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The LifeMatters programme for developing life-skills in children: an evaluation

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Abstract

Purpose – LifeMatters is a cognitive behavioural coaching programme that provides tools and techniques for developing and applying five areas of life skill competency: taking care of the body, feeling positive, thinking wisely, acting wisely, and taking care of the spirit. The purpose of paper is to evaluate the viability of the LifeMatters programme with a cohort of secondary school students (12-15 years) in Ireland.

Design/methodology/approach – Open-ended feedback obtained from 196 participants who completed an open-ended questionnaire. These responses were subjected to a thematic analysis. Subsequent quantitative analysis of the resulting categorical data were carried out using correspondence analysis.

Findings – Categorical analysis produced statistically significant sex and age differences showing that males and females differed in their experience of the programme. Girls benefited more from a focus upon stress and self-confidence whereas boys benefited more from a focus on relationship building.

Originality/value – This study demonstrates the viability of the LifeMatters programme for secondary school students as an aid to develop life skills. It highlights the different needs of boys and girls in this area.

Keywords Gender differences, Education, Correspondence analysis, Positive psychology, Intervention, Psychological capital, Cognitive behavioural coaching, Life skills, LifeMatters

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

An important goal for educators is to equip young people with the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural tools that might promote good mental health (Gruman *et al.*, 2013; Seligman, 2000; Wei *et al.*, 2013; Williamson *et al.*, 2013; Wolpert *et al.*, 2013). In a meta-analysis of research findings (Catalano *et al.*, 2002) outlined a set of recognisable features of positive youth development programmes. These generally sought to promote one or more of the following: bonding, resilience, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, belief in the future, as well as social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and moral competence. This study highlights the importance of using structured guidelines or manuals that facilitate implementation and foster consistency.

The traditional remit of schools has been to teach and educate students in the core academic subjects, so as to prepare them for challenges they will face in their lives (Humphrey *et al.*, 2007). However, there is an argument that social, emotional, and mental health factors are related to academic indicators (Goldstein *et al.*, 2015; Vierhaus *et al.*, 2016; Shankar and Crystal, 2016). Thus, primary and secondary schools have a

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vested interest in promoting students' personal development. In response to this, "positive" schools (Bird and Markle, 2012) that promote student well-being are becoming an important development in education practice.

Schools have a special role in promoting integrated approaches to well-being (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). Moreover, programmes that are adopted by the entire school, by being normalised and not differentiating on an individual basis, can work to prevent the social isolation of those who are experiencing mental distress. As highlighted by Spratt *et al.* (2006) the context in which individuals develop, and this includes the educational environment, has an influence on overall health and well-being. Consequently, mental health promotion targeted at school age children has become a focus both nationally and globally (Irish Education Act, 1998; WHO, 2002; Department of Education and Skills, 2013). Such interventions are necessary because problems in childhood and adolescence can compound one another and may affect school, family, relationships, and social life with serious consequences in present and later life. Research demonstrates that the mental health of children and young people foreshadows the mental health of future generations of adults (Gillham and Revich, 1999).

In the past, youth interventions were primarily responses to existing problems (Gillies and Wilcox, 1984; Kalafat, 1997; Patton and Burns, 1999; Perry *et al.*, 1992). Preventative approaches began to emerge two decades ago, with an emphasis on supporting young people before problem behaviours occurred. Most prevention programmes, guided by reductionist models, focused on single problem behaviours such as smoking, bullying, substance use/misuse, truancy, or high-risk sexual behaviour (Burkhart *et al.*, 2013; Sherman and Primack, 2009; Soole *et al.*, 2008; Tanner-Smith and Wilson, 2013; Walcott *et al.*, 2008). However, many of the early dominant prevention programmes failed to show positive impacts on youth drug use, pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, school failure, or delinquent behaviour (Ennett *et al.*, 1994; Fuller *et al.*, 1998; Gillham *et al.*, 1995; Thomas *et al.*, 1992).

