

Healthy Minds – Schools’ Case Study Report

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“It’s different for each person because I enjoyed everything I learned. When I sit in one of those lessons, I really like ‘connect’ and I switch on a different part of my brain. I know it sounds weird but I don’t think about school, I think about life as a whole and you learn different things, but every single thing that you learn in each topic is very real, it’s personal.”
Student of Healthy Minds

1. Background and introduction

The Healthy Minds programme has trialled soft skills education in 32 secondary schools in the UK over a period of four years (2013 – 2018). The programme offers a unique curriculum that supports students to develop emotional resilience and self-efficacy alongside their academic development. Course content is designed to be to build learning across a wide range of personal, health and social domains and to be appropriate to age and stage of development.

The concept behind Healthy Minds was formed from knowledge of the evidence base surrounding resilience and soft skills development, by Richard Layard (LSE), John Coleman (LSE) and Dan Hale, who were funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Subsequently, Bounce Forward (formerly How to Thrive) developed a four year curriculum comprised of components such as the Penn Resilience Programme, mindfulness, navigating social media, sex and relationships etc. This was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) who, went on to fund the training of secondary school teachers by Bounce Forward in delivering the curriculum. An evaluation of the programme was undertaken by the London School of Economics (LSE) and schools were recruited to a randomised control trial to test for effectiveness.

The programme has tracked 11,000 students from 32 secondary schools over a period of four years. The trial focussed on five key outcomes: *global health, life satisfaction, physical, behaviour and emotional health*. Findings, published in 2018, show that the programme is effective. Pupils improved in global health by 10 percentiles (out of 100) with similar results for physical health. Life satisfaction and behaviour also showed significant effects. Whilst the outcomes for emotional health are positive they have not yet reached statistical significance. Results on academic achievement are being reported by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research in 2020.

This short case study was commissioned in order to provide qualitative data relating to the experience of teachers and pupils in schools undertaking the programme and to draw out other school related outcomes that have not been captured by the overall evaluation. The case study was undertaken by Dr Julie Harris at the Institute of Applied Social Studies at the University of Bedfordshire.

2. Methods

An ethical protocol for the study was produced and approved by the University of Bedfordshire Research Ethics Committee along with topic guides and information materials to support the work. All participants were fully informed about the study and issues such as consent, data protection, anonymity, confidentiality and safeguarding were clearly explained prior to participation.

The methods used were qualitative and included focus groups with students and face to face interviews with teachers. All participants were given an overall summary of the Healthy Minds programme content as an aide memoir and to trigger reflections and memories of their experiences of particular aspects of the course.

In the event, 7 senior staff and teachers, alongside 21 students from the two schools participated in the case study. Three focus groups were held with students: one with Y 8-9's and two with Year 10-11's. Each of the focus groups or interviews was recorded with the permission of participants and then the recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically using Nvivo software.

The comments that have been quoted below have not been individually labelled because of the difficulty in ascribing individual comments in a group situation, and also to protect anonymity given the small sample size.

3. Findings

3.1 The school context

Both participating schools had delivered 'Healthy Minds' in its entirety over the four years. One of them had, for the purposes of the trial, initially implemented it in one of four colleges within the academy and had since rolled out to the remaining three. The other had taken a whole school approach from the start.

The size of student population was an important feature of school context with one school having 400 students and 60 in each year group, whilst the other had more than doubled in size from 400 to 850 students since the programme had been introduced. This had some 150 pupils in each year group. The smaller school was able to deliver the programme to classes of about 30 pupils.

The full Healthy Minds teacher training programme comprises 19 days in total. Whilst training for schools participating in the trial was paid for, this still represented a significant investment of resource for schools and meant they had to make careful choices about which teachers should be put forward. For example, one of the schools trained up eight staff but then six of them subsequently left.

Staff also needed to have the right skill set and ability to develop good relationships with students:

"A school needs to be careful about who they put on this course; you need to have teachers that have got good relationships with the students and those foundations." Senior staff

However, achieving the right balance between skilled staff and those likely to remain with the school over the long term could be challenging:

“So maybe someone that was slightly in the early part of their career that were real aspirational, that had great relationships with those kids, just come out of university, two or three years, that were quite knowledgeable about issues in society, issues within drugs or relationships or sex ed. But then we found those people were also very ambitious and want to move on. So then we had a think about what type of teacher do we need and it is those people... that are going to stay but also have the good relationships with those kids.” Senior staff

Consistency in delivery of the programme was also seen to be important and having ‘staff that have dipped in and dipped out’ was not perceived as workable. The benefits to staff and in particular to senior leads were also recognised:

“It’s an advantage for them to be able to get to know their kids really well; that is definitely worth thinking about.” Senior staff

Schools emphasised the importance of having a fully trained champion for Healthy Minds that would promote and campaign for the programme’s successful implementation and delivery.

“I would say [name] has been the driving force, if [they] had left at any point in the last five years, I’m not sure we would be continuing it so there are other people who are passionate about it and caring about it, want it delivered etc. but [they’ve been there] right from the beginning, changing all aspects and is the lead on it.” Senior staff

Representing five days of the whole course, the Penn Resilience training was viewed as the bedrock of the Healthy Minds programme and in one school, five teachers had completed this, with a further three going on to train in other components of the programme. These could be chosen to reflect topics of particular interest or relevance to the school so, for example

“I sent four members of staff on the Mental Health Investigated course because we knew statistically, last year we had a lot of issues with attendance that was based upon mental health stresses, anxiety, depression so actually if we could get more of our students doing that six week course, it would have an impact on our attendance.” Senior staff

Both schools perceived the Healthy Minds teacher training course to be high level and good quality professional development for teachers and essential to the programme being delivered well:

“I was one of the first cohorts to go onto the teacher training programme for this, it was a really in-depth teaching and training programme that had been really thought about and I think that was probably key to this being successful and working.” Senior staff

