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EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ARTICLES

Co-designing a Whole-school Solution Focused Programme With Students, Staff, and Parents and Carers to Improve Communication and Wellbeing

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Schools are witnessing rapid increases in child mental wellbeing problems and demand cannot be met by specialist mental health services. School staff are not currently trained in approaches to support wellbeing, however upskilling staff in solution focused approaches offers a promising approach to improve communication and wellbeing. Whole-school approaches are recommended and programmes developed through co-design can promote greater acceptance and buy-in from staff and students. Aim: To co-design a whole-school solution focused programme with students, staff, parents and carers at a large, all-through school in England. Methods: the programme was developed using primarily qualitative methods informed by the human-centred design approach. Staff interviews (n=10), student focus groups (n=3), and extensive engagement work over a two-year period explored stakeholder needs. Subsequently, student and staff co-design workshops (n=4) aimed to develop the programme structure, content, and implementation strategy. Results: 101 participants contributed to the co-design process (65 staff; 21 students; 15 parents). Priorities included supporting staff to effectively manage behaviour and improving student-staff communication and overall school climate. A multi-component programme based on solution focused principles was developed, including whole-school activities, plus individual student work. A study testing the prototype is warranted.

In this paper, we describe the process of partnering with school stakeholders to develop a whole-school solution focused programme, aiming to improve communication and mental wellbeing in students and staff. It is reported that one in six children in England have a probable mental disorder (NHS Digital, 2022). Poor mental health is associated with many negative outcomes, including lower academic attainment, life satisfaction, and social and peer related problems, with effects often continuing into adulthood (Vizard et al., 2020). The demand for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has increased sharply following the COVID-19 pandemic

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(NHS Digital, 2023), yet many young people cannot access the care they need. Nationally, nearly a million children were referred to mental health services in 2022/23. At the end of 2023, 28% were still awaiting treatment and 39% had referrals closed before accessing services (Children's Commissioner, 2024). There is therefore an urgent need for earlier intervention and non-NHS interventions.

Schools have a statutory duty to promote student wellbeing and are ideally placed to deliver prevention and early intervention, which are advocated in the UK government's vision for reducing health inequalities (Department of Health & Social Care, 2018). This may prevent escalation to more specialist mental health services which may be unavailable or have long waitlists. However, school staff are not generally trained in supporting wellbeing, nor have the skills or resources to respond to student wellbeing needs (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Furthermore, many young people feel overwhelmed by the demands of secondary school or responded to with punishment or exclusion, which compounds the structural inequalities of those living in poverty or from racial or other minoritised groups (Mind, 2021). Schools also require support to address staff stress, impacting job satisfaction and retention and relationships with students and parents and carers (Barker et al., 2022). These intersecting factors all negatively impact student and staff relationships and mental wellbeing.

The most effective programmes for supporting wellbeing in school-aged children, advocated in NICE guidelines, involve whole-school approaches, with the school community working together to create a culture that supports wellbeing (NICE, 2022). While there is an evidence-base for universal school mental health programmes, effectiveness is mixed; with neutral or small positive effects and methodological shortcomings, including poor implementation and affordability (Mackenzie & Williams, 2018). There is therefore a need to develop and evaluate further high-quality programmes, particularly those that promote positive relationships and school climate and are delivered in-house by staff, thus increasing affordability and potentially benefitting people who may not access specialist mental health services.

A positive school climate is associated with reduced student conduct and emotional problems and better wellbeing (Leurent et al., 2021) and aligns with strengths-based programmes including solution focused approaches. This involves a paradigm shift from problem talk to promoting strengths, helping individuals to work towards their future by exploring what is working, their resources and past successes (de Shazer, 1985). This approach has potential to address many generic challenges that young people face, and – in contrast to problem-focused approaches - promote a growth mindset and resilience, which are priorities for schools. Existing evidence demonstrates that solution focused programmes delivered by mental health professionals in schools are effective in improving student wellbeing and may also improve teacher confidence (Franklin et al., 2021; Lloyd et al., 2012). While there are pockets of school staff-delivered solution focused practice in UK schools,

its potential has not been systematically explored. Furthermore, no research has developed a whole-school programme, shifting the culture to a strengths-based approach. Training school staff in solution focused approaches offers an exciting paradigm shift for promoting mental wellbeing that could embed in-house expertise, optimising sustainability.

Co-designing programmes with schools increases the likelihood of acceptability, relevance, and ensures the resulting programmes are tailored to individual contexts and needs (Reed et al., 2021). A key component of co-design is that stakeholders are involved in all decision-making stages of the project, from conceptualisation and development through to evaluation (Hawkins et al., 2017; McConnell et al., 2018; Morrow et al., 2010). While co-design frameworks have been used extensively within health settings, their use in school settings is still emerging (Neill et al., 2023). Co-design aligns with a central pillar of whole-school wellbeing approaches, i.e., empowering students by partnering with them to develop programmes. Furthermore, whole-school programmes are typically complex and often multi-component in nature. They aim to make changes at not just the individual, but the whole-school level, including changes in school climate and ethos (Wignall et al., 2022). To our knowledge, these complexities of designing such a programme have not been described in the existing literature.

Aims

We aimed to co-design a whole-school solution focused programme at a large, ethnically diverse, all-through (ages 4-18) school in England.

The objectives were to:

a. Explore experiences of mental wellbeing, communication, and relationships at school that impact on student, staff and parent/carer wellbeing;

b. Identify priority areas that a whole-school programme could address;

c. Co-design a programme prototype for future testing and evaluation.