A change of direction began to be advocated by many working within the intervention/prevention field (Eisenman *et al.*, 2013; Gruman *et al.*, 2013; Madden *et al.*, 2011; Williamson *et al.*, 2013). Factors that promoted positive youth development were emphasised, in addition to focusing on problem prevention. Practitioners, policy makers, and prevention scientists have advocated that models of healthy development hold the key to both health promotion and prevention of problem behaviours.

Aligned to this viewpoint, there is evidence to suggest that some forms of emotional intelligence (EI) may protect people from stress and lead to better adaptation (O'Rourke, 2004). Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences identifies a wide range of abilities, of which personal intelligence could be seen as the precursor of EI. Goleman (1995) defined EI as recognising and managing emotions in oneself and others, self-motivation and managing relationships. There is still much research and debate about the nature of this domain (Bar-On, 1997; Mayer *et al.*, 2000; Joseph and Newman, 2010). Although Gardner warned against making a direct link between his theoretical model and educational practice, his ideas have stimulated a number of responses from educators.

One such response is *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)* (Kuschè and Greenberg, 1994). This curriculum was designed to help deaf children understand, regulate and express their emotions. Subsequent implementation of the programme supports the idea that EI can be taught (Kelly *et al.*, 2004; Curtis and Norgate, 2007), and that it can build resilience in young people (Greenfield, 2006).

Ciarrochi *et al.* (2002) found that EI makes a unique contribution to understanding the relationship between stress and three important mental health variables: depression,

hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. For example, an objective measure of emotion management skill has been associated with a tendency to maintain an experimentally induced positive mood (Ciarrochi *et al.*, 2001), which has obvious implications for preventing depressive states. They also cite evidence to suggest that adolescents who are good at managing others' emotions tend to have more social support and to be more satisfied with that support. Such increased support may help to protect young people from depression and suicidal ideation (Cha and Nock, 2009; Kalafat, 1997; Motahari and Rahgozar, 2011). Thus, EI (involving both self and others) appears to help to protect people from the adverse effects of stress. The fact that life skills such as problem solving, self/other awareness, stress/emotion management and positive thinking, can be learned, feeds the potential for health promotion programme development.

Major strides in mental health promotion have largely come from a perspective focused on the systemic building of competency, rather than correcting weakness (Eisenman *et al.*, 2013; Madden *et al.*, 2011; O'Rourke, 2003; O'Rourke and Hammond, 2000; O'Rourke *et al.*, 1997; Seligman, 2000).

The LifeMatters programme

Consistent with positive psychology and research on EI, the LifeMatters programme (O'Rourke, 2004) is a group coaching programme that utilises a cognitive behaviour approach. It provides tools and techniques for learning life skills and developing goals, as well as implementing a personal support plan and applying this to five areas of life skill competency. The programme utilises a coaching approach based on the ethos of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikzentimihalyi, 2000) to foster life skills in the following five areas: taking care of the body, feeling positive, thinking wisely, acting wisely, and taking care of the spirit. Each of these group coaching sessions offer a variety of skills and step-by-step activities that support student growth and the development of EI. The programme is based upon the four-systems model (O'Rourke and Hammond, 2006), which is a biopsychosocial, cognitive-behavioural model of health and well-being that considers body, mind, spirit and context as a whole. Previous interventions have typically emphasised either physical or cognitive health (Catalano *et al.*, 2002). However, the contribution of this model is that health and well-being are conceptualised as the combination and balance of all four systems.

Specifically, the programme attempts to develop thinking skills and strategies for fostering self-esteem and conflict handling, including conflicts with family members and peers. Important health issues, EI, behavioural and emotional self-regulation, relaxation, nutrition, alcohol, and drug use are also covered, with an emphasis on responsible choice rather than censure. Our aim was to try to view the programme from the participant's perspective (Cook and Reichardt, 1979). As such, this would act as the first step towards evaluating this original programme, and aid its adoption within school settings.

