

**TALK** OPENLY, BE HEARD, CONNECT  
**BUILD** RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING  
**BE PART** OF A MORE CONNECTED SOCIETY



**THE TALK FOR HEALTH COMPANY LTD**

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## **Talk for Health in Schools Project Progress Report - November 2019**

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Talk for Health is a psycho-educational programme for wellbeing. It teaches ways of communicating that, when practiced, build community cohesion, improve wellbeing and prevent/relieve mental distress. It has been delivered in community settings, funded by the NHS, since 2014.

The programme rests on the evidence that there are communication practices that are good for our wellbeing. Whilst these are often dispensed by Psychologists, they don't have to be. Ordinary people can be just as effective. (Jacobson & Christensen, 1994).

The results of Talk for Health in the community have been analysed by a researcher based at Roehampton University, using a validated instrument for measuring wellbeing. Results from 600+ participants showed that Talk for Health has a positive and highly significant impact on participants' wellbeing.

In 2019, Talk for Health received funding from Islington Giving and Slaughter and May to carry out a year-long research and piloting project to adapt the programme for school settings.

Reaching young people at school is crucial since 75% of what is called mental illness has been established by the age of 24, and 50% by the age of 14<sup>1</sup>.

This project is being carried out in collaboration with **Bea Herbert of States of Mind**, a social enterprise working to co-create solutions for better mental health in schools.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-children-and-young-people>

## 1.2 Objective and Methodology

The objective of the project is to develop a version of Talk for Health that works to measurably raise wellbeing amongst students in Islington schools and beyond.

The project comprises

1. **Identify partner schools** willing to participate in the project (April -June 2019)
2. **A day-long co-creation workshop** with our partner schools (young people, teachers, other staff), to explore how to adapt Talk for Health to the school environment (June 2019)
3. **Draft processes and training materials; carry out initial pilots** in schools (June/July 2019)
4. **Refine processes and materials; carry out further** pilots (Autumn 2019)
5. **Develop final processes and materials** ready for rollout across schools (by end March 2020)

Phases 1, 2 and 3 are complete and phase 4 is being carried out. The following section describes the process to date.

### Co-Creation Workshop

Co-creation describes the process of developing innovations through a collaborative process between key stakeholders and experts. Co-creation allows the views, experiences and insights of stakeholders to inform the design of new approaches so that they are more effective, relevant and engaging for those who use them.

Young people are the key stakeholders within education and experiences of the education system offer valuable insight into aspects of their mental wellbeing which could be misunderstood or overlooked. The co-creation day sought to identify key issues affecting their wellbeing and to identify new opportunities and methods for resolving them using Talk for Health principles.

At the co-creation day in June 2019, the 70 attendees were:

### From Central Foundation Boys' School in Islington

- Assistant Headteacher
- 15 Students aged 16-17
- 15 Students aged 11-12

### From Archer Academy in Brent

- Deputy Headteacher
- 8 Students aged 13-14

### From Moreland and St Luke's Primary Schools in Islington

- Assistant Headteacher
- SENCo and Inclusion Manager
- 20 Students aged 10-11

### Facilitation Team

- **Nicky Forsythe** – Talk for Health Founder and Psychotherapist (MBACP Accred.)
- **Roy Langmaid** – Psychologist, Co-creation pioneer and Founder of Co-Creation company CSpace <https://cspace.com/>
- **Bea Herbert** – Founder of States of Mind <https://www.statesofmind.org/>
- **John-Paul Flintoff** – Financial Times Journalist and workshop facilitator
- **Wendy Jones** – Author and former Primary School Teacher
- **Rachel Ison** – support worker in CAMHS
- **Molly Carroll** – Talk for Health Facilitator and Peer Worker in the NHS
- **Gabriel Langmaid** – University Student

Through a series of interactive, small-group exercises, students shared their views and experiences on mental health and wellbeing at school. Facilitators recorded key themes and ideas that emerged from the following discussions and activities:

- 1) Good and bad moments in School
  - Exploring protective factors - and factors contributing to distress
- 2) Visualising Wellbeing in Schools
  - Solution-focused exercise to develop innovations
- 3) Turning Vision to Reality
  - Identifying methods and processes for implementing Talk for Health in schools

## 2. Executive Summary and Next Steps

The most important issues that students reported to affect their well-being were those that negatively affected relationships.

