

The BERA Guide to Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools

“This is a timely contribution to a post-Covid world where schools in particular are struggling to restore equilibrium for their pupils. Teachers, School Governors and Health professionals who work with CYP will greatly benefit from this book as well as academics whose research centres upon school-based intervention. The book is helpfully presented in two parts, the first addressing relevant theory and policy related to the mental health and wellbeing of CYP and the second offering informative case studies of how health promoting frameworks can operate in schools. Furthermore, the editors are all well qualified to comment on the current state of play in education.

I would highly recommend this book to both my academic colleagues and to the teaching professionals that I know and work with as a Primary School governor.”

– Madeleine Ohl, Professor of Child Mental Health and Wellbeing, University of West London

“Addressing the pressing concern of deteriorating mental health among children and adolescents, the book offers a timely and insightful exploration of how to best support the mental wellbeing of young people in today’s world. The authors, all possessing significant expertise and experience in psychology and education, particularly mental health, wellbeing, and inclusion in educational settings, shed light on the urgent need for effective interventions, emphasising the importance of collaborative and multi-disciplinary approaches.

The book’s comprehensive approach encompasses theoretical frameworks, policy analysis, and practical case studies, which showcase innovative practices and interventions; it provides readers a detailed understanding of the challenges and opportunities in promoting mental health within educational settings and offers a wealth of actionable strategies for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals alike. The authors recognise the importance of embedding the student voice within whole school approaches and highlight the interconnectedness between staff wellbeing and pupil mental health. By addressing barriers to successful implementation, such as funding constraints and insufficient training, the authors offer valuable insights into how schools can create supportive environments for both students and staff.

This book provides evidence-based insights and practical guidance for fostering resilience and wellbeing in educational settings; therefore, it serves as a valuable resource for anyone invested in the mental health of children and young people and underscores the collective

responsibility in creating supportive environments where all children and young people can thrive.”

– Dr Annita Ventouris, CPsychol, AFBPsS, FHEA,
School of Life and Medical Sciences, University of Hertfordshire

“This is an excellent book for anyone who is a part of a school community and would love to contribute to its development. The authors are experts in mental health and wellbeing, and they provide us with several different lenses to look through to the issues i.e. children and young people, their parents, teachers and school leaders. It is a timely book that offers highly useful strategies and practical suggestions to the whole school community in terms of supporting both mental health and wellbeing of all involved. I have used some of its suggestions in my teaching and some when parenting! If you are a stakeholder in school education right now, you will find this book very useful indeed.”

– Pınar Robinson-Gümüş, ITE Programme Leader,
University Centre, St Helens College

“Mental health difficulties in children and young people are continuing to increase at a time when specialist resources are under great strain, which means that non-specialists need to (and can very ably) provide support to the children they come into contact with. This is particularly true in the school environment. School staff may feel that their primary role is to instill academic learning in their pupils, but the reality is that children’s emotional wellbeing needs to be addressed if they are to successfully learn. This book addresses a number of issues around that wellbeing and how school staff can support children’s mental health. It takes complicated and, often, quite scary issues, and demonstrates how the right approaches, such as a trauma-informed or compassionate one, can encourage children to speak up about the difficulties they are facing and get the support they need. It normalizes experiences that children can find frightening and suggests practical ways of giving children the confidence to share their problems with an adult. It also explores the expanding world of online support that older children, in particular, might find useful. It brings together a wide selection of the most up-to-date research in order to inspire and build confidence in those in the front line.”

– Bronach Hughes, MBE, Pyramid Project Co-ordinator at the
University of West London



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Critical Insights into Educational Research and Practice

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The BERA Guide to Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools

Exploring Frontline Support in Educational Research and Practice

Edited by

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Marcus, Jay and Danny for your inspiration and
unwavering support

-MJ

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About the Editors

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About the Contributors

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Naomi Field is a Drama School Teacher with over 20 years' experience working with both secondary and primary-age children. Over this period, she has held senior pastoral roles. During her teaching career, Naomi has held a strong interest in what educators can do to help pupils develop a set of skills that promote psychological wellbeing and equip them to cope with the challenges of growing up and moving into adult life. While Head of Year 7, Naomi was particularly struck by the impact of transition for children with emotional regulation difficulties and the associated negative outcomes on learning and social development. This motivated her to work part-time in a primary setting to observe more closely the social and emotional progress of children during the primary years. Naomi is currently applying for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology.