Methods

Project design

The programme was developed using mixed methods, including extensive relationship building and consultation with the school over two years, as well as interviews, focus groups, and co-design workshops.

The methodological process was based on human-centred design, a design philosophy that puts the human perspective as central to the process (Garreta-Domingo et al., 2018). The process allows stakeholders to define their own priorities, solutions, and success criteria for use in future evaluations, thus facilitating ownership (Taylor Salisbury et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is context-aware, ensuring resulting programmes are optimised for both local

Table 1. The Five Stages of the Human-centred Design Approach and Work Completed

Stage	Definition	Work completed
1. Empathise	Gain an understanding of stakeholder needs	a. Systematic review of school staff and student peer delivered solution focused approaches b. Small funded project to build a collaboration with the school's senior leadership team c. Student focus groups d. Staff interviews e. Parent/carer consultation
2. Define	State the core needs	Analysed data collected during the Empathise stage to define stakeholder priorities
3. Ideate	Consider different perspectives and ideate solutions to the problem	a. Student and staff co-design workshops to brainstorm ideas for the programme b. Staff introductory session in solution focused approaches
4. Prototype	Iteratively draft the programme components and implementation strategy; obtain stakeholder feedback	Stakeholder feedback on programme prototype
5. Testing	User testing and feedback to refine and improve the prototype	Prototype to be tested in a future study

and national contexts (Taylor Salisbury et al., 2021). Table 1 summarises the five stages of the process; this paper presents the findings from the first four. The prototype will be tested in a future feasibility study.

Underpinning approach: Solution Focused approaches

At the project's outset, the research team considered the possibility of the solution focused approach as having the potential to promote positive mental wellbeing in students and staff. We completed a systematic review of school staff delivered solution focused approaches, with preliminary evidence supporting improved classroom relationships and student outcomes (Johnson et al., under review). We discussed the potential of co-designing a whole-school solution focused intervention with the schools' Senior Leadership Team, which they favourably received.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the City, University of London Research Ethics Committee (REC reference ETH2223-1821). The school Principal gave permission to conduct the study. Approval for students age 11+ precluded us from recruiting younger students in the primary school stage.

Student/staff participants were provided with a study information sheet and consent form, detailing confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, and right to withdraw. Participants were informed that confidentiality would need to be breached in the event of safeguarding disclosures. The researchers briefed participants about the topics covered in focus groups/interviews beforehand, including the option to stop the activity should they become distressed. Participants were made aware of support pathways for immediate mental health needs.

Setting

The study took place in a large (1800 students), inner-city, all-through school in England. The school comprised primary (ages 4-11), secondary (ages 11-16), and sixth-form stages (ages 16-18). The borough was ethnically diverse, with a highly racially minoritised population and high poverty levels.

The research team (academic researchers at City St. George's, University of London) were initially contacted by the school Safeguarding Lead, who expressed an interest in embedding additional mental wellbeing support within school. Over two years, the research team built relationships with the school Senior Leadership Team and key personnel, including the Safeguarding team, Assistant Principals, Parent Teacher Association representative, Student Welfare Officer and pastoral teams including Attendance and Behaviour teams.

School Stakeholder Recruitment

Students

Students were purposively selected to ensure a range of ages within the secondary and sixth form stages (years 7-12 i.e., ages 11-17). The school Safeguarding Lead identified students and made initial contact with them and their parent or carer for those under age 16. Students and parents/carers were presented with the study information sheet. Electronic consent was obtained from parents/carers. Researchers obtained in-person consent (assent for under 16s) from students. Students received a shopping voucher as thank you for their time.

School Staff

For interviews and workshops, staff were purposively selected to ensure a range of teaching and non-teaching roles, including members of the Senior Leadership team, teachers, and pastoral and support staff. Staff were emailed the study information sheet and electronic informed consent was taken from those expressing an interest. Staff received a shopping voucher as thank you for their time.

The school Senior Leadership Team invited staff to attend an introductory solution focused session. In-person consent was taken from all staff prior to delivering the session.

Parents and Carers

The staff Parent Teacher Association representative invited parents and carers of children attending the primary school stage to attend an informal group consultation by distributing a poster/flyer advertising the event. Parents and carers received a shopping voucher as thank you for their time.

Data Collection process

Data collection took place between January 2023 and February 2024.

Empathise and Define Stages

Student Focus Groups. Three groups with 21 students aged 11-17 were held (see Results for participant details). Groups were kept purposively small (maximum 8 participants) to allow all participants an opportunity to speak. Focus groups were conducted by two facilitators (FR and RM), who are experienced in conducting mental health research with young people. Groups were held in-person on school premises, during the school day and lasted between 45 and 50 minutes.

Questions followed a semi-structured topic guide, exploring student wellbeing needs; provisions to support wellbeing at school; and views on what could be better at school to support students in feeling happy. Students also watched a video example of a solution focused conversation with a young person, and asked for their thoughts on whether this approach could support school conversations.

Staff Interviews. 10 interviews were held with staff from the primary and secondary school stages, purposively sampled to include different roles. Interviews were conducted online, during the school day and ranged from 27 to 40 minutes. A semi-structured topic guide was developed, exploring student and staff wellbeing needs, and provisions in school to support wellbeing. Staff were also introduced to the solution focused approach and asked for their thoughts on whether it could support conversations, and practicalities of implementing this approach in school.