Method

Participants

In total, 196 adolescents undertook the programme. They were drawn from a community school in the Republic of Ireland and were in their first and second year of secondary education (mixed sex). There were 85 (43 per cent) females and 111 (57 per cent) males in the sample. Ages ranged from 12 to 15 with a median age of 13.15 years.

Materials

Each participant received a five-part LifeMatters workbook as an integral part of the programme. They also received a feedback form following the programme delivery. This form was designed to elicit an open-ended evaluation of the programme. Participants were asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the programme as well as give their views as to its personal value to them. No limit was placed upon the amount of feedback they could provide.

Procedure

An initial trial study was conducted involving a different first-year class in a Republic of Ireland community school. A guidance teacher attached to the school delivered the programme. Such teachers, as part of their wider training, deliver learning experiences that aid young people to develop self-management skills in personal and social development (Department of Education and Science, 2005, p. 4). In addition, the teacher received training in the specific requirements of the LifeMatters programme. A structured plan was provided from which the teacher worked. The trial led to clarification and minor modification of the pilot programme. This was then presented to the two cohorts reported here. Each participant received a minimum of six group coaching-sessions and their own copy of the workbook.

LifeMatters programme sessions

This pilot study is a six-week programme that is based on a biopsychosocial model, which incorporates skill development in taking care of the body and mind, and promoting positive behaviours within the context of their social environment. The manual incorporated checklists for goal development, as well as self-monitoring strategies. Table I summarises the programme structure.

Data management

A thematic content analysis was used to analyse the student responses. The open-ended nature of the responses enabled participants to articulate their experience of the programme from their own point of view. The four-systems (body, mind, behaviour, context) categories were used as a guideline for analysis. Via the methodology of open coding, the student responses were first coded, categorised, and then subcategorised in order to capture the richness of the narrative content and to convey the participants' experience in as faithful a way as possible. All of the subthemes were related to the global themes (e.g. mind, body, behaviour, and context). However, their use enabled a deeper insight into how individuals experienced the programme.

The responses on the feedback forms were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using the concepts of coding, categorisation, and conceptualisation (Stern, 1980). Following initial readings of the transcripts, brief notes were made regarding issues emerging from the data, and key concepts were highlighted. These concepts were then grouped into categories. As the analysis progressed, a constant comparison of categories from each subsequent transcript was made. This process led to the identification of the characteristics within each category. Categories were then linked and refined so that category labels could be identified.

In order to supplement the qualitative information, the resulting categorical data were subjected to an initial bivariate χ^2 analysis so that the effects of sex and age could be explored. Finally, the multivariate interactions in this data were examined using a graphical approach known as correspondence analysis (Bland and Altman, 1995).

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
Introduction	Take care of your wonderful body	Take care of your beautiful mind	Take care of your best behaviours	Taking care of our nurturing surroundings	Take care of your Exceptional Spirit
What do you need to be healthy, happy and live a productive life	Be more active and exercise	Train your brain	Making all your behaviours your best	Sorting out your surroundings	Needs and seeds
How can you plant these seeds in your life	Make more wise food choices	Develop a positive mental attitude	Making wise choices	Being responsible for your safety	Identifying our Spirit
How to start to develop a personal support plan	Avoid alcohol and other drugs	Power thinking	Being an assertive person	Caring for others	Goal setting and life planning
	Rest, relax and restore	The power of thinking positively	Always act safely	Coping at school	
		Overcoming anxiety	Managing anger and strong feelings	Getting on with other people	
What do you need to be healthy, happy and live a productive life		Dealing with panic attacks		Getting on with difficult people	
How can you plant these seeds in your life		Overcoming depression		Seeking help	

Source: For more details of the programme see O'Rourke and Hammond (2006)

Table I. Content of each of the six sessions within the LifeMatters programme

Results

Broad a priori themes

The four major a priori themes corresponding to the four-systems model (body, mind, behaviour, context) were clearly identified in the participants' responses. This was not surprising as the programme made very specific reference to these themes and used them as the structural framework of the programme.

