DfE research: wellbeing of young people

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Summary

The DfE-commissioned Longitudinal study of young people in England: cohort 2, wave 2 (LSYPE2, July 2016) analyses a survey of students undertaken in 2014 when they were in Y10 (14 and 15-year-olds) and makes comparisons with a similar study done in 2005. Both studies form part of a DfE research programme on the attitudes of young people and their parents to the final years of compulsory education, and choices about further education, training, employment and other activities and career paths. Findings include:

- The 2014 cohort are significantly more ‘serious’ than the 2005 cohort, believe in the importance of hard work, are positive about school, less likely to play truant, and more likely to have aspirations to go to university.
- Disadvantaged families continue to fare less well than those from privileged family suggesting that more needs to be done to tackle inequalities.
- The level of psychological distress of girls increased although not by a large amount, although for boys it remained fairly stable although a complex picture emerges.

This briefing will be of interest to members and officers with a brief in the areas of education, employment or health and wellbeing for young people. It will also be of interest to secondary school managers and teachers with pastoral responsibilities.

Background

Government commissioned youth cohort studies date from 1985 where a large (approx. 10,000) representative sample of 13-year olds are selected and re-interviewed periodically until they reach 20. The current programme dates from 2004 when ‘Longitudinal study of young people in England: cohort 1’, also known as Next Steps, was commissioned. Young people aged between 13 and 14 were interviewed annually until 2010. There are now seven waves of data available and this programme is now managed by the UCL Institute of Education in London and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Data for both cohort studies can be accessed via the UK Data Service as Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). The programme has become a major source of information and baseline data to monitor the progress of young people, evaluate the success of policies aimed at this group, and provide an evidence base for further policy development. The second longitudinal study of young people in England (LSYPE2) began in 2013 and will track a sample of over 13,000 young people from the age of 13/14 annually through to the age of 20 (seven waves). The research was undertaken by TNS-BMRB, a research company which has done a number of surveys and studies to inform education policy development.
A number of studies have now been published that rely on LSYPE cohort data. The most recent was a report on young people’s experience of bullying. An LGIU briefing (see Related Briefings) was published in December 2015.

**Briefing in full**

The report considers survey outcomes in Y10 (wave 2) from 2014 and compares them with LSYPE1 survey outcomes from 2005. It provides:

- A descriptive analysis of school life and health and wellbeing for Y10 young people;
- A wider view of health and wellbeing in the context of the government’s focus on the whole child;
- A deeper exploration of measures of psychological distress used in the survey looking at what might be explained the trends seen in this area.

**Methodology and background factors**

The sample was selected through a two-stage process; firstly of schools then by pupils within those schools. Young people in local authority (LA) maintained schools, academies and independent schools were included. In sampling, a wide range of pupil characteristics and household types were taken into account. LSYPE2 is not only a large study (13,000 subjects) but also provides a match with national pupil database information and linked surveys of respondents parents, providing a rich and varied evidence source. The young people in LSYPE2 and a nominated main parent were interviewed at home.

LSYPE2 is also constructed to provide comparisons with LSYPE1 as far as possible. In this case comparisons are made with LSYPE1 interviews with Y10 students in 2005. These comparisons are complex as social and economic life has changed significantly for young people during this time.

The most obvious example of change is in the extent to which electronic media have penetrated young people’s social lives. In 2005 this was on the horizon (the i-phone was not even launched until 2007), whereas by 2014 it is reasonable to assume it has been embedded in the lives of most Y10 young people (by 2015, 90% of 16-24 year olds had a smartphone). There is a growing body of research evidence on its impact taken into account by the study, including work which suggests it may have impacted negatively on happiness or sleep patterns, and may also be changing the nature of young people’s sexual development.

The global financial crisis in 2008/9 will have had an impact on young people’s views of their place in the world. House price rises may also have impacted on how they see their future, particularly in London which has seen the biggest rises.

Comparisons also require the changing policy context to be taken into account. This includes changes such as (a) the impact the increase in the participation age (in education and training) and the effect on young people’s outlook, (b) the increases in university tuition fees, (c) the effect of changes to GCSE assessment may have had on student stress levels, (d) the impact a National Wellbeing Programme established by the coalition government in 2010 and the an increasing
focus on mental health may have on young people, and (e) the impact of the policy focus on child poverty, which has been significant since the launch of LSYPE1.

