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Student Wellbeing: An analysis of the evidence

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In recent years, policymakers and practitioners have increasingly focused their attention on the importance of student wellbeing. It goes without saying that recent events have emphasised this as students try to cope with an unprecedented amount of change in the ways in which they live and learn. However, the evidence on how schools and teachers can promote student wellbeing, and the effects of wellbeing on other educational outcomes, is a relatively new topic for researchers.

Oxford University Press ran a survey in the UK to understand more about how schools were tackling wellbeing.

87% (109) of UK respondents and 90% (53) of international respondents indicated wellbeing is a priority to a great or moderate extent in their schools.

Classroom teachers will find opportunities to cover wellbeing as part of their lessons (64%)

Classroom teachers will use curriculum programmes with wellbeing content within them (58%)

Classroom teachers will cover wellbeing on an ad-hoc basis, for pupils/students who need it (54%)

90% of international teachers indicated their schools will be providing wellbeing support to teaching staff in the next 12 months

This handout focuses on research in the form of an impact study that Oxford University Press commissioned to inform the new Oxford International Curriculum. The impact study included research from many different countries, to better understand any potential links between wellbeing and academic attainment, as well as other educational outcomes.

It has a particular focus on whole-school approaches to promoting wellbeing and explores the factors that contribute towards an effective strategy and implementation. Any recommendations in this handout are based on evidence and are not advice from Oxford University Press. They should be assessed against the context you work in before decisions are made on implementation.

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What is Oxford Impact?

As a department of the University of Oxford, improving educational outcomes is core to our mission. As you would expect, everything we develop at Oxford University Press is created with rigour and care to ensure that it will help to engage learners and deliver results. As part of this commitment, we developed **Oxford Impact**, Oxford University Press's approach to evaluating the impact that our educational products and services have on teaching and learning so that teachers, learners, senior leaders and parents/carers can be sure that they make a positive difference.

At the heart of Oxford Impact is the **Oxford Impact Framework**; a rigorous process for evaluating impact developed with the **National Foundation for Educational Research** (a UK charity) and supported by the **Department of Education, University of Oxford**.

We are proud to have worked with these highly respected organisations to create a trustworthy and robust Framework, giving reassurance around the integrity and consistency of how we evaluate and report on impact.



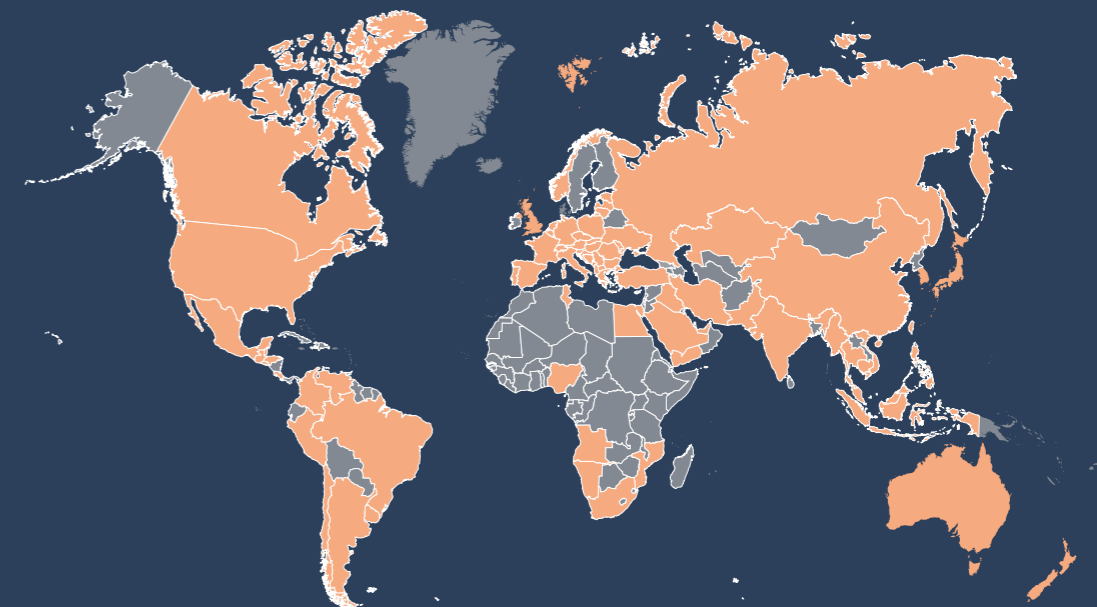
What is an impact study?

