Wellbeing Measurement *for* Schools

Research Note

Does completing an online wellbeing survey change how pupils are feeling, and what factors are associated with this?

June 2020

Summary

At a time when large-scale wellbeing surveys are being conducted with greater frequency it is important to be aware of how they are experienced by young people. This research note offers some insights into the numbers and characteristics of pupils who felt happy or sad after taking the Wellbeing Measurement for Schools survey between June 2018 and March 2020.

The findings suggest that, while the majority of young people reported that the survey did not change how happy or sad they were feeling, completing it was not a neutral experience for all pupils. 56% reported that completing the survey did not make them feel happy or sad, 30% reported that completing the survey made them feel happy, 9% reported that completing the survey made them feel sad and 5% skipped the question. Breakdown of the responses suggests older children were less likely to say they had been affected by the survey, and further breakdown found associations between how pupils felt after the survey and their self-reported levels of mental health, life satisfaction and resilience.

The findings may can be taken as a positive sign that the questions being asked are meaningful to pupils in relation to their wellbeing, and it also underscores the need for participating schools to continue to make appropriate preparations for administering the surveys.

Introduction

Wellbeing Measurement for Schools is a research project and service offer that helps schools to understand and support pupil and staff wellbeing. It is a collaboration between the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) and the Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU).

In accordance with ethically approved processes, schools share data on the characteristics of participating pupils with the research team and are supported in administering an online wellbeing survey to these pupils (CORC and EBPU 2019). The surveys are completed in school as part of a planned session, under the supervision of an appropriate member of staff. Following completion of the surveys, schools receive a Wellbeing Measurement Report that identifies strengths and challenges in different areas of wellbeing. In addition to providing school and area feedback reports, the research team are exploring wider questions related to the use of surveys to support pupil wellbeing.

This research note examines whether completing the online wellbeing survey, which includes questions on mental health, wellbeing and resilience, changes how happy or sad pupils are feeling. Although large-scale surveys using these kinds of self-reported measures are designed with careful consideration of ethical issues (e.g. NHS Digital 2018, University of Oxford 2019, Deighton et al. 2020), information on the experiences of the children and young people completing them is limited. One study recently explored what pupils thought about filling in this type of mental health and wellbeing survey (Demkowicz et al. 2020). A range of themes emerged, including personal reflection on emotions and life in ways that in some instances provided a sense of catharsis, or a basis for considering handling issues differently in future.

In the area of trauma research, studies conducted with adolescents and undergraduate students suggest that being asked questions about traumatic events is distressing for small proportions of participants (DePrince and Freyd 2006, Zajac et al. 2011), and adolescents who had experienced post-traumatic stress disorder or depression were more likely to be temporarily distressed in response to being asked the questions (Zajac et al. 2011). We were interested to find out whether similarly low levels of pupils would report feeling sad after answering online questions about their wellbeing, and what factors may be associated with this.

Samples analysed

Two samples were prepared for this analysis. The first, referred to as the 'Main Sample', consisted of 6,675 pupils in year groups 5, 7, 8 and 9, who participated in the online wellbeing measurement survey in 88 schools between June 2018 and March 2020 *(Table 1A)*. Although Wellbeing Measurement for Schools is available for other primary and secondary school year groups, other year groups were not included in this analysis because fewer pupils had participated in the same time period.

The second sample, referred to as the 'Year 8 Sample', was a subset of the Main Sample, consisting of the 2,626 pupils in year group 8 *(Table 1B)*.

Table 1A: Main Sample - Pupil characteristics (6,675 pupils in total)

		Number of pupils	%
Year group	Year 5	2243	34
	Year 7	978	15
	Year 8	2626	39
	Year 9	828	12
Gender	Female	3411	51
	Male	3264	49
Ethnicity grouping	White British	3719	56
	Other ethnicity	2787	42
	Not known	169	3
Language grouping	English	4910	74
	Other than English	1630	24
	Not known	135	2
Free school meals	Yes	750	11
	No	5801	87
	Not known	124	2
Pupil premium	Yes	1302	20
	No	5249	79
	Not known	124	2
SEN provision	Any SEN category	878	13
	No SEN	5797	87

Table 1B: Year 8 Sample - Pupil characteristics (2,626 pupils in total)

		Number of pupils	%
Gender	Female	1293	49
	Male	1333	51
Ethnicity grouping	White British	1492	57
	Other ethnicity	1108	42
	Not known	26	1
Language grouping	English	2099	80
	Other than English	522	20
	Not known	5	0
Free school meals	Yes	259	10
	No	2367	90
Pupil premium	Yes	495	19
	No	2131	81
SEN provision	Any SEN category	340	13
	No SEN	2286	87

Does completing the wellbeing survey change how happy or sad pupils are feeling?

