Supporting emotional well-being in schools in the context of austerity: An ecologically informed humanistic perspective

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Background. Schools are commonly asked to take on roles that support the emotional well-being of students. These practices are in line with humanistic education theory and can be difficult to fulfil by schools. Broader ecological pressures, such as periods of austerity, are likely to add to the difficulty in meeting students' needs.

Aims. To explore whether professionals in schools believe that their work supporting pupils' emotional well-being has changed as a consequence of the current period of austerity.

Sample. This project reports the views of staff from three secondary schools in the North West of England. A purposive sample of 29 individuals, including members of the senior leadership team and newly qualified teachers, were involved.

Methods. All participants were interviewed about their perceptions of the impact of a sustained period of austerity upon their work. The transcripts of these interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings. Educational professionals associated wider socio-political factors with a perceived increase in the need for emotional support of pupils. They reported taking on new roles and responsibilities to accommodate this and noted they are doing so with fewer resources and limited governmental support.

Conclusions. This paper concludes that considering humanistic education theory alongside ecological theory helps to conceptualize how socio-political factors can impact upon the emotional well-being in schools. An ecologically informed humanistic framework is depicted based upon the findings of this project as a means of understanding how these two theories complement one another and interact.

Schools are commonly being asked to take on roles that pro-actively support the emotional well-being of their pupils (Humphrey, 2013). Indeed, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2003) notes that supporting emotional well-being is an important responsibility for schools. Further, expectations in this area appear to be evolving and becoming more significant in certain countries; for instance, the *Future in Mind* publication by the Department of Health in the United Kingdom (UK) views schools as

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potential hubs for offering child and adolescent mental health services (Department of Health, 2015).

The primary rationale for using schools as focal points for supporting the emotional well-being of students is that they are able to provide convenient access points for services that are familiar to the children, young people and families who may need additional support (Humphrey, Wolpert, Hanley, Sefi, & Shorrock, 2012). However, in contrast to the enthusiasm for having schools engage in such developments, the theoretical conceptualization of such work has received little attention to date. This paper therefore uses two key interrelated theoretical lenses to consider the findings from a recent study in the United Kingdom. It uses principles from humanistic education (Patterson, 1973) to consider the way in which professionals working in schools perceive their roles to be changing, and, to acknowledge the distinct challenges associated with the socio-political climate of austerity upon well-being (Barr, Kinderman, & Whitehead, 2015), Bronfen-brenner's ecological theory (1979). In the sections that follow an overview of related literature regarding humanistic education and ecological understandings of distress are provided before discussing the study in more detail.

Humanistic education

The mandate for schools to be pro-active in supporting the emotional well-being of pupils is not a new debate. Indeed, consideration of whether schools should address 'intellect' or 'moral character' can be traced all the way back to Aristotle in Ancient Greece (Pring, 2010). More recently however, humanistic educationalists advocate that schools purposefully support the development of educational environments that facilitate constructive growth of the whole person (e.g., Patterson, 1973; Winter, 2018). These take from the realms of humanistic psychology (Bugental, 1964) and emphasize the belief that all humans are unique, have the potential to constructively grow, and have agency within the world (Gillon, 2007; Hanley & Winter, 2016). Further, they take from client-centred therapeutic theory, in which authenticity, empathy, and acceptance are regarded as central to any facilitative environment (Rogers, 1957). In drawing parallels between the process of education and therapy, the eminent humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers stated, 'to my mind the "best" of education would produce a person similar to the one produced by the "best" of therapy' (1969, p. 279). These developments in educational theory have led to teaching approaches that prize learning methods that are reflective, dialogic, and democratic (Aloni, 2002). Although the extremities of this movement are viewed by many as straying too far from contemporary expectations (e.g., examinations being an unnecessary extrinsic goal), the core principles associated with humanistic education have been positively correlated to successful academic attainment (e.g., Cornelius-White, 2007) and have been reframed successfully into less radical approaches such as 'learner-centred instruction' (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010).

School professionals can be seen to adopt a wide variety of roles to support the emotional well-being of pupils. They are typically pragmatic in their ethos and reactive to the needs of the groups or individuals in need of support, rather than being fully embedded within a broader educational theory. As such, humanistic education theory is not discussed within the recent developments that focus upon making schools hubs for mental health support. Instead, rather than viewing the child holistically and engaging with the theoretical debates about how these activities might interact, the worlds of education and health appear to be quite neatly divided. This way of working can be very

flexible and responsive to presenting needs. However, previous research highlights that where teachers cross over into significant supportive roles, this can also prove challenging. For instance, when teaching staff provide mental health support, studies indicate that they do not always feel completely confident in this growing part of their work (Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Kidger, Gunnell, Biddle, Campbell, & Donovan, 2009). Such observations highlight a potential mismatch between the skills that teachers are trained in and the activities that they are asked to undertake. Further, studies exploring the integration of other support staff (e.g., counsellors and psychologists) into schools have commonly highlighted significant practical challenges for interagency working (Cooper, Evans, & Pybis, 2016).

