

Promoting emotional resilience: Supporting vulnerable learners in their transition to secondary school

Introduction

In supporting vulnerable learners in their transition to secondary school, Poppy Nash and Chris Teesdale developed and piloted a small group intervention in three York secondary schools in Autumn 2007. The intervention programme aims to equip vulnerable learners moving to secondary school, with strategies for promoting emotional resilience and coping with change. The intervention takes the form of eight weekly one-hour sessions held in school, for a maximum of 10 participants per group, with one group per school.

Intervention programme

The intervention programme has been drawn from materials already developed for children in Year 5, as part of the Key Stage 2 Circle Time curriculum (Lown, Nash and Dunderdale, 2005). The Year 5 Circle Time curriculum focuses on promoting emotional resilience, with particular emphasis on encouraging children to give themselves positive messages about their learning. In the literature, this is referred to as 'self-talk' or 'inner dialogue', and is recognised as an effective and powerful means of enhancing children's academic self-concept. For example, when asked to read aloud in class, the vulnerable learner may immediately panic and think "I can't do it (unhelpful negative self-talk). The confident reader, on the other hand, is more likely to think "I'll do my best" (helpful and positive self-talk). Thus, by enabling children to identify and change the nature of the unhelpful messages they give themselves on a daily basis, it is possible to promote more positive self-perceptions, especially regarding attitudes towards learning and experiences of school.

The 'themes' presented in the Year 7 intervention begin with the identification of thoughts and feelings about changing school, and progress to the introduction of self-talk and the practice of strategies to encourage positive self-talk. In this way, vulnerable learners can feel equipped to cope with aspects of school life that they find most challenging. In developing the activities, careful attention has been given to addressing the Every Child Matters priority areas (Being healthy, Enjoying and achieving and Making a positive contribution), and incorporating Secondary SEAL learning outcomes (Managing Feelings, Self-awareness, Empathy and Social Skills and Motivation).

Evaluation

Evaluation of the pilot project suggests that the intervention programme offers an effective means of addressing many of the issues experienced by vulnerable learners, in their transition to secondary school. The programme appears to be of greatest benefit to those who are particularly anxious about changing school, those who experience difficulties with peer relationships and those who hold negative beliefs about their learning abilities and school in general.

The intervention programme is now being rolled out to other York secondary schools this term (Autumn 2008), following the training of school staff.

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