Teachers also described the impact of the training on their daily practice with students but also on themselves as individuals and its application in everyday life (see also 3.4.2)

“They got us to think about us as people and then they brought the kids back into the room, it was really interesting to take forward and using things with like ABC¹, things that I use on a daily basis now with a lot of kids” Teacher

Findings in relation to the successful delivery of the programme are explored in 3.5 below

¹ A cognitive behavioural therapy approach on which the Penn Resilience programme is founded – see p.7

3.2 The Healthy Minds programme

In the focus groups students were asked if they could describe the Healthy Minds programme overall and sum up the difference they thought it had made to them. The older students described a clear progression through the programme as it supported them through the transition to secondary school and then on to consider and plan for life beyond school:

“But I think Year 7 and 8 are really school based, they’re more academically helpful. With Year 9, you’re learning how to conduct yourself outside of school and in Year 10, you’re obviously planning for the future, getting ready for when you’re not at school, things you need to know.” Student

Students also described different facets of the course and how it represented a break from the rest of the curriculum that was not subject to the same pressures as their academic work:

“...it’s not so taxing on their brains, it’s almost like a way of escaping because it’s a safe space, they can share things, they can learn stuff that isn’t going to be tested in the same way that all of their other subjects are, there’s no pressure so it’s almost like they can fully enjoy it rather than worrying about what the outcome’s going to be if they don’t get a question right.” Student

Teaching staff also recognised the value of being able to teach in a non-pressurised context where the focus is on individual development and expression and on providing a safe space in which that exploration can happen:

“I always say your subjects will get you qualifications and open doors, they’ll get you opportunities in life but none of them will save your life... But this stuff; I always say the only reason we’re here, there’s no exams, no pressure, I’m not going to talk to your parents about your grade, we just want you to be happy, healthy and successful and that’s what you learn. And there is no other subject that is geared purely towards them being happy, healthy and successful. A lot of them buy into that because they realise it’s a low pressure environment.” Teacher

However, this is not to say that the programme was viewed as a soft option. Instead, students often described it as supporting the development of a range of skills that they needed to learn as they negotiated the transition to adulthood. These were essential for everyone regardless of their academic achievement or ability.

“I think this course really helped with critical thinking and I think that’s something we all need, it’s really important and I think that course really did help with that.” Student

“I would say Healthy Minds teaches you the skills that you don’t get taught at school, so it teaches you for later on in life rather than English, Science, Maths, it’s more about how to be a person rather than be academic. It doesn’t really matter if you excel in your academic [subjects] or you don’t. It all matters - it’s more based on your personality because anyone could pick this up, anyone.” Student

3.3 Programme content, order and timing

Students and teachers reflected in some detail on the content of the programme by year and were asked to pick out key features that they felt were particularly successful or that could be improved. The next section outlines the findings in relation to these and points to areas where content, order or timing might be reviewed.

A resilient foundation

The first module of the course undertaken in Year 7 proved to be universally memorable and Penn Resilience and .Breathe were all seen as core elements of the overall programme. Students described particularly valuing the programme as they entered Year 7 as it helped to steady the transition between junior and senior school:

"..in Year 7, everyone's new and so having that kind of subject, everyone gets to talk to each other and that helps you settle into school much better, I felt it helped me settle in better."
Student

In particular the older students (Year 10 and 11) viewed the Penn Resilience training as foundational in building some essential skills that would be applied, practiced and developed over the whole four years:

"I think those are skills you should learn in Year 7 because it helps you focus, it's not just to keep you calm and in Year 7 I had absolutely no focus before I learned about all that stuff. I was talking in every single lesson" Student

"I think you can see it in everything though. When I said it was a foundation of everything... you need to use resilience with School to Life, Media Influence, everything, you need to use it and if we don't understand Penn Resilience, we're not going to understand the rest of the course. It's the thread that runs through it all." Student

Significantly, teachers were able to cite examples of hearing students applying the thinking amongst them, both in and away from the classroom:

"Some parts of the curriculum I think are really important, the fundamentals in the first few lessons, ABCs and dealing with issues in a structured way for students, genuinely do at that point of being reminded of those ABCs and so on, start to apply it at times. I've heard it in the corridors, they're mocking each other a little bit but nonetheless it's there in the background, so it is something they use and I think more than that, the time in lesson to reflect on something where they probably didn't use it, they've given that time and we asked them to think of real life situations, to think about internally." Teacher

There was discussion amongst both students and teachers about whether the timing of the Penn Resilience training was the most effective in the first year of the programme. For some, this felt a little early because the skills it provided were most applicable later when choosing options and dealing with exam pressures and stress. One teacher also agreed that students would gain most from it at a later stage:

“And there’s a real naivety about 11 year olds that you don’t get, you’re more self-conscious and self-aware at 14 and 15 and really. Penn Resilience is about self-awareness more than anything else and as I say, 11 year olds tend to have a bit more of a naivety about them mentally and psychologically than the older students.”

Teacher

However, in general, participants felt that the foundation was best laid earlier so that these techniques could be practiced and applied throughout the school career. Teachers, in particular described how they actively encouraged ABC² thinking and described situations where they witnessed students applying the technique for themselves. In this example a student reflected on a disagreement she’d had with a friend and sought to resolve it:

“..It was a Year 7 student who’d recently done the PRP lesson, looking at negotiation and how to deal with challenges, and she’d learned the ‘describe, explain, ask for a change and list the improvements’. This one [student] was having trouble with another [student], and it came to a head and she said, “But I only wanted to deal with the issue, I wanted to fix it, I wanted to work out what the problem was and solve it”.... I thought ‘she’s going to take that right throughout her school life: that actually ‘it’s okay to verbalise how I feel, it’s okay to ask for change, it’s okay to list improvements.’ That will come from that and I thought: ‘That’s actually going to serve you really well’...It’s examples like that where it informs my opinion of why I feel it sits there and it sits well at the beginning.” Teacher.