It investigates changes that have taken place and the extent to which these changes can be attributed to a particular product or service. Examples include: 'has a reading scheme improved pupils' engagement?'; or 'has a maths scheme led to progress?'. We are asking if the product is doing what it was intended to do.

An impact study assesses the change a product or service has on the people or group of people it is intended to help or benefit (learners, teachers, senior leaders and parents/carers).



Since the launch of Oxford Impact in 2016, we have completed 60 impact studies involving over 11,000 participants in 79 countries.




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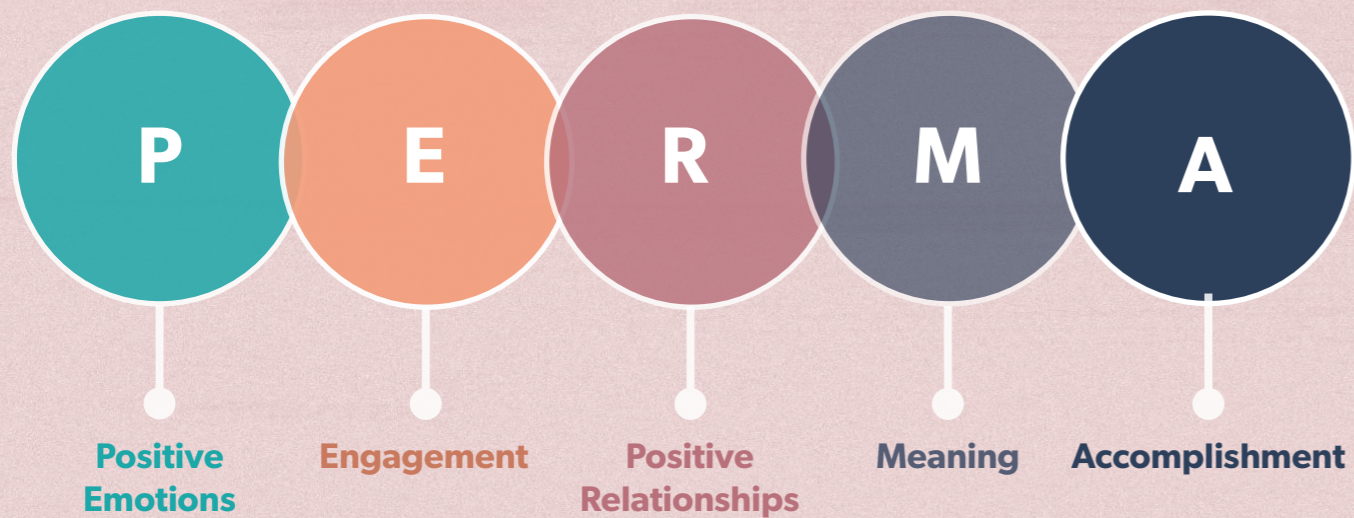
Department of Education
University of Oxford

What is wellbeing?

Most teachers know that happier students learn better. However, an unavoidable complication involved in unpacking the concept of wellbeing and its relationship to other outcomes for students, is that the term 'wellbeing' has different meanings and definitions.

Some authors use wellbeing as a term for general happiness, others as a term encompassing physical and mental health, while others frame wellbeing as a component of physical and/or mental health. It is important to note that we are specifically focusing on student wellbeing here as opposed to general wellbeing.

