Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Improving Adolescent Emotional Health in Schools: A qualitative study of student and staff views in England

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 22 March 2009

**Reviewer:** Saoirse Nic Gabhainn

**Reviewer’s report:**

Although this manuscript aims to address an important and relevant issue for adolescent health; the flaws in the manuscript are substantial and would require considerable work to render the manuscript publishable.

**Major Compulsory Revisions** (see comments 1-52 below)

I suggest that the authors revisit the literature in this area and more explicitly determine how these data can contribute to the current debates. The authors must provide more detail on how and why participants were recruited and exactly how the data were collected. More detail and justification of the analytic techniques must be provided.

**Minor Essential Revisions**

Correction to the manuscript, references and tables as listed below

**Discretionary Revisions**

I would recommend omitting all reference to the survey and removing the direct quotes in favour of more analysis – rather than description of the quotes.

1. I think the authors have made a mistake in drawing together both the survey and the interview/focus group data. It does not appear that the survey data are published elsewhere – at least no reference to another publication is made – and the detail provided here is too scant to make a judgement on its usefulness – beyond, that is, a very low response rate. I can see that it would be useful to refer to it if the sampling for the qualitative study truly depended on the quantitative information provided. Although the authors say that the schools included in the qualitative study were purposively sampled from those who responded to the survey – is it not clear how this was done (i.e., on what basis), and indeed table 1 shows that they have not achieved the geographical spread they aimed at.

2. The alternative purpose of the survey data was to identify schools with high/low levels of emotional health provision. However there is not sufficient detail in how these labels were applied to be useful – how did schools determine how much ‘teaching’ they did in these areas, and whether these reports were valid remains unclear. Comparing the high/low designation with the chosen quotes from students does not help; examples of poor practice from supposedly ‘high’ schools are common and this also calls into question the labelling process.
3. In the methods section of the abstract some of the language appears superfluous – for example describing focus groups as qualitative and semi-structured.

4. Also in the abstract there is the first indication of a problem with the manuscript that pervades throughout – there is a real and problematic lack of clarity concerning the purpose of the communication – the link between the research questions as stated, the findings as presented in the results section and the conclusions; the background in the abstract says that research questions explored were a) the role of schools in emotional health and the b) the interventions they (i.e., schools) prioritised. However, the results section of the abstract refers to ‘themes’ of emotional health in the classroom, support for those in distress and school environment. Neither in the abstract nor in the body of the manuscript is it clear how these two are linked. The title suggests that the manuscript is oriented towards the future (improving …) but only part of the manuscript refers views of participants in how to go forward, and thus I would argue that the title is misleading.

5. One of the key difficulties with this manuscript is the extent to which the authors have situated their work within the literature in the area. In the background they appear to interchange emotional and mental health, and indeed later on their regular references to depression and self-harm almost appear to represent a hobby-horse and is this is probably misleading. Emotional Health is generally considered a positive and Depression a negative – this juxtaposition has implications for how the real issues of adolescent well-being are dealt with; how these issues can be aligned with pedagogical theory and be supported by existing trained staff. But they are not interchangable.

6. In terms of the literature – while there are real and substantial gaps in our understanding of what works and when, considerable progress has been made. The authors do not appear to have tailored their work to add to our understanding. I would argue that the background section is essentially too short to do justice to the literature that their work could be adding to. In addition, and particularly relevant to the discussion, is that many of the findings are not new, nor surprising, and would not add to the understanding of those familiar with the literature. One unfortunate casualty of this is that the real data they have collected and the features that are unique and interesting are buried within the analyses – I’m referring here specifically to the finding of the possible role of chaplains and curricular areas such as Art in schools to help address emotional health.

7. A number of details are missing or unclear in the methods and surrounding the methodological approach. The first is more of an inaccuracy – referring to the finding here as ‘in-depth’ is somewhat misleading, when the analysis and findings as presented are rather more superficial – more of a whistle-stop tour around the data. If in-depth analyses were really undertaken then they should be fully detailed in the methods section and would be welcome. The authors mention the constant comparative method in the abstract – but the approach to data treatment described in the final paragraph is not fully consistent with either grounded theory or the constant comparative method. Such variation should be explained and justified.
8. In the methods section the process for choosing the purposive sample is outlined, but it would be useful to justify these dimensions and give some detail as to how they were measured.

9. It would be useful to provide a justification for holding single-sex focus groups.

10. It would also be useful to explain why focus groups were used at all. Given the difficulties in using focus group data during analysis phases, it is unclear why focus group are preferred over other methods of data collection when the use of the group interaction data is not to be explicitly employed to address the research questions or objectives.

11. It is interesting that the authors choose the word ‘instructed’ to refer to their directions to teachers in relation to the the sample of students for the focus groups. This implies a level of relationship between the research team and the schools that is unusual.