Whilst recognising the importance of an early foundation, some pupils also requested that it be refreshed or repeated at key points through the years:

“I think before exams, it would be a good one as well, just to refresh how to stay calm, control yourself, time management ...” Student

“It’s something that’s relevant to all parts of your life so it should be reintroduced as often as possible.” Student

Students also suggested that, whilst the academic pressures were too great throughout Year 11 to attend Healthy Minds consistently, there should be refresher classes both at the beginning and end of the year. These should focus particularly on Penn Resilience and .Breathe in order to remind students of the coping strategies available to them.

Not all students had used techniques learnt in .Breathe or felt that they were likely to, but others described how they had learned to ‘breathe through their hands’ - a technique that uses finger counting to manage stressful situations. Teachers also described using this with individuals to manage anxiety:

“Today I had a student who was really upset...she had a real big anxiety problem and we were using the Dot Breathe, finger breathing techniques to help calm her down outside the lesson and you saw the visible difference in her face, I’ve used it with other students and it’s really helped them calm down before tests and stuff.”

Teacher.

² Activating event, Belief, Consequence based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Albert Ellis)

Learning these techniques at a foundational stage supported students to manage stress in their lives more effectively, potentially ameliorating some of the cumulative pressures that might lead to mental health issues later in their academic career.

Setting goals and forward planning

Both teachers and students valued the structure and support that 'From School to Life' in Year 8 provided with helping students to set goals and achieve them. Students used these sessions to think about the short term – setting weekly goals around attendance or grades, or describing their aspirations for the term or year. Others had undertaken a more extensive mapping exercise where they had made a timeline of their life, enabling them to project and think about the goals they wanted to achieve over the long term and plot out how to get there:

"...so we started from birth and what we've achieved, where we are now and what we want to achieve. So for me it would be GCSEs, A Levels, degree, job etc. So I think it just puts into perspective your future because so many people at our age don't want to think about the future, they'll just live every day every day how it is."
Student.

"It does give us a huge advantage over other students as well because at that age. It wasn't a really strict one, but I had a 10 year plan for myself which was good because when it came to the next year when I was choosing options, I knew which ones fitted into that plan that I had. Other students would go into the meeting when they chose and be like, "I don't know, just pick whatever". Student.

One student said they would like the opportunity to pause and revisit that in Year 10. Teachers also described the value of this element of the programme and the importance of revisiting it given the dearth of careers advice currently featured within the school curriculum.

'Parents under Construction' in Year 10 provides students the opportunity to consider the implications, realities and the practicalities including the costs of parenthood. This was a popular topic with students who felt it gave them the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which they had been parented as well as being thoughtful about how they might aspire to parent themselves:

"I liked that topic because it was quite open, every parent's different, so your class can discuss quite a lot about what they think a good parent is and what they think a bad parent is, it's quite social, everyone's talking about it, I liked that topic." Student.

Whilst teachers also felt this was a helpful module there was some question as to the length of time dedicated to it (10 sessions) in contrast to other equally important topics. The timing of the topic was also debated given that, for the majority of students, these skills are unlikely to be required for many years:

"They engage with it and they like it, I think it makes them think about their own lives, it makes them think about their own parents, it makes them think a lot ... but again I wouldn't have it as high priority. We've talked about transition, we've talked about drugs, we've talked about road safety, financial management. Parents Under Construction is given priority over all of those things and I would argue that although

it's important, how much are they going to, what we can say about it is the vast majority of those children are not going to have children for 10, 15, 20 years after that lesson because they're 14/15?... If you learn some skills that you don't have to use for 10, 12/14 years, how effective is it learning those skills then?" Teacher.

However, students were not necessarily in agreement with this and felt that these were issues they would remember and reflect back upon at a more apposite time:

"But it might be that as you grow older, you might take that from your secondary school life and that's something you can carry with you, it might be something you might find uncomfortable talking about now but when you're older, you'll think back and think "it's really helpful, something that I didn't realise could help me then but can help me now." Student.

Navigating the present day

Media Influences builds on the earlier Media Navigator and students described how relatable these topics were and how they provided the means to recognise media and advertising techniques that distorted reality and to question representations and images that they might otherwise have taken at face value. Teachers also valued these opportunities to open up discussion about topics that would otherwise go un-debated and in countering unhelpful messaging about body image and helping to build individual self-esteem.

"Media Influences, that was a very good topic, everyone related to it, everyone understood it so it's not as though it's something that you learn once and you're not going to understand, it's just you learn it and it will be with you for the rest of your life." Student

"I like the whole programme from media influences, where it really gets them to analyse and pull apart what they're seeing on a day to day basis, where they're seeing it and actually thinking about what the hidden messages of media and how they're really easily sucked into that. We were able to give them some of the consequences of not taking a deeper look as to what you're viewing and how you're viewing it." Teacher

The sex education modules also span across two years (Years 8 and 9) and this is supplemented by Relationship Smarts which begins by exploring friendships, friendship groups and healthy relationships before moving on to consider how to exercise resilience in the face of unhealthy relationships:

"I think in Year 8 it's more friendship and then in Year 9, when you go onto it again, you go over what you learned and then you're introduced to the type of toxic relationships you can be in as well, like when you're being pressured into sexual stuff you don't want to do, toxic relationships, how they can impact on your school work in a negative way and when to cut it off." Student

These modules together with the Sex Education Sorted 1 and 2 cover sensitive issues and students described how the teacher's approach and delivery (see 3.5) was key to providing safe and comfortable space for open discussion and exploration. Where this was achieved both students and teachers agreed that the topics were met with maturity and reflection:

“The risks involved in terms of some of the scenarios they get is quite in-depth, quite heavy but actually they’re two mature groups that are able to have those discussions and actually asking questions about there’s things like rape in there, sexual assault, it’s been quite heavy stuff” Teacher