First, with regard to body (in which subthemes of raised awareness, alcohol and drugs, nutrition, and relaxation were identified), both male and female students reported that the programme improved their outlook on diet, sleep and relaxation: "[…] it taught me how to relax so you can do better in exams"; "I pay more attention in school now". Comments on drugs and alcohol were particularly encouraging: "[…] it helped me to learn more about drugs and alcohol and the harmful effects they have on you personally"; "[…] knowing how drugs affect not just your body but your body and mind together"; "[…] how they make things worse not better"; "They change how you think".

The mind theme was composed of the subthemes of calm, positive mental attitude, self-esteem, self-awareness, stress, and depression. Once more, there was a marked positive response. At least two-thirds of students (both male and female) stated that the programme provided them with the skills to deal with these important issues. Typical responses included: "[…] knowing how the body and mind worked together really helped me to understand myself"; "[…] if you're going through depression it helps you

cope better"; "[…] knowing how to stay calm in bad situations"; "[…] to solve problems you have in school and family"; "It helped me feel good about myself"; "[…] to deal with some things I thought I would never get out of my mind".

With regard to behaviour, subthemes included interpersonal skills, problem solving, concentration, behaviour change, anger management, and decision making. Over 60 per cent of responses focused on interaction in the context of the above subthemes, with particular emphasis on "friends" and on "bullying". For example, "[…] it showed me how bullying affects the person you are bullying and how it can affect yourself"; "[…] how to make good decisions"; "[…] to keep calm and not to get so angry"; "[…] how to be a friend".

Finally, context dealt with important skills such as life planning, getting on with people, and dealing with difficult people. Here again, the students' responses revealed the success of the programme in helping to foster coping strategies in young people and enhancing insight and awareness of self and other. For example, "[…] it made me aware of other people's feelings"; "[…] it helped me know how to get along with people"; "[…] to like myself better"; "I look at life in a whole different light".

It must be emphasised that the feedback forms were completed by the students after the programme had finished and without access to the workbook. When this is taken into consideration, the recall level of the students regarding the important themes of the programme is both impressive and encouraging. Furthermore, because the workbook is intended as an ongoing resource to be accessed on a continuing basis, it is expected that the positive effects will be enhanced over time.

Categorical analyses

The categories, or subthemes, identified in the content analysis underlying the a priori themes were identified as those relating to the programme delivery (six) and those describing content that the participants deemed useful (18). These 24 categories were identified by one researcher and were then examined by a second researcher for refinement. The resulting 24 categories were then provided as a template for a second and third researcher to use in categorising each participant's responses. The 24 categories are scored for each participant as being present or absent in his or her feedback. This dichotomisation of the content categories provides the basis for a categorical analysis with respect to sex and age cohort differences.

The results of the template scoring are summarised in Table II. The label for each category identified is presented in the first column of the table. The degree of agreement between the second and third researcher was evaluated by use of Cohen's (1960) unweighted κ coefficient, which provides an estimate of the reliability of the appraisal of each category. This is presented in the second column of the table. The percentage of times that each category was cited by the participants is recorded in the third column. A χ^2 analysis with Yates' correction was carried out by sex and age separately. The χ^2 values are presented in columns 4 and 5, respectively. As each of these analyses were based upon a four-point table and there were six programme delivery themes and 18 content themes, a Bonferroni adjustment (Bland and Altman, 1995) requires χ^2 values of 6.97 and 8.99, respectively to satisfy a 5 per cent significance level.