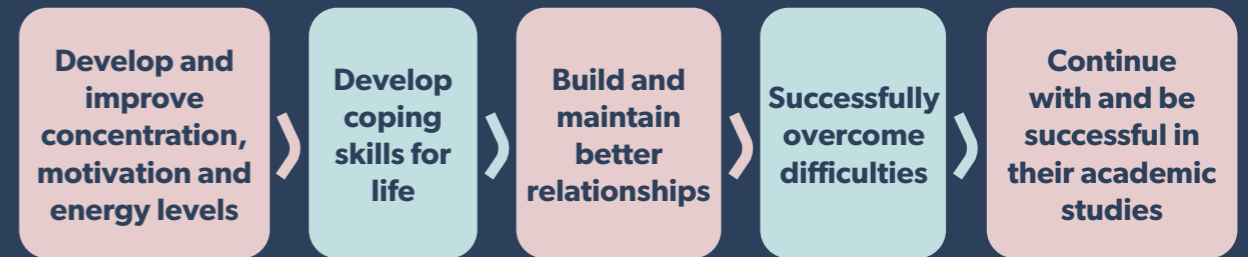
One well-known approach to defining wellbeing is by American psychologist and educator Martin Seligman who designed the **PERMA Model**, which represents what he classifies as the five core elements of happiness and wellbeing.



Why is student wellbeing important?

We all know that it is fundamental to the overall health of an individual, but past experiences, attitudes and outlook can all impact wellbeing as can physical or emotional trauma. Low levels of wellbeing and associated mental health problems can have adverse consequences for the health and development of the young. They are usually the precursor to difficulties in adulthood, and are strongly connected with poverty, disadvantage and deprivation, both as causes and as outcomes.

Students who are happy and healthy tend to:



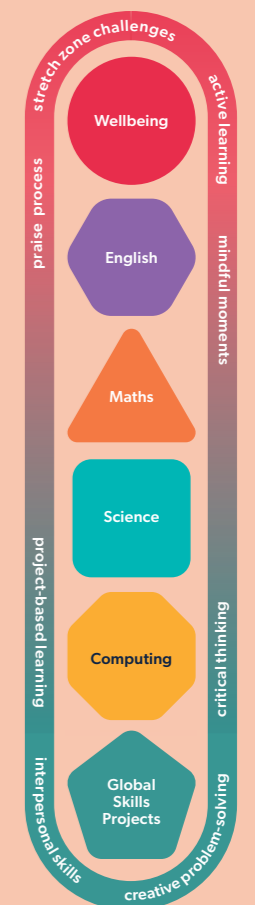
It is also important to note that employers value soft skills such as emotional resilience, adaptability and lateral thinking, making it even more important that today's educators focus on developing these skills to support their students' academic, personal and professional successes.

Oxford International Curriculum

This need to focus on student wellbeing inspired our new **Oxford International Curriculum (OIC)**, which is an integrated curriculum from Early Years through Primary, Lower Secondary, International GCSEs, AS and A-levels. It includes four key components:

- Curriculum
- Resources
- Assessment
- Professional development

OIC offers a new approach to teaching and learning focused on **wellbeing** and **global skills** development and aims to put **joy at the heart of learning** to promote personal, academic and career success. Wellbeing and Global Skills Projects are taught, both as stand-alone subjects and interwoven across the four core subjects. It's an integrated approach based on the science of positive education, with a focus on developing physical and mental wellbeing throughout the educational experience of each student, as well as important skills and competencies, such as critical and creative thinking.



The research: An Evidence analysis impact study

An Evidence analysis impact study was undertaken to better understand any potential links between wellbeing and academic attainment, as well as other educational outcomes. An Evidence analysis seeks to find and analyse a range of literature (research articles, books, etc.) on a specific topic of interest to uncover evidence and create an overall picture.

The impact study was conducted by Dr Ariel Lindorff, Departmental Lecturer in Research Methods, Department of Education, University of Oxford.