Teachers perceived these as a real opportunity to anticipate and pre-empt some of the issues that they knew young people were going to be facing down the line as well as flagging up specific risks and countering the normalisation of sexual images that young people experience online and through social media:

“I think as a Healthy Minds teacher, if you're not convinced that you're there to pre-warn those students, not after it's happened. I don't want to help them deal with a mistake as much as I want to tell them before they've got into that situation so sex education in Year 8, I think is like one of the most important ones because chances are they've not started to have sexual relationships and they've not started to find themselves in all sorts of trouble with mobile devices, so if we can at least air those issues that could happen in the next few years of their lives and really help them.” Teacher

Teachers developed strategies for managing conversations so that these topics could be explored without exposing students’ personal experiences whilst also providing opportunities for them to seek help or advice outside the classroom:

“Yes, I had a similar experience with the Relationship Smart, looking at what’s a healthy relationship versus an unhealthy relationship and actually, I had a student come back to me at the end of the day and say, “Miss, I don't think my friend’s in a healthy relationship right now, how can I help her?” and then the appropriate measures were put in place for that. I think some of them, especially as they get older, are aware of what it’s acceptable to say in a classroom and when it needs to be a private conversation.” Teacher

The Healthy Minds programme also develops input around alcohol and substance use from Year 8 to Year 10. Both teachers and students described engagement with these modules as really high. In particular the students found the alcohol unit really informative in understanding the effects of alcohol on wide-ranging aspects of health, social behaviour and impact on the economy.

“We did like the myths of drinking, it’s like if you drink a unit and then drink water, you’ll be fine, so they debunked that completely. I think because alcohol, it’s not seen as a drug because it’s legal but it’s like much more harmful than a lot of other things and it’s quite a big thing in the UK, because a lot of people struggle with alcohol, things like that and it just helps you understand and people’s personal experiences, people with alcoholics in the family, they sort of understood it more and why they would do it. I liked that one.” Student.

Students described how the course gave them more awareness of the realities of alcohol and more confidence in navigating scenarios where they might want to avoid excessive drinking whilst at the same time recognising that it was unrealistic to expect that that these

would cease to arise.

Teachers and students reflected on the content of the 'Unplugged' modules in Years 9 and 10 and the challenges in keeping up to date with current trends in substance misuse and how these were experienced in the school context. There was a consensus that, whilst much of the course material addressed illegal substances such as heroin and cocaine, these were less likely to be encountered these days by young people whilst there was a fast developing problem with other legal highs such as cough medicines, prescription drugs for ADHD, and nitrous oxide (laughing gas) balloons etc. Older students described how they struggled to keep up with developing trends amongst younger pupils. Several felt that whilst:

"Obviously, everything's changing, there's new stuff around everywhere, even peer pressure, it is increasing because people are becoming scared and with all threats and stuff like that." Student

"[They are] easier to get hold of. Don't you think it's getting younger though, the children that you ...? We came here, we were not thinking about that at all and now there's students younger than us, like I hear them talking about it and I'm like "oh my God" ..." Student

Both teachers and students felt this was a real challenge in terms of keeping the Healthy Minds content current, relevant and recognisable to students and one teacher also wanted the content to be more focussed on the issues that underlie substance misuse:

"I would argue that it's heavy on the sex and relationships and light on the drugs education and sadly, some of the drugs stuff does fall into the traditional "just say no" type thing. It's not that explicit but the sub-text of a lot of the drugs stuff... is "just avoid it" and for me, it doesn't actually address the causes why people take drugs, particularly as adolescents, the effect that can have on later life and the effect it has, forming habits and things like that." Teacher

Lastly, the module 'Mental Illness Investigated' in Year 10 made a keen impression on students and teachers were keen to discuss it also. Students clearly felt it was important to flush mental health issues out into the open, not only in order to reduce the stigma associated with them but to increase understanding and empathy amongst peers. Students also felt it was important in learning how to spot the signs early that someone wasn't coping:

"And recognise the situation because so many children are dealing with this [issue] on their own, and not getting help that they need. If you're taught how to recognise it, you can see that behaviour in your friend, you can advise them to get help, you can tell them they're not just crazy, they're actually going through something." Student

Timing was again an issue for debate with this module with some participants feeling that these issues should be highlighted earlier in the curriculum in order to help with strategies to manage mental health earlier and before issues really develop:

“Because actually there are anxieties, there are stresses which then they need to be resilient with, however do they need to be aware of self-harm and eating disorders at the age of 13 for them to think, “I might give that a go”. But actually when you leave it till Year 10/11, you're almost leaving it too late because those problems are already in place and then they're sometimes not able to deal with those.” Teacher

Whilst some students agreed it should be introduced earlier it needed to be done:

“..on simpler basis so they know, [so] they're aware of it but I don't think they could be shown the kind of graphic images that we were, like with bipolar, depression, cutting themselves, I think it would give them the wrong ideas.” Student

However there was also a perception that the other aspects of Healthy Minds helped to put in place a series of building blocks which cumulatively worked to pre-empt issues developing. Included in these were the modules like .Breathe which helped to develop mindfulness and strategies to manage stress. On the whole students felt the unit was appropriate and timely in being aimed at Year 10 specifically who were managing GCSEs throughout the year.

Some teachers noted signs of distress amongst a small number of pupils attending the unit and there was some debate as to whether it might exacerbate issues for some students. For this reason the module required careful thought and sensitive delivery. It was also important that follow up support was available and clearly signposted and the students indicated that this had been the case. Increased awareness meant that more issues came to light than the schools might otherwise have been aware of and this also raised awareness amongst the whole peer group (see also 3.5):

“The students summed it up earlier, they said that they felt that their relationships with one another were strong, they would support vulnerable students, they were very much quite conscious about other people. However they recognised that there were students in there that had some challenging mental health issues. And they also felt that that might not just be because of the Healthy Minds six week course that they did, however it's definitely made them a bit more aware of their own emotions and stuff.” Teacher

A couple of students also referred to their own experiences of mental health issues and described how the programme had supported them firstly to get the issues out into the open and then to seek help for them. Examples were also given where the programme had resulted in a student coming forward to talk about problems rather than acting on them through self-harming.

