**Towards alleviation and prevention of possible/future mental health difficulties in school settings**

**What school staff and research has been saying over the last few years:**

There is much on the news these days about child mental health. Even before the pandemic in 1919 Sally Weale wrote *‘More than eight out of 10 teachers say mental health among pupils in England has deteriorated in the past two years – with rising reports of anxiety, self-harm and even cases of suicide – against a backdrop of inadequate support in schools.’* (Guardian 17.04.19)

Anne Longfield, the previous Children’s Commissioner for England was clearly concerned about this.In January 2020, in her third annual children’s mental health briefing she said **‘***there is still no commitment to a counsellor in every school, which would make a huge difference’*.

*‘Teachers believe there is a lack of support for tackling poor classroom behaviour, either from school leaders or from parents’*, new research has found. In a [report published at the end of 2019 looking at the well-being of teachers](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-well-being-at-work-in-schools-and-further-education-providers), ‘*Ofsted found that managing poor behaviour in the classroom is one of the main causes of low morale’.* Ofsted July 2019

And more recently we hear:

*‘All this pressure is having a drastic effect on teachers’ mental health too. Nearly half of teachers plan to quit the profession within the next five years. A survey found in a poll of 1,788 teachers by the National Education Union (NEU). 44% said they would leave by 2027, while a fifth said they would leave as soon as within the next two years’.*

Charlotte Bateman Sky News April 2022

*‘Teachers are leaving careers they love in a last-ditch effort to save their mental health. How did we get here?’*

[Stephen Noonoo](https://www.edsurge.com/writers/stephen-noonoo)  Voices of Change   May 2, 2022

**Towards mental health prevention – The role of thoughtful nurturing schools**

There are clearly major concerns around both the education and mental health of both children, and of their teachers too as Charlotte Bateman says.

And of course the Covid19 crisis has doubled the pressure on everyone. Children already burdened with insecurity and trauma and their families may have become increasingly prone to fear and panic reactions, and to going into fight, flight or even freeze responses, burdening pressured school staff even more. These 2 concerns are also interrelated. Vulnerable and especially Looked-after children have often experienced multiple traumatic losses as they move in and out of care situations. So for such children teacher absences and changes due to stress etc. are likely to trigger painful memories and anxieties around their own traumatic changes – leading perhaps to acting out, ‘acting in’ and inhibited capacities for learning.

Increasingly these days, and especially in inner city schools, classes have a small number of students who just can’t learn or respond to good teaching. This can cause huge anxieties for staff. Their behaviour can disrupt relationships and the learning of others - sometimes stretching the capacities of the whole school.

Its not all bad news though. Difficulties can challenge and motivate the introduction of supportive systems and learning; for example:

“Our senior leader checks in with us regularly to see how we are doing personally as well as how things are going in the classroom. She’s allowed us time to focus on ourselves and the students we see daily, rather than the red tape aspects of education. This allowed me to focus heavily on connecting with students which has finally paid off in late April. **I finally feel like I’m peeling away the levels of trauma and enabling students to connect to the classroom.”**

*“Why so many teachers are leaving and others stay”*

Jennifer Gonzalez in **Cult of Pedagogy** May 2022

Both teachers and especially the most vulnerable children need to feel heard and understood; and a trusted, nurturing base within which to function, learn and grow.

As an educational psychotherapist I certainly support Anne Longfield’s concern around the availability of counselling and therapy, both in school and from outside agencies. Indeed some children really need specialist services. But sometimes it is either not available or they are just too fearful and anxious to risk opening up or, as I saw at the Pupil Referral Unit where I worked, they can sometimes be just too needy to bear the gaps between sessions.

There is a lot however that school staff, and schools as a whole can do to ease these difficulties within their daily interactions and work with vulnerable children. I would like to offer a few thoughts and suggestions from my own experience and training - focusing particularly on understanding, and on using a ‘relationship-based approach’.

**A relationship-based approach to supporting vulnerable children in school.**

In my experience thoughtful, committed, understanding, and well supported school staff can over time, turn some of our most at risk children and young people towards trust and self-acceptance, and a capacity to talk through rather than act out, and towards developing the secure base needed for learning, and for accessing specialist therapeutic support.

I know this because for several years I worked as a psychotherapist at a Pupil Referral Unit, which was a huge learning curve. It was during this time that I saw first-hand the big difference *understanding* can make. Through training and work discussion staff came to understand the effects of insecure attachment and trauma on the brain, on behaviour, on relating and on learning.