Parent and Carer Consultation. This was held as an informal group session during school hours and on school premises. Two facilitators (FR and RM) conducted the session, which lasted 90 minutes. Parents and carers were asked to discuss issues they would like to be different in future. The facilitators then introduced the solution focused approach using a video example and participants were asked for their thoughts on the potential of this approach to support parent-child and parent-teacher conversations.

Ideate and Prototype stages

Co-design Workshops. Three staff workshops (n=3-10 participants) and one student workshop (n=7 students, years 8-10) were held to co-design the programme. Workshops were held in the secondary school stage only due to practical difficulties arranging workshops in the primary. Workshops were conducted by one or two facilitators (FR and RM), in-person on school premises and lasted an hour each. In advance of the first workshop, participants were emailed a video animation summary of the interview/focus group findings.

The workshops were run using solution focused questioning techniques, including imagining best hopes (i.e., establishing what the participants hoped to achieve), and scaling questions (asking participants on a 0-10 scale where they are in terms of achieving best hopes). In putting the workshops together, the research team sought advice from solution focused practitioners with expertise in school settings (Ajmal & Ratner, 2019; Metcalf, 2003).

In the first workshop, participants split into groups to discuss 'what would be happening if this school was the best school it could be in helping students and staff to feel at their best?' The groups reconvened for whole-group discussion and identified a list of 'vision points' (the schools' vision for the future). Examples of the vision points included 'school is a positive place to be'; 'students feel appreciated and liked'; 'educators are calm, respectful and kind'. One facilitator collated the information and, between workshops, circulated a summary of the discussion.

Subsequent workshops were held every two-three weeks. In workshop 2, participants rated where the school is for each vision point using a 0-10 scale, with 10 meaning they have achieved this and 0 meaning the opposite. For each vision point, participants discussed 'what's working well at school already?' and 'what will be happening when we move one point higher on the scale?' These suggestions formed the basis of the programme content and components. Workshop 3 followed a similar format, continuing until each vision point was rated and discussed.

In advance of the student workshop, one facilitator collated the findings from the focus groups and these formed the basis for the vision points for discussion (e.g., 'students feel happy at school' and 'students are treated fairly and respectfully'). During the workshop, participants again split into groups and rated where the school was for each vision point using a 0-10 scale, as well as identifying 'what's working well' and 'steps to move one point higher on the scale'.

Staff Introductory Session in the Solution Focused Approach. Two facilitators held two 90-minute sessions on a staff INSET day to: a) 11 members of the secondary Senior Leadership Team; b) 46 staff from the primary school stage, including the Senior Leadership Team, and teaching (teachers, teaching assistants) and non-teaching staff. These staff were chosen for practical reasons, based on staff availability and other commitments on the INSET day. During sessions, the facilitators introduced the solution focused approach, including video examples. Participants engaged in role-play activities to demonstrate the techniques in practice. Participants completed a session evaluation questionnaire asking their views on the potential of the approach to support school conversations, via open-ended questions and rating scales against a series of statements (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

Analysis

Qualitative data were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised and analysed in Nvivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023) The Framework method (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was used to analyse the data because of its suitability for comparing different perspectives, including students of different ages and diverse staff roles. Framework analysis is also appropriate for research comparing multiple sources of qualitative data. The analytic process involves the following stages: 1. Familiarisation via reading the transcripts and noting down thoughts or impressions; 2. Coding i.e., classifying all the data. All

Table 2. Demographics of Student and Staff Participants

Data collection	Participants	Student ages	Staff job roles
Focus group 1	8 students	11-13	
Focus group 2	5 students	13-15	
Focus group 3	8 students	17-18	
Interviews	10 staff (6 primary; 4 secondary)		4 Teachers 3 Assistant Principals 1 Student Welfare Officer 1 Teaching Assistant/Wellbeing mentor 1 SEN teacher
Student co-design workshop	7 students	12-15	
Staff co-design workshop 1	10 secondary staff		4 Teachers/Year Heads/Behaviour Team 2 Safeguarding Team 1 Student Welfare Officer 1 Education Welfare Officer 1 Attendance Officer 1 Teaching Assistant
Staff co-design workshop 2	7 secondary staff		3 Teachers/Year Heads/Behaviour Team 1 Safeguarding Team 1 Student Welfare Officer 1 Education Welfare Officer 1 Attendance Officer
Staff co-design workshop 3	3 secondary staff		1 Safeguarding Team 1 Student Welfare Officer 1 Education Welfare Officer
Introductory solution focused sessions	57 staff		11 secondary Senior Leadership Team 46 primary staff, including Senior Leadership Team, teachers, support staff

transcripts were coded by one researcher and discussed with another; 3. Developing an analytical framework, by grouping codes into categories. Team members met to discuss until a working framework was developed; 4. Indexing the data by applying the framework to all transcripts. One researcher entered the framework into Nvivo and applied it to all transcripts; 5. Charting the data into a framework matrix. One researcher created detailed summaries by category for each participant, including verbatim quotations. The matrix was created in Nvivo and exported to Excel; 6. Interpreting the data. Team members met regularly to discuss the data and coding. As the purpose of this project was to develop a prototype programme, the findings are presented descriptively.

