Research for All

RESEARCH FOR ALL

UCLPRESS

Practice case study

Involving children, teachers and parents/carers in dialogues around child well-being in schools

Myrofora Kakoulidou[1,2], Heba Al-Jayoosi[3,4], Maria Kambouri[3] and Georgia Pavlopoulou[2,5,*]

[1]Department of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London, UK
[2]Group for Research in Relationships and NeuroDiversity (GRRAND), Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, Division of Psychology and Language Sciences, Faculty of Brain Sciences, UCL, London, UK
[3]Department of Psychology and Human Development, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, London, UK
[4]Assistant Head, Mayflower Primary School, London, UK
[5]Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, London, UK
*Correspondence: georgia.pavlopoulou@ucl.ac.uk

Submission date: 5 June 2022; Acceptance date: 11 April 2023; Publication date: 18 August 2023

How to cite

Kakoulidou, M., Al-Jayoosi, H., Kambouri, M. and Pavlopoulou, G. (2023) 'Involving children, teachers and parents/carers in dialogues around child well-being in schools'. *Research for All*, 7 (1), 12. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.07.1.12.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright

2023, Myrofora Kakoulidou, Heba Al-Jayoosi, Maria Kambouri and Georgia Pavlopoulou. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.07.1.12.

Open access

Research for All is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

Building dynamic partnerships between communities and academic institutions, via knowledge exchange, plays a vital role in generating research with mutual benefits for research partners and wider communities. Knowledge exchange between universities and schools has recently received particular interest in child and adolescent mental health research. This article outlines a knowledge exchange programme that involved children, primarily, and teachers and parents/carers in dialogues around school well-being. Using a series of co-created and multimodal creative activities, we: (1) worked closely with 25 students of an inclusive and multicultural primary school (aged 9 to 10 years old) to understand their school well-being experiences, and to co-create a school blog to communicate key messages with local communities; and (2) initiated a discussion around child and school well-being with a group of parents/carers and teachers through expanding on the children's blog. In this article, we outline our methodology to facilitate children's involvement with the project well-being activities. We explore key methodological strengths and challenges, and highlight lessons we learned and how these stress the significance of seeking young people's points of view when designing school well-being initiatives.

Keywords school mental health; child well-being; participatory research; knowledge exchange; creative methods

Key messages

- A collaborative approach to whole-school wellbeing that involves young people, school staff and parents/carers offers opportunities for researchers to deliver knowledge exchange initiatives that attune more genuinely to the needs and priorities of the school communities.
- Involving school staff in decision making across all the knowledge exchange phases, from the co-design and delivery of activities to dissemination, is central to building more equitable partnerships between schools and academic institutions that also consider key practicalities, such as teachers' workload and other commitments.
- Participatory arts-based approaches afford greater agency to young people, and offer them a creative space to leverage different types of media and reflect upon their school well-being experiences in their preferred ways.

Background

Building equitable partnerships between communities and academic institutions, via knowledge exchange, is an integral part of university research. Involving the public in higher education activities has been considered a key pathway towards maximising research impact (UKRI, 2022). In particular, engaging schools in child well-being research has recently received increasing interest, considering that this is a key priority in the school curriculum of England (Brown, 2018). Schools represent the physical, social and emotional environment in which children spend a large proportion of the day. There is extensive, high-quality research delineating that children's well-being could have a fundamental influence on cognitive and socio-emotional development and learning during childhood, as well as a long-lasting impact on physical, emotional and social well-being in adulthood (DfE, 2022; Gutman and Vorhaus, 2012; Jessiman et al., 2022).

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2023) advises that primary and secondary schools should adopt a comprehensive, 'whole-school' approach to promoting young people's social and emotional well-being. Such an approach moves beyond learning and teaching to cover all aspects of school life. Evidence suggests that mental health interventions are more effective when they consider the whole context of schools, including students, their families and school staff (Spencer et al., 2022). Involving the school community in planning, implementing and evaluating school approaches encourages creative and collaborative thinking about how to more meaningfully promote and support student, staff and parental mental health. This can open communication channels, foster a sense of ownership, and increase the relevance of the whole-school approach.

The new Covid-19 reality has triggered fundamental changes to children's lives, including frequent school closures and changes to school and home routines. Drawing on the recent reports by the UK Department for Education (DfE, 2020) and Public Health England (2021), children showed relatively stable well-being (for example, levels of happiness) during the pandemic lockdown periods (March to September 2020); however, other high-quality research underscores the negative impact of the pandemic, especially on the well-being (for example, increased anxiety) of children from socio-economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority groups (Knowles et al., 2022; Kooth, 2021). Given the adverse effect that poor well-being could have on children's life outcomes, there is an increasing focus upon promoting early mental health awareness in schools (Public Health England, 2021). The recent European Commission communication on the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025 (European Commission, 2020) has also set in motion a collaborative process to determine how schools can address the learning and socio-emotional needs of students.

