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In the eye of the 'perfect storm'

Dr Fiona Pienaar and **Dr Patrick Johnston** explore what support and training schools need to address spiraling pupil and staff mental health needs.

The frequently reported increase in the number of children and young people experiencing challenges to their mental health has prompted a description of the situation as a 'perfect storm' [Ref 1]. Given the critical role and position of teachers in the lives of children and young people, we could describe teachers as finding themselves in the 'eye' of that 'perfect storm'.



We know that an estimated one in ten children and young people have a diagnosable mental disorder, that this is described as the equivalent of three pupils in every classroom, [Ref 2] and that they are likely struggling with their mental health at a level that we should be considering referring them to specialist support such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The data that we continue to quote dates back to 2004, although it is hoped that a new prevalence study will be published early 2018, giving us a much needed update.

In the absence of recent national data, what we do know today is that senior leaders and teachers are reporting a rise in the number of children presenting with mental health difficulties within the school. In a recent joint publication between the National Association of Head Teachers and Place2Be, 93% of Head



Teachers reported that pupils today are bringing more worries into the classroom than they did five years ago, with 96% of Head Teachers noting that their pupil's ability to learn was impeded by these worries [Ref 3]. This is consistent with many academic studies demonstrating a strong link between mental health difficulties in children and young people with poor educational achievement and consequent lifetime disadvantage. These increasingly complex issues which teachers are facing in their classrooms are frequently outside of their skill set and training; 92% of surveyed Head Teachers identified that teaching staff are managing issues that go beyond their teaching role [Ref 3].

At the same time as we are experiencing an increase in both the numbers of children and young people reporting with mental health difficulties, as well as the complexities of these issues, we are faced with challenges in the retention of newly qualified teachers. It is reported that half of young teachers are considering quitting the profession [Ref 4], with a third of teachers who started work in 2010 already leaving the profession [Ref 5]. The National Union of Teachers (NUT), Young Teachers Working Party, surveyed more than 3,000 young teachers in April this year [Ref 4]. Of those surveyed, 85% described difficulties maintaining an adequate work-life



balance, similar to the recent findings from the NAHT annual recruitment survey [Ref 6]. Furthermore, nearly 50% of young teachers cited concerns about the effect of teaching on their own mental health. Clearly, the connection between an adequate work-life balance and the challenges on teachers' mental health cannot be ignored.

There is currently little attention paid to the mental health of teachers. They are expected to be 'available' (mentally, emotionally, socially and cognitively) to all their students and at times, for parents and carers. With a growing population of children and young people expected to attend school over the coming years, coupled with the complexity and challenges of the issues brought into school, are we simply asking too much of teachers today?

Education can play an important role in promoting good mental health; the Government has recently committed additional resources to every secondary school by providing funding for a teacher from each secondary school to be trained in Mental Health First Aid [Ref 7]. This is a positive step forward in equipping some teachers with the skills and knowledge to identify and respond to emerging mental health problems in school, however these plans are currently limited to secondary schools and only one teacher per school.

Whilst it is important to remember that teachers are not mental health professionals, in many cases they are well placed in aiding the identification of children and young people with mental health difficulties through the relationships and understanding they are in a position to build with their pupils. Relationships are fundamental for children and young people to feel attached and secure in the educational environment, for some pupils this will be the only stable attachment that they have in their life. However, questions must be addressed about the availability of teachers to be present to build these relationships with their pupils when they themselves at times are overwhelmed and, for some, struggling with their own wellbeing.

In the recently published report from the Education and Health Select Committee's on *Children and young people's mental health – the role of education*, the importance of initial teacher training and the inclusion of mental health training was highlighted. The initial teacher training framework published in July 2016 states that: "providers should emphasise the importance of emotional development such

as attachment issues and mental health on pupils' performance, supporting trainees to recognise typical child and adolescent development, and to respond to atypical development" [Ref 8]. With the implementation of this framework, mental health will feature more prominently on all initial teacher training courses. However, what is missing from the framework is the importance of teachers examining and protecting their own mental health.

'Mental Health Champions – Class Teacher', is a training programme developed by Place2Be. The programme involves a series of facilitated experiential training and consultation sessions, aimed at upskilling teachers understanding of mental health and wellbeing, with the expected outcomes of positive impacts on teaching, pupil learning and achievement as well as a positive impact on the job satisfaction of trained teachers. This programme aims to support teachers in the application of their learning in the classroom setting, utilising a toolkit of practical strategies to support classroom management, behaviour and learning as well as building positive working relationships with pupils, parents and carers, and families. Unique to Place2Be's programmes is a confidential reflective session (Place2Think), with an experienced child and adolescent therapist that provides trainees with a space to discuss issues which they are finding troubling, whether they are related to students or to other issues which may be causing anxiety or stress. These Place2Think sessions also allow a space for 'processing the learning' delivered during the programme.



An independent review of this training programme identified that teachers who participated in the training had an increased level of confidence and ability when identifying and support pupils with mental health difficulties [Ref 9]. Furthermore, there was also further confidence evident amongst trained teachers when working with challenging parents and carers. Overall, those who participated in the programme had an ability for greater self-reflection and a better understanding of how their own feelings and state of mind can affect their own capabilities, resulting in improved personal wellbeing.

With the growing number of children and young people struggling with their mental health, teachers are at the frontline each day, trying to make sense of behaviour, emotions and the myriad of issues and life experiences that challenge their pupils.

What is needed is a commitment to ensuring that teachers feel equipped to recognise when there might be emerging signs of mental ill-health and to feel confident in how they might respond. Response is two-fold in that teachers should feel able to respond in the classroom to children and young people that they have concerns about as well as feeling confident that they are in a position to seek advice and support from a professional based in the school who can then offer in-school support or refer on to more specialised services.

This raises a number of recommendations. It is vital that Government ensures that there are sufficient funds ringfenced to support compulsory Initial Teacher Training on mental health and mental ill-health, as recommended by the Carter Review [Ref 10].

Critically, let us not forget the mental health of teachers. This commitment to funding should be from both the Department of Health and the Department of Education. There is a large body of research identifying that mental health challenges in adulthood often originate in childhood or adolescence and these are both education and health issues.

Funding should also include provision for a mental health professional in each school. This will ensure that teachers and all school staff are supported as soon as possible when they seek insight and direction about a pupil they might have concerns about. This school-based mental health professional would forge the critical relationships with the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team and other external statutory services. These connections are essential for, not only information and guidance but for the smooth and timely referral process should a child or young person require more specialised support.

Ideally, every school should benefit from the presence of a local CAMHS professional for one day each week to work closely with the school-based mental health professional, providing that more specialised advice, early screening, treatment for those meeting the criteria for diagnosis into specialist services [Ref 1] and onward referral. This regular presence of a specialist will provide additional support for teachers and school staff.

Our understanding of mental health and mental ill-health are constantly evolving, as are the issues that challenge our children and young people. Funding for ongoing continuing professional development is essential to ensure that our teachers and school staff stay abreast of developments.

Schools are excellent at pastoral care but this is more often than not, reactive; a response to mental health challenges as they arise. This approach is often driven by a lack of funding and knowledge as to how to develop a 'whole school approach' to mental health. School leaders need to be supported by a commitment from the government that they will ringfence funding on an ongoing basis so that we can train teachers, support them, educate children and young people about their mental health, help them develop the coping skills that underpin resilience and act as early as possible when concerns emerge.

Without commitment to funding, education and support, teachers will always only be able to react rather than feel confident in the management of their own mental health and in their understanding of the mental health of their pupils.



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