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An evaluation of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)-informed School Approach in three secondary schools in Wales

Short report

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An evaluation of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)-informed School Approach in three secondary schools in Wales – Short Report

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Glossary of terms

ACE	Adverse childhood experience
PLACE	Playful (environment & approach), Liking, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy
CWW	Cymru Well Wales
PATH	Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope
EAT	Early Action Together
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
EPs	Educational Psychologists
SIP	School improvement plan
SEF	Self-evaluation form
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

Background

As in the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) and across the world, the health and wellbeing of the people of Wales is significantly affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Early in 2016, Public Health Wales published the first Welsh ACEs study, which revealed that 47% of adults in Wales have suffered at least one ACE in their childhood and 14% have suffered four or more[1]. ACEs such as abuse, neglect and dysfunctional home environments, can have a detrimental impact on an individuals' life chances. ACEs are associated with poor educational achievement and the development of a wide range of harmful behaviours, including smoking, increased alcohol consumption, drug use, risky sexual behaviour, violence and crime[2,3].

In order to tackle ACEs at a population level, Cymru Well Wales (CWW) established the ACE Support Hub to help drive the achievement of the collective vision for Wales as a leader in ACE-free childhoods.

ACEs and Education

The CWW ACE Support Hub has continued the development of an ACE-informed school approach to introduce and implement trauma-informed practices within schools. Schools play a major role in mitigating the traumatic impact of ACEs[4-6]. However, traditional approaches to address challenging behaviour associated with complex trauma often includes disciplinary procedures such as detention, suspension and exclusion; which are not effective long-term to creating lasting, meaningful change[7]. In fact, such measures increase a child's risk of dropping out or of being pushed out of school[8], which has been shown to predict negative individual[9] and societal outcomes[10].

ACE informed whole school approach pilot

In Wales the ACE-informed whole-school approach was originally designed and piloted within three primary schools . This programme included ACE-awareness training across schools and encouraging school settings to adopt an ACE-informed approach to improve the awareness, knowledge and skills of all school teaching and support staff.

As part of their delivery plan, the CWW ACE Support Hub Education Sector Lead co-ordinated the implementation of an adapted training package for secondary schools and this was piloted in three secondary school settings in South Wales over the duration of the school academic year 2018/2019.

Table 1: Components of the ACE-informed school approach for secondary schools

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
ACE-AWARENESS	TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE	PLANNING ALTERNATIVE TOMORROWS WITH HOPE (PATH)
Trainer: CWW ACE Support Hub Education Sector Lead	**Trainer: Educational Psychologist (EP) x 2**	**Trainer: Educational Psychologist (EP) x 2**
What constitutes an ACE?	Meta-emotion philosophy	Establishing ACE-related goals
Toxic stress/trauma and brain development	Emotional coaching and PLACE	Agreeing strategic priorities
Impact of ACEs on health and wellbeing	Window of Tolerance	Establishing a time-line
How to identify ACEs in children	Personal wellbeing when dealing with trauma (Five Wells)	
Introduction to trauma-informed practice	Building resilience in children and young people	
	What should an ACE-informed school look like?	
Target School Audience		
Whole-school	Targeted smaller group: wellbeing leads, senior leaders, heads of year, pastoral staff	Targeted smaller group: wellbeing leads, senior leadership team (SLT), heads of year, pastoral staff

Evaluation Method

This evaluation reports on the pilot implementation of an ACE-informed school approach in three secondary school settings in the academic year 2018/19. The three schools were self-selected, having an awareness of the work in primary schools and existing links with CWW ACE Support Hub. Each were evaluated using a non-experimental mixed-methods process evaluation methodology. The evaluation comprised of pre and post-training questionnaire (Phase 1 n=51; Phase 2 n=56 and Phase 3 n=6) and qualitative interviews (n=2), with focus groups (n=2 [15 participants]).

The evaluation aimed to assess the levels of knowledge, awareness and attitudes of education staff following receipt of three phases of ACE-informed training; as well as seeking to explain how the training programme worked, for whom, and in what circumstances[12,13]. The evaluation did not aim to measure the impact of ACE-awareness training on outcomes for children. The keys findings from this pilot are described next and lessons learnt for future development in this area.

Findings

Increased knowledge and awareness of ACEs and their impacts

Our evaluation found evidence of increased levels of staff confidence in their knowledge and awareness of ACEs after attending Phases 1-3 of ACE-informed training. After completing Phases 1 and 2, the knowledge area 'understanding what ACEs are' received the highest reported confidence levels overall, closely followed by 'understanding the impact that ACEs can have on a child's development'.