Several projects have aimed to promote child well-being in the school context. Nevertheless, the majority of these are led by researchers, and they do not necessarily capture the lived experiences of children in school. Limited research has explored how we can examine with, rather than for, children the impact of the school environment and school-related factors on their well-being. Knowledge exchange between children and researchers provides opportunities to work towards shared goals around well-being which are more meaningful to children's school lives, and thus more likely to lead to a positive change (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou, 2020). Despite the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has also brought into research (for example, the transition from face-to-face to online methods of data collection), it has also sparked new levels of creativity and innovation among researchers when engaging with local communities (Pavlopoulou et al., 2020).

Understanding how primary school students experience their school environment, and the impact of school life on their well-being, is valuable. Such understandings could help tailor more effective practices of support to promote children's well-being and learning. The latter is in line with the recently updated NICE guidelines on involving stakeholders in whole-school mental health approaches (NICE, 2023). The present short-scale knowledge exchange programme aimed in this direction by involving children, teachers and parents/carers in conversations to understand school-related facilitators and barriers in children's well-being. Given their relative neglect, the overarching goal has been to stimulate the interest of educational psychology scholars in involving children in knowledge exchange activities that are creative and multimodal, and that may generate local solutions.

Our public engagement activities were in collaboration with Mayflower Primary School in East London, and they were funded by the UCL (University College London) Train and Engage Fund, a public engagement bursary offered by UCL Culture. The activities took place between April and July 2021. Connecting with school communities in East London allowed us to engage with the narratives of British children from Black, Asian and other ethnic minorities that typically remain under-represented in research and public engagement. Specifically, the overall aims of the public engagement activities were: (1) to encourage Year 5 children (aged 9 to 10 years old) to share their ideas about everyday school-related facilitators, stressors and barriers through a series of creative activities; and (2) to start a dialogue with teachers, parents/carers and researchers around school well-being. Phases 1–3 involved pre-knowledge exchange considerations and initial conversations with school staff. Phases 4–5 included a set of blended (face-to-face and online) school activities with 25 children, 3 teachers and 2 academic researchers. Phase 6 involved teachers and parents/carers. In particular, school staff members (N = 5) completed a brief online survey, while parents/carers (N = 2), teachers (N = 2) and academic researchers (N = 2) came together to reflect on school well-being, expanding on children's key messages. This article outlines methods, strengths and barriers during our collaborative work with the school community.

Methodology: a synergy

Phase 1: Establishing equitable partnership with the school leadership team (online, via email)

School recruitment was an evident challenge during the pandemic. To mitigate this challenge, the researchers Myrofora Kakoulidou (M.K.) and Georgia Pavlopoulou (G.P.) approached the school leadership team at an early stage (August 2020) to secure the school's involvement and to discuss how to best establish an equitable partnership. G.P. and M.K. exchanged emails with Heba Al-Jayoosi (H.A.J.), the school Assistant Head, to discuss the school's involvement, and the project aims and objectives, as well as to agree on practicalities, including the number of school visits and the timeline of activities.

Phase 2: Pre-knowledge exchange considerations (online, via email)

In early December 2020, H.A.J. and the classroom teacher, Alexa Todd (A.T.), met with researchers G.P. and M.K. to discuss pre-engagement considerations. We decided together that the child activities should be face-to-face, rather than online, to ensure children's greater involvement. Following input from the teaching team, we discussed the school's expectations, and agreed to co-deliver short and well-planned creative activities, while minimising any unnecessary workload and pressure on teachers.

H.A.J. and A.T., M.K. and G.P. developed brief information letters and opt-out consent forms for parents/carers in a way that ensured that these were culturally appropriate and accessible. Addressing language barriers was a significant challenge, considering that most parents/carers had English as an additional language. H.A.J., M.K. and G.P. discussed this challenge and agreed to keep the parent/carer information sheets brief, including visuals where possible. Teachers also offered to translate the information sheets and to further explain the programme's aims and activities to the interested parents/carers. M.K. and G.P. secured a risk assessment and discussed the school disclosure policy, as well as similar concerns with H.A.J. Two parents/carers were initially hesitant to offer consent for their children due to the sensitive nature of the topic of well-being. Following discussions with the teaching team, we clarified at an early stage that the focus of our activities would be on school, rather than home, well-being. We also offered age-appropriate visual and audio information in the classroom to secure children's verbal assent. We created visual instructions and two PowerPoint recordings to support students' enquiries. Familiar school staff also explored children's interest levels about participating prior to the activities, and children were reminded that they could withdraw from the activities at any stage. Throughout the knowledge exchange programme, the teaching team did not receive any withdrawal requests from children.

