



“Oh ... that Mommy needs a bit of help as well”: why every school needs a health and wellbeing lead

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“Oh...that Mommy needs a bit of help as well”: Why every school needs a Health and Wellbeing Lead.

Funding:

This research was unfunded.

Ethics:

This research went through a strict ethical approval procedure (in line with British Educational Research Association Guidelines) carried out by the University of Chichester.

We also chose to implement our own, further parameters of care and sensitivity, which are explored in the article.

Abstract

Methodological Approach:

This case study took place in a primary school (children aged 4-11) in the South-West of England. Data was collected through activities with children, semi-structured interviews with senior staff and parents, and a 'learning walk'.

Purpose:

The research explored the impact that the relatively new role of the Health and Wellbeing Lead upon the health and wellbeing of children and their families at this school.

Findings:

Our data suggested that this role provided compassion, unconditional positive regard and respect for parents that is frequently absent from research into parent partnerships in education. The role presented as invaluable in tackling the many mental and physical, challenges that parents faced in rearing their children, and in providing their children with the best possible chance of success.

Limitations:

We did question to what extent the findings demonstrated the strength of this role per se, or whether the impact could simply be the result of a uniquely caring and passionate individual.

Practical Implications:

We concluded that this was a role needed in all schools that recognise the key role that parents play in their child's wellbeing, and the indirect impact that parent mental health can have upon their child's success.

Social Implications:

It is vital that this role is not used as an excuse by the government to further reduce the already denuded Social Services landscape within communities.

Originality:

This research presents a fresh perspective on the multiple pressures that parents face and how these can impact upon their child's education.

Why every school needs a Health and Wellbeing Lead.

3

Keywords:

Parents, mental health, poverty, holistic development, compassion, unconditional positive regard

Introduction

During 2018-19 two authors of this article carried out research into the role of Maintained Nursery Schools (MNSs) in low-income areas of England (*Authors Removed, 2020a*). The most prominent finding from this research was how these nurseries not only supported the holistic education of the child but were also attuned to the wider needs of the family; as the comment made by a nursery leader during that research, used in the title to this article, indicates. The MNS practitioners worked on the seemingly obvious premise that *'happy parents' equals 'happy children'*. They often referred to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) either implicitly or explicitly, sharing with us their understanding that if a child's basic needs were not being met, and if they were not feeling safe and secure, they would be in no position to learn. Consequently, they viewed it as an imperative that they work with parents to support the child. So why are we beginning this new piece of research by referring to our previous research? It is because the findings were the starting point for this research.

During the previous research, a different nursery leader shared her wish that they had a designated member of staff solely for the 'social' aspect of education, someone that they could 'send out' to families when they saw that *"the wheels [were] getting wobbly"* (*Authors Removed, 2020a, p. 56*): someone who could act as a bridge between the home and the setting. Fast forward three years and we encounter Katie (pseudonym) at a university conference on the South Coast of England. This straight-talking school practitioner led a small workshop where she spoke about developing professional friendships with hard-to-reach parents, and how she helped them to navigate the daily challenges of parenting in her setting's area of relative poverty. Katie explained how she listened to parents, and how she felt could understand their perspective because of her own challenges as a parent. She empathised, and she identified routes to provide support. Although she worked in the school, she was not a teacher. She had a family-support background and was called the Health and Wellbeing Lead (HWBL). Her role, as she described it, seemed to be just what those in our previous research had identified as lacking in their own educational settings.

This, therefore, is a case study of Katie's role as a HWBL and the impact that she has had upon the primary school in which she works, a setting nestled in a pocket of low income in a predominantly affluent coastal town. Although the context has changed from early years, where we originally recognised the need for this role, to primary (ages 4-11), the role, with a focus upon care, remains the same. Katie was gracious enough to allow us to spend time at the school with her, considering the aims and parameters of this role and how it is perceived by various stakeholders. In this article we predominantly focus upon the voices of the parents and families that we spoke with. When using the terms 'parents' or 'families' we do so in an encompassing sense, referring to those responsible for the care of the child, whether blood relatives or not.