The overarching research question was: **'To what extent does the promotion of wellbeing in schools lead to improved educational outcomes?'**

This broke down into three distinct areas of research:

- What academic research is there that might indicate that student wellbeing can improve academic attainment?
- In what way does a curriculum centred on the principles of wellbeing lead to improved physical and emotional health, and associated educational outcomes?
- What specific strategies are linked with positive outcomes (academic or otherwise)?

Convincing evidence for links between wellbeing and academic attainment was drawn from research carried out internationally, including from China, Germany, Chile, the UK, Australia and Mexico (see references).

Search parameters and criteria

There were several meetings to discuss and agree the focus of the research.

Phase of education

Lower Secondary (11-15 years), though Primary level would also be very useful

Geography

Literature published in the English language (international and the UK)

Date range

Research from the last 5-7 years (published from 2013-2020)

Nature of literature

Academic journals, scholarly texts, research reports, articles on websites and books



One of the key issues with an Evidence analysis is whether there is enough existing research to draw on, especially if we were to be very narrow and specific with the search.

Key findings from the impact study

The Evidence analysis impact study found the following:

- There is **convincing evidence of a relationship between wellbeing and academic attainment**, drawing on research conducted in a wide range of countries.
- There is **robust, longitudinal evidence that wellbeing is also associated with a variety of additional student outcomes** including:
 - engagement
 - experience of transitions between Primary and Secondary school
 - success compared to parents at the same stage of education (with 'success' defined in terms of the highest level of education attained).

Strategies linked with positive outcomes of whole-school approaches:

There is a **strong international evidence base to support the assertion that whole-school approaches to promoting wellbeing can have an effect on academic attainment**. There is some mixed evidence on this matter (e.g. studies finding a lack of effect), but some authors have suggested that where an effect has not been found this may be due to problems with implementation.

There is also **strong evidence to suggest that whole-school approaches to promoting wellbeing can have positive effects on a wide range of other student outcomes**, including:

- mental health
- self-esteem
- self-efficacy
- motivation
- behaviour
- decreased probability of dropout.

Further evidence is needed from studies over longer time periods to improve understanding of the effects of whole-school approaches to promoting student wellbeing on non-academic student outcomes.

Strategies linked with positive outcomes

A variety of considerations may affect the ability of a whole-school intervention or strategy for promoting wellbeing to have positive effects on student academic and other outcomes.

Some of the key advice from multiple authors based on empirical evidence suggests that schools should:

- Tailor to and account for **specific school context**:
 - Engage in appropriate self-assessment prior to implementation in order to be aware of and act on assets and strengths of the school as well as specific problems that need to be addressed.
 - Ensure that wider school policy supports implementation.
- Take an **integrated, cross-level** (school and classroom) **approach**.
- **Actively engage the wider community**, including parents/families.
- **Focus on professional development for teachers** to support them with implementation.
- **Put monitoring systems in place** to keep track of and adjust implementation as needed.
- **Ensure that sufficient time and resources are available** to support implementation.

Let's look at these areas in more detail and look at some ideas for successful implementation.

Taking an integrated, cross-level approach

A growing body of research suggests that social and emotional skills are malleable and can be effectively taught using a variety of approaches and formats, including classroom-based programming and whole-school approaches (Jones and Bouffard, 2012). Further evidence from high-income countries suggests that integrative strategies combining approaches at the school and classroom levels have the potential to be effective towards positive mental health outcomes (Fazel et al., 2014).



Tailor to and take account of the specific school context

This is a good place to start:

- Assess current school policies and strategies to identify strengths, weaknesses and where you need to target any initiatives ensuring that you recognise existing good practice.
- Take stock of what interventions and initiatives are being run alongside whole-school strategies to promote student wellbeing and consider what tensions might arise as a result (Heller-Sahlgren, 2018b).
- Put clear systems and processes in place to help staff identify children and young people with possible mental health problems; providing routes to escalate issues with clear referral and accountability systems.
- Ensure that there are robust policies and practice in place to tackle key areas such as behaviour, anti-bullying and diversity, including tackling prejudice and stigma around mental health.