Results

Participants

In total, 101 participants took part, comprising 21 students, 65 staff (46 from primary school stage and 19 from secondary stage); and 15 parents of children attending the primary stage (ages 4-11). Some participants took part in several data collection activities, for example, some students took part in both a focus group and a co-design workshop. Table 2 shows demographic characteristics of students and staff.

Need for the programme (Empathise and Define stages)

Across staff interviews, student focus groups, and the parent/carer consultation, all participants discussed student and staff needs that a solution focused programme could support.

Student Needs: Improving School Communication and Relationships

In the primary school stage, staff discussed a range of student needs, including understanding, communicating, and regulating emotions; family and home life issues, including bereavement; and supporting students with special educational needs and neurodiversity. Five out of six participants identified friendship and peer related problems as common, including conflict in the playground. Some participants discussed how students were often difficult to settle after break times, and the impact that playground incidents had on students' learning and classroom atmosphere,

> The main behaviour incidents often happen in the playground...they then felt like they weren't having the opportunity to speak to an adult at the appropriate time. So, it would end up eating into learning time, after break and lunch. Because you'd be in the doorway, half trying to watch the kids who are starting the lesson, dealing with this issue, that issue. (Primary teacher and Year Head)

Parents and carers identified similar needs for their primary-aged children, particularly understanding and supporting their child with special educational needs, and children struggling to articulate and regulate emotions at home. Several parents reported a need for strategies to help them respond to their child's behaviour in non-punitive ways.

In the secondary school stage, the main need discussed by students in all year groups was improving communication in school, particularly student-staff communication. Students consistently vocalised the perception that punishment methods (e.g., detentions) are often not effective in changing their behaviour. Many students reported not understanding the reasons behind school expectations, particularly behaviour and uniform standards. Furthermore, that perceived confrontational communication dynamics with staff negatively impact their learning, concentration, and motivation to attend school,

> If you do something and you go to Reflection [detention], by the end of the day you're probably still going to do that again. I feel like teachers should be more understanding and understand your point of view rather than just putting you in a room to reflect for the day. (Year 9 student focus group)

Students described what 'good communication' looks like in school, including being treated as individuals, and listened to and treated respectfully following behaviour incidents. They said that listening to their perspective

and understanding the reasons why a behaviour occurred helps to create trusting student-staff relationships, increases respect and willingness to change behaviour, and a school atmosphere that positively impacts learning,

> [if the teachers listened] you might be more likely to go and talk to them about something. It makes it a better environment for school because you don't have to worry about anything other than your education. (Year 12 student focus group)

Some students reported feeling a lack of control over their future outcomes; one year 9 student said, 'certain teachers will escalate it, they'll give you detention...there's not much I can do about it.' Students in all focus groups expressed the need for a greater emphasis on student voice, agency, and the ability to make their own decisions and shape school policy. Students from racially minoritised backgrounds particularly reported wanting more 'themed' days based around issues relevant to them (e.g., Black Lives Matter).

Older students, aged 16 and 17, also discussed the transitional stage they were in - approaching adulthood and yet, as they perceived it, were treated like children,

> I'm turning 18 in a few months and it's like I'm still being talked to like I'm in Year 7 and it's like some of us are going to start apprenticeship ... some people already have jobs. We're really in a weird place but we're seen as adults some of the time and seen as children the other half of the time. It gets really confusing because we don't know how to act. (Year 12 student focus group)

In interviews, two staff also discussed their perception that many students felt unmotivated to control or change their future outcomes. However, this 'sense of fatalism' (secondary Assistant Principal) was framed as a student mental health need heightened post-pandemic, rather than a student-staff communication issue.

Despite this, nearly all secondary staff spoke about wanting to improve student-staff communication. Staff discussed the significant time spent on behaviour management, with the behaviour escalation system used frequently; pastoral staff speaking to individual students removed from the classroom or escalating to an after-school detention.

Furthermore, staff identified a need to strengthen existing positivity strategies, including creating opportunities to celebrate student and staff strengths and achievements, however small,

> I think we need to get better at sharing those [positive] stories...
> I only knew by chance because I've got Year 11, but that the mock exam results were coming out today in assembly. Now
> I think everyone should have known that, so tomorrow you
> find a positive way of having a conversation with a Year 11

student. Even if they didn't get the grades or the results that they wanted, it's about that pep talking to them saying, tell me your best one then. (Secondary Student Welfare Officer)

Staff also recognised the need for greater student input into school policies,

> The other thing ... is how much consultation that we do with students around some of our policies...we have prefects, we have leadership group, we have citizens' ambassadors, all these opportunities to get students working on things that are really important to them...I'm not sure we use them as effectively as we could...we might not accept all their recommendations, we might say, that's not feasible, but I think this whole thing about being heard. (Secondary Safeguarding Lead)

Linked to this, staff identified a need to close the feedback loop by communicating back to students the changes made following consultation, ensuring that students feel they are valued members of the school community.

Staff Needs

Staff across the primary and secondary school stages reported similar needs, including workload related stress, external pressures, and general recruitment and retention issues to the profession, with high staff turnover. In general staff said they were well supported by senior leaders and the school offered a range of initiatives to promote staff wellbeing.