12. There are also concerns around the choice of interviewees – these are described in different ways in different places; but the end of the second paragraph of the methods section is most illuminating. Details on how these people came to become the people who ‘arranged the focus groups’ is required. In fact the whole presentation of the recruitment needs to be much clearer and explicit. Asking those who ‘arranged the focus group’ if there were any other colleagues delivering EHWB work that were available does not appear to be a systematic approach. Are these the same people who were ‘instructed’ to provide the students for the focus groups?

13. The information provided in table 1 (and the footnotes to table 1) on who the staff interviewees are is difficult to follow and may not be easily interpreted to the readership – at least those not familiar with the English education system – there appears to be a wide variety of types of staff, not all similarly qualified and the level of comparability between them is unknown. The final sentence of the background section says that the paper reports on teachers’ views, but it is not clear that those actually interviewed were teachers. Similarly, the discussion refers to teachers’ choices of focus group participants. If all of these informants were indeed teachers, it might be best to stick with a single descriptor throughout – i.e., teachers, rather than staff.

14. Could the authors provide a definition of ‘EHWB work’ as opposed to curriculum activity – or teaching on this topic/subject or teaching explicitly intended to enhance emotional health. This is important if the staff/teachers were chosen on the basis of their involvement in delivering EHWB work.

15. It is unclear from the level of detail provided what questions were asked of students / staff during the focus group and interviews. It is not sufficient to say they were devised from pilot data collection – as the pilots must have been informed by something – were the issues chosen to help contribute to strategy, policy, practice or the academic literature / theory in this area (or some combination of these)?

16. It is difficult to judge the quality of the data and the findings presented without more detail on who the data were collected from (and why), the context of the
data collection (during school time or not, on school grounds or not, alongside other data collection or not, how the process was explained to participants and what guarantees they were given in relation to the data being volunteered) and what exactly they were asked.

17. In the section on data treatment the description provided is quite vague and general and does not assist readers in understanding what exactly was done. In addition describing inter-rater reliability as ‘good’ is not that helpful. In terms of reaching agreement the statement that the response to any examples of difference between the raters/coder was to generate more sub-themes rather than reconcile the differences or strengthen the category definitions is a little strange. In trying to understand this is it would be useful to know if there were two or twenty examples (or indeed any other number).

18. In describing the survey response it would be useful to know why these are relevant dimensions of schools, and indeed what SATS results are (for those not from England).

19. The information provided in relation to the telephone survey of the schools that did not respond to the questionnaire survey needs to provide more detail to be useful – for example why 17? What were they asked and why were they chosen? Although I have suggested earlier that all reference to the questionnaire survey might be better omitted as it is not clear how it strengthens the manuscript.

20. In the section introducing the focus group and interview data the themes are presented as being related to ‘ways in which schools can impact on students’ emotional health needs’ – this is yet another way of framing the data/purpose/objective/goals/data – and adds to the lack of clarity and difficulty interpreting the findings presented.

21. It would be useful for the authors to consider their use of the word ‘curriculum’, as this means different things to different constituencies (especially those from health vs. education), and thus it’s intended meaning in this manuscript is not clear.

22. Authors needs to be mindful of the non-English reader – for example what is year 8?

23. It is somewhat confusing that the authors are drawing such a distinction between emotional health and alcohol, drugs and sex – which are in many configurations part and parcel of emotional health teaching/education/learning – either as a vehicle – or as if they were precursors. This is an example of how useful it would be to have provided a clear definition of what is included in emotional health and well-being work; just because students or even teachers do not recognise this term or explicitly link their work or learning to the term does not mean that the underlying objectives of their educational experiences are unrelated to emotional health.

24. Is there any particular justification for locating the students quotes within given school, but not those from staff?

25. The authors draw a distinction between the usefulness of tutors and teachers
26. The issue of outside speakers, also introduced on page 11, is one about which there is considerable debate in the literature and which could appropriately be followed-up in the discussion; if the authors have a meaningful contribution to this debate it would be very welcome.

27. The introduction of numbers into the findings is somewhat distracting – especially as it’s not clear if all groups were asked the same things – to say, for example, that four of the 26 girls groups favoured single sex groups for the delivery of emotional health is hard to interpret unless we know that the other 22 did not agree or just didn’t mention it – and whether it was discussed or asked in all groups. Again, the issue of gender specific health education is current in the literature and it would be useful to see the manuscript contributing to this debate.

28. It is frustrating to see there were mixed feelings on covering depression and self-harm, but not to be told a) if it was students and/or staff who had such mixed feeling and b) if all were asked to express their views.

29. The whole issue of numbers (agreeing or disagreeing with perspectives, or saying a particular thing) is also somewhat contrary to the analytic approach described. It would be much more useful to use analytic dimensions such as strength of views, specificity of examples, use of metaphor or changing opinions following the views of others to illuminate the data.