This is not surprising. Quality of relationships has been found to be the single biggest factor affecting well-being across the life course in a Harvard 75 year longitudinal study (Harvard Study of Adult Development <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/48WRX9>)

A report by leading academics for the Royal Society of Arts also found in 2015 that feelings of connectedness were the biggest factor correlating with well-being (<https://www.thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/publicservices-and-communities-folder/connected-communities-social-inclusion-andmental-wellbeing/>).

The specific issues students reported as negatively affecting their well-being included:

- Transitions to new schools and classes, where one loses old relationships and has to build new ones
- Disruptions to or breakups in relationships: arguments, being rejected, bullying
- Individuals valued according to academic achievement. Whilst academic attainment is a key purpose of school, students found that feeling valued (or not) *only* on the basis of academic strength disrupted their sense of belonging
- Hierarchical structure: whilst an inevitable part of school life, students reported that hierarchical divisions over-rode connectedness and left them with unpalatable feelings of powerlessness and 'not having a voice'

To address these issues, some of the key measures students wanted were:

- Training in relationship skills, including how to address conflict
- Spaces in school life where one is valued just for who one is. For example - whole days, assemblies, or intervals in the school day where everyone's voice is heard and equally valued, and students can influence the way school is run. They appreciated those spaces that already exist for this purpose.

In terms of how Talk for Health might help with these issues, when we explained the ideas and techniques of Talk for Health at the co-creation workshop - and gave students a chance to practice them - they were warmly welcomed. Core Talk for Health principles centre on everyone having an equal voice, and building and maintaining closer connections. Students could clearly see a value in these skills.

Following the co-creation day, we adapted the Talk for Health training to fit what we had learned about students' key concerns and ran two, 2 – 3 hour trainings - one at Central Foundation Boys' School amongst 15 and 17 year olds, and one at Archer Academy in Brent amongst 13 and 14 year olds.

The students were fast learners of Talk for Health techniques – seemingly faster than adults - perhaps because they have few entrenched beliefs about how people can or should relate.

Overall, then, this first part of the project has allowed us to:

- Gain a good understanding of the relevance of Talk for Health to students, and how to make the programme relevant to their concerns
- Discover how to teach Talk for Health skills in 2 – 3 hour school sessions
- Discover how to engage students' eagerness and capacity to learn these skills.

The next part of our project will be to find out how Talk for Health can move beyond a skills session to become woven throughout school life.

This part of the project will be carried out this term (Autumn 2019), as follows:

- We will run two further Talk for Health skills trainings with students, alongside two, two-hour co-creation sessions with both students and teachers. At the co-creation sessions we will explore how to apply Talk for Health skills in school life so that they fit within the wider school culture.

Following the activities described above, we will trial ways of integrating Talk for Health into school life. We will get feedback, and further refine these methods for re-trial next term (Spring 2020).

### 3. Extracts from Facilitator Summaries of the Co-creation Day

#### Wendy Jones – Author and former Primary School Teacher

*One boy talked about dread at going to school. He didn't seem to have an idea of how to get rid of that. But I think it was about the powerlessness. I thought they all felt very, very powerless over school and the structures and how school is run. They just have to deal with it. They had no sense that they could change the school. They just took it all and tried to cope. I felt school was quite a joyless experience for them and one in which they have to survive and accept. I felt they needed more power and self-determination. They were really at the mercy of how these adults with a lot of power over them behaved. They didn't even have a sense that the relationships could involve negotiation.*