The discussion that follows focuses on the many advantages of the HWBL role, but it also questions the sustainability of it, where one individual takes on the concerns of so many in a way that is both connected to more formal institutional structures, but is also somewhat apart. Katie's role is both within and between. Finally, it raises the question of whether the appreciation of the HWBL that we experienced in this school is down to the significance of the role itself, or whether it has more to do with the 'cult of personality' of Katie, as a singularly compassionate and caring individual who invests tirelessly in the families with whom she works.

Literature Review

Those who deal with families every day, like the nursery leaders in *Authors Removed* (2020a, p. 44) research, know that "it's hard to take children and families apart, it's about... working as a partnership". We argue, in this article and others, that a genuine parent partnership is not about instructing parents, but about meaningful dialogue and working shoulder-to-shoulder with them. In a UK society where "teachers are overstretched, mental health professionals are overstretched, therapists are overstretched, [and] the third sector is being cut" (Ambrose, *no page*), it is about practitioners recognising when "mommy needs a bit of help" (*Authors Removed*, 2020a, p. 52) and working out how practitioners and parents can move forward together, for the benefit of the child; always "holding the needs of the child in mind" (*Authors Removed*., 2020b,p. 82).

Why parents and families need to be recognised within education systems

In 1967 the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council) first brought the benefits of parents and educationalists working collaboratively together to the public's consciousness. Following this Vygotsky's theories of the parent as child's first educator, from 1978 on, became increasingly accepted as a conceptual framing. The key role that parents play in their child's educational development became taken as a given. In fact, during New Labour's time governing England at the turn of the century, parents assumed responsibility as the conduits of their child's success or failure in schools, with: "the involvement in learning activities at home ... closely associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years" (Siraj- Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 101). From the early 2000s onwards, the recognised benefits of parent partnerships for children, their families and teachers have been extensively researched and consistently written about (see, for example: Callanan et al., 2017; Desforges & Abouchaar 2003; Lynch & McDonough, 2018; Reynolds 2015). Contrary to the education experiences of those of us born in the sixties and seventies, parents are no longer kept firmly outside of the school gates, but, expected to be active players in their children's education.

Although much education policy states the need for productive relationships between parents and settings, how that relationship is approached varies significantly between settings (Alexander & Cottle, 2014). The interplay between the individual professional's experiences (Goodson, 2003), the objectives and priorities of the setting (Alexander & Cottle, 2014), and the lack of clarity provided by government policy in this area (*Authors Removed*, 2023) has resulted in a smorgasbord of views and approaches to parent partnership, where the parent dons many guises, from valued expert to feared adversary. The most persistent (and damaging) model of parents in education remains the deficit model, where it is presumed that the expert practitioner needs to repair the damage caused by the incompetency of the ignorant parent. This was a view that emerged during the nineteenth century when the Macmillan sisters attempted to educate the 'failing' parents of the UK (Alexander & Cottle, 2014), and even though our view of parents within the education system has, nominally at least, shifted from the parent as consumer to the parent as 'partner', a deficit perception of parenting persists. It is this model, Bullock et al. (2010) argue, that continues to blight educational policy in the UK, and, Alexander (2009)

contends, it is this view that continues to cause an impasse and prevent fruitful relationships between families and educators developing.

Despite the increased rhetoric of parental partnerships with schools, in some settings parents' involvement remains perfunctory, rather than collaboration in a shared endeavour. This compliance approach requires the less knowledgeable parent to comply with the requests of the more qualified educator, *if they want what is best for their child* (Authors Removed, 2023). Parents provide an 'extra shift' of education for the child, in the pursuance of the child's measurable success. They become complicit with educators in their acceptance of, and in the relentless quest to reach, technocratic markers of success (Haines Lyon, 2018).

In this education landscape the influence of the home environment upon the child's successful development is rarely acknowledged. The practice of MNSs withstanding, a truly "joined up" (Early Education, 2015 p. 11) approach to working with families is still rare in England, yet our own research has shown that the child and the family *cannot* be considered as separate entities where educational provision is concerned. Our pre-pandemic research demonstrated that the challenges faced by families, including homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, poor mental health were hugely impactful for the whole family, *and for the education experience of the child* (Authors Removed, 2020a). Negative impacts, particularly those related to mental health disorders, have now been further exacerbated by Covid-19 (House of Commons Library, 2021). In our previous research, one MNS leader told us: "[with] some of our kids, one of the first things I say is 'where did you sleep last night?' Most of our fundraising goes on feeding our kids" (Authors Removed, 2020b, p. 80-81), because as every practitioner knows, a child who is hungry, or tired, or worried, cannot learn. The child's home environment is inextricably linked with their ability to achieve in school.