Phase 3: Supporting teachers to facilitate child-led creative sessions – aligning values, exchanging ideas on practices, and organising multimedia material (online, via email)

One of the key strengths of our programme has been the level of collaboration between the school staff and the research team. We worked closely with teachers to design the content of the activities from the outset of the programme. During an online meeting, we co-created the programme agenda and scheduled dates for the activities. Working closely with teachers was central to developing more child-centred and purposeful content. We sought teachers' input regarding the multimedia material and artistic resources for use with children. Following the teachers' feedback, some originally planned creative activities were replaced by others suggested by teachers to cater for children's preferences. For example, students were more interested in activities such as drawing and Lego modelling, than in performing arts, which was initially suggested by the research team. An activity plan was emailed to all teachers at least a week before each school visit. These activity plans included optional, multimodal tasks, and they were informed by the preferences of the students, who were directly invited to choose only their preferred activities. According to teachers, our methodological choices were well-considered and organised in advance, while resources were planned well to ensure that teachers did not feel distressed introducing new activities.

Phase 4: Involving children to record their well-being experiences and needs

Step 1: Pre-recording views in a large group, live introductions, and co-establishing aims and objectives (face-to-face)

All activities with children took place during morning school hours in a spacious empty school room. This room selection enabled children to move around with fewer restrictions than in a regular classroom. Two teachers and three teaching assistants were present to facilitate activities. In this knowledge exchange programme, we aimed to offer opportunities for children and school staff to work together during entertaining activities outside the formal school learning context. Due to the assessment-oriented character of the educational system in England, such opportunities are usually limited. To minimise teachers' influence and offer greater agency to children, we included a variety of whole-group, small-group and individual activities, as explained later.

Before the first school visit, M.K. and G.P. created a short video to be shown in the classroom by the teachers. In this video, M.K. and G.P. introduced themselves, and the knowledge exchange programme, and invited children to work together with researchers. During the first school visit, we all introduced ourselves, and M.K. explained the reasons for collaborating with the school. After this, children shared their thoughts and feelings about the different areas, people and activities at school. Three child volunteers and M.K. noted down the group's thoughts and feelings on a poster. After this, children reflected on what they would like to find out while working with UCL. This was an introductory activity that explored children's thoughts about the concept of well-being and their expectations from the programme, which later informed the public engagement agenda.

Step 2: Write-share-create – child-led collection of ideas (face-to-face)

Children picked four cards (*thought bubbles*) in different colours. Each bubble had a different question for the children to answer about their school life. Children looked at photographs of different school areas, and they wrote down what they liked and disliked about school life, and what made them feel safe, calm, worried and scared in school. They stuck the thought bubbles on the wall, and exchanged ideas with their peers by looking at each other's thought bubbles.

Step 3: Magic hat – multimedia creative expression (face-to-face)

In a circle, children picked a card from a 'magic hat'. Each card had an emotion word on it. Some children had the word 'Calming', others the word 'Stressing', and others the words 'Having Fun'. Based upon the card they had picked, children used their preferred creative methods to reflect upon their school experiences. They expressed their calming or intense feelings about people, places and situations during typical school days. Creative methods included drawing, talking, writing and Lego modelling. All materials were placed in the centre of the room, and children were encouraged to pick their preferred resources. Children were free to change their emotion word or method of expression at any stage. Children could also select their materials and find their own space in the room to work on the activity.

Phase 5: Collaborating with children to create outputs (blog)

Step 4: Preparing the school well-being blog – the idea of blogging (face-to-face)

In a circle, children decided how they would like to communicate their ideas about school well-being to the wider community. Children, teachers and M.K. agreed on the idea of blogging, as most of them were already familiar with online blogging from school. Children and the research team agreed to prepare a school blog about children's well-being. After looking at four different school blogs, including their own school's blog, children worked in groups, facilitated by school staff, and wrote down tips for a successful blog. At the end, they shared these ideas with the whole group.

Step 5: Co-designing the blog and thematically organising the blog ideas

Four groups of children picked their thought bubbles from our previous sessions and codified the themes generated from the photographs and their discussions. This process followed some of the steps highlighted in Pavlopoulou and Dimitriou's (2020) framework. A fifth group chose photographs to include in the school blog, and wrote a caption under each photograph to explain their preferred methods of recording their views.

