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Spotlight on mental health and education: SIG hosts inaugural conference

Jayman, Michelle ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0277-4344 and Glazzard, Jonathan (2019) Spotlight on mental health and education: SIG hosts inaugural conference. British Educational Research Association, UK.

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Spotlight on Mental Health and Education: SIG Hosts Inaugural Conference

"I thought it was great – well pitched – one of my best conferences this year!"

Over 80 delegates attended the first conference of the recently launched Mental Health, Wellbeing and Education SIG at the University of West London (UWL) in July. The theme, *Researching Mental Health and Education: Where are we now?* attracted academics, practitioners, students and others working across a range of education settings from early years to adult community learning. The impetus for the event was to provide a much-needed forum to showcase latest research in the field, facilitate knowledge exchange and share best practices. There were many highlights from a diverse programme which comprised research presentations, round table discussions and a panel debate.

Sinéad McBrearty from the Education Support Partnership (ESP) (a charity committed to ensuring everyone working in education is respected, supported and resilient) gave the opening address, highlighting some core mental health and wellbeing issues affecting educators and learners alike. Recent figures from the Teacher Wellbeing Index (ESP, 2018) revealed that 76% of educators have experienced negative behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms in the last year due to work stresses, with over half of those surveyed (57%) considering leaving the profession. Inevitably, the repercussions of this are felt throughout the school community and the impact on learning is profound. For McBrearty, tackling the current mental health crisis in education requires a sea change; this involves driving policy (using evidence-based research) to create systemic transformation, coupled with a cultural shift that normalises and nurtures self-care for everyone.

Throughout the day it was interesting to hear the findings of so many different research studies, and equally illuminating to be exposed to a plethora of different research methodologies and methods. Presenters showcased a range of innovative methodologies including visual and auditory approaches to research. These included photo elicitation, drawings, timelines, radio and collage. It was refreshing to learn about innovative and participatory approaches as well as to hear the findings from more traditional studies. Mental health is a complex and broad field of enquiry and it necessitates a wide range of methodologies and methods to examine it thoroughly. *Creative approaches to supporting wellbeing* was the 'delegates choice' round table topic – this comprised a fascinating exploration of how art, culture, and animals can be used inventively to help all learners achieve and thrive.

"Round table discussions were really excellent and drew upon lots of the presentations."

The scope of research projects spanned across age groups, education settings, and members of the learning community and starkly demonstrated how all-pervasive mental health and wellbeing concerns are in education. Colleagues agreed that initial teacher training requires greater focus on how to support the mental health needs of children and young people as well as practice self-care, including specific input on developing resilience for teachers to enable them to cope with the challenges of the job. The discourses of resilience and character education were questioned – Are these are being used as excuses to expose young people to an increasingly toxic education system in which school and teacher effectiveness are currently evaluated on the basis of narrow performance indicators?

Crucial issues were raised about the mental health of students in higher education. For example, the nature of student transitions into and through higher education and whether

negative experiences of multiple and multidimensional transitions which students navigate daily are a contributing factor to mental ill health in the student population. Like schools, universities need to adopt a whole institutional approach to mental health which includes embedding mental health into the higher education curriculum.

In the closing plenary, Professor Glazzard drew together several pertinent points that had arisen during the day. Supporting the mental health of children, young people and staff is an urgent priority. Training teachers to identify the signs and symptoms of poor mental health is critical but this must be matched by sufficient investment in external services to meet these needs once they have been identified. Crucially, although schools play a pivotal role in supporting young people's mental health needs, placing the onus on schools simply detracts attention away from the deep-rooted causes of mental ill health such as poverty, adverse childhood experiences and factors, for example, exam-related stress and the narrowing of the curriculum which arise from wider political decisions. Finally, a key take home message was the need to move away from an individualised /medical approach to mental health which locates the individual as the source of the problem. The problem of mental health necessitates a systemic response which interrogates the structural factors which result in mental ill health. These factors are located within societies, families and schools rather than within the individual.

On a last note, the SIG convenors would like to warmly thank all the presenters, UWL staff, and delegates who helped make this conference such a success. Look out for a special edition of *Research Intelligence* coming in 2020!

Reference

Education Support Partnership (2018). *Teacher Wellbeing Index 2018.* Available at: https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/resources/research-reports/teacher-wellbeing-index-2018