Life in year 10 and wellbeing in school

Attitudes to life in year 10 at school were more positive in 2014 than was the case in 2005 with the proportion of pupils truanting also falling from 23% to 13%. There was little difference between boys and girls in their overall attitudes. Overall attitudes towards school worsened between year 9 and year 10 in both 2005 and 2014 with the decline between 2013 and 2014 less pronounced than that seen between 2004 and 2005. The report suggests that a decline between years 9 and 10 is to be expected given the start of GCSE courses, but nevertheless sees the improvement from 2005 to 20014 as ‘encouraging’ and something worth monitoring further.

Attitudes to school were, however, negatively associated with deprivation factors. The study set attitudes against low levels of parental qualifications, illnesses or disabilities and family instability, and found that those from a disadvantaged background had a less positive attitude towards school than those from more privileged backgrounds. 90% of year 10 students in 2014 were content with the marks they achieved in their school work which showed little change from 2005 despite the increased seriousness of young people in year 10 (discussed below). Those from less privileged backgrounds also tended to be less positive about their marks.

Young people with special education needs were four times more likely to have been excluded from school in year 10 than young people generally, and had more negative experiences on a number of other measures. The same was true for those with an illness or disability that affected school.

The recently implemented Raising the Participation Age policy requiring young people to stay in education until the age of 18 is likely to have been the main factor in an increase in the proportion of young people planning to study A levels after year 11. Boys were more likely than girls to plan to go into work-based/part-time training and young people from a white ethnic group were the least likely to plan to study A levels especially compared to those from Indian and Black African backgrounds. Despite the increase in tuition fees, the report found that the number of young people expecting to apply to university increased from 60% in 2005 to 71% in 2014. The report therefore suggests that “tuition fees are not a primary inhibitor to aspiration”.

Young people’s wider health and wellbeing

The report found that, in terms of overall self-reported health and psychological distress, young people’s health and wellbeing was slightly worse in 2014 than in 2005. The deterioration was more marked for girls and was also worse for young people living in single parent and reconstituted families, and those with a long-standing illness or disability that affects their schooling. Young people in 2014 were, however, more likely to strongly equate hard work with success and also appeared to be more restrained, reporting fewer risky behaviours than in 2005. Risky behaviours included smoking, drinking alcohol, using cannabis, shoplifting, graffiti and vandalism.

LSYPE2 describes this increase in seriousness but points out it has not been “accompanied by an equivalent rise in confidence in young people’s ability to control their own future” with young people in 2014 reporting a slightly lower ‘locus of control’ than their counterparts in 2005. This perceived lack of control over their lives was again more pronounced among girls, young people in

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single parent and reconstituted families, and those with a long-standing illness or disability that affected school. For the report writers, this decline in locus of control and increasing seriousness of young people raises two questions:

- Is rising expectations and higher psychological distress levels the price to be paid for more focused students, working harder in school and aspiring to university in greater numbers?
- In a harsher economic climate, do young people feel greater pressure but less confidence in their ability to see their way through?

Again the report notes that, in general, there is a strong relationship between disadvantage and wider measures of well-being but cautions against assuming that young people from advantaged backgrounds therefore suffer less from mental health and well-being problems. The report noted young people living in a household where the highest qualification was degree level or above were slightly more likely to be psychologically distressed than those with no qualifications. LSYPE2 suggest that it is “important that support should be provided to young people from all backgrounds”.

LSYPE2 introduced a new measure of sleep in 2014, and were able to show that certain groups who rated poorly in terms of a range of wellbeing measures also slept less. Disadvantaged groups were over-represented among those who slept less than the recommended amount and those who were long-sleepers, whilst advantaged groups were more likely to get the optimal amount of sleep. The analysis is not, at this stage, able to say whether poor sleep patterns lead to poor wellbeing or vice versa, though it suggests it is likely to be interdependent.

### Further exploration of wellbeing and distress

Chapter 4 of the report sets out to illustrate the potential of LSYPE data to develop further analysis by exploring the psychological distress aspects of the health and wellbeing of young people in more depth. The report noted the following:

- Young people who reported higher levels of psychological distress were also likely to report their overall health as poor.
- Young people who had a lower locus of control and were less likely to equate hard work with success had worse self-reported health and higher levels of psychological distress.
- Young people with worse self-reported health and psychological distress were more likely to engage in risky behaviours.
- The opposite of all of these statements is also true i.e. better health is associated with more strongly equating hard work with success, higher locus of control and fewer risky behaviours.

