

Staff wellbeing is key to school success

A research study into the links between staff wellbeing and school performance.

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In the first UK study of its kind, average levels of teacher wellbeing within schools has been found to be linked to pupil performance as assessed by SATs and value-added measures.

This report summarises the main findings of research undertaken by Birkbeck College in 2007, in partnership with Worklife Support.

Worklife Support was established in 1999 by the national charity Teacher Support Network. Since then, they have worked with approximately 140,000 staff in more than 2,600 schools across the UK, providing programmes (such as the Well-Being Programme) that aim to improve the wellbeing and effectiveness of all staff groups.

The Well-Being Programme takes an approach broadly equivalent to the HSE Management Standards for Work-Related Stress. It aims to help schools reach their potential by identifying and building on the organisational factors that support wellbeing.

It is widely assumed that employees' feelings at work - expressed through satisfaction, stress and attitudes towards their jobs - are related to employees' performance. While hard evidence for such links is weaker and less common than most people seem to believe, there is no doubt that there are relationships between how people feel and how they behave, and that these relationships are likely to have implications for performance.

Although most research has tended to focus on individual wellbeing and performance indicators, research conducted on a group or collective level (i.e. on the level of teams, work units and organisations) reveals stronger links between wellbeing and performance. In other words, work units that on average have higher levels of wellbeing tend to also have higher levels of work-unit performance.

This report summarises the main findings of a research project designed to explore the links between the wellbeing of school staff (as measured by ratings from the Worklife Support Well-Being Programme's survey of staff perceptions) and school performance (as measured by SATs and value-added measures).

Methodology

The wellbeing measures used in this research project were developed from Worklife Support's Organisational Self-Review Measure (OSRM), an online survey of staff perceptions that provides the starting point for the Well-Being Programme. The OSRM survey is open to all staff in participating schools (including teaching staff, managers and support staff).

Three dimensions of both positive and negative aspects of wellbeing were measured during the course of the research: feeling valued and cared for; feeling overloaded; and job stimulation and enjoyment. For each school, the average levels of these three aspects of wellbeing were calculated across two consecutive administrations of the OSRM survey.

Data was collected from 24,100 staff, in 246 primary schools and 182 secondary schools. For primary schools, OSRM data was available for 2003, 2004 and 2005 and for secondary schools, from 2001 to 2005 inclusive.

For primary schools, the performance data collected were Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), averaged across the three core subjects, and the school value-added measure. For secondary schools, the performance data collected were the percentage of pupils achieving level 5 or above at each Key Stage as well as the school value-added measure.

The data for primary and secondary schools were analysed separately. This analysis set out to explore relationships between school-level teacher wellbeing on the one hand and school-level pupil performance on the other.

Key findings

Initial analyses were conducted using the primary school data only, and thus more detail from these findings is provided here. Only the last of the key findings relates specifically to secondary schools.

1. When scores on the OSRM indices of wellbeing in primary schools are aggregated, and the average wellbeing of staff in each school is then examined in relation to the SATs results for that school, a statistically significant positive association between staff wellbeing and SATs results is apparent in 2004 (the year in which most primary-school OSRM data was collected). As an indication of the strength of this relationship, in 2004 the average wellbeing of teaching staff accounted for 8% of the variance in SATs results.

While the clear majority (92%) of the variation in SATs scores is explained by other factors, 8% of this variation is accounted for by teacher wellbeing. Though this may appear relatively small, it is statistically significant and may be practically important because teacher wellbeing may be more amenable to intervention and change than other factors known to strongly affect SATs scores (such as social class).

2. The increase in job stimulation and enjoyment between the two administrations of the OSRM has a small but statistically significant positive association with the measure of “value-added”.

This means that increases in the average levels of job stimulation and enjoyment reported by teachers were significantly and positively associated with the value-added measure of pupil performance. This finding suggests that where teachers within a school experience improvements in their feelings of stimulation and enjoyment, school performance may also improve.