Several staff discussed the detrimental impact that high levels of need among students, including increasing numbers of behaviour-related incidents (approximately 300 per day in secondary), had on their wellbeing and enjoyment of work, as well as impacting life outside work,

> In general, like you're managing a lot of people that have a lot of varying needs at once. And that can be quite hard to manage within your sort of personal life and make sure that it doesn't take over your life in general. (Primary SEN teacher)

There was a sense that staff sometimes felt 'stuck' with a particular student or unsure of how to move conversations forwards. Some staff discussed occasions when they would like to feel that their work had a more positive impact on students. Similarly, staff discussed feeling 'stuck' in conversations with parents and carers, or wanting to improve school-parent communication,

> I think a lot of the conversations [with parents], this year, there has been quite a like an instant offence...and, you have to reassure them, that the only reason you're telling them, is because you really want the best for them and you're really trying to get them on that track...there is a real disconnect now,

> I've felt. I think because the onus was put on them for so long, at home [during the pandemic], and that was so challenging, that almost now it feels like an attack in that, oh, like you're saying that in the last few years, I haven't done a good job, and it's like, not at all, I'm just saying they have come back this year, there are some new challenges. (Primary Year Head)

Staff discussed wanting to bridge this 'disconnect' with parents by increasing positive communication around celebrating their child's achievements, thus changing the perception that teachers only call parents and carers with 'bad news'.

Identified Priority Areas for the Programme

The key challenges and priorities agreed by stakeholders were:
1. Supporting staff to build a positive classroom atmosphere and school climate, and use the behaviour escalation system consistently;

2. Building trusting and individual relationships between students and staff;

3. Greater promotion of positivity strategies, including providing positive feedback and celebrating strengths;

4. Empowering students through promoting greater autonomy, independence and responsibility.

Programme Development (Ideate and Prototype stages)

Acceptability of the Solution Focused Approach

In general, a mental health programme based on the solution focused approach was acceptable to staff, students, and parents/carers. In the focus groups, students watched a video example of a solution focused conversation with a young person. They liked the tone of the conversation, which they saw as 'calm' and 'just going back and forth' (Year 10 student), with no imbalance or power dynamics between practitioner and young person. They also liked that the practitioner listened closely to the young person, repeating the young person's own words back to them to demonstrate listening. In the parent/carer consultation, positive feedback was received from parents who participated in a solution focused exercise in pairs, particularly the focus on their parenting strengths.

Evaluation questionnaires completed following the staff introductory solution focused session showed they perceived the approach had potential to improve conversations with students (M=4.42, SD= 0.85, on a scale of 1-5 with 5 meaning 'strongly agree') and staff (M=4.33, SD= 0.82), and to promote student (M=4.51, SD= 0.84) and staff (M=4.44, SD= 0.83) mental wellbeing. Staff expressed positive views about the approaches' potential to

'promote a real mindset shift' (secondary Assistant Principal) and said that it aligned with the schools' values and ethos, where mental wellbeing is a priority.

Programme Format and Delivery

Based on the priority areas identified in the Empathise and Define stages, co-design workshops were held to develop the programme. As staff and students also discussed some aspects of programme development during the Empathise and Define stages, quotations from interviews and focus groups are also included here.

Staff reported that the solution focused approach could be integrated into different aspects of daily school life, including the curriculum, individual conversations with students, staff-staff conversations, and staff-parent communication. Central to this was the need to adopt a whole-school approach, optimally commencing the programme at the beginning of the school year when staff are establishing relationships with students. Furthermore, ensuring consistency by having regular solution focused conversations throughout the year – rather than a time-limited programme – with ongoing training and support for staff,

> It would need to be a whole school shift, rather than just individuals. Yeah, because it needs to be a consistent across every member of staff in the school, because then you change the narrative of what students are thinking. (Secondary Assistant Principal)

A whole-school approach was viewed as integral to shifting the school culture and mindset from a problem-focused to a solution focused approach. There was consensus that key staff should initially be trained in the programme and act as 'champions' in delivering regular all-staff training throughout the academic year. This may help to avoid 'not just using it as a tokenistic thing at the start' (secondary Assistant Principal). Potential champions included Year Heads (primary stage) and pastoral staff (secondary stage), including members of the behaviour and attendance teams.

Most staff said that the approach should be a universal programme offered to all students, embedded into the curriculum: in Personal, Health and Social Education lessons in primary and secondary, and tutor/form time (i.e., non-subject related time) in secondary. The solution focused approach was perceived as linking well with these times in terms of discussing students' personal development. In the focus groups, year 12 students also discussed tutor time as an appropriate forum for conversations around future aspirations, particularly in this transitional period approaching adulthood. In all focus groups, students discussed their perception that tutor time could be used more meaningfully and productively, which would increase their engagement with these lessons.

Table 3. Examples of the Schools' Vision for the Future and What is Already 'Working Well'

Vision for the future	What's working well
Educators embody the values we wish to teach: educators are calm, respectful and kind	• Some staff calmly ask students for their perspective while encouraging accountability for how they could have done things differently (restorative justice conversations) • Some staff use humour and build relationships with students
Students feel appreciated and liked	• Staff have corridor conversations with students, using humour and compliments • Pockets of positivity and celebration e.g., mini student Oscars
School is a positive place to be	• Mechanisms in place to celebrate students and staff e.g., award ceremonies, reward schemes
Delivery in classroom: educators feel confident, in control and are present	• Varied content and lesson plans, engaging activities • Some staff are good at establishing relationships with students; especially important in the first few months • Some staff effectively manage behaviour in the classroom without using the behaviour escalation system

In addition to curriculum time, primary staff discussed the potential of 'bookending' the school day with brief whole-class solution focused conversations,

> We could have that maybe in the morning, I often set like targets for the day … and then maybe, at the end of the day, also you can have a discussion about, okay, what, how close are we moving to that. If we're on a five [on a 0-10 scale], we want to move now, so on and so forth. (Primary Year Head)

In this way, conversations become part of the daily school routine, allowing students to end the day celebrating 'what's gone well' or considering next steps to move towards achieving a goal.