Staff also experienced how helpful clinical supervision and case discussions could be for those *working* with hurting and vulnerable children and young people, both for themselves and for the students in their care. Supervision can enable *staff* to feel heard and held in mind, as well as giving them a space to think together about the challenging children and young people they worked with. As we talked through the ordinary unconscious processes which these insecure and at times dangerous children sometimes evoked and acted out, staff were able to distance themselves a little from the resulting stress and helplessness, and think together of more helpful responses.

We also saw how giving the students a ‘second chance’ experience of secure attachment, of being ‘held in mind’ and of feeling ‘heard’ and nurtured, could slowly shift their dysfunctional patterns and enable openness to learning and relating - within the context of increasingly trusted relationships and settings. In the PRU we could *see* the difference these discussions, training sessions and reflections were having both on the children and staff, and on the PRU ethos.

I remember for example, how during that time exclusions slowly became a thing of the past, and the regular ’necessary’ holding down of dysregulated children was reduced to almost nothing. The ’time out room' was well used though - when out of control children accompanied by an understanding but silent adult would go to calm down.

So firstly understanding enough of the reality of the causes is key. Often children cannot help their behaviour. Trauma may be repressed or originate before words, but even-so little hints of it can trigger a reaction which gets them into ‘double trouble’, often evoking unbearable pain and helplessness – both within themselves and within others around them, leading to teacher stress and buried hurts.

Dysfunctional attachment patterns can pass through generations, leaving a child conflicted, or even abused or neglected, influencing the ways they expect to be treated. Thus vicious patterns can be repeated and exacerbated both at home and at school without conscious awareness.

Through looking more deeply into pupils’ difficulties and behaviours, we discover that there may be very good reasons (rooted in their precise history and relationships - sometimes going right back through the generations, or perhaps involving severe health issues or painful losses) for children’s acted out outbursts and anxieties.

It is possible to understand therefore that in a profound sense and in the heat of the moment some children *just can’t help* the way they react. Of course we need to stop hurtful behaviour, but basically they need help – a **firsthand experience** of a different kind. This is where the amazing opportunity of schools and school staff comes in; school staff who see children every day of the school year, and who necessarily make significant relationships with their students – ‘for better or worse’.

What I am describing is a **relationship-based** **approach** to both understanding and working successfully with vulnerable children. A secure nurturing relationship which survives the ‘bad times’, and which can offer little opportunities to talk (or play!) things through, will begin to shift those unhelpful expectations; and even (along with parent support) prevent escalations into ‘mental health’ difficulties later on[[1]](#endnote-1).

Of course teachers are not social workers, but they do often have the privileged opportunity of seeing children every school day, and the relationships they make with their students can make all the difference.

Although all teachers need and hope to develop good working relationships with their students as a foundation for teaching and learning, this more conscious relationship-based way of thinking and working is rather different.

**Understanding behaviour as communication**

Take behaviour management. In schools these days we often see various little, and perhaps cumulative reward (and punishment) systems for both learning and behaviour. Most teachers are naturally both encouraging and challenging, and for the vast majority of children this works well. Children generally love praise, rewards are enticing, and challenge stimulates extra effort. I call this ego support, because it supports their developing egos.

Often for the most vulnerable children however, this approach just doesn’t work. Especially at stressful times they can turn praise on its head and think: *“I’m not good, I’m rubbish”.* They might also *feel* failures because they just can’t earn the rewards on a consistent basis. This is not to denigrate the use of praise and rewards and challenges. Indeed with enough experience of secure nurturing relationships in school vulnerable children will become less vulnerable and may *then* begin to use and enjoy praise and rewards like their peers.

What very vulnerable children often need however, is emotional containment, which is very different from ego support. Emotional containment is the experience of being and feeling held and understood, or thoughtfully ‘wondered about’ in someone’s (initially the mother’s) mind. It includes bearing the child’s pain, reflecting on it and responding thoughtfully. This is a natural process in secure families. Sadly needy, vulnerable and traumatised children have too often not had this secure nurturing beginning. They may not even *know* empathy or thoughtful responsiveness, but unconsciously they crave it.

Sensitive attuned staff will often naturally respond to children’s needs, ‘read’ their subtle behaviours or their play communications, and slowly help them put words to their feelings. Understanding (especially repeated) behaviours as unconscious communications can feel very containing. Wondering about behaviours (when they are open to it) completely changes your response and even if you are wrong they will feel thought about.