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Megan McEwan is a Counselling Psychologist and has worked in both mainstream secondary and primary school settings. She also works in the NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service with young people experiencing moderate to severe mental health conditions, and as an assessor for Autistic Spectrum and Attention and Hyperactivity Disorder. She recently completed her Doctoral Research on young people's experiences of disclosing their voice heard in an educational setting. Her research interests include the role of shame in exacerbating mental health conditions and the relationship between self-compassion and personal development.

Foreword

Too many children and young people (CYP) experience a probable mental health problem. There are escalating issues linked to this such as non-attendance, managed moves, and the increased use of alternative provision in our education system at present. Thus, this book is extremely timely, much needed and provides critical exploration of the many complex and multi-faceted issues which are at play and impact on the opportunity of CYP to have good mental health and wellbeing in education.

In this book, informed and knowledgeable contributions are gathered that give us insights into the way these CYP and wider wellbeing issues in schools are being supported. The book offers a high-quality exposition of the debates that are occurring within the fields of education, health, and social care around the mental health of CYP. It also provides practical solutions as to how we may shape the timely support and meet the escalating need of these individuals and their families.

The book is comprised of two sections which integrate theory and practice. The first section is a timely focus on ‘Child and adolescent mental wellbeing: Theory, policy and critical issues for education’. This presents a highly important theoretical framework and policy context which is later explored in the case studies in the second section. Critical debates are often not a strong feature of many empirical studies in this area of research; thus, this book provides a much-needed bridge between this and the practice-based literature in the field at present.

A major and cross-cutting feature of this book is the critical exploration of the problematic nature of developing effective whole school approaches (WSA) in settings. This starts in chapter 1, where the author considers the changing and challenging expectations on schools to offer frontline support for CYP in the context of the ever-evolving constraints in the sector.

The complexity of the mental health crisis is investigated, and connections are made to wider systemic issues within society. It is a must read for anyone who is involved in developing a settings-based philosophy to mental health promotion via a multi-levelled and layered approach, alongside needing to know the challenges and constraints that they may face on the way.

This book is full of treasure, rich in critical appraisal and evidenced-based practice to improve the solutions that educators are seeking to develop to allow their CYP to thrive and survive in our present educational landscape. It will help you consider the best practice to develop in a setting to allow you to grow individuals who are emotionally and mentally strong. I can commend this book to the reader as an essential component to developing your onward journey in your own professional area of improved mental health for all.

Bev Peartree, Associate Professor,
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INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

Schools and the Mental Health Crisis: Education on the Frontline

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the topic of mental health and wellbeing in schools and the overarching theoretical framework for the book. The evolving role of schools from nurturing environments to frontline support for pupils' mental health and wellbeing is scrutinised in the context of demand, capacity and constraints in a post-pandemic world. Alongside this is a critical consideration of schools' and education staff's role, responsibilities and boundaries. The disparate mental health needs of pupils within the school population are discussed, as well as key risk and protective factors to help facilitate timely identification and appropriate support pathways for vulnerable pupils. Key topics and case studies which comprise the remainder of the book are introduced to navigate the reader, and this concludes the chapter.

Keywords: Mental health and wellbeing; health-promoting schools; risk and protective factors; school-based interventions; early intervention and prevention; school responsibilities and boundaries

Introduction

There are multiple and complex challenges facing schools across the world today. Not all countries or regions share the same or

equal pressures, yet the education sector is beset with an unprecedented host of familiar and novel threats. Pre-existing difficulties were both exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic with new challenges emerging in its wake. In the UK, the journey to recovery has been blighted by a cost-of-living crisis, rising numbers of families living in poverty and widening inequalities in society – harbingers of uncertain and worrying times still ahead.