The online wellbeing survey took about 15 minutes for pupils to complete and consisted of three questionnaires, namely Me and My Feelings (Deighton et al. 2013), Student Resilience Survey (Lereya et al. 2016) and the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner 1991).

The final page in the survey contained a closed-ended question that asked participants whether completing it had changed how happy or sad they are feeling.

This question had three response options: 'No, completing this survey has not made me feel happy or sad'; 'Yes, completing this survey has made me feel happy'; 'Yes, completing this survey has made me feel sad'. The numbers of pupils who selected each response were counted for the Main Sample and Year 8 Sample *(Tables 2A and 2B).* 'Not known' means that the question was skipped.

Table 2A: Main Sample
Responses to 'Has completing this survey changed how happy or sad you are feeling?'

Response	Number of pupils	%
No, not made me feel happy or sad	3730	56
Yes, made me feel happy	2005	30
Yes, made me feel sad	634	9
Not known	306	5
Total	6675	100

Table 2B: Year 8 Sample
Responses to 'Has completing this survey changed how happy or sad you are feeling?'

Response	Number of pupils	%
No, not made me feel happy or sad	1717	65
Yes, made me feel happy	513	20
Yes, made me feel sad	285	11
Not known	111	4
Total	2626	100

In the Main Sample, 56% reported that completing the survey did not make them feel happy or sad, 30% reported that completing the survey made them feel happy, 9% reported that completing the survey made them feel sad and 5% skipped the question.

In the Year 8 Sample, 65% reported that completing the survey did not make them feel happy or sad, 20% reported that completing the survey made them feel happy, 11% reported that completing the survey made them feel sad and 4% skipped the question.

What factors are associated with how happy or sad pupils are feeling from completing the survey?
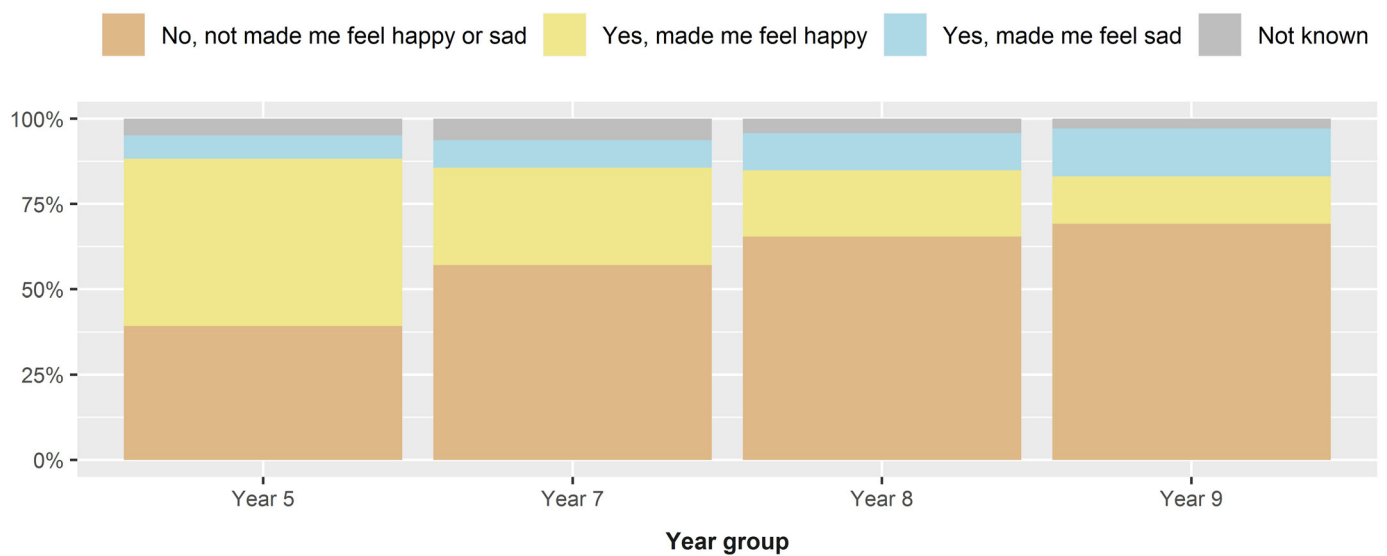
Year group