30. While the authors have divided the findings into three – they refer to ‘group of themes’ under each heading (see top of page 15) – it would be helpful to have these themes (or sub-themes / categories) explicitly laid out for the reader.

31. Is the variation in suggested ancillary staff dependent on type of school – for example, do all English secondary schools have nurses and counsellors? Do schools have a choice in this? Why do some schools have chaplains and others don’t? Were the schools that have chaplains (all of whom appeared to be rated positively) different from the other schools in some what – are chaplains resourced or trained differently – what is special about them?

32. It seems rather unfair to compare across staff (e.g., nurses were not regarded positively), unless we know that all categories of staff were asked about in similar ways and that all groups / interiewees were asked – I realise this is repeating the same point as earlier, but the more often it is relevant the more frustrating it is to continue reading and trying to interpret the data presented.

33. In relation to the desired attributes of those to support students in distress – it appears that these are being anticipated in advance by the student participants who may never have used them – can you link this to the literature on what is known about effective support provision. Might it be that such attribute vary by sub-group of students and thus that multiple sources (with varying attributes) may be required.

34. The word ‘conceded’ on page 22 is somewhat pejorative and suggests that they were ‘encouraged’ to concede such a point?

35. Overall it appears that this is partially an evaluation of existing provision and partially setting recommendations for future provision. However the types of data
are mixed throughout the results section and it might be clearer to separate them throughout. In addition there are potential contributions to the literature here that need to be explicitly linked to the literature and drawn out further.

36. The representativeness of the quotes is a bit out – and begs the question whether there were no useful quotes from schools 1 and 2 – who aren’t included at all?

37. While there is a balance between schools high and low in EHWB in terms of the quotes – some of the negative quotes would suggest that the validity of the label ‘high’ could be questioned – this should be addressed in the discussion.

38. One approach to improving the manuscript could include severely limiting the direct quotes provided and instead placing more emphasis on the analysis rather than the description of the quotes. Such analyses could then be more explicitly linked to theory/policy/practice or empirical questions in the discussion sections.

39. On page 25, the authors mention that ‘stigma’ underpinned much of the discussion – if so it would have been worthwhile to have this drawn out more explicitly in the results section.

40. Under strengths and limitations the first paragraph should also acknowledge the inclusion of the views of ‘teachers’.

41. Suggesting that data being generally negative is evidence of non-selection among the informants who recruited the focus group participants is not reasonable – the data may have been even more negative, or perhaps even positive – this is an unknown. Note that it is not clear in the results section that groups contained ‘a range of experiences’ regarding emotional distress.

42. The use of the technique of inviting friends to the focus group is interesting but has certain implications both positive and negative. General focus group guidelines generally recommend that participants, though homogenous on the issue in question, should not be known to each other. This is extremely difficult to achieve in practice and the authors could make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of how focus groups work (or not) based on their recruitment procedures. It would also be useful to know if they followed any particular guidelines on the conduct of focus group (or the analysis of focus group data) – or why they chose not to?

43. The authors note that it became apparent that the focus groups were often the first time that students had had to discuss emtional health among themselves – it would be very interesting to document how that became apparent and what the implications of this was for data quality.

44. The references used to provide evidence that few studies aim to improve understanding of emotional distress and help-seeking (numbers 36 and 37) – simply don’t provide this evidence. This weakens the manuscript overall and places the use of other references in question too.

45. The term ‘environment’ is used in different ways throughout the manuscript and would benefit from being unpicked and disentangled – for example into the physical environment and the psycho-social environment.
46. The manuscript would certainly benefit from situating itself more closely to current debates in the literature; greater recognition of the developments in this area and greater understanding of some of the complexities involved – the following papers are suggested as a starting point for a new look at the relevant literature:


47. The presentation of the manuscript itself requires more attention – not all references are provided in the same style, the layout of the tables results in words running over lines and there is a stray page break in the results section – all these require attention.

48. The differences across schools in relation to how many staff were interviewed and how many focus groups were conducted requires some explanation.

49. It would be useful to know what ‘free school meal eligibility’ actually means - for example is it based on the means of the family of the student, or the characteristics of the school or the community it serves.

50. It would be useful to know what ‘religious affiliation’ refers to - for example does it mean whether the school is run by members of a religious order or has an ethos aligned with a particular religion – and if so what?

51. In table 3 it would be useful to know how these provisions were assessed (was it self-report by questionnaire – and if so were respondents just asked to tick for yes?) and who the respondents were? (though I still believe it would be better to omit all references to the survey).

52. The cut-off points for ‘good’ PSHE and EHWB remain unclear (the variation between 10-20% is wide) and it’s not clear if these are averages across the whole school – what is provided to every child, or most children and whether it includes cross or extra curricular activity.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I declare that I have no competing interests