The Concept of the 'good parent' in education

Although the term 'parent partnership' conjures ideas of engagement and "shared responsibility for a child's learning experience" (Cyr et al., 2022, p. 25), in actuality this tends to remain as just that, a soundbite, "a term offering more palatable language for educators to use when addressing parents and their role at school without a substantive shift in the role parents play" (ibid, p. 29). The concept of

parent partnership remains school-centred, driven solely by the school's priorities, and this, Campbell-Barr et al. (2012, p. 866) argue, actually fosters further exclusion of parents rather than engagement. The responsibility of parents for their child's success or failure has steadily increased whilst their individual agency in creating a purposeful life for their child has steadily decreased (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2011). A clear example of this was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, where those parents who chose to prioritise the emotional health of their child, rather than academic development, those who chose a walk in the park rather than another worksheet, were stigmatised for their children falling behind on their prescribed indicators of achievement (Sellgren, 2020).

In 2019, *Authors Removed*, discussed how the image of 'the good parent' that tends to be favoured by schools in the UK is one of passivity and compliance. The good parent is docile, obediently following instructions given by the school. Cyr et al. (2022, p. 11) explain how, when research questions parent involvement, it is most often from a school's perspective, questioning "why parents may not participate in ways schools expect or desire"; it rarely challenges the approaches that schools take, and the potential mismatch in values and priorities between parent and school. Parents who question or challenge school procedure are quickly labelled uninformed and "a problem" (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). This is not to blame individual teachers for such behaviours, as they function under the intense pressures and accountabilities created by macro-policies which define schooling cultural norms. Furthermore, the training that teachers receive often leaves them ill-prepared for this incredibly complex, social interactive, aspect of their child-parent-school role (Broomhead, 2013; *Authors Removed*, 2021).

Developing Healthy Partnerships

Despite the rather negative picture painted above, examples of positive practice within parent partnership are found in research literature. *Authors Removed* (2020a and b) and Bertram and Pascal (2019), during their explorations of MNSs, found that nursery settings displayed a deep commitment to developing mutually beneficial and supportive relationships with the parents of the children in their educative care. Constructions of such partnerships were not undertaken by way of a response to government policy or a directive, but based upon their belief in the "trust, reciprocity mutuality and

shared goals” described by Rouse and O’Brien (2017, p. 51). The values that underpinned the approach taken by the practitioners in *Authors Removed* (ibid) research were that if practitioners could support parents to fulfil the nurture aspect, then the practitioners would be able to be able to move their child on in their educational endeavour. In line with Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Need, they prioritised supporting parents to put the basic requirements of the child (for food, sleep, a safe home environment and so on) in place, so that the child could feel secure enough to learn. Similarly, when *Authors Removed* (2021) researched the relationships between parents and practitioners in Specialist Schools, there were no unrealistic expectations placed upon parents. Instead, the teachers in this context acknowledged how challenging it could be raising a child with complex needs, and that they and the parents should work constructively and supportively together if they were to obtain best outcomes for the child. As one of the teachers in that research reminded us, “It’s not about us! It’s about this little person, and that life” (ibid, p. 477).

Other than the texts mentioned above it remains difficult to find examples of genuine parent partnerships in schools in the UK. Yes, we see educated, middle-class parents sitting on governing boards, listening to children read and running the parent-teacher association, but what we do not see is the ‘muck and bullets’ partnerships of day-to-day human encounters. Partnerships where school and parent work side-by-side through life’s challenges, through grief, divorce, addiction, poverty and depression. Partnerships where, despite a parent’s defensiveness, anger or frustration, an educator is able to see past such things, and “be kind to them” (*Authors Removed*, 2021, p. 479). We rarely see the type of partnerships that “identify *problems* rather than *problem people*” and that “turn challenges into positive action” (*Authors Removed*, 2023, p. 28). This rich, multifaceted, and, crucially, ‘hands-on’ caring was the type of partnership that emerged from the data that we collected relating to the HWBL.

