

Foreword

Professor Gabriel Kirtchuk

Traditionally, education and mental health have been seen as separate and independent of each other – conceptually and operationally unrelated. Fortunately, the important and influential relationship between education and mental health has become increasingly recognised, within the context of the well-being of both students (in terms of the educational process) and teachers (in terms of the educational environment). For those of us who work in the clinical environment, it is clear that many significant mental health problems that permeate into adulthood have their origins in the experiences in childhood across a range of environments, including family, peers and school. Understanding this complex relationship is incredibly important, not simply from a philosophical or research perspective, but from a strategic, policy and sometimes interventionist standpoint. Engaging, and where appropriate intervening, early in the development of a mental health issue may not only reduce the extent, or even negate the development, of a mental health problem, but also foster a sense of coherence, comprehensiveness, comfort and care within the educational environment.

It is worth reflecting that modern classrooms resemble an extended family environment; they are dynamic places where relationships are fundamental to growth and maturity, both intellectually and behaviourally. This dynamism is complex, comprising a myriad processes and contexts that interplay uniquely to influence, facilitate, and sometimes obstruct, everyone enmeshed within that environment. Teachers thus have one of the most challenging and most important jobs imaginable, being key influencers in the development, growth and achievement of the students in their care. These challenges often present a significant emotional burden for teachers in achieving their objectives with their students. Stress-related illnesses in the teaching profession are – historically and contemporarily – concerning for all those involved in the educational and care systems, as well as policy-makers.

Teachers, of course, encounter a broad range of students in the educational environment and are generally successful at accommodating their wide spectrum of abilities and characteristics. However, the interaction of this diversity with the developing character and personality of each student can manifest as a 'sub-clinical' or overt mental health problem.

Within the overarching agenda of equity and inclusivity in education, children with challenging or concerning behaviours are more likely to remain in mainstream education than be excluded or taught in a special setting. This pursuit of inclusivity, desirable though it is, can produce a high-stress, high-emotion environment for both educators and fellow students.

The current political landscape is one of austerity, with scarce resources. And in this context, teachers find themselves striving to provide high-quality education to students with very diverse abilities and behaviours, with limited support. It is no surprise that perhaps this 'noblest' of professions is increasingly vulnerable to significant stress-related disorders, particularly depression and anxiety.

Colin Martin, Mick Fleming and Hugh Smith have done a superb job bringing together an excellent set of contributors, including key academics and practitioners in the education and mental health fields, to explore the discourse between mental health and education in an applied and translational way. *Mental Health & Well-Being in the Learning and Teaching Environment* is the first book that considers the relationship between mental health and education in an evidence-based and practice-focused way, and discusses the mental health needs of both teachers and students contextually anchored in the learning environment. The book is a practical and useful resource for teachers, and for all professionals whose work brings them into this environment, for example, educational psychologists and school nurses.

It is my hope that the key messages contained in this exciting new book may not only contribute to enhancing and improving the quality of experience of both students and teachers, but also reduce the occurrence of significant mental health problems by facilitating early identification and intervention. Nurturing an environment of positive mental health and well-being is instrumental to such an aspiration and this impressive volume holds that ideal as a central tenet and core value throughout.

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