

<b>Institution:</b> University of Sussex		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 4 – Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Promoting mental health and well-being in schools through assessing peer group processes		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> Jan 2000 – Aug 2014		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Robin Banerjee	Professor of Developmental Psychology	1998 – present
Dawn Watling	Postdoctoral Research Fellow	2002 – 2005
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> Sep 2013 – Sep 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> <p>The mental health of children and young people is an increasing focus of attention for schools, but the relevance of their peer relationships was often neglected in the past. Banerjee's research produced insights into the importance of social, cognitive, and emotional processes in these relationships, and led to his creation of free online assessment resources to support schools with visualising and understanding children's social and emotional functioning. Since 2013, these have been used by teachers and educational psychologists in over 400 schools from over 40 different UK local authorities, as well as schools in six other countries, to identify vulnerable individuals and groups, and to plan both formal and informal classroom, small-group, and individual interventions to build social skills and promote well-being. By focusing on peer relationships, Banerjee's research has also changed educational policy and practice in terms of adopting a whole-class and whole-school approach to promoting well-being. His evidence-based focus on relationships is explicitly recommended in official local and national government guidance, and has shaped the core guidance on Health and Well-being in the new national curriculum for Wales.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> <p>Banerjee's research illuminates the relevance and value of peer group processes as a window into children's mental health and well-being. His research in developmental psychology is focused on how children think, feel, and behave in the context of peer relationships, particularly in terms of how they regulate the way they present themselves to peers. This focus on 'self-presentation' relates to behaviour (e.g. distinctive behavioural presentations to peers vs. adults), social cognition (e.g. understanding of mental states), emotional functioning (e.g. social anxiety), and specific indicators of children's peer relationships (e.g. nominations of playmates) (R1). Banerjee's peer-reviewed publications have demonstrated systematic connections among these cognitive, affective, behavioural, and socio-relational variables, showing that greater peer acceptance is linked to a more sophisticated understanding of emotions (R2).</p> <p>The implications of this work for mental health and well-being have been addressed explicitly in Banerjee's work. For example, research led by Banerjee's lab – involving PhD students, international collaborators, and Local Authority partners – has shown how children with higher levels of mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression have maladaptive strategies for coping with peer conflicts (R3). Crucially, this area of research has the significance of moving away from a 'within-child' model of children's behavioural and emotional problems to a 'between-child' model that requires assessing and responding to how children think and feel within the context of their peer relationships.</p>		

Subsequent research activities have advanced this understanding further. One collaborative programme tracked children's development longitudinally through the primary school years, with regular assessments of theory of mind, verbal ability, and prosocial behaviour, alongside completion of peer nominations. Results showed that early development of theory of mind was associated with greater prosocial behaviour, which in turn led to less likelihood of peer rejection and greater likelihood of peer acceptance (R4). Other longitudinal work has demonstrated that peer rejection serves both as an antecedent and a consequence of children's difficulties with understanding others' beliefs, intentions, and emotions in everyday social encounters (R5). Collectively, Banerjee's work has demonstrated that the peer context is a critical location for both problems and solutions in children's ability to manage the demands of social life at school.

Finally, Banerjee's research has drawn attention to the wider social context within which the above peer processes operate. Notably, his research on national educational strategies to promote social and emotional skills has demonstrated that adopting a whole-school approach – focusing not just on individual children's problems but also on the many layers of relationships they have across the entire school community – is associated with enhanced perceptions of the overall school ethos and in turn with key outcome indices such as better academic attainment on standardised tests and reduced levels of persistent absence (R6). In sum, Banerjee's body of work clarifies the relevance of peer group processes for children's well-being, and underlines the value of addressing peer relationships within the wider context of the whole school community.

### 3. References to the research

- R1. Banerjee, R. (2002). Audience effects on self-presentation in childhood. *Social Development*, 11, 487-507. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00212>
- R2. Banerjee, R., Rieffe, C., Meerum Terwogt, M., Gerlein, A. M., & Voutsina, M. (2006). Popular and rejected children's reasoning about negative emotions in social situations: The role of gender. *Social Development*, 15, 418-433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2006.00349.x>
- R3. Wright, M., Banerjee, R., Hoek, W., Rieffe, C., & Novin, S. (2010). Depression and social anxiety in children: Differential links with coping strategies. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 38, 405-419. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-009-9375-4>
- R4. Caputi, M., Lecce, S., Pagnin, A., & Banerjee, R. (2012). Longitudinal effects of theory of mind on later peer relations: The role of prosocial behaviour. *Developmental Psychology*, 48, 257-270. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025402>
- R5. Banerjee, R., Watling, D., & Caputi, M. (2011). Peer relations and the understanding of faux pas: Longitudinal evidence for bidirectional associations. *Child Development*, 82, 1887-1905. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01669.x>
- R6. Banerjee, R., Weare, K., & Farr, W. (2014). Working with 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning' (SEAL): Associations with school ethos, pupil social experiences, attendance, and attainment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40, 718-742. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3114>

