

## A Step Too Far for Teachers?

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Psychologist **31**(3):7-7

Published 01 Mar 2018

The recent green paper '*Transforming children and young people's mental health provision*' (DoHSC & DoF, 2017) contains much that should be lauded. The proposals include designating leads for mental health in schools, integrating mental health and wellbeing into the curriculum, and mental health awareness training for staff. Embedding psychological services in schools could potentially provide a destigmatised, de-medicalised way of supporting children's mental health needs as they emerge. However, it is essential that the teachers at the forefront of these changes are not forgotten.

YoungMinds (2016) have previously raised concerns that, after years of cuts to mental health care, government funding intended to support CAMHS services is often being diverted to other priorities. CAMHS services are left struggling with increasing waiting times, and that means more children and young people are not receiving the support they need in a timely manner, with the burden of care shifting to families and communities, including schools. However, our own emerging research indicates that teachers feel overwhelmed with this responsibility, for which they have little or no specialist training or support. Evidence suggests that, when faced with pupils experiencing psychological distress, teachers can struggle to manage professional and personal boundaries (Locke et al, 2005). They can become exhausted with the emotional labour necessary to support distressed pupils in the classroom, and this can negatively impact teacher's personal lives, increase the risk of burnout, and reduce the quality of teaching (Rayner & Espinoza, 2016). Whilst teachers are theoretically well placed to perform a valuable role in front-line mental health first aid, given the current climate of austerity, this seems somewhat unrealistic and unfair. Asking teachers to be key players in early intervention for psychological distress may be seen as just another burden by the teaching profession (Ringeisen, Henderson & Hoadwood, 2003). This concern is particularly salient now, given that whilst the green paper is open for consultation, practical implementation has not yet been addressed. Any policy changes arising from these proposals will not be rolled out until 2022/23, leaving today's teachers feeling pressured to take a more prominent role in providing mental health support in schools but feeling they lack needed professional knowledge (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri & Goel, 2011).

Teaching is currently experiencing a retention crisis, with the number of full-time teacher vacancies and temporarily filled posts rising yearly since 2011 (Foster, 2018), arguably due to increased stress, low levels of trust, budget cuts and accountability pressures (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014). Alongside this, children's mental health issues are becoming more prevalent, with one in ten young people now experiencing a diagnosable mental health condition (DoHSC & DoF, 2017). An effective policy response is vital if children's outcomes are to be improved, but there appears to be little recognition of teachers' needs within this agenda. Teachers themselves are at risk of mental health problems and burnout (Greenberg, Brown & Abernavoli, 2016), which only exacerbates the retention issues, and disrupts pupils' learning and the possibility for supportive emotional attachments. Including a

mental health role within the teacher's remit, without providing structured guidance and systemic support, will surely only increase existing stressors in the sector on teachers and their pupils.

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