



Staff Wellbeing in Education

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ABSTRACT

Mental Health in Further Education. Something which all of us want to understand better, although on the surface is something that most within the sector are just trying to cover with a band aid. I came into Further Education wanting to help students, change their lives every day and give them potential and motivation to understand their own self-worth. What I found was students having more negative feelings towards college, their work and themselves because they see the stress their teachers are under. They see the daily struggles of marking, paperwork and scrutiny. They see us exhausting ourselves and ultimately believe it is down to them. When you realise the impact you are having on a young person, both positive and negative, you can't help but to continue to improve. I've spent the past year studying both my own, and my students' mental health in connection to Art Education & Art Therapy. My interest lies in actively trying to find mechanisms, techniques and ways for our students to understand their emotions and improve them every day. What I have found is that, of course, Art Education can help. It gives our young adolescents an outlet to consider how they feel, articulate that in some way and then move forward. I also found that our students are not the source. Yes, we can improve their Mental Health with Art Therapy & Art Education, yes we are beginning to find active solutions which could potentially have a positive impact, but that just isn't enough.

Keywords: Education, Potential, Art Therapy, Art Education, Stressed, Struggling

INTRODUCTION

Students still see staff stressed, tired and struggling. Students still see the change in that teachers, and the impact this has. Students potentially still feel that they are to blame for

some of this. So we still need to change that, specifically in the maze that is Further Education.

Further Education as a place, or as a collection of institutions, is continuously

transformative. Staff and students are able to adapt themselves into a huge circumference of situations, both positive and negative. FE is, in some ways, the forgotten generation. We have had no funding increases in the past 9 years, and on average, this has caused more than half of the institutions available for students to either have to merge or to close down. We have less money per student, with students who have higher needs, with more expensive equipment and with Universities expecting more from us to prepare our 16-18 year olds for the rest of their lives. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) reported in 2019 that "Between 2010/11 and 2018/19, real terms funding per student in school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, and Further Education (FE) colleges declined substantially, by 16%, from £5,900 to £4,960" with specifics in terms of sixth form funding declining by 26%. This shows just how big the impact has been across the last 9 years, and in our current societal climate, what a hug impact this will have on each individual student.

Staff have had to consider a huge dimension of things to be able to help support our students in their work, their lives and their abilities to mature and prepare for their futures. We have to teach our students through change and transformative learning, focusing on both instrumental and communicative learning (Transformative Learning Theory) to often make them realise their potential, while also taking on increasing workloads with minimal support. We plan, we prepare, we teach mark and then improve every day to ensure each adolescent passing through our system has the ability to have their lives changed. For myself, I teach a full timetable while managing three different BTEC courses. I lead on the

planning, prepping and marking across both Art & Design and Creative Digital Media while also ensuring each of my students is given one to one support. I have meetings with my principal, I check CV's and interview potential new support staff members and am currently building a new curriculum in preparation for the 2019-2020 year. All of this without a title, or the potential to show a new employer the skills and experience I have. Every member of staff in my institution struggles with their workload, often exhausting themselves as the term comes to an end, and I do not believe that this is isolated. Staff are burnt out across the sector, with 75% of teaching and education staff reporting huge stress levels and symptoms and are often left struggling.

There is an evident push, due to the stress staff are put under, to support wellbeing across the Further Education sector, with even Ofsted producing a report which outlines the need for improvement in this area. Essentially, we are now trying to fix what is already broken, almost like placing a band aid on a cut you could have prevented. Institutions have started to 'install' different things to potentially help staff release their anxieties, struggles and stress throughout the year. For myself, this has come in the form of one 'wellbeing day' a year, where we are able to go out and do as we please with a given budget from the college. We have given a member of staff a role of 'Wellbeing Coordinator', who, on top of his full teaching timetable, is now expected to organize, plan and run events for staff to help improve their mental health. We have discussions about potential improvements at the beginning of each year with our principal, to help us feel like we are listened to, and are part of the changes

in the college. The question that we are left asking is:

Is the situation that staff are being put in being considered? Or are we just trying to fix what is already broken?

The Society of Education and Training, a major foundation within FE, has recognized the need for change in the area, especially in terms of improving staff's mental health. This foundation, alongside the Education Support Partnership, have produced a study on the impact that mental health has really had on staff across the sector. This has not only looked into the generic feelings you may feel when being stressed, depressed or anxious but how specific changes in Education have impacted that. In this study, things such as work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounts for 44% of work-related illnesses, 72% of the staff who took part in the study described themselves as stressed and over half of staff across the sector reporting symptoms such as insomnia.

