by normalising children and young people as rational decision makers, responsible for their own futures through the choices they make. The “participation of children and young people” (one of the 9 criteria for EHWB) emphasises the importance of involving and including all children and young people in school activities and processes, and of giving them a “voice” (7 instances). The message here is that children and young people should be “involved in decisions that relate to them”. By representing children and young people as autonomous decision makers this policy obscures the socially constructed nature of all possible choices. According to Rose (1996: 12), “the construction of young people as active and autonomous represents an extension of the power of government to shape the very experience of selfhood in contemporary society”.

Interestingly, despite intimating the importance of “honest and true dialogue” which “requires a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that ideas will be welcome and not simply accommodated so as not to disturb existing orthodoxy”, this document arguably encourages schools to employ methods of “consultation” (9 instances) through which they can maintain control over who can speak and limit their possible responses. Rather than advancing “dialogue” (2 instances) and “debate” (absent), more strategic forms of consultation including “questionnaires” (5 instances) and “surveys” (7 instances) are advocated.

According to this document, “Empowering children and young people means sharing the power between adults and children and young people”. Although this implies that children and young people will be given increased power over school decisions, it is important to consider how much power schools are actually prepared to share with
children and young people, and what constraints will remain. For example, school councils are also proposed as a means to provide children and young people with the opportunity to have a say, however, in practice the extent to which this will be led and regulated by teachers and school leadership will have to be seen.

This document states that the sharing of power should be “realistic and meaningful and not tokenistic”, but does not specify what this might look like. In this instance, use of the term realistic implies that power will remain limited according to particular judgements about what is unrealistic. Arguably, this document is more concerned with making children and young people “feel their voice is heard”, “feel they can contribute” and “feel they have an influence” (emphasis added) through strategic forms of consultation, than it is with giving children and young people the power necessary for political dialogue and action. It appears to me that children and young people are encouraged to participate and to ‘feel’ they are involved so that they develop a sense of “ownership” (3 instances) and “responsibility” (12 instances relating to children and young people taking responsibility). Indeed, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility through increased opportunities, inclusion, participation and voice could be regarded as a divisive attempt by schools and government to appear open, fair and democratic, whilst (covertly) controlling children and young people to think, behave and feel in certain ways. So, although this document creates the impression that children and young people will be empowered through improved voice systems and increased opportunities for participation, arguably, because these opportunities and voice systems are ultimately the products of top-down management, any redistribution of power from adults to children within this formulation is likely to be tokenistic.

Similarly, although schools are encouraged to value parent/carer involvement and their contributions through a “two-way relationship … based on mutual trust, respect and a commitment to improving learning outcomes”, I would argue that the two-way relationship proposed here is likely to depend on parents/carers first accepting the prescribed EHWB problem representation. I suspect this will widely be the case if schools uncritically accept the problem representation in this policy guidance and adopt the largely promotional approaches to disseminating “clear messages on EHWB” to parents/carers. In this sense I would argue that parental voice is largely backgrounded in this policy formulation, with their participation required primarily to reinforce this normalising and individualising problematisation of EHWB.

**EHWB policy as a technology to surveil and inspect schools**

The discourse of EHWB emerging out of this NHSP policy document is deeply interwoven with the discourses of school effectiveness and improvement, with the influence of “standards” (8 instances), “targets” (6 instances), “criteria” (7 instances), “strategies” (21 instances), “frameworks” (17 instances), “systems” (42 instances), “procedures” (10 instances), “effectiveness” (30 instances) and “improvement” (34 instances) obvious in the text. A clear link is also established between the NHSP criteria for EHWB and the New Inspection Framework for schools, whereby “evidence of successful practice would help inspectors in their judgments”. As part of the inspections
process, and in order to achieve National Healthy School Status (described as a “National Audit”), schools are expected to provide the “minimum evidence” (13 instances) for all 9 of the EHWB criteria. Throughout the document we see the reoccurrence of terms such as “assess” (17 instances), “measure” (4 instances), “identify” (18 instances), “examine” (1 instance), “evaluate” (6 instances), “judge” (5 instances), “monitor” (19 instances), “review” (19 instances), “report” (14 instances), “record” (4 instances) and “evidence” (23 instances), undoubtedly illustrating the way in which EHWB policy is to serve as a surveillance technology.

Arguably, by texturing together discourses of EHWB and school effectiveness/improvement, this policy extends the culture of performativity (where productivity and quality are measured by the performances of individuals and organisations) to include new emotional performances. Here we face a potential paradox, where additional performative pressures produced by this policy formulation could in fact lead to increased levels of confusion, stress and distress rather than improved levels of EHWB. Indeed, research demonstrates that “the anxieties experienced by children may be, in part, transmitted by the teaching staff as a consequence of the pressures they experienced over target setting and school league table position” (Connor, 2001, 2003 in Putwain, 2009: 392).

Numerous discussions with my peers have highlighted the concern that far from helping schools to promote the EHWB of teachers, children and young people who, in a culture of testing, performance management and inspection, are already under a great deal of pressure, the need to evidence EHWB criteria is more likely to add to these pressures and increase bureaucracy and “fabrications” (Ball, 2001). Following this course it seems entirely possible that we could soon see the emergence of school league tables for EHWB as well as national qualifications in EHWB. For some this may be welcomed as an indication that EHWB promotion is being taken seriously, but for myself this would signal the full assimilation of our emotions into performative culture where “tasks and activities which cannot be measured and recorded or which do not contribute directly to performativity are in danger of becoming ‘valueless’” (Ball, 1998: 195).