Embrace a growth mindset

Ensure that as well as a performance culture, there is a focus on wellbeing and embrace a growth mindset. A student's sense of achievement shouldn't rest solely on school grades. Teach children and parents that it's not all about attainment, it's ultimately about enjoying the process, overcoming challenges and embracing failure. Happy students will naturally develop **and improve their concentration, motivation and energy levels**. So by focusing on improving their wellbeing, students are more likely to be in a positive place to embrace learning and good results are likely to follow as a result.



Integrate wellbeing across all learning

Wellbeing impacts all learning, it isn't something that can be separated from maths, science, reading and other subjects:

- **Integrate wellbeing across all disciplines.** Research indicates that interventions yield most successful outcomes when they are integrated into daily practice and school culture.
- **Seek to engage all staff and reinforce skills outside of the classroom,** such as in hallways and playgrounds.
- **Develop a supportive school and classroom ethos** that builds warm relationships and a sense of connectedness with focus and purpose. Make sure that there is an acceptance of emotion and vulnerability along with a celebration of difference. Creating a school ethos that promotes wellbeing, resilience and positive skills has been shown to improve individual and school performance.



Actively engage the wider community

According to the results of a meta-analysis across 30 different interventions (Goldberg et al., 2019), the inclusion of a community component also impacts the effectiveness of whole-school interventions focused on social and emotional development.

Wellbeing is ultimately everyone's responsibility, including the students' themselves. We need to consider wellbeing in different contexts and understand that sometimes responsibility for promoting wellbeing lies outside the educational establishment. There is only so much a school can do to support a student's wellbeing if they live in an unsafe environment, for example.

Teach social and emotional skills

Finally, discrete teaching of social and emotional skills will help to give students the life skills that they need now and for the future. Ensure that you are explicitly teaching social and emotional skills, attitudes and values, using well trained, enthusiastic teachers with positive and interactive methods and resources.

Undertaking a school mapping exercise to highlight the different settings, staff and interventions where young people are learning about themselves and their coping strategies, will reveal in your school the wealth of opportunities that can positively impact your students. For example, you may be able to provide nurture rooms and Mind first aid (Stirling, S., & Emery, H., 2016).

Respond wisely to 'difficult' behaviour, both by responding actively with clear consequences and also understanding its deeper roots, taking opportunities to model and teach positive alternatives.

Provide more targeted and intense work on social and emotional skills development for pupils in difficulties, including one-to-one and group work. Where pupils continue to experience difficulties, provide clear plans and pathways for help and referral, using a coherent teamwork approach, including the involvement of outside agencies as required.

Involve everyone!

To best promote wellbeing in schools, consider an approach where you involve a mixture of voices from teaching staff, parents and students to truly resonate with the school community and get to the core of what it means to them. Recent research by Barry et al. (2017) underscores the importance of doing this within the development and design phase of school-based interventions and approaches.

Engage pupils and parents/carers as much as possible so that they are bought in and wellbeing can continue at home. Coordinate this with outside agencies where necessary, particularly for those in difficulties, whose families may feel blamed and stigmatised. Schools can be influential in shaping external services and negotiating agreements.

Research from Australia suggests that an emphasis on relationships may be key to successful efforts to support and promote student wellbeing, including teacher-student relationships and relationships inside and outside of school (Graham et al., 2017).

Learn from others

Finally, don't forget to contact other schools engaged in similar work. Collaborative practice within and between schools can be illuminating and provides extra support.



Focus on professional development

Most importantly, any initiative such as wellbeing, needs encouragement and support by senior managers and leaders to give it the best chance of success.



Some teachers may be concerned that they do not know how to address wellbeing. In fact, many teachers are already teaching for wellbeing, even if they are not conscious of it. For example, when you teach in a way to reduce student anxiety, promote self-esteem or enhance motivation – you are in effect already finding ways to teach for student wellbeing, but there is always more that can be done.

