

Providing an embedded and holistic approach to positive mental health in post-primary schools- identifying the challenges and implementing the opportunities

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Adolescent mental health

“Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come”

- Victor Hugo

Teacher concerns

EdChatIE Twitter debate by Irish teachers (March 2017)

- Wondered if this was “mission creep”
- Would they be asked to “fix issues way beyond our remit”
- Were concerned that “slotting [mental-health education] in as a subject” was not a lasting solution
- Instead wished to: “make every child feel cared for everyday” and building “consistent, caring relationships & a safe environment. Not amateur psychology class”.

Guidelines and support?

Broad aspirational 'actions' have been offered such as the Well-Being in Post-Primary Schools, 2013.

1. Developing and maintaining a safe and caring environment within the school where a sense of belonging and connectedness is fostered
2. Building positive teacher-student and student-student relationships to promote participation, social interaction and pro-social behaviour
3. Actively involving young people and their parents/guardians in developing and implementing school policies to support mental health and health promotion
4. Adopting a whole-school approach to health promotion, where health is promoted by all and not just by a few members of staff
5. Supporting and implementing a well-planned, consistent and integrated SPHE/RSE curriculum to enable young people enhance their coping, resilience, communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills
6. Developing whole-school systems and structures to support the early identification of young people experiencing learning, social, emotional or behavioural difficulties
7. Actively involving, supporting and encouraging young people's participation in extra-curricular activities
8. Fostering a whole-school ethos that accepts and values diversity within the student and staff population
9. Providing easy access to information for students and staff on supports available to them within the school and wider community
10. Facilitating access to continuing professional development for school staff on the promotion of the mental health and well-being of young people.

Whole school responsibility

There is evidence to say that a whole-school approach to student well-being not only enhances mental-health and resilience but also promotes pro-social behaviour, pupil engagement, and academic learning

(Roffey, 2015; Noble *et al.* 2008).

Programme

- Develop the capacity of the students AND those working with the students
- Work with the existing structures of the school
- Encourage a sustained engagement
- Seeks to avoid box-ticking exercise

Existing structures

- Aim is to add and coordinate the work already being done in school
- Much of the best and most innovative initiatives already being done
- This is not another ‘whole-school planning initiative’!

Teacher mental-health

- 80% of teachers in UK report experiencing stress, anxiety and stress at work
- 50% feel severely stressed (NUT, 2013)
- Supporting teachers' mental health and involving all stake-holders ensures a higher chance of long-term and sustainable effects (Browne, Gafni, Roberts, Byrne & Majumdar, 2004).

Programme

Divided into four 'areas' or 'domains':

1. Raising the awareness of, and sharing information relating to, issues relating to positive mental-health.
2. Establishing efficient and clear channels of communication between and among the stake-holders involved in mental-health provision is vital to the success of any programme.
3. Building the capacity and sense of efficacy within the student, staff and parent bodies.
4. Increasing a sense of empowerment, involvement and a sense of belonging

1. Awareness raising and information sharing

- 1) Establish a shared understanding of the language around positive mental-health and emotional well-being
- 2) Interventions that increase knowledge about identifying and managing anxiety
 - Aware's Beat the Blues
 - Pieta House's Resilience Academy
 - Friends for Life
 - .B Mindfulness for Schools Programme
 - On my Own Two Feet

- 3) The support structures within each school (GC, Year Head, Form Teachers, Class Tutor)
 - A clear graduated pathway for students
 - Understanding for parents
 - Clarity for staff
- 4) Knowledge of external agencies and how to contact them:
 - ISPCC
 - Pieta House
 - Samaritans
 - Bodywhys
- 5) Bullying and SPHE curriculum

- 6) Interventions that raise awareness about diversity can improve overall mental-health of the school (The National Healthy School Programme in the UK, 2006)
- Reduces stigma and normalises ‘additional needs’
- 7) Programmes that reduce stigma around mental health were limited by teacher anxiety due to fears around expertise (Cooke, King & Greenwood, 2016).
- Providing information to teachers
 - Offering CPD
 - Clarifying boundaries

2. Efficient Communication

- Information sharing and awareness raising needs communication
- To alleviate fear and bring people with them, management need to articulate the “knowledge of the why of change, namely moral purpose” (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005).
- The “moral purpose” (Michael Fullan) needs to be provided
- Placing the the “learner at the heart of educational endeavours” includes what “people communicate and how they do it” (Noble *et al.*, 2008)

3. Capacity-building

- 1) Capacity building is defined as any strategy that increases the “*collective effectiveness of a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning*” and that this should occur at the **individual** level and also at the **collective** level (Fullan, 2006).
- 2) Providing opportunities to gain skills throughout school through interventions and talks
- 3) Teachers also lack the confidence to implement a mental-health programme (Askell-Williams *et al.*, 2007)

Capacity can be built by consistently **developing a shared-language** around mental-health.

- 4) Building capacity must come from management (resources)
 - Flexible timetables
 - CPD and training

- 5) “Lateral capacity building” (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005)
 - Cluster groups of schools

- 6) Multi-domain approaches such as family/ school/ individual/ community has been found to make mental-health provision more successful (Browne, Gafni, Roberts, Byrne & Majumdar, 2004).

4. Belonging and Empowerment

- Frederickson (2009) showed that the promotion of positive feelings such as feeling calm, being heard and supported actually can increase creativity and problem-solving skills.
- A sense of marginalisation and exclusion is a risk factor for adolescents and for adults and ...
- Student involvement and participation boosts positive mental-health (Engels, Aelterman, Van Petegem, & Schepens, 2004).
- Social capital is built by allowing each group to be heard (Mental-health Foundation, 2010).

How to achieve this?

- Questionnaires
- Student Council
- Awareness weeks that celebrate aspects of the school, e.g. diversity
- Peer mentoring
- Vertical interaction between year groups and also up to staff

Challenges

1. A drop in motivation
2. A lack of consultation
3. Paying lip-service to the concept
4. Poor communication and listening
5. Legacy issues

6. Fear

Thank you and any questions?

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