Children and young people's experiences do not exist in isolation and a public mental health crisis is in our midst. Worldwide, approximately 10–20% of children and adolescents experience mental health difficulties, yet the majority do not receive timely and appropriate care (Binagwaho & Senga, 2021). In England, 18% of 7- to 16-year-olds were diagnosed with a probable mental disorder in 2022 (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2022), coinciding with the first full academic year of face-to-face teaching since the onset of the pandemic. Self-reported anxiousness was also elevated for both primary- and secondary-age pupils (Department for Education [DfE], 2023). While children's¹ subjective wellbeing continued its downward trend, with 1 in 16 pupils aged 10–15 unhappy with their lives (The Children's Society, 2022). Beyond these harrowing statistics, educators, practitioners, parents,² and crucially young people themselves, have called for urgent government action on mental health.

Certainly, a serious gap between the demand and supply of children's mental health services pre-dated the pandemic and a worldwide shortage of mental care professionals has exposed serious failings at a global level (Hatcher et al., 2019). International studies have shown that mitigation efforts including the provision of adequate resources, strategic programming and system-level support are demonstrably weak (Binagwaho & Senga, 2021). Services across the UK have struggled over recent decades, with pandemic-related factors and rising poverty exacerbating pre-existing demand (Blanden et al., 2021). Despite this burden, a historical failure of parity of esteem with physical health appears to persist. A review of children's mental health services revealed that the NHS had anticipated treating just one-third of current diagnosed cases. In addition, wide variability across regions in investment in services, access rates and

wait times were highlighted, with some children waiting on average 81 days to receive support ([Children's Commissioner for England, 2021](#)).

A Settings-Based Approach to Health

Childhood and adolescence are crucial periods for developing socio-emotional skills and preventing mental ill health ([World Health Organization \[WHO\], 2021](#)). Academics and policy makers have argued with increasing fervour that schools are uniquely placed to nurture wellbeing and support mental health. Schools offer a universal environment where almost all children can be reached and are integral to the WHO's settings-based approach to health. A setting is, '[a place] where people actively use and shape the environment' and 'create or solve problems relating to health' ([WHO, 2023a](#), para. 4). More specifically, a health-promoting school (HPS), 'constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working' ([WHO, 2023b](#), para. 1). According to [Jeet et al. \(2016\)](#), health-promoting settings are guided by principles of equity, supportive environments, empowerment, community participation and multisectoral partnerships. Therefore, for an HPS to flourish, support from staff and the learning community, a stable infrastructure and health-promoting policies are needed. Conversely, negative factors such as excessive workloads, inadequate funding and poorly trained staff, threaten the foundations for a setting to thrive. Settings-based approaches provide a holistic framework which acknowledges children's mental health and wellbeing as a concern for individuals, families, communities and global society. Or simply put, as 'everyone's business'. However, for schools to fulfil their potential to positively influence the health outcomes of pupils and staff they must be properly publicly resourced and steadfastly supported in their efforts.

This book aligns with a settings-based philosophy of mental health and advocates a comprehensive multi-level approach. Within this bold vision, the vital role of education in mental health promotion and support is acknowledged. Nonetheless, in current practice, clear responsibilities and professional

boundaries for staff are lacking, leaving many educators feeling overwhelmed and at risk of burnout ([Education Support, 2023](#)). Crucially, staff are the lifeblood of a well-functioning HPS, but need to be supported themselves to effectively support pupils. People create change and this book is designed as a practical guide for schools, educators, parents and other key stakeholders. As a starting point, we consider the post-pandemic school environment within a healthy settings framework and identify gaps and barriers. The pivotal role of schools in mental health promotion is introduced and is a constant thread throughout the book. As children's mental health and wellbeing are clearly connected to their unique lived experiences and identities, risks and protective factors are explored to gain a better understanding of individual needs which can inform preventive actions. Clearly, there is no silver bullet for the current crisis. Arguably, however, well-functioning HPSs can play a ground-breaking role in building back better provision, and this was the impetus behind writing the book. Although our main focus is on the UK, the issues are universal and will have resonance with an international readership.