The report has already noted that there has been an increase in the proportion of young people with a low locus of control and an increase in the proportion strongly equating hard work with success but who also had a low locus of control. In other words, the proportion of young people who appreciated the importance of working hard to succeed but felt they had little control over their own outcomes is increasing The writers note that this “may be related to the difficult economic climate for young people entering the workforce” and suggests this needs further research. It may also have implications for the way schools promote higher achievement.
Because young people were more likely to value and equate hard work with success and they were also more likely to have higher levels of psychological distress, the report suggested “that young people may be paying a psychological penalty for being more serious than their counterparts in 2005”. However, they also found a small to medium negative correlation between psychological distress and ‘those that equate hard work with success’ which suggests this hypothesis may not be true. It appears to be the combination of associating hard work with success and a low locus of control that increases the level of psychological distress.

The report looks at explaining why it is that young people living in better educated households experience higher levels of psychological stress. The report identifies factors describing:

- Parent push (parental aspirations for year 12, parental aspirations for university, how involved the parent feels in their child’s school life, frequency of discussing the school day, regularity of discussing school reports, whether they pay for private tuition, and how often the parent talks with their child about future study plans);
- Personal drive (aspirations for year 12, aspirations for university, attitudes to school, compliance with homework and whether and how strongly the young person equated hard work with success); and
- Peer pressure (friends think doing well in school is important, friends laugh at those who do well, friends distract me from doing well in school, and friends help me with school work).

The writers explain that, in their analysis, factors which capture the idea of ‘parent push’ are not as helpful as expected at explaining distress, while factors related to ‘personal drive’ are more so. In combination, ‘parent push’ and ‘personal drive’ explain about one-third of the relationship. Interestingly, the report also suggests that ‘peer culture’ is important at reducing distress as having peers who support academic success appear to protect against psychological distress.

Comment

The report’s findings support much that is already known although the summary of the findings in the Research brief is worth a study. The impact of family, especially single parent families and those with step families, and special educational needs or longstanding illnesses and disabilities on school outcomes is already well understood.

In opening up of questions around mental health and well-being for young people and the relationship between psychological distress, outcomes and other personal or socio-economic factors, this report is contributing new ideas and research to our existing understanding. The points the authors make about the need for both targeted and universal approaches to mental health support for young people are worth reflecting on. The authors suggest that the increase in psychological distress merits further investigation as does the experiences of specific groups of young people who seem to fare worse. These include young people in single parent and step families and those with a longstanding illness or disability that affects their school work.

Many schools already see understanding the psychological factors that underpin attitudes to success as an important focus, and this report supports that approach. It suggests that understanding the cultural world that young people inhabit and the peer pressures they experience may be worthwhile in ensuring success while also protecting well-being.
The policy implications of the mental wellbeing of young people are challenging to unpick. If the authors are right, young people’s attitudes and sense of control over their own destiny should improve as the economy improves, although the impact of Brexit on that also now needs to be factored in. Opinion polls after the results were announced suggested that people generally experienced the outcome emotionally much more so than a traditional election, especially young people. There may also be other underlying factors, arising from broader societal changes, which will continue to raise psychological distress levels. This is an area to monitor as the economy develops over the next few years. The report suggests that the economic context of a global economic crisis changing attitudes between 2005 and 2014 will be worth monitoring further.

For the British Association of Social Workers the report also highlights the way young people are portrayed in the media who “may also have a role to play in terms of their [young people’s] belief in their personal worth and their future prospects. In recent years, a caricature that has sometimes been presented is of young people on a downward trajectory in terms of behaviour … a culture of binge-drinking, drug-taking and laziness, with the implication that young people’s success stems from easier examinations rather than hard work” now seems unreasonable in the face of the evidence presented in this report.

External Links

DfE: Longitudinal study of young people in England: cohort 2, wave 2 (July 2016)

Social Care Institute for Excellence: Longitudinal study of young people in England cohort 2: health and wellbeing at wave 2 (July 2016)

British Association of Social Workers: Longitudinal Study of Young People in England cohort 2: health and wellbeing at wave 2 (July 2016)

DfE: Longitudinal study of young people in England: cohort 2, wave 1 (November 2014)

Institute of Education: Welcome to Next Steps (LSYPE):

UK Data Service: Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (since 2004)


Related Briefings

Bullying of young people: Recent Research in England and Scotland (December 2015)

Influences on Students’ Development and Outcomes at age 16: EPPSE Research (January 2015)

Child well-being in rich countries: international comparisons Unicef report (May 2013)

Young children suffering, or likely to suffer significant harm: Experiences on entering education – DfE Research (July 2012)

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