Research Methodology

This research is a case study, inasmuch as “is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied” (Stake, 1994, p. 236); although person, or role, is a more appropriate term than ‘object’ here. Our approach to data collection started with this in mind, and because “the world is composed of intersubjective social facts” (Struett, 2017, p. 80) we took a constructivist approach,

assuming, “there are areas of social reality which... statistics cannot measure” (Silverman, 2001, p.32). Our interest was in understanding the experience of phenomena of the HWBL role “from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221). In our research this related to the staff, parents and children at the school, and our aim was to become more aware of their “rich and contextually situated understandings” (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019, p.227). To this end we first selected *who* it was important that we hear from, and then the best ways of us listening to them.

Although, ideally, we would have heard the views of all who came into contact with the HWBL, we needed to take a pragmatic approach and function within the limitations of both our own, and our research subjects’, limited time. Therefore, over two days at the school we:

- Carried out a group activity/ discussion with six children who had worked with the HWBL
- Spoke with six parents who had been supported by the HWBL
- Spoke with the three staff who made up the Senior Management Team (SMT) at the school
- Spoke with the HWBL herself
- Were taken on a ‘learning tour’ of the school.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, carried out in an area of quite extreme deprivation, (and where the role of the HWBL is to work primarily with parents and children recognised as vulnerable), we were particularly mindful that we stepped softly and with great sensitivity. As well as seeking institutional ethical approval and stringently following recognised ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018) we were also led by Katie’s knowledge of the families that she worked with, in terms of which parents and children we might safely speak to (without it causing them discomfort or upset), and the best ways that this might be done. Although this may have made our sample more selective, we make no apology for this; our priority was the wellbeing of our participants. We recognised that our research would have consequences for all involved (Costley et al., 2010) and, in line with Bloor’s advice (2010), we wanted to ensure that the impact of our research process, from start to finish, was a positive one for all who played a part in it.

Katie read through and discussed our participant information sheets with parents before they decided whether they were willing to take part. They were encouraged to bring a friend with them to their interviews, to make the situation less intimidating for them, and they took place in Katie's office, which was a familiar space. Although one might cynically suggest that those parents most likely to provide positive response were hand-picked by the HWBL, on the contrary, following the interviews Katie shared that she had *deliberately* approached parents where she was more dubious of positive feedback, as she believed that this would be more beneficial to her own professional development.

The interviews, with the Head Teacher, Deputy Head Teacher and SENCo, who make up the SMT, and with the HWBL herself, took place in their own offices at a time to suit them. Prior to all interviews we gained consent for the discussions to be audio recorded. We were led by the guidance of the HWBL in how we spoke to the group of six children (aged 8-11), and were assured that they would be happy and confident enough to talk to us without another, more familiar, adult present. We used an activity whereby the children drew a picture of the HWBL to promote conversation about how they interacted with her. Although we had gained parental consent for the children to take part in this activity, we also sought the children's assent, throughout. All data were anonymised upon transcription.

In the first stage of data analysis the data were considered as a whole, by each researcher. This provided opportunity for a psychoanalytical sensibility (Frosh & Baraister, 2008), allowing the researchers' different situated experiences and knowledges to constructively infuse their readings and interpretations of the texts. The research team then came together to share and further explore the understandings that they had reached. This shared dialogue led to the identification of emerging themes. Once key themes were agreed these were processed using a data reduction grid (*Authors Removed*, 2014), enabling us to collate determining evidence. Finally, this evidence was re-assimilated into a logical argument (Wellington, 2015) that could tell a powerful story.

In the findings that follow we present the elements of Katie's role that are *different* to the support that parents and families receive from teaching staff at the school. We explore the *added value* of these elements that significantly influence, and are integral to, the educational successes of the

children. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and the voices of respondents are clearly identified through being presented in italics.

Findings

Through our discussions with the staff and parents at this school, we discovered that some of the challenges parents faced included: grief, extreme poverty, domestic/ relationship difficulties (including abuse), lack of sleep and the resulting exhaustion, serious medical issues (both child and adult), court cases and parent imprisonment, mental health issues, fear of social services, anxiety over bureaucracy and form filling, coping with challenging behaviour from their child/ren, isolation, SEN (particularly the waiting time for assessment), child bullying, child body dysmorphia, the fear of their children encountering online predators, and the disruption and the lack of stability caused by COVID-19. It is worth noting here that *all* the parent participants, as we brought our interviews with them to a close, thanked us for providing them the opportunity to talk about the support that they had received from the HWBL. They described how Katie was there for them, to listen to them and to empathise with them, and to offer support in whatever way she, and the school, was able. The conversation with the two parents below provides a glimpse of the sentiments and tonality of many of the interviews we conducted during our time at the school. Please note that ‘social’ refers to ‘Social Services’, the government body that oversees the welfare of children and families. Its use here infers a ‘policing’ role, whereby a concern has been raised that the parent is not caring for the child adequately.