Staff also discussed the potential of using this approach in individual conversations with students, for students at risk of being removed from the classroom, or when a student has already been removed,

> …the amount of staff that we have that send out a kid because not sitting in the right seat. And it's something they should be able to deal with quite easily. I have a sense that the methods that we're talking about would help to be able to deal with it. (Secondary Assistant Principal)

Another aspect discussed was strengthening existing initiatives or staff qualities that were already 'working well' in school (see Table 3). These included reward schemes, events to celebrate student and staff achievements, and restorative justice conversations (allowing students to explain their perspective while taking accountability). Positive staff qualities included using humour, fostering individual relationships with students, and genuinely valuing opportunities for student interaction. Participants agreed that the programme could therefore involve staff shadowing other staff who demonstrate good practice in building relationships and positive conversations with students.

Resources and implementation considerations

Staff discussed the resources needed for implementation. Most staff perceived that training refreshers and ongoing supervision were important for sustaining the programme. Some discussed the various other training programmes offered to them, that unless regularly reinforced, easily 'slip' (secondary Assistant Principal) out of mind and practice:

> I think the important thing would be kind of public, regular like training and regular talks about it within school. Cos I think you've got so many different training things ... that it's so easy to come away from something I feel really invigorated about it, and be like, oh, that sounds really amazing. And then everything happens and you kind of feel like how to use it? (Primary SEN teacher)

Here, the participant perceives that personal interest is not sufficient to sustain using it in practice, and that new initiatives may be diluted among existing training programmes. Some staff mentioned that a top-down approach from the Senior Leadership Team would be instrumental in ensuring the programme remains a school priority.

Linked to this, most staff spoke about obtaining staff 'buy-in' for a new programme. Some said that, given their existing pressures and full timetable, there is often 'wariness around new initiatives' (Secondary Assistant Principal), particularly if perceived to increase their workload,

> I think as soon as you ask staff to do extra, it becomes more challenging, whereas if you're asking them to do something within their existing remit, I think it's just carefully wording, carefully marketing it, makes them feel like they're not doing extra work. (Secondary Associate Assistant Principal)

Compellingly explaining the programme to staff, while ensuring it fits into the schools' existing structures, was viewed as paramount. Some staff discussed the need to 'sell the benefits', for example that 'you're going to have much more positive interactions with people' (secondary Student Welfare Officer). Furthermore, demonstrating that these conversations are easy to adopt in practice, by providing practical, simple techniques that staff can easily translate into daily routines.

Staff also discussed obtaining student buy-in. Suggestions included framing the programme as a new way of having normal, everyday conversations, rather than as a mental health programme: 'I think people can, especially young people, they can get a little bit over saturated with terminology and new things, and they roll their eyes if you talk about mental health and wellbeing' (Secondary Student Welfare Officer).

Staff willingness to adopt a solution focused mindset was perceived as varying. Several staff thought that experienced teachers often adopt a strengths-based approach in their practice already. However, others may not be so flexible in adapting from a problem-focused to a solution focused mindset. Therefore, training could include shadowing staff who typify a strengths-based approach in their teaching practice, to demonstrate skills needed.

Perceived Impact of the Programme

Throughout the design process, students and staff discussed perceptions about how a solution focused programme could affect change in the school community. These were categorised into two sub-themes: developing new capacities, and more positive relationships.

Developing New Capacities. This comprised instances where students and staff think in new or different ways following the programme. Staff perceived that the programmes' focus on future hopes - rather than past problems - could help students to 'move forward with things' (Secondary Assistant Principal),

> I think particularly people that present themselves with challenging behaviour, I think that's where it could really help shift that kind of hopelessness, and that mental kind of barrier … I think yeah working with young people that are challenging or can be challenging, is moving that conversation forward (Secondary Student Welfare Officer)

This included a mindset shift towards a more hopeful future, increasing students' sense of control over future outcomes and motivation to change. Some staff discussed how a solution focused mindset could increase students' autonomy to solve their own problems – therefore less reliance on teachers to do this for them – as well as increased accountability for their actions.

Furthermore, the programmes' focus on strengths and resources was perceived as potentially increasing students' self-worth and confidence in their abilities. Noticing and naming these instances may help students to draw on their strengths in future. Linked to this, staff perceived that increased self-confidence may help students to feel comfortable in talking about what they do well. Older students may become more adept at articulating their future career prospects,

> You're looking at career prospects, and where people go on once they, their destinations once they leave school. They can confidently take sitting an interview, for example, talk about what they do well, what their achievements have been, what they … how are they going to bring that to a new role, a new job? (Secondary Student Welfare Officer)

More Positive Relationships. Both students and staff perceived that a solution

focused programme could positively impact school relationships. In focus groups, students discussed shifting the focus of student-staff conversations towards how things could be better in future, rather than punishment for wrongdoings,

> I guess the issue as well is that you're not talking about doing things wrong, you're talking about how things might be different in the future. You're not like focussing on what you've done wrong, going to Reflection and stuff like that. You're trying to figure out how you can move on from there (Year 10 student, focus group)

As a result, staff may feel more in control of the classroom, reducing the focus on managing behaviour incidents so that staff are able to 'concentrate on teaching rather than behaviour management' (Secondary Assistant Principal).