> **"It would be the ACEs that we mentioned in the training. That certainly rose awareness...There are some obvious ones in terms of perhaps abuse or alcoholism in the home or background, but there are some other ones that then perhaps weren't quite so obvious." Focus Group 1, Participant C**

Before completing any training, staff displayed least confidence in their knowledge and skills to 'apply an ACE-informed approach in education' and of the 'longer term impacts of ACEs into adolescence and adulthood'. These two areas of knowledge resulted in the two highest reported areas of increased confidence levels following completion Phase 2 training.

> **"I think for myself it was the health effect in later life... How it can affect or shorten their lifespan really. I found that a bit of a wow factor."** **Focus Group 1, Interview F**

Our qualitative explorations highlighted an increased staff understanding of the underlying causes of difficult behaviour in the classroom, as well as helping to provide a contextual understanding of the historical and combined effects of adversity.

> **"I think in the classroom, sometimes you are more likely to have that question in your head – right, what is it that is causing this behaviour? ...Is there something underlying about this individual that I'm perhaps not aware of."** **Focus Group 2, Participant F4**

The role of school culture on ACE-informed training and implementation of new learning

The evaluation of three pilot schools highlighted different cultures within the schools taking part, as well as the noticeable impact this had on the implementation of training, particularly after Phase 2 trauma-informed training.

Two schools integrated the benefits of ACE-informed training within existing support systems in school. To this extent the ACE-informed training complemented the existing systems in the schools and additional change was already beginning to be reported, including a reported reduction in pupil exclusions and positive recognition from the external school inspectorate. Changes reported in this evaluation are likely to have been present (in part) before ACE-informed training was undertaken by the school. However, the ways in which staff built good relationships with pupils created a sense of pride in what teaching staff were doing for vulnerable children. This positive wellbeing culture acted as an enabler for creating an ACE-informed school vision in the pilot school which undertook Phase 3 to create an action plan.

Our evaluation found evidence of increased levels of staff confidence in their knowledge and awareness of ACEs after attending Phases 1-3 of ACE-informed training.

"I think for myself it was the health effect in later life... How it can affect or shorten their lifespan really. I found that a bit of a wow factor."

Focus Group 1, Interview F

A positive wellbeing culture acted as an enabler for creating an ACE-informed school vision.

"We've built capacity by improving the knowledge of key staff ... and then from that, we've been able to cascade this out to all staff. But what's good about that way is that we can make it more bespoke to our pupils and we can give real life examples. For instance, one pupil... is a Looked After pupil ... abuse, so we can relate it ...we were able to look at how we may tackle this on a day-to-day basis."
Stakeholder Interview 1

This culture was underpinned by a strong sense of leadership within the school to develop their wellbeing plans and 'get on board' with the need to be ACE-informed. There was greater peer to peer support for staff when dealing with difficult cases within school culture, which aligns with the intended training outcomes for 'personal wellbeing when dealing with trauma', to place a strong emphasis on staff looking after themselves. These findings highlight the connections between a positive school culture and staff willingness to adopt an ACE-informed school approach.

"...we do sit down at the start of a new school year and then go through a list of pupils that are...vulnerable, attendance issues....they [staff] come with a spreadsheet. They say, "Oh, this one's... what do you feel?" And our input then, and if we agree with them then. And they're the ones that they pick up on."
Focus Group 1, Participant G

In one of the pilot schools, the increased confidence levels reported after Phase 1 (ACE-awareness training) did not then translate into further change within the school environment. While there was evidence of change in the confidence levels of staff to both understand and deal with the impact of ACEs on children, qualitative follow up with participants after Phase 2 training illustrated this was not sustained after completion, and an absence of senior leadership commitment to capitalise on the momentum, limited effective engagement at a school-level. This school had recently been reviewed by the school inspectorate body, and had a number of important areas identified for improvement. It is probable that these circumstances will have impacted their readiness to become ACE-informed and innovate new systems, which require schools to embed learning and practice change, in order to achieve systems change.

The wider school context is an important area for future consideration when planning staff training and commitment to action planning to become an ACE-informed school. Readiness to change can be seen as a cognitive precursor to behaviours that either support or resist a change effort[14]. Being aware of the barriers to developing an ACE-informed school approach should be seen within the context of the school environment and will influence how likely the ACE-informed approach will be adopted within systems.

Action-planning within an ACE-informed school approach

Phase 3 of the ACE-informed school approach was reported by participants to be a necessary component of the whole-school approach following Phase 1 and 2 training, and that it provided the 'what next?' element to implementation of planned changes and approaches. The training only took place within one school and used a model of action planning called the Planning Alternatives with Hope for Tomorrow (PATH) approach[15]. It provided the environment and opportunity for staff to create a vision for an ACE-informed school, with key stakeholder engagement and co-productive approaches, and there were no suggestions for revisions to the training content or exercise, and participants unanimously reported it to be very useful in working towards developing an ACE-informed school approach.