Amy: ...I honestly think I would have social involved if it wasn't for Katie.

Sarah: I definitely would have social involved...

Amy: Not because I'm a bad parent, but just because...

Researcher: It's too much?

Amy: Yeah! Children are hard!

The parents that we spoke with, all of whom were struggling with high levels of stress and anxiety, found solace in Katie's understanding. Among the numerous challenges faced by the families that we spoke to directly, or that we heard about indirectly from our range of interview participants, mental health issues (both child and adult) and poverty dominated. Far too much emerged from the rich

data to do it justice in a single article, so we will discuss poverty and the specific support *for the child* in alternative publications. Here, we maintain a focus upon the key role of the HWBL in supporting parents' themselves. But before doing that, it useful to consider how Katie viewed her own role within the school. She said this:

Well, it's a privilege, really, to be allowed into people's lives and homes... I think we are really lucky that our parents are open and honest. Enough to be able to kind of say 'I'm not okay' because really, we all want the same outcome. We all want what's best for the kids. For the kids to be happy and fed and all the rest of it. So, we are really lucky and privileged that people are honest with us, to enable us to do that together. Because that's really hard for people.

Katie was an ally and an advocate for the families that she worked with. She demonstrated fierce loyalty towards the parents that she worked with; parents that, in a different context, would be labelled as failing, hard to reach, or disengaged. She made very clear that: *"they are all good parents they all love their children, and they all want the best for their children. It's just that their lives are really tricky and chaotic ... and that's not even necessarily their fault"*. Katie described the parents in unwaveringly positive terms and detailed how at this school the parents' *"best may not look like someone else's best, but they're trying and that's really important to recognise"*. Unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1956) towards the parents that she worked with underpinned all our interactions with Katie and all of the data that we collected.

Parents Battling Mental Health Issues

Our visit to the school was at the start of the working week, and a number of comments were made about how fraught Mondays in school tended to be. The Head Teacher explained why:

I would say that's the biggest issue we face with our kids. If they are having a bad day, I pretty much guarantee that their parent is having a poor mental health episode-guaranteed. And we always struggle with Mondays ...Monday mornings are hard. Because for some of the kids they've just had a bonkers weekend. It's just been unstructured, or they haven't known whether they are coming or going, or...if mum's had a poor mental health

weekend then that's been tough. So, then they come in and just, kind of can't manage it themselves, really.

The Deputy Head Teacher referred to mental health as a “*huge issue*” and, likewise, Katie called mental health issues a “*massive*” part of the problems that the staff dealt with at the school on a daily basis. She highlighted the paucity and inadequacy of mental health services which regard parents as doing ‘okay’ as long as they do not seem to be presenting a safeguarding issue for their children. However, the poor mental health of those ‘okay’ parents meant that they often struggled to get out of bed and take the children to school. Katie highlighted that, “*there's nothing in between*”. Insufficient local resources mean that the challenges that parents face have to reach crisis point before any support can be put in place.

Our evidence suggests that staff at this school were acutely aware of the relationship between the parents’ mental health and the wellbeing of the child in their charge, and parents intimated that they appreciated the staff’s understanding of this. One of the parents, Sarah, highlighted that Katie provided a regular and known “*safe space*” for them, where there was “*no judgement*”. Another, Amy, said that the staff at the school: “*understand that children feed off the parents, and if the parents aren't OK, the children aren't OK*”. Amy referred to dealing with the many demands of parenting as ‘fighting’ and explained how there were times that she “*sort of gave up*”. It is a key finding that at such moments the school did not offer criticism, but rather encouragement. She gave a practical example of the unconditional positive regard she received from the teachers at the school:

I can just walk into school and be like right Mr Smith, or Katie, they haven't got this, they've got this wrong or I've got this wrong, they're wearing the wrong clothes, but they're here. And they'll give me a round of applause and be like 'yay go you!'.