An ecological understanding of emotional well-being: The impact of austerity

Many approaches to supporting the emotional well-being of pupils can be seen to problematize the person who is visibly at the centre of the difficulties. As such, attempts to address problems commonly focus upon individuals (e.g., pupil x is struggling with low mood and therefore they will be offered one-to-one therapy). An alternative view is to adopt a systemic perspective, in which the broader ecology of a person's life is considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Domitrovich *et al.*, 2008). In such frameworks, the impacts of broader changes, such as those within society (macrosystem), communities (exosystem), or families (microsystem), are also factored in when considering the distress that individuals may experience. These perspectives, commonly aligned to the critical psychology movements (e.g., Prilleltensky, 2013), argue that individuals need to be considered within the social contexts that they inhabit and any associated interventions also need to take account of this. In contrast, humanistic approaches are sometimes critiqued for being too centred upon individuals (O'Hara, 1989). However, adopting an ecological perspective which acknowledges the importance of the socio-political context the individual is embedded in is an important part of attending to the 'whole' person (Perrett, 2006). Therefore, it can be argued that to look at the individual from a humanistic theoretical position necessitates looking at the broader systems they are situated in (Nash, 2006; Winter, 2018).

The United Kingdom, the direct context of this research, entered into a period of austerity following the 2010 election of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government. Following on from the international financial crises in 2007/08, numerous countries globally adopted economic policies focusing on austerity: 'a "voluntary deflation" in which governments reduce public spending, wages and prices of goods and aim to increase competitiveness' (Blyth, 2013, p. 2). This led to reductions in state spending and the shrinking of the welfare state (e.g., Karanikolos *et al.*, 2013), including reductions to Local Authority budgets (impacting upon social care, children's centres, libraries, and some health services), and significant changes to the tax and benefits system. Low-income families with children are adjudged to have lost the most in the United Kingdom from the changes to the benefits system and the taxes introduced between 2010 and 2014 (De Agostini, Hills, & Sutherland, 2014).

Given the wide-ranging impacts of the global financial crisis, although this project is situated within a UK context, it has resonance with other international contexts. Changes, such as those noted above, impact greatly upon peoples' lives and the impact of poverty and inequality upon mental health is well documented (Allen, Balfour, Bell, & Marmot, 2014; WHO, 2014). These policy changes have had a direct impact upon educational practices (e.g., Jones, 2015; Simmie, Moles, & O'Grady, 2016), and specific changes such

as the removal of the spare room subsidy (colloquially known as the 'bedroom tax') have led to explicit changes in pastoral support structures (Bragg *et al.*, 2015; Winter, Burman, Hanley, Kalambouka, & Mccoy, 2016). In this latter project, school staff and community workers reported encountering increases in poverty, new challenges related to hunger within schools, and the perception of increased mental health needs. It also highlighted that schools respond to challenges such as these by allocating school resources to extend breakfast club provision, provide short-term loans to families, and increase pastoral care services, interventions that fall quite far out of the stereotypical roles and responsibilities associated with schools.

Rationale and research question

Given the challenging socio-economic climate that preceded this study, this paper explores the perceived impacts of a sustained period of austerity upon the way that schools support the emotional well-being of pupils.

We report the findings of a significant focal point of a larger project (Hanley, Winter & Burrell, 2017), with the specific research question reported here being, *How do professionals, working in schools, believe their work supporting the emotional well-being of pupils has changed as a consequence of the wider context austerity?* The findings from this exploratory question are then considered in relation to the principles of humanistic education theory and ecological theory within the discussion. These lenses, which have not been considered explicitly in empirical work before, are used to provide a theoretical reflection upon the current political trend of supporting the emotional well-being of children and young people within schools.

Methods

A qualitative design was adopted which aimed to facilitate conversations that would help gain a rich understanding of the phenomena of interest (Levitt *et al.*, 2018). Ethical approval was granted by the host University of the first author.

