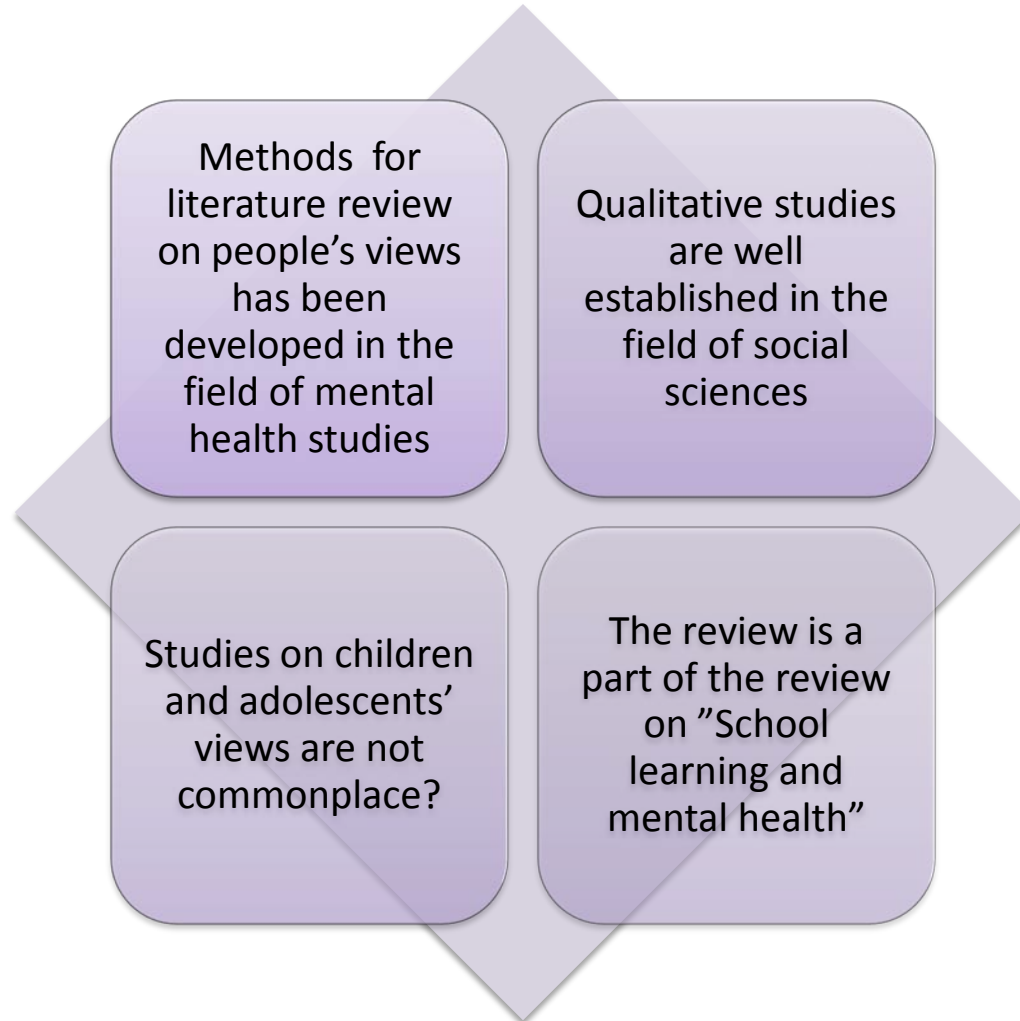


The experiences and perceptions of mental health of Swedish children and youth : reflections and results from a review of qualitative studies

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences
13 April 2010

Background of the review



School learning and mental health

- Systematic review of literature performed by appointment of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences
- The whole review will be presented at the next conference (April 26-28)
- Main aim: to review studies on the causal relationships between mental health and school achievements

Strategies

- Broad mapping of quantitative studies and reviews
- In-depth review and synthesis of longitudinal studies
- Review of qualitative studies on Swedish children and adolescents' views

Links and differences

- Swedish population of children and adolescents
- Methods, approaches and topics
- Mental health and well being in relation to school and learning

Motives

- To consider the *children as subjects*, with the right to express their views
- To take account of the specific Swedish *social and educational context* through the experiences of the students that actively take part of it
- To *gain enrichment and depth* from a mixed method approach, in which the studies employing different methodology could contribute presenting complementary knowledge and insights.