Writing about the pervasiveness of target setting in policy and practice, Fielding (2001: 152) highlights the way in which:

“the overriding instrumentality of conversations makes listening difficult: attentiveness is overdirected; clues to meaning are trodden underfoot in the scramble for performance; dialogue disappears as reciprocity retreats under the sheer weight of external expectation; contract replaces community as the bond of human association”.

Indeed, there is very little reference to the importance of relationships in this policy document, with discourses of effectiveness and improvement purveying the primacy of systems and procedures over human relations. As Harris (2008: 369) argues, “the language of statistics, efficiency, performance targets and evidence-based practice has validated and reinforced more distant, depersonalised and dehumanising relationships
between leaders, teachers and students”. In this policy formulation the value of relationships seems to be linked to the particular functions they serve according to predetermined outcomes rather than their intrinsic value – “opportunities to build effective personal and professional relationships between staff, children and young people” (emphasis added).

If EHWB policy is received as yet another set of criteria to be performed and evidenced this could compel school leaders and teachers to experience EHWB promotion as a burden adding to their ever mounting workload. This could have potentially disastrous effects on relationships and wellbeing in schools and points to the need for empirical research to explore the effects of such EHWB policy in schools.

Just as structural-economic explanations for EHWB ‘problems’ are backgrounded, this problem representation fails to acknowledge the performative culture that now characterises schools and the effects this culture can have on the whole school community. For example, the potential impact of high stakes testing on wellbeing is backgrounded in this document with only one reference to “stress and anxiety around periods of testing”.

Marginalising the EHWB of staff

Finally, I argue that despite “a serious erosion of personal and institutional health as key personnel feel overwhelmed by the continuous stream of demands and the pressures of accountability” (Harris, 2008: 368), this policy guidance represents the EHWB of teachers (staff) as marginal to that of children and young people. Only 1 page out of this 75 page document is allocated to “Developing Staff EHWB”.

Concerns about the ‘deprofessionalisation’ and ‘intensification’ of teachers’ work (Woods, 1999) are omitted from this problem representation with attention instead directed to levels of “motivation and participation”, “confidence and belonging” and “satisfaction and contentment”. What this achieves is an individualistic focus. Although research suggests that increased managerialism is at the root of the ‘problem’ (Hargreaves, 1994), according to Troman and Woods (2001: 5) “[r]arely is stress considered as a social construct and as a response to structural forces”. Indeed, where “stress” (2 instances relating to staff stress) is acknowledged as a problem it is individualised and broadly therapeutic solutions are advocated – “Do we run training days where our staff can explore EHWB related topics such as relaxation, stress management and problem solving in order to promote the support that staff can access?” (emphasis added). In other words, this policy document advocates training and increased access to support rather than systemic change; ways of ameliorating the effects rather than addressing the structural and institutional causes of EHWB ‘problems’.

Moreover, the development of staff EHWB ultimately appears to be in the interest of school effectiveness and improvement – “By enhancing staff mental health and wellbeing, schools will be investing in their future by increasing staff retention rates.
and ensuring a consistent teaching experience for children and young people” (emphasis added).

Conclusions

Framed largely in terms of “outcomes” (26 instances) we can see that this problem representation clearly values EHWB according to its instrumental purpose rather than as an end in itself. Numerous personal, social and economic outcomes are implicated as potentially problematic in this document, with work to improve the EHWB of children and young people positioned as a preventative measure. The list of “key trends” set out in the introduction of this document demonstrates an effort to connect EHWB with each of the following: child poverty, educational attainment, the number of young people not currently in education, employment or training (NEET), infant death rates, child pedestrian deaths and injuries, youth crime, teenage pregnancy, the number of workless households, use of public space, school exclusions, and literacy and numeracy. Although no explanation of the relationship between EHWB and these trends is provided, it seems they are mobilised as moral and economic justifications for proposed interventions.

In this paper I am not arguing that EHWB is unimportant, but that EHWB policy discourses do not merely present the ‘problem’ as it exists but construct it in ways that have significant social justice implications. I have argued that this particular policy document problematises EHWB in terms of the skills and behaviours of individuals, and that, formulated in this way, it responsibilises children and young people for their own success or failure regardless of their social, economic and cultural background. Not only are structural-economic explanations omitted in this problem representation, but this policy document deals in a number of assumptions and presuppositions that normalise dominant cultural perspectives on the value and purpose of education, appropriateness and success, for example.

We have also seen the complete omission that performative school culture might be the cause of problems for staff as well as children and young people and that by interweaving EHWB with the discourses of school effectiveness and improvement this policy takes care not to challenge the existing orthodoxy where managerialism and market ideology have authority over more humanitarian principles.

I conclude, in accord with Burman (2009: 150), that “rather than becoming literate about emotions, the task is to analyse the models of writing emotions in circulation”, and do not hesitate to put forward that with the growing momentum of the NHSP in schools in the UK what is urgently required is empirical research to explore how far this policy representation is being taken up in schools and with what effects.

References


National Healthy Schools Programme (NHSP) website http://www.healthyschools.gov.uk Accessed 04.05.09.


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