We used 100% stacked bar charts to examine whether responses to the survey completion question were associated with a range of factors, including year group, pupil characteristics and wellbeing measure scores. The factor found to be most highly associated was year group. As year group increased, the percentage of pupils reporting that completing the survey did not make them feel happy or sad increased. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils reporting that it made them feel sad increased, and the proportion of pupils reporting that it made them feel happy decreased *(Figure 1)*.

Figure 1: Main Sample - Breakdown of responses by year group
Has completing this survey changed how happy or sad you are feeling? (n = 6,675)

In light of the association between responses to the survey completion question and year group, and the potential imbalance of pupil characteristics such as ethnicity and free school meals between year groups in the Main Sample, we explored associations with other factors using the Year 8 Sample *(Figures 2, 3 and 4)*.

Association with pupil demographics

The breakdowns of the year 8 pupil responses indicate weak associations with pupil demographic characteristics as shown by the slight differences in the distributions of responses to the survey completion question between the categories of a given characteristic *(Figure 2)*.

Figure 2: Year 8 Sample - Breakdown of responses by pupil characteristics
Has completing this survey changed how happy or sad you are feeling? (n=2,626)
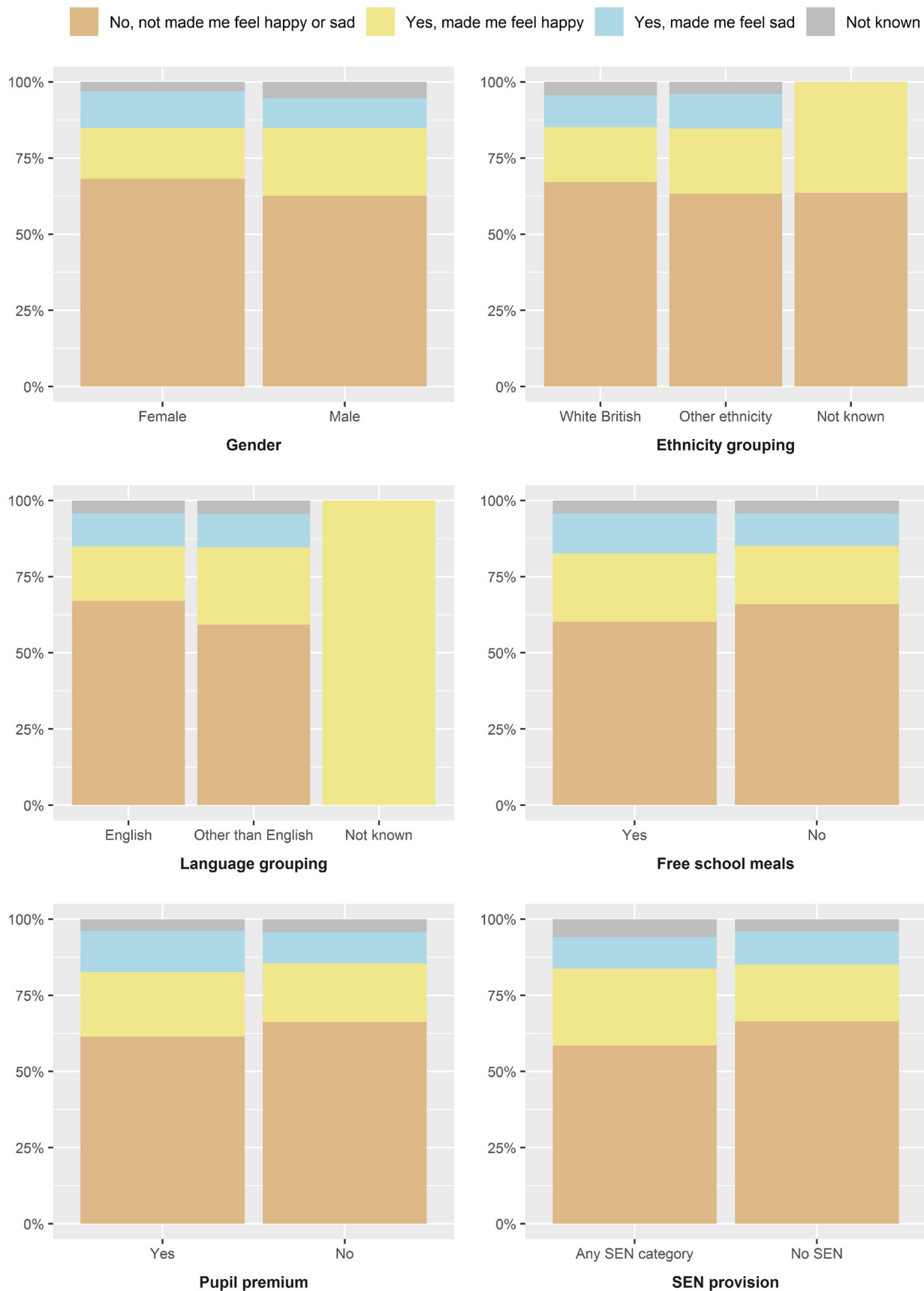
Association with mental health/resilience

