

## **COPING IN THE CLASSROOM – AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RISK FOR TEACHERS**

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I was part of the Community/Society group. Each expert took the lead in helping a sub-group generate questions for the Education and World of Work groups. Before generating the questions, there was an opportunity to tell the group about research that we had been involved in. My topic was 'Coping in the classroom – an occupational health risk for teachers'.

This was a qualitative study and as such gives an in depth snapshot into the views of a sample of teachers in England. However, there has been research in other countries into teacher stress.

We were interested in what aspect of coping in the classroom could be a source of stress for teachers, particularly when they have to manage the inclusion of students with specific health, behavioural and emotional needs.

Stress is consistently found to be the main cause of work-related illness in education. Apart from educating pupils from various backgrounds, teachers also have to control behaviour, maintain a positive learning environment and ensure students' health, safety and wellbeing.

A semi-structured format was chosen for the focus group discussions and workshops (n = 36), consisting of case studies and questions. This helped participants share their experiences and provided a flexible approach to guide the discussion.

Transcripts from the groups were qualitatively analysed and issues causing stress emerged from the data. For the purpose of this symposium we will focus on areas where the community and society can help.

**6 issues emerged from the data where we as a community or society could be influential. These were: Recognition, Opportunities for interaction, Practical steps, Policies, Guidance and Training.**

### **Recognition**

- As a society, recognising that stress is an issue for teachers and that asking for help is not a weakness. Head Teachers and Principals need to take a lead in overcoming the stigma
- Raising awareness of the effect when children have to be carers at home and where there is drug and alcohol abuse.

### **Opportunities for interaction – focusing on the school/community interface**

- "Health circles" – here teachers can detect and discuss problems and devise solutions for mutual benefit. Social events to promote healthy lifestyles such as showing a film (at lunchtime or after work) about a health related topic and providing an opportunity to discuss issues arising with experts.

- Provide opportunities for the school and family to interface, for example 'share groups', where parents are invited into the classroom at a certain time, which gives an opportunity for parent/teacher interaction. This could help to address issues like risk-averse parents, who won't let their children get wet or play in the snow and gives the opportunity to highlight the age limits on Facebook. Parents can get tips on how to communicate with their children.
- Provision of peer mentoring within the school.

### **Practical steps**

- Reducing unnecessary bureaucracy
- Improve security so that gangs and drug dealers cannot access school or college premises.

### **Policies**

- Setting up policies on mental health and related issues such as violence, bullying and harassment at work and adopting a 'no tolerance of bullying' attitude. (bullying is often fuelled by Facebook)
- Conducting anonymous teacher surveys and then taking action based on the findings.

### **Guidance**

- Different attitudes to staff wellbeing, within the school and a lack of guidance on how to cope with different situations can be a cause of stress among teaching staff.
- Resources to help teaching staff cope with those challenges vary between different schools and colleges. There is a lot of information available but the mechanism for communicating it to teachers could be improved.
- Intranet pages so that teachers can obtain information on what action is being taken to combat mental ill health in the workplace.
- Advertising support networks such as in the UK, The Teacher Support Network and 24/7 helpline.
- Free counselling for all teachers available during the working week.
- Individual assessment of teacher lifestyle (perhaps as a work benefit) and helping them plan for a healthier future.

### **Training**

- Training teachers on how to recognise signs of stress in colleagues and how to find solutions.
- Courses for teachers on how to cope with stress and to help them become more resilient and develop coping skills. New teachers are particularly vulnerable.
- Training them how to cope when faced with violence from students and parents.