Students further thought that this new way of communicating may develop the emotional connection between individual students and staff, making them more likely to seek help from staff in future,

> I also feel like when you have a teacher, once you have a conversation with a teacher and are comfortable with them, like if you think there's something actually wrong, like that teacher might come to mind and think that this teacher she cares about me. (Year 10 student, focus group)

Students thought that more emotionally connected student-staff relationships would increase feelings of happiness at school. In the co-design workshops, staff also discussed how increased happiness would positively impact overall school climate, including relationships with parents. Both students and staff talked about more proactive, positive communication between schools and parents/carers.

Final Programme Prototype

The programme comprises training school staff in strengths-based, solution focused approaches for use in their daily conversations with students, colleagues, and parents and carers. The programme is multi-component, including a combination of strengthening existing initiatives (e.g., student and staff celebration events); whole-school and whole-class activities; individual work with students; and staff activities. The programme is designed to be flexible, so that staff are trained in the key principles underpinning the programme and can then adapt these to their needs (e.g., investing more focus into individual work with students when reducing behaviour incidents is a priority). An important aim is for staff to think about their role as moving beyond delivering programme content, and instead

to fostering relationships that promote a positive school culture. The programme is a whole-school approach that runs throughout the school year, rather than a time-limited programme.

For the specific school involved in this project, they identified a range of initiatives to be introduced or strengthened:

1. *Whole-school and whole-class activities:*

- Solution focused approaches to be embedded into the curriculum, in PHSE and tutor time e.g., students engage in activities and exercises designed to promote personal development, leadership, or teamworking skills.

- Training staff in managing behaviour within the classroom and reducing use of the behaviour escalation system e.g., greater focus on promoting a positive classroom atmosphere and providing positive feedback to students.

- Regular staff check-ins with students during break times to promote positive, individual, trusting relationships e.g., positive individual feedback to older students following exams.

- Student citizen meetings and a suggestion box for student input into school policies, which are then fed-back to all students during assemblies.

- Student and staff celebration events and incentives for positive behaviour (e.g., reward schemes); inviting parents and carers into school for celebration events.

2. *Individual work with students:*

- Conversational techniques that pastoral staff can use with students who are distressed or removed from the classroom e.g., asking students for their thoughts on how they can return to the classroom, therefore motivating them to take an active role in the solution building process.

- Restorative justice conversations as an alternative to punitive methods, allowing students to explain their perspective while taking accountability for their behaviour.

- Positive communication home to parents and carers e.g., letters or phone calls highlighting and praising their child's strengths.

3. *Staff activities:*

- Shadowing staff who demonstrate good practice in developing positive relationships with students and typify a strengths-based approach.

- Sharing positive news stories in team meetings and the staff bulletin.

Discussion

This paper details the process of co-designing a whole-school mental health programme with students, staff and parents and carers, along with the priorities identified by these stakeholders. We worked with a large all-through school to co-design a solution focused programme to improve student and staff (and indirectly, parent and carer) communication and mental wellbeing. This involved a systematic literature review and co-design activities with stakeholders. Using the human-centred design approach, we have co-produced a prototype programme for future testing and evaluation. This is an iterative process, and we will continue consulting with the school as the project moves to the next stages.

Participants highlighted student and staff needs that the programme could address. In the primary school stage, staff and parents/carers talked about helping children to understand and regulate their emotions, and resolving peer and friendship issues, including settling children back into the classroom after breaktimes. In secondary, students and staff discussed the need to improve student-staff communication, perceiving that conversations sometimes focused on when things go wrong; leading to sanctions and time out of the classroom, rather than how students can work on being better. Students talked about the detrimental impact that punitive methods had on their wellbeing, concentration, and motivation to attend school. Staff similarly reported the time spent on behaviour management distracted from teaching and impacted satisfaction and enjoyment of work. Four priorities were identified; supporting staff to build a positive classroom atmosphere and school climate; building trusting and individual student-staff relationships; greater promotion of positivity strategies; and empowering students through promoting autonomy, independence and responsibility. Although programme components were primarily developed with secondary staff in the co-design workshops, they are applicable to students of all ages and could be integrated into primary settings.

Our findings indicate that a solution focused programme was generally acceptable to stakeholders. Participants perceived that solution focused approaches have potential to change students' and staffs' ways of thinking and positively impact school relationships and school climate. Potential changes include a mindset towards a more hopeful future, increasing students' sense of control over future outcomes and autonomy to solve problems. Focusing on student strengths could potentially improve student-staff emotional connections – resulting in more trusting, individual relationships, in turn increasing student happiness and creating a positive

school climate. This aligns with theoretical literature on Solution Focused Brief Therapy's change processes, namely that the approaches' focus on strengths and solutions increasing positive emotions (including hope and trust), creating a context for change where hope and positive expectations for change increase (Kim & Franklin, 2015). In turn, this increases an individuals' openness to new ways of thinking and behavioural change, thus broadening their ability to generate new ways of solving problems (Kim & Franklin, 2015). Moreover, solution focused approaches have potential to address many generic challenges that young people face and promote a growth mindset and resilience; priorities for school both in the UK and internationally. The generic conversational techniques can be used with diverse student populations, which, in the context of a racially diverse, inner-city school, may help to overcome the stigma associated with young people actively seeking mental health support, particularly among racialised groups (Alam et al., 2024).