SET & ESP also discussed things such as why such a large number of staff leave the education sector, with the Independent reporting that "two in five teachers are planning to quite the professional within the next five years because of their unbearable workloads" (Busby, 2019) and over 70% of all staff reporting the volume of workload, the lack of feeling valued and unreasonable demands being the most common reasons. Simply put, and the most shocking outcome of this study, states, "In 2017, 3,750 teachers were 'signed off' work on long-term sick leave due to anxiety and mental illness caused by work. This equates to one in every 83 teachers."

Less than half (41%) of Education Professionals felt that their organisations supported staff who had mental health problems. How can institutions, senior leadership and teachers allow this to happen? We need to make changes, we need to find ways to support our staff, we need to active in the work and make positive, permanent improvements, which is why this study is so important.

To help inform my own practice, and to focus my research from the extensive work the Society of Education and Training has produced, I requested staff specifically in Further Education to complete a survey in regards to their own experiences of mental health in education, and the potential for Art Education & Art Therapy to help. I wanted to know what others believed and thought of, and how much this study could really impact change for the future. Given the success of using Art Therapy in my previous studies, I decided to focus purely on this for this work. I felt, as did others, that it allows both staff and students to focus more, feel more and improve their resilience more.

Every single person believed that Wellbeing & Mental Health needs to be considered more in education, with staff believing that 'If you're not healthy mentally, how can you possible learn things and use them in real life?' as well as, as I have already discussed that "Staff need to have good mental health to best support their students and have a good, positive wellbeing." (Staff Mental Health in Education, 2019). Staff genuinely believe that they are at the bottom of the chain in education, that we just accept that the stress and overwhelming nature of our work as 'part of the job' and we have it in our

power to make a difference, we are just not given the time to do exactly that.

93.1% of staff who took part in this believed that we needed more support in terms of coping mechanisms and techniques to help support their positive Mental Health, and would be open to using Art Therapy if it was to become available in Education.

Ultimately, staff want to help. They want to help their colleagues and their friends, they want to be able to support their students more every day. Mental Health is impacting everyone in different ways, with over 75% of staff stating that the stress of their job has had a huge impact on their mental health (ticking 8 or above on a scale), it is clear that we need to do something to help. It is obvious that genuine change, and support for staff needs to be implemented to be able to make substantial future impacts on our teachers, to support them to move positive Mental Health. This has shown so much more why this study is important, and why, if it works, this needs to be implemented in Further Education across the country. We cannot allow our staff to feel the way they do, we cannot allow them to continue in this way. If we can change staff Mental Health in a more positive way, then we can change Further Education for the better. We can give our students more.

This study was built to allow for staff from all different backgrounds, subjects and specialisms to take part in. My main focus was to allow staff to see that completing a simple task, which may only take 5 minutes can really help you focus on your positive emotions and allow yourself to build these over time. Initially, staff were asked to complete a questionnaire to look into the current state of their mental

health. Within this questionnaire, staff were asked to discuss and focus on specific emotions. This questionnaire was built and based off generic mental health questionnaires used within the medical industry – such as the ‘mood self-assessment’ tool through the NHS website, which explores a range of different questions and feelings to measure your likelihood of having a Mental Health Disorder. The questionnaire also included the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Health Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). This is a 14-item scale aimed to provide a fuller picture of the mental wellbeing of an individual. Using positive comments, the WEMWBS allows you to produce a score ranging from 14-70, with the higher the score having a higher indication of positive mental wellbeing.

Staff then moved into an observation period of 3 weeks, in which they would take part in a small Art Therapy style activity each evening throughout this time. These activities ranged from things such as colouring in designs, producing post cards and drawing in certain areas. Each activity aimed to focus on one specific emotion, or to simply allow for a staff member to take some time out of their day and notice their emotions. After these three weeks, students completed a second questionnaire, with the same questions, in which the results are a comparison of how their feelings have improved. Out of the 15 members of staff who were able to begin the study, 10 completed.

