**Researching education and mental health: From ‘Where are we now?’ to ‘What next?’**

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The mental health and wellbeing of learners and teaching staff rank among some of the most pressing issues facing education as we enter a new decade. Growing rates of emotional distress among school-aged children, the impact of relentless workloads on teacher wellbeing, and the seismic effects of acute low-level funding and childhood poverty are common concerns. These were some of the critical areas for research attention highlighted at the inaugural SIG conference – *Mental health and education: Where are we now?* (July 2019). The event brought together researchers, academics and practitioners from early years to higher education contexts to discuss worries, deliberate practical solutions and set a dynamic research agenda moving forward. This special issue of BERA bites presents a collection of papers from the conference and features ground-breaking projects supporting mental health and wellbeing in education as well as showcasing some of the latest studies to emerge; collectively, helping steer the 2020 research agenda in this crucial area.

The range of selected articles starkly demonstrates how all-pervasive mental health and wellbeing concerns are across age groups and educational settings. **Paul Croll and Gaynor Atwood** chart mental wellbeing from adolescence into early adulthood in their longitudinal study of young people in England. **Sveta Mayer** reports on the trailblazing Youth Mental Health First Aid (Youth MHFA) programme evaluation in schools, while **Sarah Adams** shares her research on the self-harm experiences of primary-aged children.**Michelle Jayman and Annita Ventouris** introduce *Book of Beasties*, an innovative mental wellness card game delivered in schools; and **Josie Maitland**discusses how the complexity of school systems influences whole-school approaches to promoting mental health in practice.

Looking at mental health and adult learners, **Emma Clarke** and colleagues explore theworkload and wellbeing of PGCE students through their education journey, while **Siobhan Lynam and colleagues** highlight the experiences of postgraduate students from black, asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. **Richard Brock** **and colleagues** give insight into new research on novel approaches to support teacher wellbeing alongside **Nicky Lambert and colleague**s who relate some creative ways to support students’ learning and boost resilience. **Sinéad McBrearty** shifts our attention to the wider social and political landscape and puts the spotlight on major systemic issues which are critical to our understanding and response to mental health and wellbeing issues in education.

In the wake of the government’s Green Paper (DoH/DfE, 2017) the lens has focussed firmly on the role and responsibilities of schools to promote emotional health and develop a whole-school culture of wellbeing. This attention shows no sign of abating with the introduction of compulsory health education in the curriculum in England from September 2020 with a focus on how pupils of all ages can look after their mental wellbeing and the positive link between physical and mental health. These developments suggest the value of nurturing a child’s mental health as well as their academic potential has become more broadly recognised. Nonetheless, whilst the implementation of mental health interventions in schools is a welcome step forward, it is imperative that stretched resources are invested in evidence-based projects shown to make improvements to children’s wellbeing. Like schools, universities need to adopt a holistic, institution-wide approach; one which involves embedding mental health into the higher education curriculum and makes sure implementation decisions are based on the strength of the evidence.

Chronic mental health and wellbeing issues among teaching staff and trainees entering the profession have come resoundingly to the fore. Many educational professionals feel ill-equipped to manage escalating demands and competing priorities with additional strains and stressors becoming deleterious to their own wellbeing. Worryingly, presenteeism is evident when teachers continue to work due to unspoken pressure not to take time off. Research also suggests that teachers’ stress can be passed on to learners: primary-aged pupils of teachers with higher rates of self-reported ‘burnout’ were found to have elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol (Oberle & Schonert-Reich, 2016), indicating a two-fold negative impact on wellbeing.

Supporting the mental health of children, young people and staff is clearly an urgent priority. Initial teacher training requires greater focus on how to support the mental health needs of students. Moreover, whilst reaching out to every child with a universal approach is important, this needs to be complemented by targeted services for children already displaying signs of difficulties. Embedding an institution-wide culture of wellbeing also involves staff exercising self-care in their practice and this requires a cultural sea change. In the current climate, prioritising teacher and student mental health seems to feature lower down on the strategic agenda than exercising performance reviews and boosting examination results.

While we recognise the pivotal role of education in supporting mental health and wellbeing for all, discourses of resilience and character education which place the onus on individuals and educational settings imply we can address mental health issues in a vacuum. This misconception is distracting and needs challenging; the lens shifted to the broader societal context, acknowledging the deep-rooted causes of mental ill health such as poverty, adverse childhood experiences, and academic-related pressures which emanate from wider political decisions such as the overhaul of the examinations system. Sufficient investment in timely and appropriate services to meet the needs of learners and staff once they have been identified is paramount. Beyond this, educationalists must unite in generating evidence-based research to prompt systemic transformation, helping foster a cultural shift that normalises and nurtures self-care for everyone.

**References**

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Oberle, E., & Schonert-Reich, K. A. (2016). Stress contagion in the classroom? The

link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students. *Social Science & Medicine, 159,* 30-37.

**Questions for discussion**

1. How can we ensure staff are equipped to fulfil the health and wellbeing obligations that are being placed on schools and educational institutions?

1. What strategies can be used to prevent staff burn-out by addressing issues before crisis point? For example, tackling the stigma of taking time off for staff with mental health and wellbeing challenges.

1. How can better communication between research and practice be facilitated to ensure evidence-based, good practice is widely shared and applied in education settings?