Sex differences

Five comparisons proved to manifest a statistically significant sex difference and in all cases the females showed a greater prevalence of responses. Thus, females were more likely to cite instruction in self-presentation, confidence building, stress management, and dealing with peer pressure as positive themes of the programme. Females also

	Reliability κ	%	χ^2 broken down by Sex	Age
Programme delivery				
Activities	0.84	39.81	**16.78**	*4.21+*
Clarity	0.64	14.81	0.29	1.02
Too long	0.61	11.11	1.46	1.97
Too short	0.60	6.48	1.72	*4.46–*
Specificity	0.38	1.85	1.29	0.04
Less writing	0.39	1.85	0.20	0.00
Content themes				
Study	0.81	40.74	1.05	1.27
Positive thinking	0.84	38.88	0.57	0.12
Confidence	0.74	38.88	**19.95**	*3.92+*
Relationships	0.77	34.26	0.85	0.48
Presentation	0.78	34.26	**28.14**	1.59
Relax	0.81	32.41	0.87	0.48
Planning	0.78	24.07	0.21	0.10
Body health	0.91	20.37	1.50	0.01
Stress	0.79	17.59	**17.01**	*5.48+*
Bullying	0.68	12.04	2.00	0.49
Express feelings	0.61	11.11	5.82	0.03
Alcohol-drugs	0.88	10.18	1.97	*6.05–*
Depression	0.82	10.18	0.03	0.51
Peer pressure	0.57	10.18	**10.52**	*5.31+*
Sexual relations	0.72	8.33	0.83	*5.19–*
Awareness	0.39	0.92	2.13	1.38
New things	0.49	0.92	0.20	0.00
Chatrooms	1.00	0.92	0.85	0.00

Table II.
Themes identified by participants relating to programme delivery and relevant content broken down by sex and age

Notes: Italic values are significant at the 5 per cent level unadjusted. Bold values are significant at the 5 per cent level following Bonferroni adjustment

cited the activities used in the programme as having a positive benefit more than males did. It should be noted that these results may be biased by the fact that the females in the sample tended to be more detailed in their responses than the males.

Age differences

The analyses on age revealed seven statistically significant differences between first- and second-year students before Bonferroni adjustment, but none following adjustment. Those indexed by a – sign reveal that older students made greater reference to these themes, while the + sign indicates the opposite. Thus, first-year students recognised instruction in peer pressure, stress management and self-confidence as positive aspects of the programme, while second-year students identified the coverage of alcohol and drugs and sexual relations as particularly beneficial. In terms of programme delivery, older participants were more likely to report that the programme was too short. Although all reported that they like doing the activities, first-year students reported this more strongly.

Correspondence analysis

In order to examine the interaction between sex and age, and to take into account the multivariate nature of the analyses, a correspondence analysis was carried out

(Benzécri, 1979; Greenacre, 1984). This technique explores the underlying associations between the content categories as differentiated by participant groups. In this way it may be conceived as a form of discriminant or canonical analysis for nominal data. The method provides an *n*-dimensional mapping of the content themes in Euclidean space. In addition, the groups can then be projected into this same space providing relative reference points to aid interpretation of the superordinate structure.