#### John-Paul Flintoff – Financial Times Journalist and Facilitator at School of Life

*The moments that I found most telling were when the boys were not participating in the exercises but when they made asides and comments that gave away their feelings of not being heard or involved in decision making.*

*Highlights generally involved moments of being seen (e.g., winning the Headteacher's award) or celebrating with others (school football team won league, watching Marvel films with Mum). Interestingly, [one student's] highlight was leaving behind old schoolmates he disliked.*

*[Another student] was firmly of the belief - or resolutely pretended - that he had never had any highlights or bad things happen. When I described Marvel characters as his heroes, he said he didn't have any heroes really. I felt that he just absolutely didn't want to be coerced, or go along with anything for the sake of it, and found it helpful to be congratulated on knowing his mind.*

*Gradually, he opened up - especially when the conversation turned towards injustices involved in attending a school with rigid rules and hierarchy. It occurred to me that his prior lack of participation came from a deeply held, if unconscious, belief that his point of view was not going to be taken into account, so why bother.*

## **Bea Herbert – Founder, States of Mind**

*I noticed that my group were very confident in expressing their views and ideas throughout the day and I sense that this is because of their familiarity with working with me for several months in a non-hierarchical way. They have been given a space to share about their views and experiences of mental health at school and have had much more time to articulate their feelings about the issues that exist. Having a space to be heard, seen and supported seems to me to be the most crucial dynamic for young people to develop a positive sense of self within education.*

*One of the most significant and recurring themes that emerges from conversations with this group is that their distress is caused by an inability to make decisions regarding their difficult experiences at school and the lack of opportunities or spaces where they feel their voices and opinions are taken seriously by teachers. They are highly sensitive to power imbalances and the subsequent feelings of powerlessness and invisibility. To them, mental health is about been seen as individuals not as students and being treated with respect and appreciation by the adults around them. The key to improving mental health in education seems to lie in facilitating the relational context between students and teachers.*



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#### **4. Excerpts from School Outputs on the Co-creation day**

##### **Younger: 11 – 14 year olds**

<b>Things that negatively affect wellbeing</b>	<b>Things that positively affect wellbeing</b>	<b>Ideas for what could be better</b>
Rudeness, pressure, teasing, insults  Tripped over by someone and friends laughed  Tricked by a friend  Fights/bullying  Not being able to help someone  Feeling excluded/isolated/rejected; rifts and arguments. SATS	Kindness  Friends, loyalty; not being alone  People asking if you're OK  Making me laugh  Having someone's back  Cheering you on; playing with you; helping you sort out feeling sad	Kind & friendly teachers; safe  Everyone can speak their mind; respectful; equality; no pedestals; giant circle table so everyone sits together at lunch  Art classes – messy for emotions  The school that listens; feelings shouldn't be hidden; don't suffer in silence  Be yourself at school; feelings shouldn't be hidden  Feel as well as think at school; emotions room where you can relax  Come as you are  Given examples of how to be nice



**Older: 15 – 17 year olds**

<b>Things that negatively affect wellbeing</b>	<b>Things that positively affect wellbeing</b>	<b>Ideas for what could be better</b>
<p>Comparisons made by teachers based on performance</p> <p>Singling out high achievers</p> <p>Having to share results</p> <p>Teachers shouting when teaching; tone of voice makes us tired &amp; exhausted</p> <p>Power imbalance</p> <p>Isolation</p> <p>Exam stress</p> <p>Being blanked/ghosted</p> <p>Struggling to keep up with old friends</p> <p>Social tensions; hierarchy</p>	<p>When teachers praise &amp; encourage</p> <p>Being able to form relationships with teachers</p> <p>Long-lasting friendships</p> <p>Exams ending</p>	<p>Mutual respect; feel more in control e.g. vote on school issues</p> <p>Change the culture of comparison to recognising &amp; celebrating everyone's strengths</p> <p>Group sessions with art, drama, role-plays on how to e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stay physically and mentally healthy</li> <li>• support someone when they are upset</li> <li>• what to say when someone is crying / angry / sad, etc.</li> <li>• sort out arguments/get along better with friends</li> <li>• ask for help</li> <li>• tell someone how you feel</li> <li>• deal with bullies; calm down when stressed</li> <li>• have better family relationships</li> <li>• deal with failure</li> </ul>



