

The challenge of mental health problems as a whole school

ReTHINK Conference 23rd September 2015

There is no doubt that, in the year since the Newcastle RGS "Out of Character" Conference, the importance of good mental health in young people and the growing requirement of schools to provide support where the overstretched CAMHS services no longer can have become a priority for most schools. We see that there is a evident link between attainment, a sense of wellbeing and mental resilience and we also see, far too often, students who simply feel unable to harness these qualities all together, all of the time.

The question is, how do schools do the best by their students and their staff when resources and expertise are inevitably limited and the confidence of staff to support students is tested by increasingly complex cases? Put simply, there is a lot of handwringing going on and lots of well-meaning concern and significant resources being poured into school based counselling and other support: but too often it is all piecemeal and reactionary. Schools find themselves swimming with the tide but never really able to make it to the front of the wave; to take a strategic look at what they do and change culture, ethos and attitude across their communities whilst also patching up and supporting the students and parents who rely on them for support.

What has struck us more than anything in the last twelve months is how much parents and families are increasingly turning to school staff for advice and support when they suspect their child has mental health issues. As we talk more about emotional wellbeing, so parents are more prepared to talk to us about it too. Understandably they are scared and frightened by the unseen illness often evident in harmful behaviours. They feel besieged by the "other life" their children live through social media, alien to them but the bringer of so much angst. Crucially, they are in need of education and understanding to enable them to access the right support for their children.

With CAMHS thresholds for intervention so high, and a typically ten week wait from referral anyway, families turn to school not just for advice, but also for partnership, because together we are the only adults who seem able to care for their sick child. As this relationship grows and school communities become used to talking to parents routinely about the mental health of their children, as well as their academic attainment, all teachers need to recognise that awareness of mental health issues and care for the individual is part and parcel of the differentiated learning to which we all aspire. That recognition begins in the language and culture of the staffroom AND classroom and needs to be supported by all: not just by the harassed pastoral staff who take on another student pushed their way by colleagues who feel ill equipped to cope - or even believe it is not their job to deal with mental health issues.

This year's RGS Newcastle Pastoral Conference "ReTHINK" aims to provide pastoral staff with the opportunity to gather ideas and share with colleagues thoughts and strategies in order to permanently change the whole school approach to emotional wellbeing. With talks and workshops on changing the language of the workplace, providing practical training programmes, as well as reassessing the effectiveness of existing services, the Conference aims to stop the handwringing and move schools into a culture of prevention as well as action. With contributions from Dr Pooky Knightsmith, MHFA England and Place2Be, as well as experts in the fields of counselling, training and eating disorders, it promises to be a great day of idea sharing and high quality CPD.

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