Purpose and method

- The main purpose of the review was to **gather testimonies** that could give indications of the experiences and views of mental health and well being done by children and adolescents in this specific context.
- Literature searches of peer-reviewed articles, reports, academic thesis and doctoral dissertations.

Literature searches in bibliographic databases

- Medline (OVID), EBSCO, CSA multiple databases
- Example from CSA:
- **Search Query #1** ((DE=("adolescent attitudes" or "adolescents" or "childhood attitudes" or "children" or "early adolescents" or "elementary school students" or "elementary schools" or "inclusive schools" or "late adolescents" or "middle school students" or "middle schools" or "nursery schools" or "preadolescents" or "preschool children" or "secondary school students" or "secondary schools" or "small schools" or "special needs students" or "special schools" or "state schools" or "student attitudes" or "toddlers" or "vocational schools" or "young adults" or "young children" or "youth" or "youth problems")) and((TI=Swedish) or(ID=Swedish) or(AB=Swedish))) and(DE=("attitude measures" or "attitudes" or "case studies" or "ethnography" or "field studies" or "focus groups" or "interviews" or "naturalistic observation" or "opinions" or "participant observation" or "surveys")))

Other searches

- DiVA - Academic Archive On-line, a digital archive of publications from 24 Swedish universities
- LIBRIS, the Swedish university and research libraries search service
- Websites of Agencies and NGO

Review of 38 included studies

- 7 peer-reviewed articles
- 7 reports
- 10 doctoral dissertations
- 14 other academic theses

Results

- The results that are relevant for the aim of the review are structured in four themes:
- general views
- protective factors
- risk factors
- individual factors

Emotional experiences

You don't feel well, you don't have any friends and so on. (Focus group, 13 years old, boys)

...feeling well in your brain, that people care; then you feel happy. (Focus group, 16 years old girls)

Feeling sad is part of mental health. If you feel bad you can be very unhappy. (Focus group, 16 years old boys) (Johansson, Brunnberg and Eriksson , 2007,187-188)

Positive and negative feelings

- *You have the strength to do anything and you want to socialize with people without wanting to go home and so on.* (16 years old girl)
- *feeling no stress, being calm and not having to do things you do not understand* (boy)
- *. . . if you have real good friends, you don't feel lonely.* (16 years old, boy) (Johansson, Brunnberg and Eriksson 2007, p. 188- 189)

Feelings about school

- Enjoyable and boring (Alerby, 2003)

I don't like school so very much . . . just sitting and doing maths, almost like a prison. The law says you have to go to school, but sometimes it is terribly boring. (...) (Alerby, 2003, p. 24).

Threats against mental health

- relationships and events in the family and in the social network
- the situation at school
- personal circumstances such as sickness or accidents (Lövheim, 2007)

At the moment it's just crap at school because I went to a wrong program and I don't know what to do anymore. Bloody teachers they underestimate you all the time, one feels not worth anything anymore. (Lövheim, ibid., p. 45)

Stress and well being

- Emotional support and safety made the girls feel trust and gave them the self-confidence to resist stressful situations
- Their possibility to be involved and having a say in important matters seemed important for their well being
- Low participation in decisions could lead to feelings of being reduced to objects. The girls could feel schoolwork as an obligatory duty that is required in a social context not characterized by nearness. In this context, the stress was perceived as dismay and demoralization (Haraldsson, 2009, p. 52-53).

Responsibility and self-esteem

- *People can make you feel sick, they can sink your self-esteem a lot, but actually you should not care about that. But it's really difficult to not care about what people think. You [end up] thinking that you are bad even if you are good. (Westerlund, 2009, p. 17)*

Educational experiences

- Children and adolescents with various experiences enter and attend educational settings with similar characteristics
- The educational environment can be an arena for social, emotional and cognitive experiences, relationships and accomplishments that are enriching the individuals, and increase their well being
- There are problematic aspects: their status and self-confidence can be negatively influenced by negative feedback (Westling Allodi, 2002)

Some concluding reflections

- Mental health and well being are defined as positive and negative emotions and feelings
- An amount of qualitative studies are available
- Qualitative studies may offer important insights in the experiences of children and adolescents
- The systematic review of qualitative studies is a fruitful approach that can complement quantitative approaches
- The review of qualitative studies may require the development of particular methodologies