Step 6: Finalising and publishing the blog

Children decided upon a set of possible titles for their blog, and, finally, voted for their favourite one within a week of our last visit. The research team had an online meeting with the classroom to finalise the school blog. Children and teachers offered constructive feedback on the school blog (for example, formatting, pictures and content), which was then incorporated into the final version of the blog (Mayflower Primary School, n.d.). Children received copies of the school blog, thank-you vouchers for their collaboration, and certificates of young well-being scientist collaborators.

Step 7: Reflections and feedback on activities

At the end of the activities, children and teachers used whiteboard wall surfaces and coloured markers to offer feedback by: (1) indicating their favourite activity; and (2) letting us know what it feels like to explore children's well-being with academic researchers. For children, the whole experience proved to be valuable, as they reflected upon learning more about what real-life research looks like. For researchers, it was important to explore school well-being by seeking children's points of view and using participatory arts-based methods. School staff reported that they had been able to learn from jointly working with academic researchers. Inspired by these knowledge exchange activities and previous research work, G.P. and M.K. also held discussions (for example, face-to-face meetings and webinars) with academic and non-academic experts in the field as part of work by the Group for Research in Relationships and NeuroDiversity (GRRAND) to explore more broadly how researchers can involve communities, including schools, in research that attunes more to their needs and priorities.

Phase 6: Working with teachers and parents/carers

We launched a short-scale survey in June 2021, in which the school staff of Mayflower Primary School shared their thoughts about school well-being, before and after reading the children's blog. In July 2021, parents/carers (N = 2) identified and invited by H.A.J., teachers at Mayflower Primary School (N = 2) and the academic research team joined forces and started a round-table discussion around school well-being, building on the key messages from the children's blog.

The authors' reflections

To our knowledge, the first-person accounts of children have not yet been actively consulted in school well-being literature. In this knowledge exchange programme, children expressed their views in sensible and constructive ways, through a range of creative activities of their choice, which indicates that children are in a position to contribute to similar conversations in meaningful ways. Taking this into account, we propose that children's points of view should be actively sought by policy makers when designing school mental health initiatives for primary schools. Children were afforded agency to co-deliver activities (for example, initial framing of project aims and objectives) and co-design the school blog; however, we designed most of the activities with teachers, rather than with children. This choice was strategic, and primarily due to practical reasons, such as the project timeline and budget. In the future, we would like to involve young people in more genuine ways, in both the design and the delivery of activities.

Involving schools in public engagement activities requires a radical shift in power dynamics between the school partners and the researchers. Working with schools frequently focuses upon the tokenistic involvement of the school community, in which children's and teachers' contributions do not necessarily influence the programme aims, agenda and outcomes (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). Due to changes in group dynamics, public engagement can often be seen as a 'threat' for academic researchers, as it challenges well-established principles of conventional research paradigms, where researchers are typically expected to have maximum control over research. This can become a greater challenge when involving children, whose points of view can easily be 'sacrificed' for the sake of the aims and objectives of the original project. Although we acknowledge that issues of power and hierarchy can still be present, as these are intrinsic elements of knowledge exchange between schools and academic institutions, we aimed to ensure greater communication and transparency with school staff and children at an early stage. In our knowledge exchange iterations, all parties were seen at different times as experts by experience and/or science in the room.

Finally, we made an effort to plan our activities in a sensible way, while considering school staff members' workload and other commitments. In future knowledge-exchange initiatives, academic researchers should also aim to encourage open conversations with non-academic partners at an early stage. Such conversations enable the establishment of greater levels of trust, confidence and transparency between the different parties. They also offer opportunities for collaborators to discuss expectations and work together on how to address important ethical and practical issues to encourage more meaningful collaborations.

Concluding remarks

Currently, there is limited representation of children's voices in school well-being research. This is rather surprising if we consider that children, as experts by experience, can offer valuable insights into what contributes and what does not contribute to their own well-being. In this knowledge exchange programme, children acted as young scientists by creating new knowledge and understandings about what it feels like to navigate school life as a young person. Our activities underline the value of creative, multimodal resources to capture young people's school well-being experiences in more sensitive and inclusive ways. They also underline the significance of designing and delivering knowledge exchange activities with, rather than for, teachers and children to ensure that these are more tailored to the needs of the school, and, thus, more likely to be embedded into the daily school routine. Our article aims to widen the discussion around how researchers can involve young people and teachers in knowledge exchange efforts in more authentic ways. Methodological issues and practicalities around the involvement of stakeholders are rather loosely touched upon in current literature. We believe that our participatory methodological framework could inspire researchers committed to co-creation/co-research philosophy about building more meaningful partnerships with non-academic collaborators, such as young people, school staff and parents/carers.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank UCL Culture for offering us the UCL Train and Engage Fund, and enabling us to make this series of public engagement activities happen. Most importantly, we are very grateful for the commitment and enthusiasm of the children, teachers and families of Mayflower Primary School.