That the HWBL not only saw, but understood, their personal battles, was a source of comfort to the parents, as Amy explained: “*Katie will always be there for me, because she knows that I'm a bit of a... anxious mess. She'll be there*”. Another parent, Tina, referred to Katie’s intervention as “*a case of keeping the parents’ sanity going*”. Sharon shared how, as a parent, she felt that the needs of her children constantly changed over time, resulting in a helpless feeling of “*What the hell do I do now?*” As a result,

there were times that she had turned to Katie saying, *“I don’t know what to do, I can’t do anything more as a Mum”*, knowing that Katie would be there for her.

Tina drew attention to the value of the simple human contact that Katie provided as HWBL, explaining *“Sometimes you just don’t want to feel that you are alone”*. Likewise, Sarah shared how much she appreciated *“seeing [Katie’s] friendly face every morning”*. She added that when she became anxious and began to doubt her parenting capabilities, Katie reassured her that *“We’re with you”*. Katie acted as an emotional anchor for the parents when they began to feel circumstances unravelling.

Someone to Rely On

Katie was seen as a constant in the lives of the interviewed parents, someone that they could turn to with *“Any problem, anything...for the most stupidest things”* (Amy). She was viewed as *“a massive support network”* for both parent and child and *“always either at the end of the phone or an e-mail”* (Sarah). Amy explained how the support that she experienced from Katie also impacted upon her child’s feeling of security, saying: *“they feel safe, they feel real safe around Katie ...because the children know that not only does she support them, but Katie supports us as parents as well”*. Amy added how Katie had *“been there through everything. Literally, everything, there's too much to go into what she's done for us and how she's been there”*.

The parents indicated that they felt secure that Katie would *“listen to any trouble”* and they would *“not be turned away”* (Sharon). For Amy it was important that Katie would *“make you feel like you weren't a burden, you're not a bad mother and, actually, everybody help needs help sometimes”*. Likewise, Sharon shared that *“there’s a lot of mums that are really struggling”*. Tina explained how trust was key to the relationship, *“Because if you don’t trust someone, you’re not going to feel comfortable enough in opening up”*. Whether it was helping someone to come to terms with psychologically recognising and challenging domestic abuse, replacing a broken cooker or filling in a form, Katie gave a clear message to parents that her role in the school was to help *“take that pressure off”* them (Sarah). Amy described her as *“a problem solver. For us she's a problem solver. If you've got a problem, she solves it”*. Likewise, the Deputy Head teacher referred to the value of Katie’s rich contextual local knowledge, that she was *“that person in a community that knows everyone, and*

everyone knows her". This amplified her HWBL role as about making appropriate and meaningful connections between people, organisations and experts, connections that had the potential to change family lives for the better.

Reassurance and Validation

The data indicated that a key aspect of Katie's role was that she would validate what parents were feeling. For example, Louise shared how fearful she was when her child first started nursery, and that Katie assured her that it was normal for her to have the anxiety that she was feeling. Katie helped put things into perspective, offering reassurance and validation. Amy explained how sometimes she would feel like she was "*getting everything wrong*" as a parent, and that talking to Katie would make her feel "*100% better*". She told us how Katie would remind her that "*the kids aren't starving, the kids aren't dirty, the kids aren't going about... you're doing alright Amy, you're doing alright, Amy*".

Katie clarified why she believed it was so vital to encourage parents rather than criticise them:

we empower parents rather than judge them, and kind of recognise what's going really well for them, to kind of help them not see themselves as crap parents. Because if they see themselves as crap parents, and someone's making them feel like that (even if in a really non-threatening 'Oh you haven't done little Johnny's reading') then that just says to them 'Oh I'm a crap parent'. And when they feel like that things don't get better, they get worse...

Early Intervention

The Head Teacher explained the importance of having a HWBL role like Katie's onsite and "*available*" to deal with situations as they occurred, so that problems did not escalate. This, he explained, was far better than them waiting "*god knows how long*" for Family Support (from Social Services). Katie's expert knowledge of avenues of support meant that parents could be fast-tracked towards the most suitable experts and organisations speedily. He stressed that these were often found in the third (charities) sector, because "*there's no services left anymore that are publicly funded, unfortunately. It's all gone*". Likewise, Katie referred to that fact that:

Children and Family Centres have become Family Hubs and they don't offer any of the services that they used to... so I think it's probably schools are picking up a lot of the work that was previously Surestart... all these services are gone and I mean they'll ...often say 'tell them to make an appointment and come and talk about their problems with this person' ... this strange person ... this strange place, and our families just don't feel comfortable to do that.