## **Examples of students' visualisations for the future**

### **11 – 14 year olds**

Fun activities to get to know everyone and the teacher

Guidance from someone close in age: not just academic role

Teach confidence

Arguments are short-lived – with the help of teachers

Lots of people being friendly, saying hi, getting to know each other

After assembly some time for people to meet and get to know each other

People listen to each other, when it's their time to talk

Understanding each other, each other's opinion

No fights between friends; better community

One day students teach the teachers

A day of learning new things

Letterbox to post problems



## 11 – 14 year olds (contd)

### **Motto**

We have a say

### **What happens**

When the teachers come to get interviewed, 2 children and 2 adults interview them. They then teach a trial day where they teach 3 lessons: one to year 6, one to year 9, one to year 12. At the end of the day all the students vote on whether they like the teachers or not.

Students re-vote their teacher halfway through the term

Students can write an anonymous suggestion letter to a teacher

When you like the teacher you're more eager to learn!

Teachers would be happier knowing that the children like them and their lessons

Students would prefer to do what the teacher tells them to do

One day students teach the teachers

A day of learning new things



**15 – 17 year olds**

**Name of initiative**

Dab of Compassion

**Motto**

*"It's not cool to be cruel in school, ya fool."*

**What happens**

Bi-weekly citizenship workshops that have supplementary YouTube videos

What gets taught:

- Coping with stress and teaching how you can talk to one another about stress
- Communicative [sic] skills which would include teaching people how to talk to each other about emotional problems; what to say and what not to say
- How to notice when someone is alone then encouraging them to engage within your group or the community
- How to deal with personal relationships and things like: friends and lovers falling out; painful things like ghosting. How best to work things out or cope with the situation.
- Cooperation with teachers so you have the opportunity to talk to about what kind of classroom environment and teacher-student relationship you'd like, validity of different opinions; how to reduce stress during test times; how to discourage comparison



## 15 – 17 year olds (contd.)

### **Name of initiative**

An environment where no-one is left behind

### **What happens**

Creating some kind of inclusion program; perhaps better introduction and settlement sessions for new students

Education of teachers in how not to increase stress and how best to practice student equality

Teaching students how to try and help others who seem alone, and how to foster healthy emotions

Students learn about peer pressure more in-depth and the importance of not establishing a hierarchy that crashes others.

Being able to have your own personal space when needed

A place where you can speak your mind to others and feel safe doing so

A place where everyone is respected and everyone's ideas are valid

Being able to speak to each other instead of the current competitive atmosphere. A more relaxed atmosphere where students are able to help each other with work and tasks

Safer and more inclusive of all

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### **5. Key themes in more depth**

There appear to be 3 key problem areas that need to be addressed in order to improve student wellbeing. They all relate to the fact that schools are relational environments and the quality of this relational context is central to young people's sense of individual wellbeing.

#### **Disruptions in relationship**

A major theme when it came to 'what causes down moments at school' was related to events that interrupt the stability and continuity of supportive relationships whether because of:

- Disputes
- Moving to new classes/schools
- New class composition/teacher
- Feeling left out from friendships

Students reported that low mood is caused by experiences of ruptured relationships at school and the lack of opportunities and skills to resolve these problems.

