BOOK REVIEW

Carmel Cefai and Paul Cooper (editors): *Mental Health Promotion in Schools – Cross-Cultural Narratives and Perspectives*. **Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, ISBN: 9789463510516**

This book is effectively a collection of papers by some well-known authors with a largely regional focus, the Mediterranean, and Australia in particular. It is divided into three parts covering the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents on mental health issues in relation to educational settings. These three parts are preceded by an introductory section that deals with some fundamental issues in the area of social, emotional, behaviour difficulties (SEBD). The term 'mental health' covers a wide range of situations stretching from temporary circumstances knowing their origin to factors in the child's or young person's environment to psychiatric conditions that usually start manifesting themselves in adolescence. In this introductory section, Paul Cooper makes a strong case for the polymorphic nature of SEBD and the need for flexibility in addressing the issues involved. He maintains that there is a plethora of psychological families of empirically supported approaches to address the issues. He also lists a number of teacher characteristics that go a long way towards making the whole process of managing such difficulties effective. As always, when dealing with vulnerable persons, a balanced measure of scientific intervention and human sensitivity, sympathy and warmth increases the possibility of effective intervention. Education may use scientific methods but will always need to rely on the human interface that can never be substituted.

I am now selecting a paper or two from each section to afford the reader a flavour of the papers in this book. In the first section covering student perspectives, there is a reference to the issue of mental health in a Maltese context. The authors of this paper posit that 10% of the Maltese student population experiences social, emotional and/or behavioural problems and

that Maltese students rate their health and wellbeing relatively poorly, citing bullying as one of the factors underlying wellbeing difficulties. I posit that relationship issues at school are but one of the constellations of underlying factors that lead to the development of mental health issues. Other issues relate to the stability of the family unit, examination pressure, and performance worries. Another paper addresses the issue that the technological revolution within society has effectively ousted from the system a historically significant number of students who struggle to meet the so-called "normal" standards of school performance and who would have otherwise been channelled into the unskilled job market. The raising of the school leaving age on its own may not have done these students any immediate favours but the development of a vocational curriculum may have. Even so, an alternative approach focussing on multi-age inclusion and a move away from traditional curricula towards meaningful activity in a working society set-up, always guided by insightful, perceptive and responsive teachers can make for positive individual futures for these students in a relationship model of interaction and life skills development.

The second section of the book deals with teachers' perspectives and recognition of mental health issues and how mental health can be addressed in the school environment. The various papers in this section seem to agree on one point. They agree that this needs to be interlaced in a whole school approach, namely commitment to and active participation in a shared vision of the child's mental wellbeing along with a good support structure at school. Furthermore, parents should constitute an integral component of this tripartite setup.

Two related papers deal with the issue of staff perceptions of mental health promotion in school from an Australian and a Maltese perspective. In the Australian case study, the authors described how targeted interventions for children at risk of experiencing mental health difficulties needed support over and above what the school programme offered. Interventions delivered by other professionals were seen as key to the implementation of an integrated education-health-social welfare model. A second paper dealing with the same theme from a local perspective described Maltese school teacher's perceptions of social and emotional learning. It shows how while some schools are receptive to the idea, there is much work that needs to be done before the concept can be developed well enough to have an impact on children's overall mental health issues. Again, mental health must be seen against a

background of all that is taking place in a learner's life, ranging from family issues to relationships and school achievement issues. These threaten to upset the fragile stability of childhood which may be mythical more than real.

The third section focuses on stakeholders' perspectives of children's mental health issues. What stood out best in this section was a paper co-authored by Helen Askell Williams about the Kidsmatter initiative, which aims at strengthening protective factors within settings, in families, and in children, with the ultimate goal being to help families access appropriate services and counteract potential long-term problem situations. The programme serves as a focal point for parent-school collaboration and decision making in the children's best interests. A well placed final paper in this section and indeed at the end of the collection of papers refers to the worsening children's mental health situation in industrialised societies. It acknowledges that on their own, teachers are not best equipped to address children's mental health issues and that a unified effort through a partnership model such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) may be more effective.

One theme that can be drawn from these papers that is applicable to the local situation is the lack of exposure to mental health training that novice teachers report having. The responsibility for identifying these needs and managing them falls on the shoulders of more than one profession but unless these professionals talk to each other, the needs of the children will not be met as adequately as when there is synergy and unison. As professionals at the coalface, teachers must be equipped to at least recognise mental health issues when they see them and be able to involve themselves in multi- and interdisciplinary team initiatives at individual and systems level to address the needs of the children they teach.

Victor Martinelli
University of Malta
victor.martinelli@um.edu.mt