The research team

In keeping with qualitative research guidelines, a brief statement about the authors' relationship to the topic is provided (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Levitt *et al.*, 2018). The research team consisted of experienced qualitative researchers with interests in exploring issues related to social justice and the therapeutic role of schools. Two (TH and LW) are practising psychologists, two of the team have school age children in the same region (KB and TH), and all have worked in educational settings in a variety of capacities (contributing to administrative support, offering school based counselling, and working as a School Governor).

Participants

Three secondary schools from Manchester in the United Kingdom were recruited as case study schools (catering for 11–16 year olds). For the purpose of this report, these schools have been given fictional names: Hillview Academy, Newtown School, and Littlewood School. Table 1 outlines some key information for each school. The information related to

Table 1. Key descriptive features of the schools involved

	School 1	School 2	School 3
Name	Hillview Academy	Newtown School	Littlewood School
Type	Mixed Comprehensive	Mixed Comprehensive	Mixed Comprehensive
Pupils	1,500	1,000	1,000
Pupil Premium	50%	65%	70%

Pupil Premium reflects the number of pupils that schools receive additional funding for due to their families low economic status. The purpose of this additional funding is to raise the attainment of disadvantaged students, and the way it is spent is devolved to individual schools (Pye, Mollidor, Taylor, & Huxley, 2015; Taylor, 2018). The exact number has been rounded up or down in this paper so as to protect the identity of the school. Further, and for comparison, the Pupil Premium mean average for the region was 57.1% during the period of study. Thus, although the figures reflect high national averages they prove relatively commonplace within the area in question.

A purposive sampling approach was adopted (Hanley, Jordan, & Wilks, 2015) with a senior leader from each school being asked to identify individuals that they believed to be involved in work supporting pupils' emotional well-being. In total, 29 interviews were completed. Thirteen came from Hillview Academy, nine from Newtown School, and seven from Littlewood School. These included members of senior leadership teams and newly qualified teachers. Additionally, they included staff employed directly by schools and those bought in from other services, such as school nurses and counsellors.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by one of the research team (KB) (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). These took place in the schools and lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. There was substantial variability in the length of the interviews as a result of participant's roles, seniority, and experience. The sample intentionally included participants with a range of roles in schools and whom varied in the level of involvement in supporting student's emotional well-being. Time pressures were also a factor for some interviews (see Table 2 for a breakdown of participant role and interview length). In addition to using pseudonyms for the schools, job titles have been disguised so that participants are not identifiable. This did not involve making significant changes to the representation of a particular job, and all new titles are considered equivalent names for approximately the same position.

The interviews focused upon the work that the individuals were engaged in that they believed supported the emotional well-being of the pupils in their schools. Further, during the interview, participants were explicitly asked about whether they saw current austerity measures impacting upon their work (see Table 3 for a copy of the interview schedule).

Thematic analysis

The interviews were transcribed (by KB) and examined using the protocols associated with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). This was an inductive process in which the understanding of each transcript was initially discussed by the research team to

Table 2. An overview of interviewee roles and interview lengths

Role	Interview length	Role	Interview length
Assistant Headteacher	01:04:53	Mentor	00:22:50
Assistant Headteacher	00:57:59	Head of Year	00:22:29
Senior Vice Principal	00:52:41	Mentor	00:21:41
Assistant Vice Principal	00:49:29	Head of Department	00:20:29
School Nurse	00:43:35	Teacher	00:20:17
Safeguarding Coordinator	00:43:30	Teaching Assistant	00:20:02
Specialist Provision Coordinator	00:39:20	Special Educational Needs Coordinator	00:19:27
Deputy Headteacher	00:37:48	Newly qualified teacher (NQT)	00:19:26
Mentor	00:34:53	Assistant SENCO	00:15:07
Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) Practitioner	00:32:41	Mentor	00:13:05
Assistant Headteacher	00:31:23	NQT	00:09:27
Head of Year	00:28:26	Safeguarding Officer	00:09:08
Teacher	00:27:59	NQT	00:08:09
School Counsellor	00:24:28	Education and Welfare Officer	00:06:44
CAMH Practitioner	00:23:23		

become familiar with the data and generate initial codes and themes. These themes were then shared with the participants to reflect upon and refine our understanding of the interviewee's contributions (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). The coherence and broader resonance of the project was then checked with peers through a series of structured discussions between the research team and presentations to peers and professionals (Elliott *et al.*, 1999). This engagement supported our final conceptualization and informed the writing up of the work.