The breakdowns of the year 8 pupil responses indicate associations between the survey completion question and several self-reported measures of mental health, life satisfaction and resilience *(Figures 3 and 4).* For example, the percentage of pupils reporting that completing the survey made them feel sad increases as emotional/behavioural difficulties increase, and

as life satisfaction decreases *(Figure 3)*. As scores on measures of resilience increase, the percentage of pupils reporting that completing the survey made them feel happy increases, and the percentage reporting that completing the survey made them feel unhappy decreases *(Figure 4)*. This relationship is more visible for some measures (e.g. problem solving) than for others (e.g. empathy, participation in community).

Figure 3: Year 8 Sample - Breakdown of responses by self-reported measures of mental health and life satisfaction

Has completing this survey changed how happy or sad you are feeling? (n=2,626)
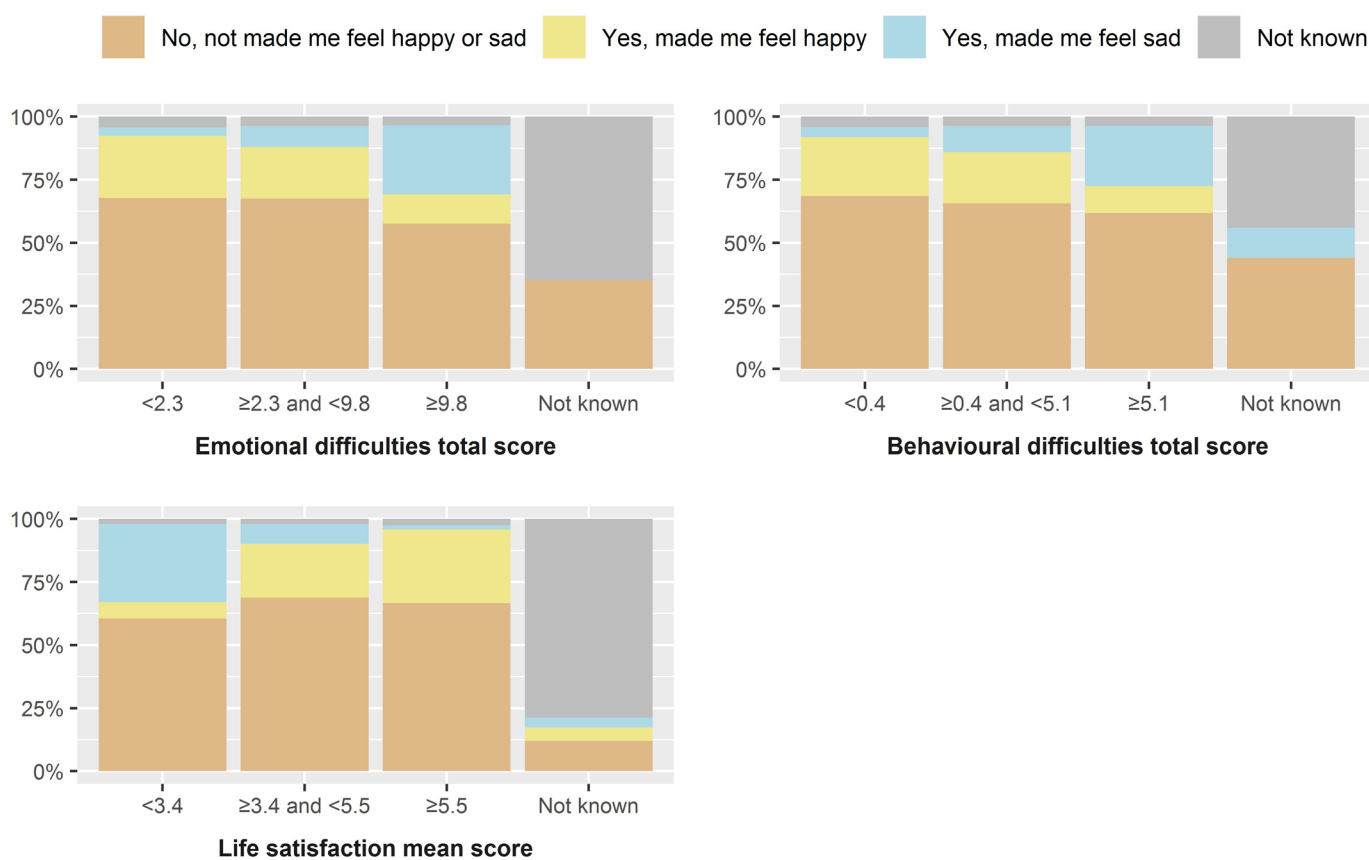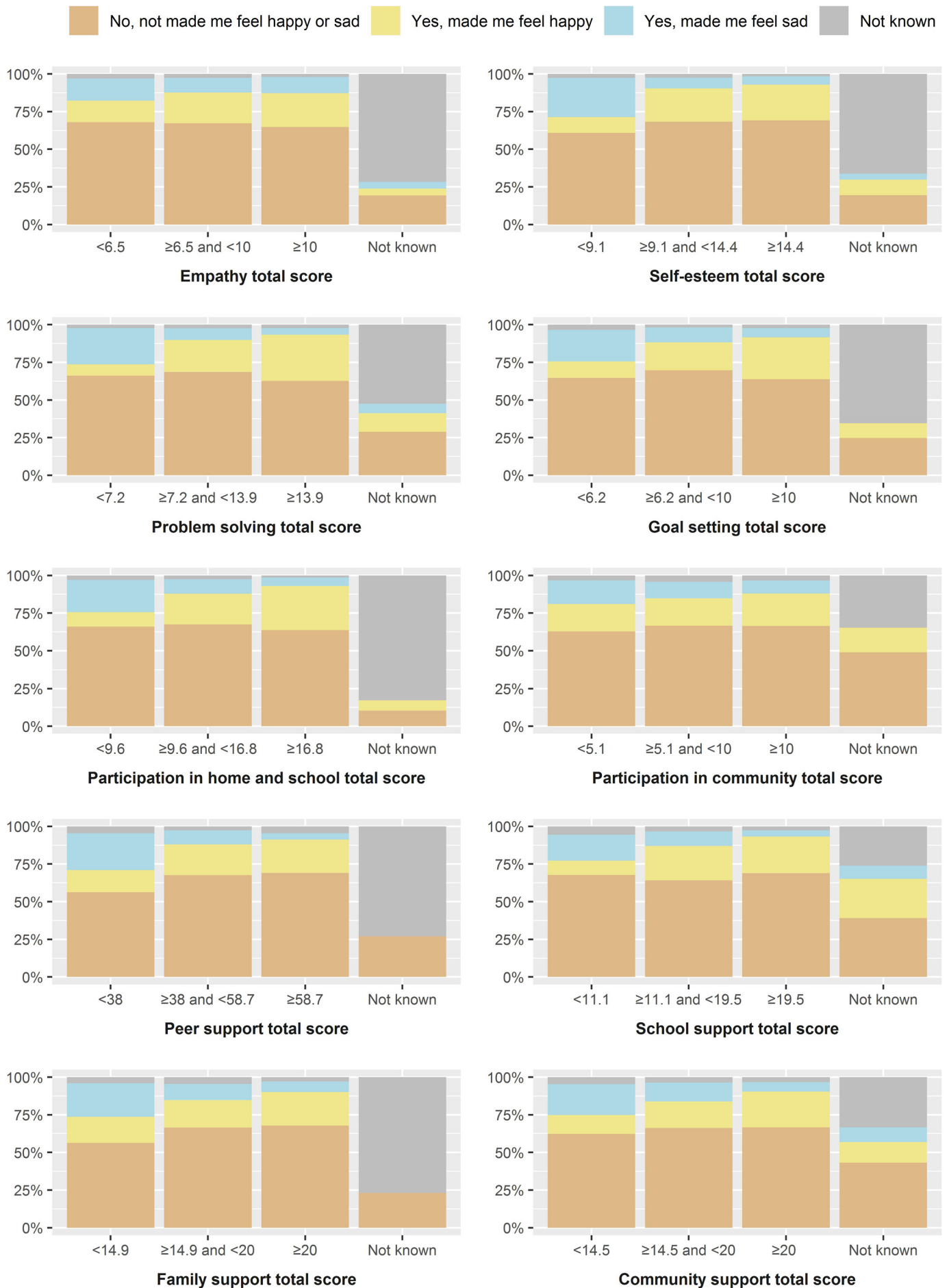
Figure 4: Year 8 Sample - Breakdown of responses by self-reported measures of resilience