However, the use of PATH represents only one process by which schools can develop a review of ACE-informed approaches and then build an action plan. Implementation of PATH across secondary school settings is limited by the availability of trained facilitators. An alternative form of action planning workshop with school leadership and senior staff would still enable schools to progress through Phases 1-3 and work towards systems change at a school level, in a sustainable and co-productive way and should be considered for development. Any further work developed for Phase 3 should also take in to account how outcomes as a result of a school action plan can be measured.

The use of the ACE-readiness tool

The ACE Readiness tool[i] was only completed in 2 out of 3 schools and participants in the evaluation found it to be too long and repeated content captured elsewhere in school plans (the School Improvement Plan [SIP] and school Self Evaluation Form [SEF]). For schools with comprehensive systems for measuring wellbeing approaches and interventions for children, the tool did not appear to add value as part of the ACE-informed approach. Consideration should be given to a review and refresh of the tool with greater emphasis on how its self-assessment approach links to an integrated action plan arising from completing Phase 3 of the ACE-informed school approach.

Overcoming barriers to becoming an ACE-informed school

A common theme reported as a barrier to utilising ACE-informed approaches were the limitations on staff time to work with children using a trauma-informed approach. This was articulated as a tension between needing to achieve learning objectives for a lesson, and taking the time to support an individual or group of children in line with the trauma-informed principles of Phase 2. Staff did not think that lack of time limited their ability to act in an ACE-informed way, but concerns about additional pressures on their time to delivering teaching objectives was a consistent theme. This barrier was balanced by a reported increase in capacity and capability in schools by improving knowledge of key staff and sharing learning.

> **"Time is the major one because from a teaching point of view...while I'm teaching, if something's happened in my room and something's kicked off, for want of a better term, I haven't got the time to be that nurturing. I just need my learners to learn my objectives for that lesson...we were given the advice to say, "I will speak to so and so. I'll get back to you later" ... It's obviously following that through and having the time to make sure you do chase that up." Focus Group 1, Participant A**

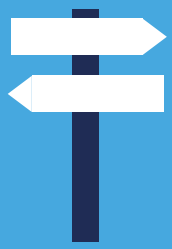
The approach to building knowledge of ACEs and their impacts across large secondary school settings was through a 'train-the-trainer' model, whereby staff attending Phases 2-3 would then pass knowledge on to other staff within their school and departments. Some participants in the pilot schools reported scepticism from their peers following training, which felt amplified when they did not feel confident in their response and their knowledge base to deal with queries about ACEs.

Participants did not feel entirely confident in promoting resilience, as well as the application of methods such as 'The Five Wells'[16]. This suggests that while participants reported an increase in confidence of their own reported knowledge and awareness, this does not seamlessly translate to increased confidence to deliver ACE-informed training, especially when it includes psychologically-informed content trainers are not familiar with.

[i]The ACE Readiness Tool was developed as part of the whole-schools approach in primary school settings and aimed to provide a baseline measure for the current ACE-related provisions that schools have in place before the training. The tool was not adapted in any way and only pilot schools 1 and 2 completed the ACE Readiness Tool in preparation for their training.

A 'train-the-trainer' approach to increase staff knowledge and awareness of ACEs in schools should give consideration to choosing the most appropriate staff to facilitate this content in future and ensure they have access to support resources after completing initial training.

> **"A small but significant body of staff who are very sceptical…I think you've got to be very, very sure that you're confidently answering…and we need to feel confident in giving them a good answer"**
> **Focus Group 2, Participant D**



Workforces require the skills and confidence to raise issues relating to ACEs, peer support for staff in doing so, as well as knowing how or where to signpost those experiencing ACEs for appropriate support when needed.

Our evaluation of this pilot across three schools in Wales has shown the potential for ACE-informed whole-school approaches to build knowledge and understanding of ACEs within school staff.

Responding to unintended consequences of ACE-awareness training

Workforce development has been identified as crucial to developing an adversity-informed system[11,17-19]. To enable such a system, this involves training and capacity building, and importantly, nurturing and supporting the wellbeing of the workforce to enable people to deliver services in an informed way and avoid becoming compassion fatigued[17,19]. While offers of ACE-awareness and ACE-screening training are becoming more commonplace across the UK, they are not always delivered with an adequate support system in place for the staff who receive training on what are sensitive topic areas[20,21]. There are reports of staff guilt at learning about ACEs and their intergenerational effect, and suggestions that trainers need careful selection, training and supervision in the delivery of ACEs content[20].