Quality criteria
We followed guidance specific to qualitative research to ensure the quality of the project (Elliott *et al.*, 1999; Levitt *et al.*, 2018). For example, we outline our personal orientations and connection to the topic as researchers above. We have provided a rich description of the sample and, in the next section, we use participant quotes to illustrate the core ideas contained within our analysis. We shared our initial analyses with participants, as well as using the research team, peers, and professionals for credibility checks.

Findings
The analysis of the interviews led to the development of three higher order themes. These were as follows: (1) *The perceived impact of policy changes upon the work of professionals*, (2) *The perceived change in the level of need for support around emotional well-being*, and (3) *The reduction of resources and funding*. These, and the associated lower order subthemes, are outlined in turn below. Tables are provided to give a sense of the spread of the themes amongst the participants and illustrative quotes are provided to give the reader a close connection to the perspectives of the interviewees.

Table 3. Interview questions

In what ways do you see your role as supporting the emotional wellbeing of young people in the school?
- What sorts of things do you do?
- How did this come to be part of your role?

How does your role link to other professionals supporting the emotional wellbeing of students in the school?
- Are there any other types of professionals or organisations you feel you would benefit from working with or having support from?
- Has the range of professionals/organisations you can access changed at all?

What are the positive things you take from supporting the emotional wellbeing of students?
- Personally?
- Professionally?
- Has this changed at all over the period in which you have been doing the role?

What difficulties, if any, do you experience with supporting the emotional wellbeing of students?
- Personally?
- Professionally?
- Has this changed at all over the period in which you have been doing the role?

Have you seen the need for such support for students change over recent years at all?
- Do you think you are spending more/less time? Why do you think this is?
- Have the particular types of students/problems you are providing support for changed? Why do you think this is?

What do you think the impact of the current economic and political climate has been on students' emotional wellbeing, if any?
- Are there specific policy changes or reforms which you think have made a particular difference?
- How do you think these changes are having an impact (i.e., on individual child, impact on family, impact on community)?

How well supported do you feel in your work with students, particularly in relation to emotional wellbeing?
- Where do you get support from? (internal/external to school)
- How often can you get support?
- How often do you find you access such support? Is this effective?
- Has the level of support changed at all over the period in which you've been doing the role?

Have you had any training which has helped you when supporting the emotional wellbeing of students?
- If yes, how helpful was it?
- Would there be any additional training which you think would be useful to your role?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Theme 1: The perceived impact of policy changes upon the work of professionals
The changing political landscape was reported to have an impact upon the work that interviewees were involved in. Notably, this led some individuals to state that their roles and responsibilities were no longer those traditionally associated with schools. Table 4 outlines the subthemes related to this overarching theme before describing them in more detail.

Subtheme 1.1: Policy changes and educational reform.   The participants highlighted the mismatch between the criteria for assessing school performance and the expectations highlighted in guidance documents.

Table 4. Theme 1: The perceived impact of policy changes upon the work of professionals

Subtheme	Participant (School 1)	Participant (School 2)	Participant (School 3)
Policy changes and educational reform	3,4,6,8,10,11,12,13	2,3,4,5,8	1,2,3,4,7
Welfare reform and disability support	2,3,5,6,8,11	1,6,7	1,2,3,6,7

> You've stuff coming from the Home Office or the Health department that this is the school's responsibility but you're not getting that reflected in [policy documents]... This is a priority and this is a priority and yet that priority is not necessarily measured in terms of what an Ofsted [The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills] would look for, in terms of judging a school. It's not always what's looked for in terms of when DfE [Department for Education] guidance comes out.(Director of Children and Family Inclusion Services, Littlewood School)

As a consequence of these multiple priorities, individuals were finding themselves taking on roles that are not traditionally associated with teaching.

> I'm not a social worker, I was never trained to be a social worker and sometimes I wonder how much of my job falls into that, you know. I'm a teacher, I'm an English teacher, that was my starting point but most of my work now is around pastoral needs and that's quite telling I think.(Assistant Head Teacher and Pastoral lead, Hillview Academy)

Further, this confused position can be linked to comments related to the purpose of underpinning the adoption of such roles and responsibilities in the first place. This varied in the way it was expressed, but commonly reflected a holistic view of education. The participant above continued by saying:

> They can't attain if they're not feeling safe, it is Maslow's triangle isn't it? If they don't feel safe, looked after, nurtured, school's the last thing on the list.(Assistant Head Teacher & Pastoral leader, Hillview Academy)

Subtheme 1.2: Welfare reform and disability support. In addition to the impact of educational guidance and reform, other social reforms, such as welfare and disability support, impact upon the work of schools. The first example reflects how the benefit system can impact upon individuals.