Has completing this survey changed how happy or sad you are feeling? (n=2,626)

Exploring the significance and strength of the associations

To further explore the relationships between the factors and the survey completion question, we ran Pearson Chi-squared tests on the data underpinning the Year 8 breakdown charts *(Figures 2, 3 and 4)*, excluding the 'Not known' responses *(Table 3)*.

The p-value for a factor in Table 3 indicates the probability of obtaining the distribution of percentages in the factor's stacked bar chart in Figures 2-4 (excluding the 'Not known' percentages) by chance alone. Since the sample of pupils analysed was not a random sample, this statistical test should be treated with caution, but nevertheless provides a way of interpreting the data complementary to the graphs above.

The table shows that for all factors apart from ethnicity and free school meals the association might be considered significant, in that there is a less than 5% probability of this happening by chance.

The Cramer's V value is a measure of the strength of the association between two categorical variables, on a scale of 0 (corresponding to no association) to 1 (corresponding to the variables completely determining each other). These values suggest that the factors most strongly associated with the survey completion question besides year group are life satisfaction, problem solving, emotional difficulties and self-esteem *(Table 3)*.

Since these factors may themselves be inter-related (Lereya et al. 2016), there is scope for further analysis to examine their relative contributions to how happy or sad pupils are feeling after completing the survey.

Table 3: Year 8 Sample - Chi-squared tests of association between factors and the survey completion question

Note: the categories of the survey completion question were 'No, completing this survey has not made me feel happy or sad'; 'Yes, completing this survey has made me feel happy'; 'Yes, completing this survey has made me feel sad'.

Factor	Factor categories	Number of pupils included in Chi-squared test	p-value	Cramer's V
Life satisfaction mean score	<3.4; ≥3.4 and <5.5; ≥5.5	2499	p<0.001	0.19
Problem solving total score	<7.2; ≥7.2 and <13.9; ≥13.9	2469	p<0.001	0.16
Emotional difficulties total score	<2.3; ≥2.3 and <9.8; ≥9.8	2508	p<0.001	0.16
Self-esteem total score	<9.1; ≥9.1 and <14.4; ≥14.4	2489	p<0.001	0.15
Goal setting total score	<6.2; ≥6.2 and <10; ≥10	2485	p<0.001	0.12
Peer support total score	<38; ≥38 and <58.7; ≥58.7	2501	p<0.001	0.12
School support total score	<11.1; ≥11.1 and <19.5; ≥19.5	2481	p<0.001	0.11
Participation in home and school total score	<9.6; ≥9.6 and <16.8; ≥16.8	2504	p<0.001	0.11
Behavioural difficulties total score	<0.4; ≥0.4 and <5.1; ≥5.1	2500	p<0.001	0.11
Community support total score	<14.5; ≥14.5 and <20; ≥20	2481	p<0.001	0.10
Family support total score	<14.9; ≥14.9 and <20; ≥20	2510	p<0.001	0.09
Participation in community total score	<5.1; ≥5.1 and <10; ≥10	2482	p<0.001	0.05
Gender	Female; Male	2515	p<0.001	0.08
Language grouping	English; Other than English	2510	p<0.001	0.06
Empathy total score	<6.5; ≥6.5 and <10; ≥10	2496	p<0.001	0.05
SEN provision	Any SEN category; No SEN	2515	p<0.01	0.06
Pupil premium	No; Yes	2515	p<0.05	0.05
Ethnicity grouping	Other ethnicity; White British	2491	0.057	0.03
Free school meals	No; Yes	2515	0.15	0.04