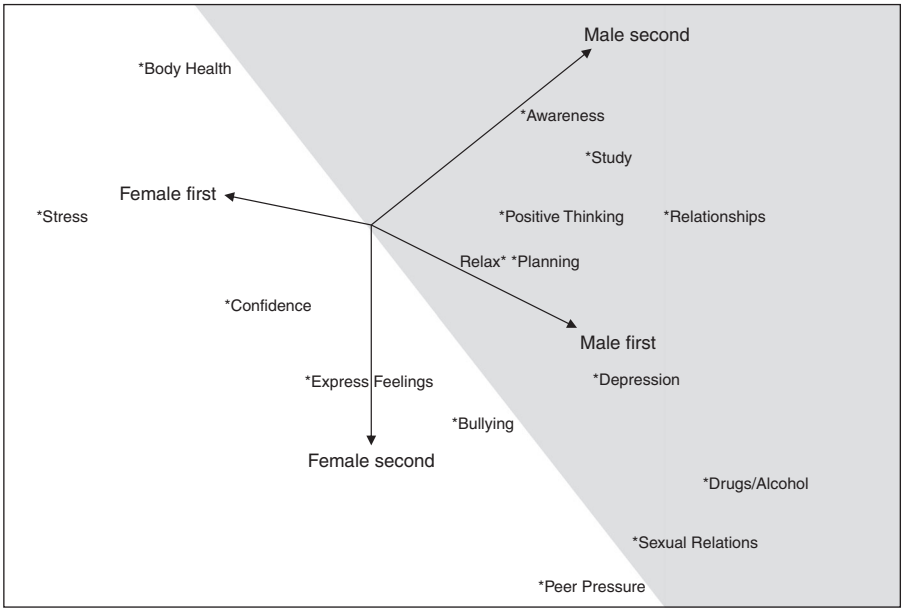
Table III summarises the eigenstructure analysis leading to the resulting mapping presented in Figure 1. The dimensionality of the optimal space was found to be two using the typical method of only selecting statistically significant inertia values. Inertia represents the amount of variance accounted for, and a cumulative total of the two inertias reveal that 83.86 per cent of the variance was accounted for in the resulting two-dimensional solution. In summary, a two-dimensional correspondence analysis was indicated, and this is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 demonstrates that there is a clear gender partitioning of the space, with males occupying the east and females occupying the west. Findings presented in Table I show that sex revealed a more significant discrimination in thematic content

Co-ordinate	% of intertia	χ^2	df	Probability
1	52.42	41.37	17	< 0.01
2	31.44	23.66	15	< 0.05

Notes: Summary of correspondence analysis discriminating four groups on 15 content themes

Table III. Eigen analysis for the 2-dimensional correspondence analysis solution



Notes: *Represents the location point of each variable. The shading indicates the "male" region on the plot

Figure 1. Correspondence analysis of four student groups and 15 themes identified as relevant

than age and this is reflected in the spatial partitioning here, where age is less clearly differentiated. However, it is interesting to note that second-year females appear more similar to first-year males than to their own first-year peers, suggesting an interaction. The implications of these findings are explored below.

The issues found to be most useful in the LifeMatters Programme ranged across the space, with stress being particularly salient for female first-year participants and depression being particularly relevant to male first-year. Given the typically sex-segregated nature of Irish education, this plot offers some tentative suggestions of the relevant salience of a variety of life skill themes for first- and second-year students.

Discussion

The aim of the LifeMatters programme has been to draw together separate areas of research within a framework of empirically tested cognitive/behavioural principles that are underpinned by the philosophy of positive psychology. In so doing, the programme aims to engender confidence, coping strategies, and self-awareness in young people, thus enabling them to be optimistic about their personal and educational futures.

The present study was designed to gain an understanding of young people's experience of taking part in an intervention, which promotes the development of positive psychological life skills. Thus, it provided a first step in its evaluation. A wider aim was to determine its suitability as a psychological capital-building exercise as part of a response to a growing recognition of stress and distress in young people and amidst the increasing implementation of school-based intervention programmes. In doing so, this study appraises one possible "shift in approach" model to mental health promotion.

The LifeMatters programme addressed the issues of younger and older, and male and female students notwithstanding the differential saliency of these issues between the groups. Moreover, participants were almost unanimously positive and offered constructive accounts of their experience. Comments were made concerning the programme implementation and, while there was some inconsistency (e.g. 11 per cent mentioned the programme was too long while 6 per cent stated that it was too short), a large number cited the activities as being a positive aspect of the programme. With respect to the programme content, the themes of studying, positive thinking, confidence, relationships, self-presentation, and relaxation were cited as particularly useful by over 30 per cent of the sample. Interestingly, these marry exceptionally well to the broad aims of the Social Personal and Health Education Curriculum for primary schools, which are "to promote self-esteem and self-confidence, personal skills, responsible decision-making, opportunities to reflect and discuss and to promote physical, mental, emotional health and well-being" (Geary and Mannix-McNamara, 2002, p. 7).