“Personally, after that I managed to get help for my issues because of that so I mean yeah, maybe it looks like an increase in the amount of people suffering from mental health but it's not because they're talking about it, they're talking about it because the conversation was opened up to them, they still had those issues, they just couldn't talk about it.” Student

“Years gone by, they would never have come in and gone, “I've cut myself, can you help me?”, I never would have had a student come in here, [a] not only able to

recognise that she felt unwell but also able to verbalise, in her words – and connect it to mental health – and then finally, actually recognise that it was acceptable and it's okay to ask for help. I thought that was massive.” Teacher

3.4 Outcomes

The following section provides examples and summarises some of the perceived impact of the Healthy Minds programme for both students and teachers as they had experienced it as individuals and for the school more generally.

Student outcomes

Several students described the impact of the Healthy Minds programme in helping them to connect and reach out to others; to open up topics and conversations with their peers that they might otherwise have found difficult and, as described above, this included being able to voice their anxieties and seek help. This was in part facilitated by the safe space that had been created within the classroom and a respect for keeping the content of discussion ‘within the classroom’. Many felt that the programme had contributed to class cohesiveness and their advice to younger pupils was to be open and not fear expression:

“And with this course, you're taught to openly discuss stuff and I think as well, when you've got a problem, we're all quite well spoken, we will say if there's a problem, we'll quite happily say that problem and if someone don't like it, we'll just be like “okay”, we're mature enough to move on”. Student

One student described the impact she felt the Healthy Minds programme had for her sister in developing friendships and the knock on effect that had on her behaviour:

“My sister is in a younger year group...she has quite bad behaviour problems but she still had the Healthy Minds course...I do think it has helped her in some senses, like talking her problems through. Before she came to this school, she couldn't make friends at all. , in all of her primary schools that she'd moved between, she couldn't make friends, she had a hard problem with it because of her behavioural difficulties. After coming to the school... I just notice that she's a lot, she finds it a lot easier to speak to people, before she couldn't communicate and so on.” Student.

Students clearly articulated how the programme had contributed to their ability to be aware of the emotional responses of others, to recognise feelings, to feel empathy with others and to avoid judgemental thinking:

“I think it makes you feel more aware of others, how to notice other people, so that's good because you might have a friend that's been a bit odd and you can just then pick up signs and then ask them if they need help, things like that. I think that's good.” Student

“Yeah, and it makes you like a little bit less judgemental, so you're thinking of how the other person might be feeling, what's going through their mind instead of all about you.” Student

Healthy Minds had helped students to develop critical thinking skills; how to work through situations logically and clearly without leaping to the worst case scenario. These thinking skills also supported their academic development because they increased concentration and the ability to absorb learning:

“But there are also skills you learn that benefit your academic life, like not catastrophising, how to keep yourself calm so that in learning environments, you can process what you're being taught better.” Student

Students described how the skills and strategies learned through Healthy Minds had contributed to increased confidence for them as individuals and increased self-efficacy. The ability to reflect on past situations and behaviour provided them ‘a wider perspective of how I can deal with things’ and meant they had to hand alternative options and approaches to use in future situations:

“Yeah, I think it's good to look back at things like that because when you get into situations, it's not like something you have to share with someone, you have it in your head for you to go back and say, “Actually, I can deal with this in a different way”, so different perceptions I think.” Student

Teacher outcomes

Students were not alone in articulating the impact that Health Minds had on them as individuals. Teachers also described a variety of outcomes for them in delivering the programme. Not all of these were school related and several made reference to incorporating the Penn Resilience principles and applying them in their own lives and increasing their reflexivity:

“Once you understand it and you believe it, there's a lot of applications, particularly in education but parenting and all kinds of different aspects of life it can be used, for yourself as well, why we do things, why we feel certain things.”

“Even myself, I use Penn Resilience in my own life with my own kids and my own wife, she'll say to me, “Stop Healthy Minding me!” ...not jumping to conclusions, not catastrophising, [using] negotiation skills...”

Skills development and providing pastoral support

Teachers talked about how their skills in providing pastoral support had improved as a result of delivering the programme and this went hand in hand with improved confidence in dealing with issues as they arose. This was especially valuable to less experienced teachers:

“I feel so, yeah, it's something that I think I'd respond to every kid who needs something rather than thinking, “You can go to [teacher name]”, you think “No, I can listen to what you've got to tell me, I know how to deal with it”. As a new teacher, it makes you a stronger one, I think.” Teacher

“I think it builds your judgement when you're dealing with any pastoral issue, the same things that come up in Healthy Minds would come up in a pastoral conversation if there was, for example, bullying going on, we'd have almost a pretext

to understanding that student and I don't mean that specific student either, you can apply it to other things...Should I in the future become any sort of pastoral position in the school, this would have stood me in really good stead I think." Teacher

Part of this confidence was due to their ability to analyse (often using the ABCs) why a student was behaving in a certain way so that they understood better how to intervene or could talk the student through their responses to a situation and staff gave several examples of this, using the approach on a daily basis.

Improved knowledge and understanding of students

One of the most tangible of these was improved knowledge and understanding of students' home lives and family make-up. For example, this had proved a benefit for one teacher taking over as head of a Year 8 class and finding that he already knew a great deal about some of the students and the important relationships in their lives from teaching Healthy Minds. He gave an example of one student whose father was in prison and because he already knew that from the 'Relationship Smarts' module the pupil was comfortable to talk about that.