Limitations of this analysis

There are three main limitations of this analysis that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, the survey completion question provided a basic indication of whether completing the survey changed how happy or sad a pupil was feeling. We do not know from these data how long the changes in feelings lasted.

Second, the samples consisted of pupils attending schools that took part in Wellbeing Measurement for Schools, had consent from their parents or carers to participate, and were happy to take the survey. Each school or group of schools selected a particular year group or year groups for participation in the project. Therefore, the samples were not intended to be representative of all pupils in the UK.

Third, the scores from the self-reported measures of different aspects of wellbeing were collected in the same online survey as the survey completion question, and pupils were free to return to previous questions. Therefore, there was the possibility that the survey completion question may have influenced the scores from the self-reported wellbeing measures i.e. it was possible for pupils to adjust their answers to the wellbeing measure questions after answering the survey completion question.

Conclusions

An online wellbeing survey was completed by 6,675 pupils in year groups 5, 7, 8 and 9 between June 2018 and March 2020. The final question asked participants whether completing the survey had changed how happy or sad they were feeling. 56% reported that completing the survey did not make them feel happy or sad, 30% reported that completing the survey made them feel happy, 9% reported that completing the survey made them feel sad and 5% skipped the question.

Breakdown of the responses suggests older children were less likely to say they had been affected by the survey. Further breakdown found associations with self-reported mental health, life satisfaction and resilience. The percentage of pupils reporting that completing the survey made them feel sad increased as emotional/behavioural difficulties increased, and as life satisfaction decreased. As scores on measures of resilience increased, the percentage of pupils reporting that completing the survey made them feel happy increased, and the percentage reporting

that completing the survey made them feel unhappy decreased.

These findings suggest that, while the majority of young people reported that the survey did not change how happy or sad they were feeling, completing it was not a neutral experience for all pupils. Furthermore, the immediate feelings of happiness or sadness from completing the survey may be affected by age and sense of wellbeing. This can be taken as a positive indication that the questions being asked are meaningful to pupils in relation to their wellbeing, which concurs with pupils' accounts of how filling in these kinds of measures led them to reflect on their emotions and experiences (Demkowicz 2020). It also underscores the need for schools to continue to make appropriate preparations for administering the surveys, including letting participating pupils know who they can talk to, or where they can access advice and resources, if they feel like discussing or thinking through issues after taking part.

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Appendix: Details of construction of the charts

In the language grouping chart in Figure 2 (as well as the language grouping breakdowns in Tables 1A and 1B) the category of 'English' includes 'Believed to be English' and the category of 'Other than English' includes 'Believed to be other than English'. In the SEN provision chart in Figure 2 (as well as the SEN provision breakdowns in Tables 1A and 1B), the pupils counted under 'Any SEN category' include those with an 'Education, Health and Care Plan', 'SEN Support' or 'Statement'.

The process of constructing the charts in Figures 3 and 4 was as follows. For each measure (e.g. emotional difficulties, behavioural difficulties), an aggregate (total or mean) score was calculated for each pupil from their responses to the survey questions belonging to that measure. We then grouped the pupil aggregate scores into three categories using cut-points set at one standard deviation below and above the mean aggregate score, where the standard deviation and mean were calculated from the main sample. For each category, the percentages of pupils who gave each response to the survey completion question were calculated, and these percentages were displayed in the form of a 100% stacked bar.

About CORC

The Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) is the leading membership organisation that collects and uses evidence to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. CORC members include mental health service providers, schools, professional bodies and research institutions from across Europe and beyond.

corc.uk.net

About EBPU

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. EBPU bridges cutting-edge research and innovative practice in children's mental health and wellbeing. EBPU are committed to finding the best ways to use measurement of wellbeing to enhance support for children and families.

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