> They've had a letter from benefits saying that they are going to stop the free school meals. They are not working [the parents], so it's a mistake on their part [the funding agency]. But obviously we're not going to let the kids starve. We are going to feed them. But it's just stupid, pathetic paperwork, and it's like "get your act together these kids are on free school meals".(Head of Year, Littlewood School)

The second quote here reflects directly upon the local changes to Disability benefits. Once again, the ripple effect upon the school is very evident.

> I had a family last week who are... this mum had been on Disability Living Allowance for quite a while and she's had one of these new assessments and they said, "you're fit to work", and it's almost like, "you're fit to work, off you go." And she comes into school because school's the

place where she knows she's going to get some support and she's hysterical. Her rent's stopped, her housing benefit's stopped [. ....]. It sounds awful but it's really time consuming and it seems that there are more and more of those situations.(Safeguarding Lead, Hillview Academy)

Theme 2: The perceived change in the level of need for support of emotional well-being
The second major theme reflects the way that professionals believed the level of need to be increasing, or remaining at high levels. This is noted within the subthemes explicitly described below (also outlined in Table 5). Further, it is notable that a number of the participants believed the increase in need to be a direct result of the socio-political climate.

Subtheme 2.1: Increase in the need for support of emotional well-being.   A number of participants believed there to be an increase in the number of young people in need of support.

> An increase in need, an increase in the severity of the need, and also an increase in the numbers. And I suppose the other thing that I have noticed is a decrease in the age at which this need becomes apparent.(Director of Children and Families Services, Littlewood School)

Such a view appeared relatively commonplace but was not unanimous. For instance, one interviewee believed that the levels of support had remained at a similar level.

> I wouldn't say I've seen a significant difference, I think there has always been. . .you always get a cohort of students within a year group who need that additional support. I think I feel probably now there's more support in place for students now within the school than there was in the past.(Learning mentor, Newtown School)

Subtheme 2.2: Increase in deprivation.   In addition to the perception that the need for support may be increasing, there was the view that the levels of deprivation were increasing. This meant that the interviewees were encountering related issues in their schools.

> I think the emotional well-being of students has been affected very much by the increase of deprivation . . . both in terms of deprivation at a family level, but also with regards to the cuts in school.(Enhanced Provision Coordinator, Hillview Academy)

Table 5. Theme 2: The perceived change in the level of need for support of emotional well-being

Subtheme	Participant (School 1)	Participant (School 2)	Participant (School 3)
Increase in the need for support of emotional well-being	2,4,5,8,10,11,12,13	3,6,7,8	1,2,5,6
Increase in Deprivation	2,3,4,5,6,8,11	1,3,7,8,9	1,2,5,6
Vote to leave the European Union	1,7,9,12	3	1

Other interviewees were more specific about the types of issues encountered and the ways it impacted upon the well-being of students.

> There's lots of arguing and I mean really massively strained relationships because of the lack of money.(School nurse, Newtown School)

> If you've got your Mum at home crying her eyes out because she's skint, she thinks she's going to be made homeless, that then means that that young person comes into school with the weight of the world on their shoulders.(Safeguarding Coordinator, Hillview Academy)

Subtheme 2.3: Vote to leave the European Union.   One very specific event that came up in the interviews was the impact of the vote to leave the European Union. Although this reflected the immediate aftermath of the referendum result, it also highlights how key societal flashpoints impact upon the work that schools undertake.

> . . . some of the students are very, very scared and very worried, and I think as adults we're a bit scared and worried at the moment about some uncertain times.(Spring space co-ordinator, Hillview Academy)

Theme 3: The reduction of resources and funding

The final higher order theme reflected the perceived reduction of resources and funding that schools have available to them. This related to both resources that the schools themselves offered and those that they may have historically referred individuals towards outside of the school. Table 6 provides an overview of the spread of respondents for the two subthemes.

Subtheme 3.1: Funding available to schools.   A number of individuals reported that the schools they worked in were making difficult decisions about the allocation of resources. The quote below reflects how one member of staff saw schools shouldering some of this financial responsibility.

> So they've decimated the service but if we wanted a nurse we could buy one, it wouldn't increase our budget; it would have to come from somewhere else. Educational psychologist we buy in. . . again, it's not changed the headline figure but it is a service that we now buy that historically was available through the local authority. Lollipop lady/man: that's a service that you now have to buy as a school. The things like, you know, the slashing Children's Services budgets and the support that's available, that's all coming down to school.(Safeguarding Coordinator, Hillview Academy)

Following on from this, individuals reported taking on roles that filled the gaps in provision that had appeared.