Funding

Our public engagement activities were funded by the UCL (University College London) Train and Engage Fund, a public engagement bursary offered by UCL Culture.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article. The research activities were conducted for public engagement rather than research-related purposes. The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with IOE (UCL's Faculty of Education and Society) standards and best practice.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

References

Brown, R. (2018) *Mental Health and Wellbeing Provision in Schools: Review of published policies and information*. Department for Education. Accessed 29 April 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/747709/Mental_health_and_wellbeing_provision_in_schools.pdf.

DfE (Department for Education) (2020) *State of the Nation 2020: Children and young people's wellbeing: Research report: October 2020*. Accessed 29 April 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925329/State_of_the_nation_2020_children_and_young_people_s_wellbeing.pdf.

DfE (Department for Education) (2022) *State of the Nation 2021: Children and young people's wellbeing: Research report: February 2022*. Accessed 29 April 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052920/SoN_2021-_executive_summary_220204.pdf.

European Commission (2020) 'Achieving a European Education Area by 2025 and resetting education and training for the digital age'. Accessed 16 May 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1743.

Fletcher-Watson, S., Adams, J., Brook, K., Charman, T., Crane, L., Cusack, J., Leekam, S., Milton, D., Parr, J.R. and Pellicano, E. (2019) 'Making the future together: Shaping autism research through meaningful participation'. *Autism: The international journal of research and practice*, 23 (4), 943–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318786721.

Gutman, L.M. and Vorhaus, J. (2012) *The Impact of Pupil Behaviour and Wellbeing on Educational Outcomes*. Department for Education, Research Report DFE-RR253. Accessed 29 April 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219638/DFE-RR253.pdf.

Jessiman, P., Kidger, J., Spencer, L., Geijer-Simpson, E., Kaluzeviciute, G., Burn, A.-M., Leonard, N. and Limmer, M. (2022) 'School culture and student mental health: A qualitative study in UK secondary schools'. *BMC Public Health*, 22 (1), 619. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13034-x.

Knowles, G., Gayer-Anderson, C., Turner, A., Dorn, L., Lam, J., Davis, S., Blakey, R., Lowis, K., Pinfold, V., Creary, N., Dyer, J., Hatch, S.L., Ploubidis, G., Bhui, K., Harding, S. and Morgan, C. (2022) 'Covid-19, social restrictions, and mental distress among young people: A UK longitudinal, population-based study'. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63 (11), 1392–404. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13586.

Kooth (2021) *Identifying Issues and Collaborating to Enable Positive Mental Health for All*. Accessed 29 April 2023. https://www.readkong.com/page/kooth-pulse-2021-may-2021-the-state-of-the-nation-s-3375177.

Mayflower Primary School (n.d.) 'UCL and Riley Class blog'. Accessed 16 May 2023. https://www.mayflower.towerhamlets.sch.uk/events/ucl-riley-class-blog.

NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) (2023) *Social, Emotional and Mental Wellbeing in Primary and Secondary Education*. Accessed 16 May 2023. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng223/resources/social-emotional-and-mental-wellbeing-in-primary-and-secondary-education-pdf-66143833987525.

Pavlopoulou, G. and Dimitriou, D. (2020) 'In their own words, in their own photos: Adolescent females' siblinghood experiences, needs and perspectives growing up with a preverbal autistic brother or sister'. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 97, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RIDD.2019.1035556.

Pavlopoulou, G., Adams, J. and Campbell, B. (2020) 'FlowUnlocked in East London'. *The Psychologist*, 9 July. Accessed 16 May 2023. https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/flowunlocked-east-london.

Public Health England (2021) *Promoting Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing: A whole school and college approach*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1020249/Promoting_children_and_young_people_s_mental_health_and_wellbeing.pdf.

Spencer, L.P., Flynn, D., Johnson, A., Maniatopoulos, G., Newham, J.J., Perkins, N., Wood, M., Woodley, H., and Henderson, E.J.(2022) 'The implementation of whole-school approaches to transform mental health in UK schools: A realist evaluation protocol'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221082360.

UKRI (UK Research and Innovation) (2022) 'Knowledge exchange framework.' Accessed 16 May 2023. https://www.ukri.org/what-we-offer/supporting-collaboration/supporting-collaboration-research-england/knowledge-exchange-framework/.