Often teaching the Healthy Minds curriculum accelerated the process of finding out about a student and helped to build relationships faster than would be the case in other academic lessons because of the discussion based approach and the topics covered.

School outcomes

Relationships in school

Teachers described how teaching the class changed their relationships with students. One teacher was able to summarise that by comparing with other students who he had not taught the programme to:

"I definitely think it changes the relationship with students. Classes that I don't teach for Healthy Minds, I tend to have a more ... 'strict' isn't the right word to use, but there is that more old fashioned classroom style in place. Whereas with the groups I teach for Healthy Minds and then other subjects, actually we have a closer relationship. I feel like I know the students better because I'm aware of some of their issues or I've seen them in a more vulnerable [light],. They give their personal opinions away a little bit easier, if you have that, not 'friendship' but more of a friendly conversation... I have a better relationship and rapport with students who I have for Healthy Minds, than I do with some of the other groups." Teacher

Teaching the programme had enabled some to 'bring more of themselves' into the classroom i.e. to share their own experiences with students in a way that helped the students to engage and relate to them more strongly as individuals.

"[As a] Director of Learning...we're very busy and often a lot of our conversations we have with our students are negative so a lot of them, when I talk to my students, it's often because they've done something wrong, I try and speak to them about positive things but in a [Healthy Minds] lesson, it's a lot more of an even playing field in the sense that the people there, you're talking about something that's sensitive and a lot of them will relate to it, that's the thing." Teacher

“I think the other thing is you can bring a lot of yourself into it...if you're a maths teacher, you can talk about the times you've used maths in your life and how it's had a big impact but ultimately, that's difficult for the students to relate to. When you talk about some of this stuff and you talk about the relationship that you had when you were 14, or the relationship with your parent when you were 15 or the way that you made some bad decisions when you were 17, the students really relate to that: they see you in a different light, it builds the relationship.” Teacher

This, in turn, helps students to feel that the teachers are more approachable and they are more likely to disclose issues or problems that are bothering them.

“...not only do they see you as perhaps somebody who disciplines but they do also view you on that flipside of actually, “You are somebody I can come and talk to”. A couple of days ago, a young lady...came in and said that “I know you're somebody I can ask, I don't feel very well” and when we got to the bottom of it, it was mental health, so I then took that forward and was able to support her correctly. But I thought that in itself was like ‘Wow’, I thought that was quite powerful.” Teacher

One teacher described this as crossing the bridge or ‘crossing the divide during the lesson, by talking about the things they are experiencing’. This helped to reduce the distance in the teacher-student relationship and gave the student both the opportunity and permission to open up about their feelings:

“It's like saying, “I'm okay talking about it so if you are, you know that I am.” Teacher

As well as improved relationships between teaching staff and students, the latter also talked about having stronger friendship groups as a result of the programme. Being moved around into different discussion groups had encouraged them to form connections with others outside their immediate circle that they might not otherwise have connected with, and also to take in a wider range of views and opinions on topics. This helped to reduce making snap judgements, to develop tolerance and empathy towards other and to acknowledge different experiences or perspectives.

“We're very open with each other because we've discussed them sensitive topics, we can understand each other, we're not afraid to go and help out one another, just because we're not friends with them, doesn't mean we can't talk to them.” Student

Behaviour

Both staff and students felt that Healthy Minds did have an overall impact on behaviour in the school although that was difficult to quantify in any way, particularly for the school that had undergone significant growth in school population since the start of the programme:

“I would love to be able to say yes but this school's changed quite dramatically since we did it...What I'm trying to say is it's not a fair test to look back seven years and look at now, has the school changed over that time? Yes, it has but mainly due to the numbers and the different children we have here and that makes any test that you're asking about or any sort of judgement on that, very difficult to judge and give an honest, accurate answer.” Teacher

However, teachers at both schools talked about a sense of satisfaction in observing how ‘a lot of the skills we’re teaching in lessons, they are using in their everyday activities around the school.’ One of the older student focus groups compared their college with others in the same academy that had not introduced Healthy Minds until recently:

“We’ve all kind of kept the same friendship groups throughout the years and we’re all friends with each other. If you compare that to like [names of colleges], because only one quarter of the school did it, you compare it to them, they’re having relationship problems all the time, they have fights when there’s friendship conflicts and I don’t think any of their friendship groups have stayed the same, they’re always switching between people and there isn’t a huge, their whole college doesn’t get along like ours does....it’s quite unlikely that that’s not due to Healthy Minds, it’s too much of a coincidence ...because we weren’t selected because we were well behaved, we were randomly selected.” Student

Staff also felt this to be the case and their perception was that whilst the college had been experiencing more difficulties than the others at the beginning of the four year programme, the original cohort ‘are achieving more highly, their project grades are better.’ In addition:

“I think they are able to talk more fluently about their feelings, they communicate well, they are quite a cohesive group of children.” Teacher

However the school had also become more aware of mental health issues arising for a more significant group within that cohort, than in the other colleges. Whilst they didn’t attribute the cause of these to the programme they felt that ‘Healthy Minds’ had perhaps brought these to the surface because the students were more self-aware and this was important for schools to be mindful of:

“I’m not suggesting it’s given them mental health issues but they are more self-aware and so is this a contributing factor in us knowing, at the age of 15/16, that there are mental health issues and actually if we hadn’t have been doing Healthy Minds, would those issues not yet have come out and it maybe when they’re 25, they get a mental health issue? I don’t know, I’m not able to judge that, but there is a high number of mental health issues in that cohort.” Teacher

The students described how they were able to apply the techniques they had learned, not necessarily consciously but quite intuitively in regulating their behaviour and negotiating the ups and downs of school life more effectively:

“I think some of them might not be direct effects, people might not come up to their mates and say, “I’ll just use my assertiveness training today” but you do pick up on things and everyone here has remembered something from the course, from Year 7, so it’s clearly sticking with people.”