Table 6. Theme 3: The reduction of resources and funding

Subtheme	Participant (School 1)	Participant (School 2)	Participant (School 3)
Funding available to schools	2,3,4,5,7,10	2,3,8,9	1,2,3,5,7
Funding available to external agencies	2,3,4,6,10,12	1,2,3,6,7,8,9	1,2,3,4,6

We used to have a huge, huge pastoral team in school. We had a full time mental health worker, well one and a half, a full-time social worker, properly qualified etc. We had various mentors . . . and they've all gone and now. We're left with, you know, a few people who are experienced and doing what they can.(Education and Welfare Officer, Littlewood School)

Subtheme 3.2: Funding available to external agencies.   The second component of this theme reflected the perception that external agencies were also seeing reductions in their funding. Reports noted that the interviewees believed there were fewer services to refer pupils on to.

I was absolutely horrified when I found out [about the cut to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) Service], and was shocked because I actually think more than ever the students are needing emotional well-being help, not taking it away, I couldn't believe it (Teaching Assistant, Newtown School).

In addition to mental health services disappearing, the interviewees highlighted the loss of community-based services.

There used to be loads of youth clubs round here. Loads, yeah. . . It's where all the youth workers worked, there used to be youth workers and mentors. . . Because the funding just stopped, they cut back on all the youth workers. I don't think there are any youth workers anymore.(Head of Year, Littlewood School)

Discussion

The themes noted above highlight a complex picture of the current trends associated with the way that schools provide support for pupils' emotional well-being. They reflect the contradiction of a system that expects schools to engage in supportive activities, but does not appear forthcoming with resources and support. Many of the views expressed appear commensurate with humanistic education principles, with the interviewees discussing the importance of responding to the whole child rather than an academic or emotional element. Ultimately, the discrepancy between expectation and real-world practices can be viewed as playing out important questions about the roles of schools and the purpose of education itself. They also demonstrate how competing political agendas have the potential to undermine one another in the way they impact upon children, schools, and families. These issues are discussed in relation to the project below.

The professionals interviewed for this study noted that the socio-political climate (macrosystem) in which they worked was having a wide and varied impact upon their workload. Many of the participants highlighted that they perceived there to be an increase in the need for emotional support generally, and as a direct consequence of policy changes. Although this project primarily focused upon the impact of policy related to austerity, the interviewees discussed a much broader picture which included both welfare-related changes and educational shifts (see Riddell (2013) for more information about the educational policy changes during this period). It is therefore reflected that the broader societal changes make it difficult to consider any discreet impact of one set of policy changes, and thus, the term 'socio-political' changes is preferred to singling out 'austerity' within this section. Further, it is important to note that this project did not set out to look at the prevalence of distress in populations of children and young people. As such, the debates about the complexity inherent in the interviewee's claims that the situation is getting worse should not be ignored (e.g.,

Myers, 2012). What is important to acknowledge however is that staff had the perception that things were worsening and observed their working roles changing. As there is substantial evidence that large numbers of young people encounter great struggles during adolescence (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005; Kim-Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Morgan *et al.*, 2017), and given the therapeutic turn within British Culture (Hanley, Noble, & Toor, 2017), it does not seem far-fetched to assert that schools are having to be increasingly responsive to young people's emotional well-being. Given the international trends and political expectations referred to at the outset of this paper (e.g., Department of Health, 2015), alongside research reflecting that emotional labour of this kind has become 'part and parcel' of the work of teachers (Kidger *et al.*, 2009), such sentiments would be in keeping even if the difficulties individuals encounter have not increased in volume.

In contrast to the complexity of considering an increase in emotional difficulties, the pressure upon local resources (microsystem) appears a little more tangible. The interviewees referred directly to services that were no longer available to them. In some instances, this appeared to be directly related to funding issues, whilst others reflected policy changes (e.g., the removal of CAMH services, referred to in one of the interviews noted above, related to a general policy within the locality). This reduction of external support has meant that schools have to fill the holes in provision and take the brunt of the responsibility related to emotional well-being. Such roles and responsibilities can be perceived as fitting well within a system that is geared up for a holistic understanding of education, as advocated by the humanistic educationalists referred to earlier (Aloni, 2002; Patterson, 1973; Rogers, 1969). Indeed, the teachers interviewed within this study reported working to support the whole person and attending explicitly to both the academic attainment and personal growth of pupils. The difficulty in adopting the conceptual frame advocated by humanistic educationalists appears to be twofold however. Firstly, the educational system in the context of this study currently places more emphasis upon academic attainment than personal growth (as demonstrated through the assessment criteria of schools in the United Kingdom) (Bonell *et al.*, 2014), and secondly, teachers are not commonly trained to explicitly work with high levels of distress (Danby & Hamilton, 2016; Kidger *et al.*, 2009). Such contradictions highlight the need to review and attend to the whole system so as to provide clarity about its specific purpose. Additional pressures, such as those described here, mean that schools are supporting individuals in ways that they are arguably not fully equipped to deal with and that they are potentially allocating resources away from activities that will contribute more directly to positive school assessment processes.