3. After controlling for the effects of relevant variables (for example, percentage of pupils absent or with Special Educational Needs), there is still a significant relation between the indices of teacher wellbeing and SATs in 2004 and 2005, and also a significant relation with the “value-added” measure.

As many other factors will affect school performance, some of the analyses also

controlled for these factors when examining the links between teacher wellbeing and school performance. Even after controlling for these factors, there were still some relationships between average teacher wellbeing and school performance as measured by SATs and the value-added measure.

4. There is no evidence for a relationship between wellbeing and SATs results in support staff or teachers not involved in teaching.

It seems that it is only the average levels of classroom teacher wellbeing within a school that are related to school performance. While the wellbeing of support staff or teachers not involved in teaching is important in itself, it does not appear, from these analyses, to be related to school performance as measured by pupil SATs results. This finding is to be expected, as pupils interact most with classroom-based teaching staff.

5. There is no evidence that the relation between wellbeing and SATs results is stronger for some subject areas (English, for example) than it is for others.

In principle, it is possible that average levels of teacher wellbeing have stronger effects on SATs scores in some subject areas than others. The results of this study suggest that this is not the case. SATs scores in all subject areas were equally affected by average teacher-wellbeing scores.

6. For secondary schools, after controlling for the effects of relevant variables (for example, percentage of pupils absent or with Special Educational Needs), there is a significant and positive association between the wellbeing variables and the following measures of school performance: Key Stage 4 results - percentage achieving level 2 (5+ grades A to C) and the value-added measure based on progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4.

This finding demonstrates that secondary schools saw very similar results to those of primary schools: average levels of teacher wellbeing were found to be associated with a range of measures of pupil performance.

What does this mean?

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that there are links between how teachers within a school on average feel about their work and the performance of pupils in that school. These links were found even after controlling for other factors that are known to have an influence on pupil performance. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to demonstrate this relationship in a UK context.

As with all research, some caution needs to be exercised in interpreting these findings. Whilst they are consistent with the assertion that teacher wellbeing affects pupil performance, it should be noted that the direction of this effect can in principle be inverted: pupil performance may influence teacher wellbeing.

Owing to the nature of the data available, it was not always possible to establish clear causality between teacher wellbeing and pupil performance in the research conducted here. In addition, it may be the case that there were other factors, which it was not possible to take into account in this study, that might explain the associations found.

It is important to note that all of these results are based on the relationships between average teacher wellbeing within a given school and pupil performance in that school.

Conclusions and implications

The major implication of these findings is that if we want to improve school performance, we also need to start paying attention to teacher wellbeing. How teachers feel on an everyday basis is likely to affect their performance and so, in turn, the performance of the pupils they teach. This may happen in several ways. For example, happier, motivated teachers may make pupils feel happier, motivated and more confident. Happier teachers may also be able to concentrate better on the job of teaching, and experience more motivation to help pupils in need of special attention.

At the same time, because this study cannot clearly establish cause and effect, it may also be the case that improving school performance has positive impacts on teacher wellbeing.

What seems most likely that there is a two-way relationship between teacher wellbeing and pupil performance. Just as increases in teacher wellbeing can lead to improvements in the performance of pupils, so increases in pupil performance may lead to increased wellbeing in teachers. If so, both virtuous circles and downward spirals are possible. In the former, improvements in teacher wellbeing may lead to improved pupil performance, which in turn leads to improved teacher wellbeing, and so on. In the latter, a reduction in teacher wellbeing at a school might lead to poorer pupil results, leading to a further drop in teacher wellbeing, and so on.

Worklife Support would like to thank Professor Briner and Dr Dewberry for choosing the Well-Being Programme as a vehicle for this pioneering work.

Worklife Support is a sister organisation to Teacher Support Network. To date, their programmes have reached approximately 140,000 staff in more than 2,600 schools across more than 70 UK local authorities.

The full report is available online at www.worklifesupport.com. For further information about this research or about any of our programmes, please call Worklife Support on 0845 873 5680 or email info@worklifesupport.com. Specific questions about the research can be directed to Professor Briner at r.briner@bbk.ac.uk.