Banerjee was the PI for grants giving rise to R1, R3, R5, and R6 (British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 'Self-conscious cognition and emotion in primary school children', £66,534, 10/1999-09/2002; local authorities; Department for Children, Schools and Families). He supervised Wright's PhD work for R3. He was the co-lead for the international collaborations giving rising to R2 and R4. Total citations for R1-R6: 429; average field-weighted citation index for R1-R6: 2.78 (Scopus).

### 4. Details of the impact

The impact of Banerjee's research is centred both on the widespread adoption of assessment and intervention practices to address the role of peer group processes in children's well-being at school, and on the shaping of local and national policy situating Banerjee's work on peer relationships at the heart of whole-school approaches to promoting children's social and emotional skills and well-being.

In the early development of this applied work between 2002 and 2012, various local authorities including Brighton & Hove, Derby, Bracknell, Bridgend, and the Vale of Glamorgan commissioned Banerjee's lab to develop specific strategies for assessing and tracking changes in peer relationships alongside measures of mental health and well-being. In order to support this work, Banerjee created a new online package ([www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/cress/tools](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/cress/tools)) of accessible assessment tools for recording children's peer nominations and producing a visual map ('sociogram') of relationships and friendship groups within a given class of children. This is accompanied by a highly accessible set of individual graphs showing children's self-reported social and emotional experiences as well as their peer-reported behavioural reputation within the class.

### **Educational Practices for Mapping Peer Relationships**

Since 2014, the uptake of work to assess and respond to peer group dynamics when promoting well-being in schools has continued to spread widely, helped by Banerjee's commitment to knowledge exchange – with keynote lectures and workshops during training and dissemination events for practitioners and policymakers in more than twenty local authorities. In fact, between January 2014 and July 2019, 416 schools in 43 UK local authorities registered a total of 3,451 new class accounts to use the free online resource, and the total number of online questionnaires completed by children and young people in that timeframe, in order to map their peer relationships, was 115,884.

As one illustration of the systematic adoption of this approach, the Vale of Glamorgan has rolled out the use of these assessment tools, fully integrated with their local school data management system, to evaluate well-being across schools in the local authority (starting from five and rising to 60 schools, surveying over 9000 students in the first two years following implementation in 2015). This was an explicit strategy to promote well-being and is prominently cited in the assessment of well-being for the local authority as a whole. Specifically, the local authority's evidence report (C1a) indicates that the University of Sussex system "has helped identify children with lower levels of well-being and helped target action plans to improve their well-being." The Principal Educational Psychologist states that "Teachers very much value the information generated by the tools ... allowing them to use both structured and informal interventions to promote positive change." The testimonial goes on to note the benefits accruing to schools from this: "Impact evaluation over a number of years reliably shows ... improvements in wellbeing" (C1b).

In addition to the UK adoption of this approach, there have been 345 further class accounts set up during the same time period by eight schools in six other countries: Spain, Japan, Philippines, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and New Zealand. Many schools registered new sets of classes to use the assessment tools every year, and many classes complete the surveys on multiple occasions to help teachers track change, demonstrating how the work has been systematically integrated into routine educational practice. For example, in an article in one online outlet aimed at international educators, specifically focusing on the adoption of Banerjee's online resource, a head teacher is quoted as saying, "We have used the results ... to identify children who were rejected and support them to build links to the class through several interventions." Another specialist staff member reported that:

"Teachers expressed their appreciation as [the resource] enabled them to incorporate this knowledge into their planning ... as well as to identify pupils who would benefit from an individual or group intervention" (C2).

Indeed, Banerjee's approach to mapping peer networks is now regularly cited by practitioners – in education blogs for teachers as well as reading lists and textbooks for trainee educational psychologists (C3) – as a routine means for assessing needs and planning and monitoring interventions to promote children's socio-emotional skills and well-being. Most recently, as part of its recovery tool to support schools with mental health and well-being in the Covid-19 pandemic, the National Children's Bureau specifically highlights Banerjee's resource in guidance to schools, noting that it can be used "to profile social and emotional functioning of classes, reveal the patterns of inter-personal relationships and help teachers to identify children who may be struggling with their place in the class" (C4).

The reach of Banerjee's research impact has grown through the endorsement of these practices at a national level, particularly across Wales. As one senior leader from a Welsh local authority stated in a testimonial:

"The work [using the online tools] was also shared nationally in a best practice Welsh Government event and as a result other local authorities took up the programme and embedded the approaches across the schools in their area" (C5).