As noted above, the broader socio-political context was viewed as having a direct impact upon the work of school professionals. Although it is difficult to untangle the impact of specific policies (e.g., welfare, housing, educational) and policy-related events (the vote to leave the EU), the participants were very clear that the broader socio-political context was having an impact upon their work. As reflected in earlier work, a wide interpretation of emotional well-being was held (Bragg *et al.*, 2015; Winter *et al.*, 2016) and the interviewees reported having to attend to pupils' basic human needs. In justifying this, one teacher linked this directly to the humanistic psychological theory by referring to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). This theoretical position, although dated and greatly critiqued (Bouzenita & Boulanouar, 2016), retains a cultural currency for communicating an interrelationship between individuals' physical needs and emotional well-being. Here, these explicit links between social indicators of poverty and an

individual's emotional well-being (WHO, 2014) also demonstrate that such thinking is very clearly evident within the work of the participants in this study.

Finally, it is important to consider the impact of the shifting sands upon staff working in schools. Teaching is described as a 'profoundly emotional activity' (Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011, p. 843) in which individuals engage in high levels of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). Given the perceived increase of emotional labour reflected in the interviews, the findings highlight that changing roles and responsibilities has the potential to impact substantially upon the well-being of professionals working in schools – a potential contributor to large levels of 'burn-out' within the teaching profession (Johnson *et al.*, 2005). In the reports here, teachers noted responding to higher volumes of distress of both pupils and parents with limited associated training. Although we would wish to prize the great skills within the teaching workforce at managing this emotional labour, such expectations raise concerns. For instance, if a comparison with therapeutic training is made, professionals who offer therapy are usually required to study for several years and have an ongoing requirement for supportive supervision (Division of Counselling Psychology, 2007). This process of reflective practice (Schön, 1983) is viewed as fundamental in supporting the well-being of individuals who work for long periods of time with high levels of distress (Hanley & Amos, 2018) and has been recommended for teaching staff who lead in these areas (Hanley, 2017). At present however, supportive supervision provided by psychologically minded professionals is not a mainstay within teaching practices.

Theoretical and practical implications

Given the findings of this work, it is important to reflect upon how these might be understood theoretically and impact upon the work of professionals in these contexts. In doing so, humanistic education theory is considered alongside ecological theory to help understand how socio-political factors can impact upon the emotional well-being provision in schools. Figure 1 is suggested as a way of conceptualizing how these two theories interact in this study. The figure conveys the complexity of creating a fertile environment, as articulated in humanistic education theory, for an individual to constructively grow. Here, it is suggested that considering the different layers outlined in ecological theory are essential for understanding the facilitative nature of the environment in a truly holistic way. Figure 1 also specifically refers to examples noted in the interviews within this project that link to the different layers of consideration. It highlights that the incongruence between the goals between the outside and inside layers increases the pressure upon the systems and individuals working directly with young people.

In considering the practical implications for this ecologically informed humanistic education theory further, it can be helpful to explicitly reflect upon issues that are evident for policymakers and schools. These are discussed briefly in turn below.