The Head Teacher added that through the constancy of the HWBL role combined with the “safe space” that the school offered, the need for assistance from Social Services, in its own state of crisis due to ruthless funding cuts over recent years, was often averted. He summarised “*we have the highest pupil premium [state money awarded to support those children coping with the most extreme deprivation] in the area, but we have the lowest number of family support workers. We don't need them*”.

The Viability of this Role

Katie was referred to by parents as a “bridge” (Amy) between home and school or a “middle ground” (Tina). Sandra described Katie as a “substitute parent” for her children whilst they were in school adding “*it's nice to know that there is someone on their side*”. But apart from the support offered within school there were also recounts of Katie providing support to families during the pandemic periods of ‘lockdown’ and during the school holidays. Additionally, the Head Teacher shared how Katie had even become a source of advice for staff, adding that this was “*really good for staff wellbeing, not necessarily for Katie's wellbeing*”. Parents described how Katie “*always goes above and beyond if she can*” (Louise) and carries “*so much on her shoulders*” (Sarah). One particular parent, Sandra, showed genuine concern for Katie's wellbeing as she reflected on the fact that Katie probably supported other staff at the school just as much as she supported the children. This led her to pose the rhetorical question: “*Who does she [Katie] get to talk to?*”. The Head Teacher explained that he and Katie spoke regularly “*to kind of offload and unpack it, really, otherwise she'll just get too full up*”. With insight, the Deputy Head commented that “*we do see glimpses where she is struggling at times*”.

Katie was also referred to as the “*glue*” and “*foundation*” of the school by Amy, and Sarah described her as the school’s “*beating heart*”. Katie was considered “*amazing*” on numerous occasions and referred to as a “*one-woman machine*” by Amy. Louise described how “*Katie’s just got a calming aura about herself... she just takes everything under her wing and if she sees someone struggling, she’s just like- ‘yeah, come on I’ve got ya’*”. Tina described Katie in almost spiritual terms, explaining that she “*does have a way of just, opening your eyes to something. But not in a scary way, just enough for you to take that deep breath and think, ‘oh, right, okay. Now I can go on to this path.’*”. Tina concluded “*all schools should have a Katie, or someone like Katie...there’s probably not many of Katie. They can’t have Katie. They can get their own Katie*”.

Discussion

What clearly emerges from the data presented here is that the ‘parent partnership’ developed by this school, is one based upon genuine care for the children *and* their families and positive collaboration. Parents’ struggles were recognised in order to provide support, not to criticise or to judge. It is crucial that schools acknowledges that parenting is ‘hard’- and that it is something that *everyone* needs help with sometimes. This is a perspective that is frequently absent from research into parent partnership, which tends to have increased parent compliance with the school’s priorities as the ultimate goal (*Authors Removed, 2023*). Rather than criticise parents for areas that they struggled with, the study school looked for solutions to the problems. For those children that arrived at school tired after a poor night’s sleep, the school was involved in research to better understand how they could support parents in this area. For those parents that struggled to get their children into school on time, the children were offered free breakfast. For those children failing to complete their homework, they offered the opportunity for them to complete it after school with the HWBL’s support. In Katie’s words, they were “*taking some of those barriers away ... working with the [parents] to make sure their kids get the best that they can*”.

Mental health issues such as anxiety, a lack of confidence, and depression were peppered throughout the data. But that the respondents felt comfortable discussing these things with us speaks volumes about the culture of honesty and acceptance that had been created at this school. Katie, through

her insight, empathy and compassion had created a judgement-free environment where these matters could be aired and tackled. There was openness and there was trust. The parents were adamant that they could come to Katie with anything, at any time and be met with unconditional positive regard. This expression, coined by the psychologist Carl Rogers (1956) when discussing the necessary conditions to provide the possibility for positive change in an individual, is not a term that we have seen discussed by any existing literature exploring parent partnership. Yet it is only logical that if positive change is to come about then a positive approach should be taken.