Staff discussed resources and practicalities of implementing the programme, including a whole-school 'drive', with regular staff training and supervision, supported by project champions and leadership. Obtaining student and staff 'buy-in' was important to ensure the programme is not diluted among other school initiatives, including compellingly explaining potential benefits and simple and practical techniques.

The prototype programme is a multi-component programme comprising whole-school activities, and staff conversational techniques for use with individual students, staff colleagues, and parents and carers. We propose the programme to be flexible, in that staff are trained in the key principles underpinning the programme, rather than following a prescriptive programme manual (although a manual can be used to describe programme principles, including a set of practical resources). We anticipate that equipping school staff with solution focused techniques for use in their daily conversations has the potential to improve school communication, mental wellbeing, staff job satisfaction, and overall school climate i.e., more supportive relationships among the school community; increased student engagement and commitment to learning; and a participative school environment in which all members shape the school vision and policies (Shinde et al., 2018). Moreover, skilling up staff in solution focused approaches could be time, resource and cost-efficient. There are currently long waiting lists for CAMHS, with many not meeting entry thresholds. Long-term, solution focused approaches applied early from primary - and sustained through secondary school – could potentially avert referrals to mental health service referrals or pupil referral units. Training staff would reduce costs of external mental health professionals and embed in-house expertise, optimising sustainability.

The programme format aligns with existing whole-school programmes, for example the Gatehouse Project in Australia (Bond & Butler, 2009), a multi-level programme to promote wellbeing and reduce substance use in

secondary schools; the Positive Education Programme in the Netherlands (Elfrink et al., 2016), promoting positive school climate in primary schools; and the Up programme in Denmark (Nielson et al., 2015), which aims to strengthen secondary school students' social and emotional competence skills. A recurring thread is the provision of a flexible 'framework' – while core programme components are included, the flexible approach means that schools can adapt them to their local context and needs. Staff are encouraged to look for opportunities to apply programme principles in their daily activities, or to create new changes at multiple levels throughout the school. This approach lends itself well to our programme; staff in the co-design workshops identified multiple opportunities to strengthen existing initiatives or introduce new ones. Adopting this flexible approach may aid acceptability and sustainability of the programme, as stakeholders can adapt to their local needs.

This paper adds to the existing literature on whole-school mental wellbeing programmes by describing the processes of co-designing the programme with school stakeholders. The human-centred design approach and co-design methods used in this study are a strength, with stakeholder knowledge and experience facilitating local ownership of the programme. Furthermore, the solution focused approaches used within the workshops allowed students and staff to identify what could be different in school and find their own solutions to this.

Limitations

This study took place in one school in England; although this was a large, all-through, ethnically diverse school, the views expressed by participants may differ in other schools. For example, secondary students and staff discussed a clear priority of reducing punitive methods. While literature indicates that disciplinary methods are common in secondary schools, and this may detrimentally impact student mental health (Mind, 2021), it may not reflect the priorities for all secondary schools. However, the generic solution focused techniques can be easily applied to a range of challenges that young people experience.

Furthermore, ethical constraints precluded us from including the views of primary-aged children. Practical constraints also meant that the co-design workshops were undertaken with secondary staff only. Although the programme principles are applicable to primary settings, further co-design work with primary students and staff would strengthen the specific programme components. For example, primary staff suggested the programme would have more of a focus on whole-class activities – such as bookending the school day with brief solution focused conversations – rather than individual student conversations.

Implications and Future Work

Based on these findings, a pilot study of the programme is warranted ('Test' stage) to assess acceptability and pilot potential outcome measures. All staff would receive introductory training in the programme, with project champions receiving more intensive training and ongoing supervision. Acceptability of the programme would be assessed via observations of student and staff communication and other qualitative methods. An important consideration for future evaluations is programme 'dose', including the timepoint at which students and staff report experiencing changes in themselves or their relationships with others. Potential outcome measures include student and staff mental wellbeing, school climate, staff job satisfaction, and behaviour incidents. Assessing feasibility and sustainability will be important before a full-scale evaluation can occur. Challenges to overcome may include staff consistency and fidelity in using solution focused conversations in their daily practice, and ensuring the programme remains a whole-school priority. We will continue our close partnership with the school during the test stage and ensure that co-design methods remain central to this process.

An avenue for further exploration is using solution focused approaches directly with parents and carers. Better communication between schools and parents can resolve emotional or behavioural difficulties earlier (Smith et al., 2022) and engaging parents is integral to whole-school approaches (NICE, 2022). While our programme includes solution focused techniques for use with parents and carers, staff highlighted their desire to improve school-parent communication, particularly post-pandemic when communication was perceived as more 'defensive'. There is scope for developing solution focused programmes specifically targeting school-parent communication; moreover, supporting parents and carers with strategies to respond to their child's behaviour in non-punitive ways, as requested by parents in this study.

Conclusion

Co-designing programmes with stakeholders is relatively recent in school settings; this paper describes the complex process of partnering with students, staff, and parents to co-design a programme using the human-centred design approach. The novelty of our programme lies not only in the active partnership with intended beneficiaries, but in the use of solution focused approaches, a paradigm shift from traditional school conversations – often focused on what is going wrong, leading to punishment – and instead on how things can be better in future. The programme has potential to make changes at the whole-school level, including improved student and staff mental wellbeing, and more positive school climate and ethos.

Disclosure statement

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

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