- **Raise staff awareness about the widespread nature of mental health problems** in children and young people, and the school's responsibility in helping to identify them and intervene early.
- **Support colleagues in helping pupils cope with predictable life changes and transitions**, based on a sound understanding of child and adolescent development.
- **Keep abreast of new challenges posed by information technology**, such as social media and cyber-bullying.
- **Develop and enhance leadership** relevant to mental health and wellbeing at various levels of the school.
- **Have wellbeing champions across the school** and make sure that they have a voice on the senior leadership team. Encourage them to identify and share best practice.

Ensure that appropriate training and resources are in place

There are plenty of resources and personal development training programmes available to support schools on how best to implement wellbeing, both from a whole-school perspective and from a teaching perspective. If staff can understand and identify signs and triggers of concern it will help to recognise the need for early intervention, which is key to preventing problems from escalating.

Ensure that sufficient time and resources are in place to support any implementation otherwise it just won't happen!

Supporting students' problems without the skills, time or credibility to do anything impacts staff emotional wellbeing.



Teacher wellbeing is important too!

Staff wellbeing is increasingly becoming a priority for schools and evidence is building to show that taking care of staff and offering them positive skills impacts not only the staff, but also the whole school climate and the students.

Teachers often put their work and students first, but it is very important for them to remember to take time out for themselves both in and out of the classroom. If they are in good health mentally and physically, they are better able to cope with the challenges of teaching and when they feel positive, they are more open to new ideas, creativity and change, making them more effective and innovative in the classroom.

Happy teachers make for happy students!

Put monitoring systems in place

It's important to note that there's no one way to measure wellbeing and, as was mentioned earlier, everyone defines it differently. Instead, schools need to think about which aspect of wellbeing is especially important for them to focus on and improve, and then find the right way to track and record progress over time.

Where to start?

A useful starting point is to **assess your current policies** and strategies to see how they could better support positive emotional wellbeing and build effective early interventions. Wellbeing initiatives need to be frequently monitored and evaluated against agreed criteria with evidence drawn from a range of sources including; pupils, parents and the wider community.

Make it easy to capture data

Consider which data will provide the most valuable insights to track the characteristics valued by your school. No single metric or figure will necessarily give you an answer, so you may need to collect data from a variety of resources such as engagement in class, tutor feedback or student survey results. Then think about how you can make it easy to collect that data and ensure that any reporting fits in with any current practices, so that it doesn't add unnecessary additional workload.

Use the data wisely

It isn't necessarily about what you measure and how you measure it, instead **it's about what you do with the data**. What will you change because of your findings? How will you improve the positive impact of the intervention methods you're trying? Will you