Through training and caring support, teachers, school staff and all adults involved with the more vulnerable and ‘damaged’ children in our society, can develop their understanding and thinking around their most vulnerable children, and draw on their innate nurturing and ‘holding’ capacities as and when children need it.

I would just like to emphasise that nurturing is not giving in to the child. Empathy **and firm boundaries** promote the secure base needed for emotional growth and learning.

* *It can be so hard when we want something and we can’t have it.*
* *When someone hurts us it can make us feel like hurting them back. Its hard.*
* *It can be hard to settle when we have lots on our minds.*
* *Perhaps we can think about that together*
* *Sometimes it can feel a bit scary to ask for help. We might worry that people think we should manage on our own.*
* *It can be hard to wait when we want something now!*
* *Maybe you worry that I have forgotten you when I am busy with W…. ?.*
* *I’m sensing some feelings are beginning to ‘bubble’. Would it help to ……. ?*
* *It looks like you are really ‘into’ that.*
* *I wonder what made you ...*

These sorts of comments will also foster children’s *inner* lives – as they learn to ‘wonder’ for themselves. Such thoughtful comments and conversations can both ease children’s anxieties and help them develop their own ability to talk things through.

This is helpful for all children of course. Secure parents will naturally have these sorts of conversations with their children. The problem is that the very children who need it most, frequently don’t get it, because their ‘irritating’ behaviour can unconsciously ‘drive’ adults to want to ignore them, reject them or control them – thus reinforcing their negative expectations. Such conversations are especially important around change, endings and transitions. As discussed above traumatised and Looked-after children may have experienced traumatic changes, making all changes anxiety provoking. Non-judgementally acknowledging subtly expressed anxieties around change can ease them and show that they can be thought about and understood.

*“I noticed that you put some Lego in your pocket. I’m sure you know that you can’t take it home, although I do understand that it must be hard for you to feel that you won’t be able to play with it for much longer, as we only have a week left in year 3.”*

Little changes too can be acknowledged:

*“I can see you becoming a bit fidgety Sam. We are going to finish this soon aren’t we, and then we will move onto ……. . Changes can often be difficult, especially when we are not sure about the next thing. I will go with you to…..’*

I am very aware however that such thoughtful responsiveness is not always easy. It requires both adequate staffing levels and resilience, and training too. Those working with challenging and puzzling children need both training and support, and case supervision too, as described in the many case studies in my book. For this approach to really work however the whole school and particularly the headteacher and senior managers need to be knowledgeable, supportive and available to staff, knowing that everyone may need a listening and understanding ear at times.

This more detailed understanding of the behavioural communications of vulnerable and dysfunctional children and of the dynamics they precipitate around them, will naturally facilitate thinking and nurturing, and the capacities of school staff to offer more thoughtful empathic responsiveness in tough situations. And it will be rewarding and delightful too for them to see their children and students grow and learn, and develop their own inner strength and confidence. Teachers in such nurturing schools will be happier knowing that asking for help is a sign of strength, and enjoy the developing ethos and relationships with each other and with the students.

‘Little and often’ comments and conversations are often best. They will gradually enable vulnerable children to re-work their expectations and develop their ability to trust and learn. If indeed whole schools could support each other to become thoughtful, nurturing, talking communities. They may also enable reluctant students to access the counselling and therapy on offer, and to develop the secure base needed for learning and functioning in society. And crucially they will often prevent mental health and psychosomatic problems later in life, as they develop the capacity to talk things through.

In my experience, in addition to effective parental and early years support, this understanding and relationship-based way of working can make a real difference for our most needy children and students, and for school and societal, mental health too. In this respect both training and adequate pastoral funding are key. Such understanding and related thoughtful responsiveness needs to be included in both initial teacher training, Senco and pastoral care and senior management training, and in teacher assistant training too.

Although more is needed, it is indeed heartening to know that there are an increasing number of agencies addressing this through delivering training in attachment and trauma awareness for example: **KCA Training** and **Wave Trust** to name but two. Government and Education leaders need to take this seriously and actively support it.

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1. For more on this subject please see: “Understanding, nurturing and working effectively with vulnerable children in schools’ - *“Why can’t you hear me?”*  Greenwood A. (Routledge 2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)