It would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the high esteem with which Katie was held by those parents with whom she worked. In just one interview she was referred to as ‘amazing’ no less than 24 times. Therefore, we cannot avoid the question of whether the enormous gratitude demonstrated throughout our interviews with these parents is down to the appropriateness of the HWBL role itself, or whether it is down to the enormous capacity for care demonstrated by Katie, the individual. Katie was always eager to reiterate that she was just one player in a whole team, where “*everybody kind of notices those little things and pieces it together*” and that it was about working “*collectively as a team*”. However, Katie’s eagerness to minimise her dedication to her role, for example, when she stressed “*I’m not a martyr, you know, I don’t think anybody should work in the holiday time. But I think sometimes, a five- minute email to check in... can prevent a much bigger piece of work you know?*”; her choice of parents for us to talk with and her surprise that they were unanimously positive in their comments, does no more than add modesty to her list of hugely likeable attributes.

It is undeniable that Katie’s character is central to her success in the role of HWBL. Through her own wisdom, but more so through her exceptional social skills, she portrays principles of both charismatic (Conger, 1989) and servant leadership (Adamson, 2009). She is inspirational, bringing about genuine, tangible change for the better through her care of, and respect toward, others. Katie’s values and methods provide valuable lessons for all of us that work with children and their families. However, regardless of the data perhaps indicating a ‘cult of personality’, it still demonstrates that this is a role that is desperately needed. The voices of our respondents clearly tell us that the HWBL role acts as a bridge between home and school, enabling parents to be more open about issues at home that

are impacting upon their child. The HBWL provides elements of *care for a parent*, that are outside of the remit of a class teacher. The HWBL role sees the holistic child and recognises that their wellbeing is intrinsically linked with the wellbeing of their family. This role recognises that the child's home environment will greatly impact the development of the child, throughout their school experience and beyond. And for all of these reasons, this key role is, unequivocally, needed in all schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The demands of this role go beyond the compassion and resilience that the Deputy Head Teacher of this school identified as being key to the HWBL role, and there are significant time and resource implications. Whilst it is of enormous credit to the school, and to Katie, that she is willing to take time out of her evenings and school holidays to support parents, one person cannot substitute the denuded and minimal range of 'support services' that exists beyond the school walls. One person cannot solve where our UK Government has fallen short since the introduction of 'austerity measures' in 2011/12 (Lewis & West, 2013). The demands are too much and too many for any one person, or even any one school: instead, drastic change is needed for our "communities in crisis" (Ambrose, 2022, no page). Yes, the role of HWBL is needed in all schools, but it is important to acknowledge, that this role is required as part of a suite of responsibilities that are supported by wider society, by local authorities. And this need does not only apply to lower income areas.

We argue that a HWBL is needed in all schools, within an embedded culture of care and education, regardless of the affluence of the catchment area of the school. Mental health issues are not the preserve of those living in poverty. The World Health Organisation (2022, no page) described the need for action to better support mental health as "indisputable and urgent". Education settings need to acknowledge the fragile mental health of so many children and families, and create cultures where mental health, and other debilitating challenges, can be discussed openly and without shame, as factors of a child's holistic development within their familial context. Data retrieved from House of Commons Library (2021) indicates that during the pandemic the number of adults suffering from severe depression doubled (from 10% to 21%) and still remained at 17% in 2021. The implications of this for the children that we work with are clear.

It is crucial to acknowledge that a child's general health and wellbeing impacts upon educational performance, that *we cannot seek academic results without first seeing the whole child*. However, the single role, of a HWBL, should not be taking up the slack caused by diminishing family support services, diminishing financial services, diminishing SEND services and diminishing mental health services. In 2019 (p.4) the Care Quality Commission warned that "Increased demand, combined with challenges around workforce and access, risk creating a perfect storm". It would seem that we are now in the eye of that storm. Our government cannot take community-based support services away and then seek praise for introducing a HWBL, the equivalent of a "sticking plaster on the gaping wound" of social inequalities (Ambrose, 2022, no page). Yes, as the parents and teachers that we spoke with made clear, every school needs 'a Katie', but that must be as part of a wider tapestry of enhanced community-wide support services, manned by appropriately qualified and remunerated staff, not as a tokenistic cure-all for struggling communities.

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