The experience of rupture in relationships is a significant factor that contributes to the emergence and maintenance of psychological distress. Research suggests that the stress caused by ruptured relationships directly influences the brain's capacity to process and retain information. Therefore over time, relational issues that are unresolved could have significant consequences for students' academic achievement and engagement in learning. On the other hand, the skill to repair relationships in an interactive way is experienced as a soothing process that enables the relationship to continue on a supportive path. (Farber and Siegel, 2011)

Students reported that to improve emotional wellbeing at school, they wanted a greater sense of community and equality among students. This is consistent with research that highlights how the need to belong is a fundamental human need and that ostracisation, through judgements and social rejection, leave lasting psychological effects on individuals. (Baumeister et al.)

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Providing students with support and skills that enable them to resolve interpersonal challenges is likely to promote students' mental and emotional development, as well as improving their engagement in school settings.

### **Schools are hierarchical structures that can diminish the experience of individual autonomy and 'voice'**

The hierarchical structure of school – while useful for discipline – has some negative consequences on student's psychological health that need be recognised and mitigated against.

Students reported that being unable to develop relationships with teachers and feeling they had no choice or opportunity to contribute their views was contributing to low mood at school. Students reported that that they wanted to feel school was fairer and more equal: a key factor that impacted negatively on wellbeing was not feeling listened to or respected by teachers.

Hierarchy in education is experienced by students as being most influenced by age and academic performance. Negative consequences are noted the lower down in the academic hierarchy you go (and especially amongst boys). Students are sensitive and acutely aware of their position within these hierarchies and expressed how a lower 'position' contributes to a sense of loss of autonomy and control.

The self-reported experiences of students are consistent with a body of evidence that demonstrates how an individual's perceived social status is a major determinant of their mental health outcomes. Social rank theory posits that emotions and moods are significantly influenced by the perceptions of one's social status; that is, the degree to which one feels inferior to others. A common outcome of such perceptions is submissive behavior and emotional suppression. It has been shown that shame, social anxiety and depression are all related to these defensive submissive strategies when individuals find themselves placed in unwanted low status/rank positions (Gilbert. P, 2000).

These effects were further documented in the Whitehall Studies conducted by Sir Michael Marmot in the 1970's, which demonstrated that the physical health, mental health and even life spans of employees correlated with their position in the Civil Service hierarchy. Those higher up in the hierarchy were healthier and lived longer than those lower down. These effects were attributed to employees perceived lack of autonomy, control and choice in their working life, which caused stress and negative self-perceptions at work.



There needs to be a communication channel, developed within educational environments, to allow students' experiences to be explored and understood, so that the education system can create what Riane Eisler calls a 'Hierarchy of Actualisation', where parents, teachers and leaders use their power to empower rather than disempower, so that 'love, care, nurturance and creativity can flourish.' (Eisler and Fry, 2019)

To begin to improve the relational environment in education, it will be helpful for schools to further develop a culture where all teachers can empathise and attune with student's subjective experiences. Empathic attunement promotes the development of greater relational depth between individuals and as a consequence, improves the quality of relationships and mental health outcomes. Attunement permits understanding to occur between two people even after they are no longer in direct communication.

An environment where students feel able to express their emotional difficulties and explore personal experiences that are important to them will foster trust, relatedness and improved communication between students and teachers so that issues can be recognised, worked through and overcome.

### **Identity based on academic achievement**

Students report that they feel their identity at school is shaped more by academic ability than other traits or attributes. Students expressed a sense of competition and comparison with peers because of a seemingly intense focus on exam results. They wanted opportunities to build relationships with peers and teachers outside of the academic context.

Students reported that if they are achieving less than their peers, they feel a significant impact on self-esteem.

High achieving students also reported feelings of pressure to maintain their image, and experienced similar fears of failure and not meeting expectations of teachers and family.

Social comparisons have been shown to have a significant impact on young people's mental wellbeing as they contribute to negative self-evaluations, anxiety and low self-worth. In contrast, environments that promote mutual aid and reciprocity have been shown to improve mental health outcomes (Kessler et al, 1985).

Students suggested that to improve emotional wellbeing, there should be a more evident valuing of traits beyond academic ability.

## References

A full list of references will be supplied in the final report