“I think it’s been helpful really with school life because the stuff we learn in Year 7 about being passive aggressive and that, helped us deal with like school situations and stuff like that.”

“We’re human and we’re children so we’re going to fall out, we just know how to work through the issues better, which is what we were taught in this course.”

3.5 What works?

Delivery

Both teaching staff and students underlined the importance of delivery to the success of the programme and talked about different aspects of this such as teacher style, methods, materials and resources.

Teacher qualities, skills and experience

In particular, senior staff were explicit about the engagement and teaching skills that were required to deliver the content well and keep students engaged. The teacher has to be someone the students relate to and want to listen to:

“...the quality lessons come from selecting the right staff to deliver these courses, you’ve got to have the right people, the right type of positive attitude, emotional intelligence, the relationships. Otherwise [with] some of the more difficult challenging aspects of the course, you don’t get those real quality intensive discussions that students then take away and reflect upon, so that is really key.”

Teacher

The students described what happened when a teacher delivered the content really effectively:

“It was like treating us as individuals as well instead of a whole group, you could connect with each one of us individually instead of just addressing us as a whole.”

Student

“Although they were serious topics, they were also like fun, the teacher made it fun to learn the tasks and that, how you went about it was really good.” Student

Consistency

Consistency of teaching staff could be a challenge. If a teacher was absent as you couldn’t expect a cover teacher to pick up on a mental health or sex education session and nor would that feel comfortable for the students. To become adept teachers needed to deliver the content repeatedly and feel confident and comfortable in using their own consistent language and vocabulary to do so, for example. Teachers learnt by the experience of dealing with different situations and scenarios as they arose. Schools felt for these reasons that a staff turnover in a school would be very detrimental for delivery:

“If you’re going to have people dipping in and out, they’ve got to be strong staff, you’ve got to be able to have those difficult conversations where teenagers will test you at times, and they will ask you questions that you really don’t want to hear and if you’ve got somebody who’s not confident enough to say, “That’s not appropriate for this space, don’t ask that”, so I think if you’re going to have a high turnover of staff, they’ve got to be strong staff and if you’re going to have a staff who are long term, then you develop those skills and you build up those resilience yourself and you end up with your own word bank, because they do test you, they do ask you questions that are definitely not appropriate but that’s teenagers.” Teacher

Role modelling

There was clearly an amount of role modelling involved in delivering the content well. Students felt the material was brought to life by teachers that were prepared to talk about themselves and their own experiences and create a 'level playing field' in order to open up discussion and put students at ease. This was particularly the case with sensitive subjects and one student described the impact of a teacher who was uncomfortable with the subject matter in sex education:

"It was really awkward and I remember us doing like contraception and doing one less and she moved on really quickly, because I don't think she was comfortable doing it." Student.

This clearly contrasted with more confident teachers who employed deliberate strategies in order to dispel initial feelings of awkwardness about the topic. So they would:

"... do this thing where they get all the silliness out first, so we were told to write every colloquial word we knew about female and male genitalia, to get it all out,... and then we were given the scientific term so when we were referring to it, we were learning scientifically, we weren't using colloquial terms, so they got the silliness out of us first so that we could focus on it." Student

Several teachers clearly accepted that opening up difficult conversations involved an element of role modelling and being prepared to put themselves on the line if they were expecting students to engage:

"We've got to teach them about consensual relationships and what sex really is and not shy away from any of the facts about it. You've almost got to be a role model in being as honest as you feel comfortable, not telling them your life story, I don't mean that, I just mean on that subject and trying to let them learn in an appropriate place because they will learn elsewhere." Teacher

Creating safe space

Students clearly preferred a focus on discussion, activities and group work rather than individual, written work. To generate good quality discussion class sizes preferably needed to be kept small. More than 30 students was thought to be too many, whilst the optimum was about 15 students in a class although it was acknowledged that this was difficult for some schools to achieve. This was also felt to be a key factor in creating safe space:

"I think class size has a big impact, the more people in the room, the harder it is to make everyone feel it's a safe space, what a safe space is not me telling them it's a safe space, it's them feeling like it is and they're two completely different things... if you've got 15, 16 kids, it's a lot easier logistically because you can often put them in a circle for example in the middle of a room, everyone's equal in that circle. If you've got a class of 30, suddenly that becomes a lot more difficult and the circle doesn't quite work because there's not enough space and then also because there's 30 of them, you've got less chance of them feeling safe because there's more of them and it's harder to manage the behaviour, it's harder to control the conversation." Teacher

It was helpful to have the flexibility to respond to the needs of different groups within the school by tailoring class size accordingly. One of the schools, for example, had delivered the

programme to a smaller group of very vulnerable students in need of a higher level of academic support. In this case the teacher was

“...very nurturing, very caring so when she’s delivering the Healthy Minds curriculum to them on resilience, she’s been able to really make them understand about improvement their self-confidence and their self-esteem, really make themselves feel that just because they’re academically not great, it doesn’t mean they’re not really good at being a friend, doesn’t mean they’re not going to end up with a really good job.” Teacher

Teachers needed to understand how best to pitch the content for different age groups and this could be particularly challenging in some modules where they were trying to combat the messages and images being promoted on line and through social media including inappropriate sexual images, for example:

“I think certainly pitching it at the right level can be quite difficult, very much what we deliver in Year 9, the students are 14 years old and I think 10 years ago, that would have been pitched at Year 11s and very much what is sex, why do people have sex, what is oral rape? It’s very heavy.” Teacher 1

“It is heavy but I think they are all aware of the misconceptions that are out there in the media about it, so it is important to deliver it at this age for them.” Teacher 2