From Where We Are Now: 'I question more and more if I want to be a teacher anymore'

Despite the herculean efforts of educators worldwide to support pupils' transition through the pandemic and back to the classroom, learning and personal development have been significantly impacted. The [Education Policy Institute \(EPI\) \(2021\)](#) had estimated that to enable pupils in England to catch up on lost learning a £10–15 billion recovery package was needed. This figure was proposed as a long-term investment, going beyond short-term measures to reverse pandemic effects and shifting the goal from education 'recovery' to education 'resilience' ([EPI, 2021](#), p. 6). The final amount (£3.1 billion) fell far short of this ambition and per pupil spending (£230–£400) compared unfavourably to other developed nations (£1,800 and £2,100 per pupil in the United States and the Netherlands respectively). Concerningly, future real-term school costs are

projected to continue to grow, while the purchasing power of school budgets diminishes in tandem. As such, educators are increasingly required to do more with less (Sibieta, 2022).

The notion of ‘intensification’ in education – the economically motivated pressure on teachers to undertake additional tasks without extra resources (Apple, 1986) – is not new. Nonetheless, pandemic effects and financial strains have contributed to an onslaught of non-teaching-related duties. Added responsibilities for pupil welfare and increased contact with agencies such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and social services are linked to more families living in poverty and unparalleled demand for mental health support (Education Support, 2023). Undoubtedly, the nature of work in schools has radically shifted and teachers have seen a steady erosion of their core professional identity. UK teachers’ union NASUWT reported that teachers were working, on average, 57 hours a week, including evenings and weekends (Roach, 2023). Unsurprisingly, 72% of teachers surveyed in a national poll (DfE, 2023) did not consider their workload acceptable.

Woods et al. (1997) described how the personal self can be inextricably bound to teachers’ professional roles and identities. Staff do not ‘switch off’ when they leave the school gates and often resort to supplementing deprived pupils from their own pockets (Adams, 2019). In a similar vein, studies have shown teachers’ high level of concern for pupils’ mental health, despite lacking confidence in their ability to provide support (Maclean & Law, 2022). Worryingly, a major discrepancy in public awareness and the reality of working in schools has contributed to low morale among teachers (Muller & Goldenberg, 2020). An international report (Schleicher, 2020, p. 3) identified England as one of seven countries (from a total of 31) to have experienced a ‘significant deterioration in the perceived prestige of the [teaching] profession’. Teachers have reported significantly higher levels of work-related stress and poorer mental health than other occupations (Lowry et al., 2022). The annual UK Teacher Well-being Index revealed that 59% of respondents had considered quitting due to pressures on health and wellbeing (Education Support, 2022); while workforce data for England (Gov.UK, 2023) showed that over 40,000 teachers had resigned from

state-funded schools in 2022. Interestingly, research by [Burge et al. \(2021\)](#) found that workplace characteristics such as workload, school culture and teaching environment, were perceived as having of higher value by staff than pay or rewards. The authors concluded – aligning with the ethos of a health-promoting setting – that a supportive working environment was a greater retention incentive for teachers than financial gain. Thus, measures to improve the working climate should be the primary focus of future strategies aimed at tackling both staff retention and recruitment.

The School as a Health-Promoting Setting

[Cefai et al. \(2021\)](#) have argued that mental health promotion is yet to be recognised as a main objective of education. In a survey involving 1,500 schools from 10 European countries over half reported having no mental health policy and only 47% of respondents considered mental health provision a high priority ([Patalay et al., 2017](#)). In the UK, the picture is complex and current discourse on provision raises critical questions concerning specific responsibilities and boundaries for teachers. Views on the appropriate extent of school involvement may vary, yet recent historical events have shone a light on the immeasurable part teachers play in supporting some of our most vulnerable children in society – seriously challenging traditional notions that academic accomplishment is the highest measure of a school's success.

Clearly, schools have statutory responsibilities and government guidance ([DfE, 2019](#)) underscores the role of educators in reducing stigma related to mental health and supporting pupils develop emotional regulation. However, as [Hurry et al. \(2021\)](#) have argued, while managing children's emotional and social behaviours is a recognisable aspect of teaching, staff are increasingly required to provide support across the spectrum of needs. This echoes findings from a national scoping study of English schools ([Vostanis et al., 2013](#)) which revealed that the main provision for pupils with mental health needs was from internal staff with no specialist training. At present, due to systemic failings, schools cannot secure timely engagement from CAMHS, and the burden falls on education staff who are buckling under