

Emotional Wellbeing – at the heart of School Communities

Understanding the Primary School Context – Pat Goff

There is something inherently wrong when a child in primary school in Ireland is clinically depressed, or is presenting with serious emotional and behavioural difficulties. This should not be the norm or accepted as normal. I am 38 years teaching, with 32 of these 38 years as a school leader.

Yet why am I surprised? Four times as many primary school principals stated that emotional wellbeing difficulties are the greatest child welfare challenge in 2015, than in 2009. Studies show that Ireland has the fourth highest rate of suicide in Europe. 500 people are now taking their own lives each year in Ireland. My own school opened as a new school a mere 32 years ago, yet ten of our past pupils have met tragic deaths, through car accidents, suicide and murder.

The reality in schools is that we are dealing with pupils who are experiencing far greater pressures than we did as children. I am sure there was always some bullying when we were in school, but at least when you went home that was it for that day – now with social media it is 24 hours, seven days a week, 365 days in the year. Last year as a principal the most serious case of bullying that I dealt with was with a group of fifth class girls – the method of bullying was on a very common app that many of you use called ‘Viber’.

It could just as easily have been ‘whatsapp’ or some of the others. Why do the pupils like these apps – they are free, easy to set up groups on, but also very easy to exclude someone from or to post nasty comments about. When the parents were called in, many were genuinely shocked not only at their own daughter’s behaviour, but also because they did not realise that VIBER could be used like that. Were all of these girls bullies? Many had never come to my attention as principal for the wrong reason before and they were now in 5th class. They got caught up in the herd mentality. In fact it highlights one of the greatest pressures, particularly on young girls, which many never lose during their life – ‘what others think of them and their appearance’. When you couple this with their need to belong, their need to be with the ‘in-group’, their devastation when they are excluded or are on the receiving end of spiteful comments about their body, their appearance, their families, and an accusation that they are ‘gay’...For those young people – this consumes their lives – apart from health & happiness learning goes out of the window.

This is only one aspect of the reality of the pressures on children at school today.

The latest research from the 'Growing up in Ireland' project found that twice as many families, 25%, were having difficulties making ends meet when their child was five years of age than when they were last measured nine months previously.

This research has shown that where there are financial pressures in the home, parents are more likely to use aggressive punishment such as smacking and shouting. The anxiety that this creates in children transfers to school and manifests itself in different ways, sometimes with emotional or irrational outbursts or poor performance at school.

In addition we have made tremendous progress, especially since the Education Act of 1998, of including many children with SEN in our mainstream schools. This has been a very welcome development but it does bring its own set of challenges and pressures.

Research has shown that there is a higher incidence of mental health problems in children with SEN than in the general population. The challenge for school has been the difficulties in recognising whether behaviours were associated with their SEN or whether they were a manifestation of mental health problems? The impact of the few has had a much greater impact on the many.

Add into this equation the fact that many staff may be struggling themselves either emotionally or are under economic pressures like so many others, it makes the situation much more difficult to deal with. To listen to me speak now you might be forgiven for thinking that schools are at breaking point in trying to cope – actually some are at that point.

There are 3300 primary schools in Ireland, all different – from the one teacher school to my own which had over 70 staff every day. 60% have a teaching principal. You can never take the school from the community or the community from the school. Yet every one of these diverse schools should have one thing in common – they should all want to provide a warm safe learning environment where quality teaching and learning takes place, where children can interact socially with other children irrespective of their backgrounds or the colour of their skin – in short where children can be children. We have only partially succeeded in providing this.

A school is more than just a building. There are many in the room today from inspectors to psychologists who could tell you that the minute they walk into a school they can sense its atmosphere. This may have nothing to do with the actual physical building, although how that is presented speaks volumes. It is rather how they are greeted and how pupils, staff and parents interact and respect each other. That has always been the underlying ethos in my own school where everyone is treated with equal respect. 'Children will not always remember how we taught them, but they will always remember how we treated them'.

Helping the school community to create that positive school culture is an essential role for any school principal.

We have to understand that 'The realisation that a young person's ability to recognise and express their emotions is fundamental to his/her capacity to learn'.

This is the challenge we face in schools each day. Many follow NEPS continuum of support – support for everyone, support for some, and then more targeted support for the few. Ironically from a schools perspective it is now easier to target the some as we can access additional resources from SNA support to extra support teachers.

Depending on where you live in Ireland accessing supports for the few can be downright frustrating as in some areas you would wonder if Health & Education live on different sides of the planet where neither the twain shall meet. Those of us working in education know the value of early intervention – be it for academic reasons where reading recovery, or maths recovery or literacy lift off can be used to boost someone that might be struggling.

Imagine the frustration then for school principals when they put in a referral for a child to see a psychiatrist to be told that there is a waiting list of 18 months to two years before the child can even be seen. Then imagine the frustration of having to follow this up with another referral because the child has self-harmed, this time putting in the referral to the social work department as well. So much for early intervention!

My own school was luckier than most because it was a DEIS school (in the past these were known as disadvantaged schools). I say we were luckier because we got extra staffing and access to programmes such as reading recovery, maths recovery, literacy lift off, etc. Most schools, if they were lucky got two psychological assessments from their NEPS psychologist. This was not the fault of the psychologists, it was simply because there was never enough of them for the number of schools.

We got a better service and more importantly our psychologist worked with classes and teachers on programmes like 'Friends for Life', Zippy's Friends Programme, Secret Agent Society social skills programme, peer mentoring. There is a pilot underway at present with a view to introducing a new model of resource allocation for primary schools. If this is introduced next September then it will considerably free up NEPS psychologists from just doing a couple of assessments in schools, it will allow them to work with, and support, a much greater number of pupils and staff.

The greatest asset in being a DEIS school was not the extra resources, though very welcome, but rather the fact that every single member of staff was focused on the same aims – increased attendance, increased literacy and numeracy and increased parent participation of parents in the school.

Everyone worked on a positive school climate and culture that is fundamental to staff and student wellbeing. It centred around mutual respect of everyone for everyone. The positive atmosphere has seen results improve as well as providing life skills to the pupils to care and manage their own emotions while understanding it is ok to be different.

The transition from pre-school to primary school can be traumatic, often more so for the parents. The transition from the nurturing, caring environment in primary to the more examination driven, points culture of second level school can also be traumatic.

A positive climate will help overcome some of this, a recognition that improving a person's mental health improves everyone else's lives around them, but also improves their academic scores. Today is about building on what we are already doing well, it is also about focusing on everyone's wellbeing. It costs nothing to provide a positive school culture for our pupils and staff, yet the benefits are enormous.

Being positive, if I had a choice I would reduce the English alphabet from 26 down to 24. The two letters I would get rid of would be D (Disorders, Deficits, Disease, Disadvantage....) and U (Unhealthy, Unhappy, Unacceptable, Unavailable....)

I will leave you with a quote I heard from Shane Martin recently: *'It is never too late to be healthy and happy – it is called hope'*.