From an educational perspective, the findings are beneficial because such improvements in social, emotional and mental health functioning can improve learning and learning-related behaviours (Catalano *et al.*, 2002). However, modern-day secondary schools have more ambitious aims than just improving academic performance (Kuschè and Greenberg, 1994; Williamson *et al.*, 2013; Department of Education and Skills, 2013). The implementation of life skills programmes has the added benefit of making a positive contribution to many other areas of young people's lives. For example, as well as improved attendance and academic performance, Catalano *et al.*'s review revealed improved interpersonal skills, healthier peer and adult relationships, improved decision-making abilities, and less substance use and abuse.

Analyses of the findings highlight some useful suggestions and caveats. The male and female experience of taking part in the programme was different and this was independent of their ages. The patterns that emerged suggest that some tailoring of the programme for different constituencies (sex and age) may be beneficial. This might involve, for example, a greater emphasis on the topics of stress and self-confidence for girls with more on relationships for boys. Perhaps a special emphasis on managing depression with younger boys is particularly indicated by Figure 1. However, it would be wrong to extrapolate too far from these data, as they were collected simply to inform the viability of the programme. Rather, the results presented serve to target future, more direct exploration of differential programme provision for adolescent males and females of different ages. These findings also give confidence in recommending the programme and moving into the next stage of implementation.

Educators should be aware of the difficulties facing schools in terms of implementing programmes that aim to develop social, emotional, and positive mental health functioning. It is important to recognise the demands that such programmes place on an already overloaded timetable, as well as the lack of adequate training, resources, and support that teachers in this context have to face (Geary and Mannix-McNamara, 2002). However, like others (e.g. DfFS, 2001) we believe the benefits significantly outweigh the difficulties in initial development and implementation work. As well as the positive reaction to LifeMatters as demonstrated in this study, it also has a number of other beneficial features, which make it useful in this context. For example, it is an activities-based, experiential learning programme, which could be easily incorporated into existing school curricula. It could also be used with both younger and older students, and could be useful across different countries. The manner in which the activities are presented, and perhaps their focus, would need to be modified to take account of developmental and cultural considerations. However, doing so in a way that is consistent with the programme aims is perfectly feasible. Furthermore, it could also add to programmes, such as the Social Personal and Health Education Curriculum, by dealing more specifically with mental health issues (e.g. raising awareness, detection, reaction, etc.), and also act as a referral route to more specialised programmes.

Additionally, one of the key benefits of the LifeMatters programme is its ease of implementation, as training requires minimal resources and the programme can be effectively administered by one teacher. A further stage in LifeMatters' development and implementation is to broaden the programme to appeal to older students in secondary school.

In this paper, we report on the use of a group coaching programme based upon a cognitive behaviour model (the LifeMatters programme) within a school setting, and which was designed to equip young people with tools that promote good mental health. This is significant because in the face of increasing levels of mental ill health in educational settings, this approach, as well as promoting psychological well-being, can act as a preventative measure against mental distress. Because our findings can immediately be applied in group coaching contexts, this study should be of interest to readers who have an interest in second-level educational. Although the programme is geared to these students, its principles could be adapted for use with those entering third-level education.

Conclusions

The present study contributes to the evidence base of using group coaching approaches to build psychological capital among secondary school students. Although the intervention

is workbook based, the benefits of the intervention differed in response to the needs of distinct cohorts (younger vs older, male vs female). Consequently, it demonstrates how a group coaching approach can meet individual goals in educational settings.

The purpose of this study is to build the evidence base for brief interventions that aim to boost the biopsychosocial functioning of young people such that, through increased EI, they can successfully negotiate the challenges of their developmental stage. The present research is preliminary in scope and should be viewed as an initial viability study into the LifeMatters programme in secondary schools. The results are promising and enable us to recommend the programme as a means of providing a comprehensive approach to developing strengths in adolescents that maximise their potential and can protect them from mental health difficulties.

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