Another important feature of creating safe space for discussion was setting some clear boundaries about the disclosure of personal information. Students clearly understood that the class room wasn’t an appropriate place for this to happen. Having said this, teachers also needed to provide opportunities for individuals to seek help or advice as individuals and so employed strategies such as a ‘problem box’ for students where they could anonymously post questions or queries for the teacher to address generally. This would also provide the opportunity to follow up after the class :

“I will often collect them in and as I’m walking, will look at them to know who’s then put them in, so if I do think there’s a safeguarding issue or something quite personal, I can pull them back at the end.” Teacher

Teachers’ advice to others delivering the Healthy Minds programme was to take time with the planning and not to rush it or feel like you have to ‘stick to the script’ religiously, rather to adapt materials according to your own delivery style and to the needs and the learning style of the student group:

“... be prepared to take out what you think is relevant, adapt it to the needs of your students because everybody is different, adapt it to your own teaching style and how your teachers are going to feel comfortable delivering those sessions and yes, have fun with it, that’s an important thing, don’t see it as another subject, another tickbox, actually they’re all going to achieve different things in it and that’s what’s good about it, is they take away from it what they need to take away from it.” Teacher

Engaging students successfully

Students provided examples where the teaching style clearly didn't work for them and they felt that the content was dealt with too systematically or in a way that patronised them, with the result that they didn't feel engaged:

"Slide shows, shit slide shows. They're the worst bit, I'd rather a teacher get up and talk to you and write stuff on that pen with the board, instead of going through a slide show and being, probably get rid of the slide show, it seems more personal if they just stand up and talk about it. When you're teaching a lesson, if you have to refer notes or if you have to refer to a board, you don't really know the topic very well but if it's just you standing in front of a class, then you know the topic much better and you seem like you know more." Student

"So it was just boring: "you should do this", "you should think about..." and it's like do you not already think about things before you do them? It just felt really patronising. It just felt stupid because you think about things before you do it and everyone thinks about stuff before they do it, I don't know why they had to teach you that." Student

Finally, students also described how their engagement wasn't just dependent on the skills or delivery of the individual teacher but also on the group and the level of maturity they brought to the discussion as well as the different levels of personal experience in the room.

Material and resources

It was important to engagement to ensure that the materials and resources were up to date so that the issues felt relevant to the students. This was clearly a challenge for the modules addressing substance, for example, where the context in terms of young people's drug taking was always changing and had moved from harder drugs towards legal highs, for example.

Some of the materials felt a little dated or less culturally relevant because they had been written for an international audience. Schools were also keen to ensure that they supplemented the content to reflect current issues that were affecting young people such as criminal exploitation and county lines, gangs and knife crime or, domestic violence and child sexual exploitation, for example. In this sense it was important to ensure that topics also responded to the local area and the context in which the school was operating. They might introduce extra sessions or bring in external experts to cover this content. One of the schools had developed an online platform through which to publish lesson plans for teachers and this made adapting or augmenting the materials easier although this could prove resource and time intensive.

4. Conclusions and key messages

4.1 Next steps for the schools

The schools were keen and committed to continuing the Healthy Minds programme after the research had ended and indeed, one of them having trialled the programme in only one of its colleges had subsequently expanded the programme to the whole school.

One of the schools felt that the impact of Healthy Minds was starting to filter out to parents and parents thinking of applying to the school. The school was keen to publicise it through open evenings, parent groups and letters home to families and were exploring ways of including it as part of the 'unique selling point' of the school.

They were keen to explore ways of demonstrating impact through undertaking surveys, attendance statistics and academic attainment, for example, but recognised this was challenging. This was an important issue in terms of future funding and accountability to Governors. For this reason they were keen to explore the potential for the programme to be accredited or kite marked so that they had more tangible ways of demonstrating the quality they felt that it brought to the school life and environment.

4.2 Key messages

1. Schools felt it was essential to have a fully trained senior lead for the Healthy Mind programme that would champion it, drive it and take responsibility for its implementation.
2. Staff to deliver it should be carefully chosen, both for their skills in relating to and engaging students, and for sustainability of the programme over the longer term.
3. The Penn Resilience course was seen as the bedrock and foundation of the Healthy Minds programme by both teachers and students.
4. With this in place other elements or modules could be more targeted in order to meet the specific needs of the school or local area.
5. The quality of the Healthy Minds training for teachers was perceived as very high and providing a high level of personal and professional development for staff.
6. The programme was viewed by students as providing them with skills for life and the building blocks to negotiate the transition to adulthood effectively, regardless of academic achievement or ability.
7. Students and staff believed there should be refreshers for Year 11s, particularly in Penn Resilience and .Breathe to remind them of the coping strategies available to them.
8. Teachers viewed the programme as a real opportunity to anticipate and pre-empt some of the issues and challenges young people would face in the transition to adulthood.
9. The programme offered students opportunities to voice anxieties or to bring issues affecting them out into the open and then seek help for them.
10. Students described the effect of the programme in enabling them to reach out and connect with others, to regulate their behaviour, to be more aware of others' behaviour and emotional responses, and to respond with empathy.
11. Students described how the skills and strategies they learned through the programme contributed to increased self-confidence and efficacy.
12. Teachers reported improved skills and confidence in providing pastoral support.
13. Teachers and students felt that relationships within school, both within peer and friendship groups, and between teachers and pupils, were improved as a result of Healthy Minds.
14. The success of the programme is strongly dependent on good delivery including teacher style and presentation, the creation of safe spaces and the ability to hold the interest of students and engage them in difficult conversations whilst maintaining clear boundaries.
15. In order to do so, teachers need to provide role models in exercising honest conversations and sharing life experience appropriately.

16. In order for the programme to be most effective, teachers advocate good planning, appropriate pace and timing, and ensuring that content and materials are current, up to date and reflective of local school and area issues, as appropriate.
17. Schools are keen and proud to promote their status as a 'Healthy Minds School' and would value some form of accreditation or quality mark that would demonstrate their commitment to and belief in the programme.