In the evaluation, participants reported concerns of adverse impacts after learning more about ACEs, both within personal family history, and also perceptions of their own parenting and the intergenerational effect of ACEs. Whilst this finding was reported by a minority of our participants, it is a timely reminder of the sensitive nature of the content which forms part of ACE-informed training, and the impact it can have on school staff.

Leadership to drive culture change

One aim of the CWW ACE Support Hub has been to transform organisational strategies, services and people to be ACE-informed, with integrated systems to tackle ACE-related outcomes in their sectors. The Hub advocates for resources and leadership within organisations needing to support an ACE-informed culture and empower staff to have ACE-informed conversations. Workforces require the skills and confidence to raise issues relating to ACEs, peer support for staff in doing so, as well as knowing how or where to signpost those experiencing ACEs for appropriate support when needed. The emphasis here being to strengthen the case for co-productive approaches that will allow organisations to lead and embed a sustainable model for ACE-informed services. Leadership and readiness for change will also undoubtedly play a critical role

in achieving this across professional sectors[22], and has been argued as the prime driver for reform in schools[23,24]. Senior leader commitment, support and resource allocation were found to be crucial to effective engagement in an attachment-aware programme in schools and it having an impact on the school[24]. The absence of strong leadership to drive change in practice after ACE-informed training in one of the pilot schools highlights its importance in the journey to becoming ACE-informed and strengthening outcomes for children.

Limitations of the Evaluation

The implementation of the evaluation faced a number of key challenges, which impacted the quality of data collected, and increased potential bias. Therefore the insight presented in this report should be treated with caution as to the applicability within secondary school settings and wider roll out for schools in this sector. The three schools included in the programme were self selected and interested in addressing ACEs, and are not representative of all schools in Wales, so the findings reported here are not generalizable.

Conclusion

Considering the prevalence of ACEs in Wales and the well-established impact of negative health outcomes[1-4], it is essential for those working with individuals impacted by ACEs to be knowledgeable and confident in the care and service they provide. Schools are well placed to support children who are experiencing ACEs, and the ACE-informed whole-school approach has been shown to equip primary school settings with relevant knowledge and skills to identify and respond to children who experience ACEs and trauma[11].

Our evaluation of this pilot across three schools in Wales has shown the potential for ACE-informed whole-school approaches to build knowledge and understanding of ACEs within school staff, but highlights the importance of the organisational culture and leadership to create change. Building understanding of the impact of ACEs on child health, wellbeing and educational outcomes is also important in supporting changes to practice. However, it does not address the question of systems level change within the education sector. Thought should be given to ensuring greater accountability in being ACE-informed within this sector, including reporting back the impact of being an ACE-informed school and what outcomes this brings for children.

Future considerations

Whilst this is a small evaluation with some limitations, the ACE-informed school approach in secondary school settings has demonstrated transferability of training content from a primary to secondary school setting in raising staff awareness of ACEs and their impacts. Drawing on the qualitative insights future development of the ACE informed approaches should consider the following:

Action-planning within an ACE-informed school approach

Phase 3 of the ACE-informed school approach was reported to be a necessary component of the whole-school approach, and that it provided the 'what next?' element to implementation of planned changes and approaches. The importance of supportive school culture was highlighted, as was the provision of tools to support staff to effect change and be confident in working differently.

However, the mode of action planning used within this evaluation only represents one process by which schools can develop a review of ACE-informed approaches and then build an action plan. Due to the limitations of trained facilitators for using PATH, an alternative form of action planning workshop to complete the ACE-informed school approach in a sustainable and co-productive way should be developed. Any further work developed for Phase 3 should also take in to account how outcomes as a result of a school action plan can be measured.

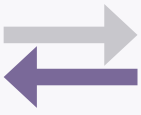
School readiness to adopt interventions

Attention should be paid to a school's readiness to adopt new interventions before investing time and resources into the training of staff. This will target and maximise the use of resources in an appropriate way to ensure that knowledge and awareness of ACEs becomes integrated in transformational plans for change, based on a school's readiness to implement any learning.

The ACE Readiness Tool was found to be too long and repeated content captured elsewhere in school plans (such as the SIP and SEF). Consideration should be given to a review and refresh with greater emphasis on how this self-assessment tool links to an integrated action plan from completing Phase 3 of the ACE-informed school approach and how it can help to identify the readiness of a school to become ACE-informed.

Practice Refresh

Staff who require additional support to cascade their ACE-informed knowledge should have access to continued support services whilst they build their knowledge and content. This may be in the form of web-based resources or peer support through school networks or Education Achievement Services. This should include additional support for senior leadership teams to address unintended consequences of training impacts on staff.



Future Evaluation

There needs to be more robust evaluation on the impact of the ACE-informed school approach on children, which is planned from the beginning of programme implementation.

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