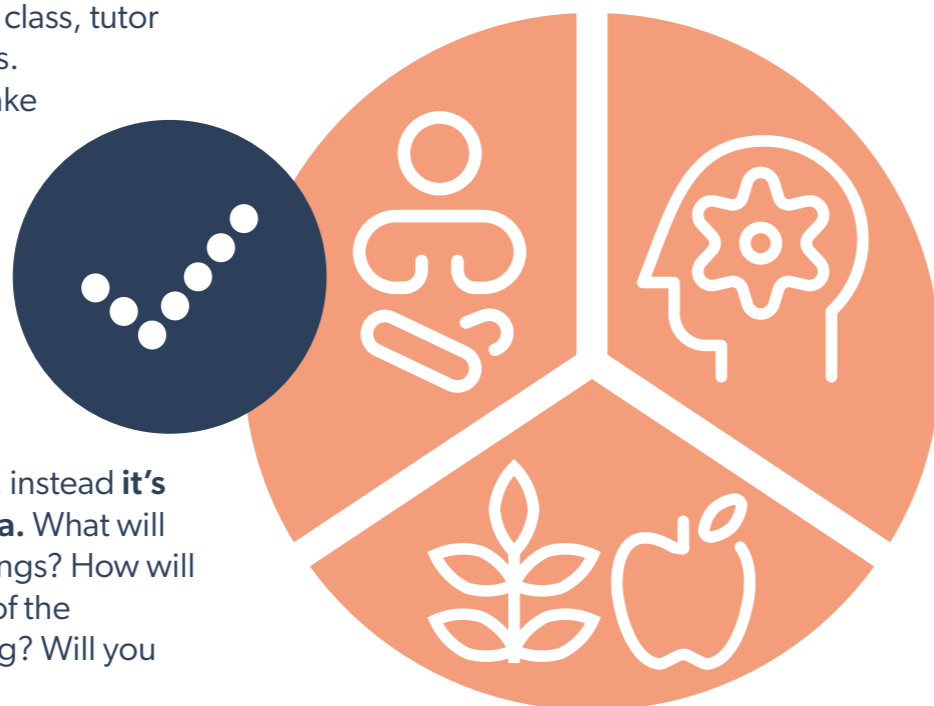
make curriculum changes? Importantly, ensure that the metrics and goals are shared with those involved (students, teachers, parents, focus groups, etc.), before collectively deciding on what to do next.

Measure over time

Conti and Heckman (2012), emphasise the **importance of evaluating wellbeing over time**. School leaders and teachers who wish to reflect on wellbeing approaches are encouraged to use robust data over long periods of time. This could be from the beginning to the end of a student's attendance at a school, or across different stages or phase transitions. These will be far more effective in measuring improvements in contrast to evaluations that only last one or two years.

Celebrate success!

Finally, and most importantly, ensure that you celebrate small steps and acknowledge and value achievements. It makes a huge difference and motivates everyone to do more!



Summary

We all know that wellbeing is important. As we have said, it can help students learn how to:

- build more positive relationships
- gain skills for managing their emotions and behaviour
- maintain a healthy body and mind
- develop and improve concentration, motivation and energy levels, which are all beneficial not only for personal wellbeing but also to their studies.

In order to ensure successful implementation of wellbeing strategies across the school, it is worth considering:

- tailoring them to specific school contexts
- taking an integrated, cross-level approach
- actively engaging the wider community
- focusing on professional development
- putting monitoring systems in place
- ensuring that sufficient time and resources are available.

And, importantly, it is far **more likely to work if supported by senior leaders**.

Find out more...

If you would like to find out more information around the impact study, go to:

<https://oxfordimpact.oup.com/home/wellbeing-impact-study/>

On this page you will find:

- the full impact study report
- a summary report
- an infographic showing the key findings
- a video of Dr Ariel Lindorff talking about the impact study and research findings.

Our Evidence analysis impact study noted that **there is evidence of a link between wellbeing and attainment and between whole-school approaches to wellbeing and attainment**, but that it did depend greatly on implementation.



Additional reading

Here are a few key recommendations of research papers for additional reading. The first three are available free of charge and the last two are payable.

- **A whole school framework for emotional well-being and mental health. Supporting resources for school leaders.** Provides a useful Framework for building your own whole-school wellbeing ethos and culture strategy and capacity within your school and with partners in other services. Stirling, S., & Emery, H. (2016).
- **Effectiveness of interventions adopting a whole-school approach to enhancing social and emotional development: a meta-analysis.** Goldberg, J. M., Sklad, M., Elfrink, T. R., Schreurs, K. M. G., Bohlmeijer, E. T., & Clarke, A. M. (2019).
- **Mental health interventions in schools in high-income countries.** Fazel, M., Hoagwood, K., Stephan, S., & Ford, T. (2014).
- **Promoting Children's and Young People's Mental Health in Schools.** In M. M. Barry, A. M. Clarke, I. Petersen, & R. Jenkins (Eds.).
- **Promoting social and emotional well-being in schools.** Health Education, Barry, M. M., Clarke, A. M., & Dowling, K. (2017).

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