The interviews highlighted a mismatch between the expectations during official school assessments and the work that the individuals commonly engaged in. It was particularly noted that work supporting the emotional well-being of pupils was not viewed as important as tasks related to academic attainment. In this instance, confusion is further compounded by guidance for schools that has been produced to aid them in supporting the mental health of pupils. This demonstrates the need for policy documentation, developed and applied at a macrosystem and exosystem levels, to be written in ways that ensure consistent messages are conveyed. In instances, where
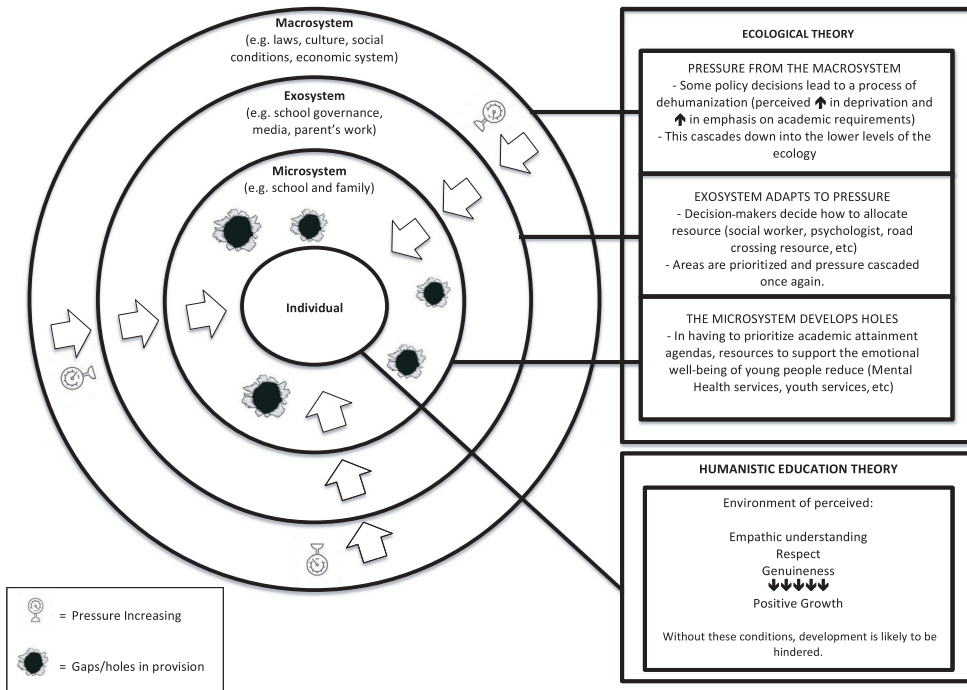
Figure 1. A depiction of ecologically informed humanistic education theory in action.

incongruence exists between the goals of these layers, undue pressure can be seen to cascade down the different ecological layers (as represented by the pressure gauges and arrows in Figure 1).

At the microsystem level, it was noted that teaching staff offered support for a wide array of complex issues. School staff noted taking on roles vacated by the reduction of resources internally and external to the school (represented in Table 3 by the hole symbol). This is likely to equate to these staff members taking on high volumes of emotional labour. Professionals in this study highlight concerns about surpassing the limits of their expertise and, unlike other psychological professions, do not receive supportive reflective supervision to aid processing the material they engage with. As such, for schools to account for the impacts of these more systemic pressures, it is recommended that staff have access to appropriate training and ongoing support.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This project has synthesized the views of a broad range of educational professionals to consider how socio-political factors are perceived to impact upon the emotional support offered to pupils. It is acknowledged however that the interviews reported here reflect the perceptions of staff that were selected because they were pro-active in supporting the emotional well-being of pupils. Therefore, soliciting the opinions of a wider selection of staff might provide a different picture. Further, some of the areas that have been discussed are considerably more complex than first meets the eye. For example, considering whether the emotional well-being of younger generations has actually worsened in recent years would warrant a thoroughly considered longitudinal research design. Although

exploring this latter element was never the intent of the paper, and it should not be considered in this light, understanding this perception warrants further exploration.

Given the discourses of emotional well-being and mental health are increasingly being embedded into the work of schools, this project highlights the potential for humanistic education theory to provide a theoretical base for these types of development. It does however also highlight several fundamental challenges of adopting such a position, and raises numerous other related areas that require exploration. In particular, given the increasing levels of emotional labour that teachers appear to be engaging in as a consequence of the current socio-political situation (e.g., schools acting as hubs for support and acting as a front-line response to the psychological impacts of welfare changes), it is important to explore the impact and needs of school staff working in this context. Here, it seems particularly important to explore further the relationship between the levels of emotional labour and the reasons given for leaving the profession of teaching. Although surveying professionals working in the field appears an important element of this work, capturing the experiences of those who have left the profession as a consequence of such roles appears important to understand.

Conclusions

Humanistic education theory can provide a congruent base for making sense of the increasing discourse associated with emotional well-being in educational settings. Given the potential for broader environments to impact upon the activities and direction of school agendas, ecological theory can be used to inform our understanding of what a facilitative environment for positive growth might consist of in educational contexts. It can also provide a means for identifying incongruence in systems that may advocate for incompatible or different goals. In the study described here, the professionals reflected how high-level policy decisions impact upon their day-to-day work. Further, they highlight how such a system has the potential to fail both the young people being served, by having professionals engaging in challenging activities that they have not been trained for, and the professionals who are offering services.

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