Similarly, Banerjee's approach to mapping peer relationships has been specifically highlighted at the national level in Wales by the government committee for children, young people, and education (C6), and over 240 schools from 13 local authorities in Wales have made use of his online resource between January 2014 and July 2019.

### **Educational Policy on Peer Relationships within a Whole-School Approach**

Key policy and guidance documents cite Banerjee's work on children's social and emotional functioning, explicitly using his research to highlight the potential benefits of whole-school approaches to promoting social and emotional skills. These include: guidance from the National Children's Bureau Partnership for Well-Being and Mental Health in Schools; government briefings on well-being for school leaders produced by Public Health England; local authority guidance to schools to Brighton & Hove; and international guidance to schools by the EU Joint Action on Mental Health and Well-being under 'Selected examples of good practice' (C7).

Banerjee's work has also directly influenced the shape of the new national Curriculum for Wales. Based on the widespread adoption of his research-based online resource across Welsh local authorities, Banerjee was commissioned by the Welsh Government to distil key educational recommendations from the literature on promoting well-being in schools (C8). Following on from this, his consultancy work for Welsh Government has particularly influenced the focus on peer relationships within the national curriculum. In a public letter jointly authored by the Minister for Health & Social Services and the Minister for Education, Banerjee is the only academic mentioned, singled out for his contribution to the development of the 'Health and Well-being' area of the curriculum (C9a, p.9); the government guidance presentation on the curriculum explicitly highlights evidence from Banerjee as the key input concerning "relationships and social and emotional learning" (C9b).

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government has continued to consult with Banerjee on national guidance to schools, drawing upon his research to highlight the role of social relationships in children's well-being, particularly in the context of returning to school following lockdown over the summer. This is clearly expressed in the [text removed for publication] 2020 testimonial regarding the shaping of national guidance in this area:

"Robin Banerjee's research on the importance of peer group processes, within a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being, has played a key role in shaping our guidance to schools for the Health and Well-being area of the Curriculum for Wales. His work also influenced our national recommendations to schools regarding educational priorities to support learners' health and well-being when they returned to school in Autumn 2020" (C10).

### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- C1. Vale of Glamorgan Council's strategic use of Banerjee's online resource for promoting well-being in schools, shown in a [2017 Local Authority report](#) on the evaluation of well-being (C1a) and testimonial from the Principal Educational Psychologist (C1b)
- C2. [Web article](#) from 2019 in *The International Educator* describing and recommending educators' implementation of Banerjee's online resource for mapping peer relationships at schools
- C3. Illustrative collection of practitioners' descriptions of sociometric assessments being used routinely to inform and evaluate interventions to promote socio-emotional skills and well-being in school, including an [education blog for teachers](#) (C3a, 2014), a newsletter for parents (C3b, 2019), and a reading list (C3c, 2016) and textbook (C3d, 2014) for educational psychologists

- C4. National Children Bureau's 2020 [Self-Review and Signpost tool](#) citing Banerjee's online resources to support school's recovery work on mental health and well-being in the context of Covid-19
- C5. Testimonial from Nichola Jones, Head of Inclusion, Well-being, and Disabilities at Pembrokeshire County Council, regarding the endorsement and spread of work with Banerjee's online resources (2018)
- C6. Public document pack for the Children, Young People, and Education Committee for the National Assembly for Wales (2017), describing Welsh schools' adoption of Banerjee's approach of using surveys and creating sociograms to "highlight potential vulnerabilities and associated risk factors related to mental and emotional wellbeing" (Paper 3, paragraph 14)
- C7. Collection of guidance documents from the [National Children's Bureau](#) (C7a, 2015), [Public Health England](#) (C7b, 2014), [Brighton & Hove City Council](#) (C7c, 2018), and The [EU Joint Action on Mental Health and Well-being](#) (C7d, 2017), explicitly using Banerjee's research to recommend promoting whole-school approaches to social and emotional functioning as best practice
- C8. Banerjee's commissioned [research synthesis and recommendations for Welsh Government](#) on emotional health and well-being in schools (2016)
- C9. Documents highlighting Banerjee's work in relation to the Health and Well-being area of the new Curriculum for Wales, including a joint letter from the Minister for Health and Social Services and Minister for Education to the Assembly Member Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee (C9a, 2019), and an official Welsh Government PowerPoint presentation introducing the Health and Well-being area of the new national curriculum (C9b, 2019)
- C10. Testimonial from [text removed for publication], on Banerjee's research contribution to the development of the national Curriculum for Wales and national guidance on the return to schools in Autumn 2020.