The WEMWBS is something which was used in conjunction with the Staff Wellbeing Index 2019. Within this, they were able to look at how many different people within the sector felt certain ways, and the findings show the majority of staff scoring 3 or above in most

elements. Comments such as 'I've been feeling relaxed', 'I've had energy to spare', and 'I've been feeling optimistic about the future' all show that the majority of the around 1400 people who took part scored 3 or below. The score of 3 and below is staff commenting either 'none of the time', 'rarely' or 'some of the time'. (Staff Wellbeing Index, 2019) Although this study did not take this a step further to be able to change people's scores through impactful change, it has been able to clearly show the use of this type of thing, hence why it was also adopted for this study.

Incredibly, every single member of staff who completed this study has reported a positive improvement in their mental health. Warwick Medical School state that an improvement of 3 points or above represents 'meaningful change' in an individual's mental wellbeing. (Warwick Medical School, revised 2019) The lowest change of a participant through this scale was 3, and the highest reported change was a total of 15. No participant lowered their score on an individual question, each at least stayed the same or improved.

In terms of the general Mental Health questions, all completed participants either stayed the same or improved in each aspect of this. The most consistent improvements across the board in this area, were staff reporting they had felt less negatively about themselves and their abilities. All but one member of staff were able to report that they felt as if their mental health impacted their ability to complete daily tasks had lessened, with most staff minimizing this by an average of 3 points.

The biggest individual case, with a WEMWBS improvement score of 11, has seen a huge

change and impact on their mental wellbeing. This particular participant was also receiving counselling alongside of this, and has genuinely seen a change in their personality. They has continued to work with Art Therapy techniques since finishing the study, and feel that each of the tasks ensured that they were able to take a genuine consideration into different emotions as well as become more actively aware of when time out is potentially needed.

Most participants were able to report themselves feeling more emotionally aware and educated, and understanding the importance of being able to switch off. Another participant reported that they actually began to look forward to completing their task every day, as it allowed them to 'switch off' from their work and move into a relaxing evening. There is also evidence of change within each booklet. Staff at first genuinely taking their time to produce something, being conscious of the outcome, to moving more into their ability to utilize this for a few minutes. It became more about the release of their emotions and potential negative mental health of the day, to staff genuinely just using this to be able to relax, consider their emotions and move forward with their day.

On the other side of this, some staff and participants who began the study were not able to complete. Although a few were due to external factors, other reported this study having a negative impact. Due to the lack of support when completing some of the tasks, participants felt this was causing more stress. Tasks such as 'design a postcard you will never send', 'draw your heart' and creating self-portraits has meant that participants were

potentially dealing with emotions and life events which carry negative impacts, often things which the individual has not fully dealt with, this did not allow them to support their emotions in a positive way. Rather, they felt it meant they were thinking of painful things, and did not have the support alongside this to deal with what they were feeling. These two staff members in particular stopped the study part of the way through, and chose not to continue with the booklet.

Overall, this has been a hugely positive study. I believe certainly things could be improved, but ultimately all staff who completed the study reported and showed genuine positive change in their mental wellbeing. I truly believe that Art Therapy could be used as a form of Mental Health support with both staff and students. Given the feedback, there is a definite need to consider implementing additional support alongside completing Art Therapy. The other consideration is that potentially the tasks may need to be changed. As the WEMWBS scale uses mainly positive comments to measure, it may be considered that positive drawing tasks are also used.

Further Education institutions could adopt resilience techniques like this easily. Giving staff short-term, or potentially long-term, booklets with a collection of Art Therapy tasks and techniques within for them to complete as and when they need of an evening could potentially see a huge improvement in staff wellbeing across the sector. 100% of staff that completed in this study reported positive change, some with hugely significant positive changes across all aspects of their mental health, shows that this really could make a huge change in Further Education.

We know that Art helps, and that Art matters. We fight for it every day. What we also need to realise is that we cannot create 'Wellbeing Coordinators' or minor changes in a huge institution and expect genuine change. Right now, all we are doing is covering the cut and hoping that it will heal itself. This study allows for us to grow and to heal, to show staff that they are thought about, that they are cared about and that we as a community have an interest in change. Change for them. This study shows that there are simple ways we can improve mental health, and that it doesn't take money or huge overhauls in policy. It takes one person to listen, and to offer a booklet of drawings and creative tasks exploring emotion to make positive change. To potentially make permanent change. Staff Wellbeing matters. Art matters. Use them together and see what a huge change we can achieve.

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