

Key Emerging Features of a Mental Health Focus for Early School Leaving Prevention – illustrations from Ireland



NESET Expert Author:
Dr. Paul Downes, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra

In brief:

Mental health care aims to cut dropping out

- **New integrated services explicitly link mental health and staying on.**
- **Childhood trauma recognised as factor in early school leaving.**
- **Most pupils say they have no one to confide in at school.**
- **All children and teachers targeted in anti-bullying drive.**

Government backs integrated services to tackle poor mental health among young people in recognition of link with early school leaving. Services include outreach support to empower disadvantaged parents, school-based speech and language therapy for families as well as a focus on the need to improve teachers' conflict resolution skills.

Background

Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, disruptive behaviour, eating disorders, or posttraumatic stress disorder, can negatively impact on a child's school success, as well as general well-being (World Health Organization, 2003; Kessler, 2009). Children living in low-income families are especially vulnerable to mental health difficulties (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). Graham and Easterbrooks (2000) found that insecurely attached children at higher economic risk had higher levels of depression than insecurely attached children at lower economic risk. Poor and minority children are more likely to report that they experienced or witnessed violence at home (Finkelhor et al., 2005), and children from families in

poverty are reported to have greater lifetime exposure to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing family violence (Turner, Finkelhor and Ormrod 2006). Social anxiety is associated with school avoidance and refusal, suicidal ideation, substance abuse and conduct problems (Harrington, Rutter, and Fombonne 1996).

A growing focus is on developing systems of care, integrating services to address mental health and early school leaving (ESL). These services are required to be child-centred, family-focused, culturally competent care systems (Cook & Kilmer 2012; Hodges et al., 2012). Any such systems of care need to address the following issues at a systemic level, through combining, indicated (intensive individual/family), selected (some) and universal (all) prevention levels.

Neglected Issues Requiring to be Addressed for Early School Leaving Prevention – Issues Pertaining to Mental Health

Indicated Prevention (IP) Level : Intensive Interventions

IP (1) Emotional support services for students experiencing trauma that places them at risk of ESL

The Irish Parliament and Senate report on early school leaving (2010) explicitly recognised the role of trauma, such as bereavement, rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, as a risk factor for ESL. The emotional support needs of more withdrawn students tend to be missed by teachers compared with students displaying externalizing problems such as aggression (Doll, 1996; Downes, 2004). In Irish contexts, a majority of primary and post-primary students consistently state that there is nobody in the school environment that they would trust sufficiently to disclose personal problems (Downes 2004; Downes et al., 2006; Downes & Maunsell 2007).

IP (2) Outreach services for family support for those experiencing intergenerational poverty and/or substance abuse

While the Irish Home-School Liaison Scheme established for over two decades engages in an outreach approach for family support by a teacher in the school, more diverse professionals such as care workers, nurses can engage with families more complex emotional needs than simply educational ones. One Irish model which adopts this outreach approach through a multidisciplinary team is Familiscope, Ballyfermot, which has displayed notable gains in school attendance for children most in need (Downes 2011). This is based on empowering parents rather than judging them or creating a parental dependency on these outreach services.

IP 3) Alternatives to suspension/expulsion

Many students with externalising problems will be at risk of exclusion from school through suspension/expulsion. In the Irish context, the post-primary students figure of 5% for suspension, applied to the total population of 332,407 students equates to well over 16,000 students suspended from post-primary schools in 2005/6 (ERC/NEWB 2010). This problem is being addressed, at least in a limited number of schools, through the Irish National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS). The NBSS has evolved from a focus simply on behaviour management to working intensively with students with mental health difficulties, as well as engaging with students' voices and at a systemic level with teachers' conflict resolutions skills.

Selected Prevention (SP) (some children, families and teachers)

SP1) Language development to promote mental health and prevent ESL

Literacy gains are correlated with decrease in aggressive behaviour in schools in a Tallaght, Dublin context of socio-economic disadvantage (Biggart et al., 2012). A systemic focus on working with parents, teachers and children in contexts of disadvantage was a key feature of a Tallaght, Dublin, initiative placing speech and language therapists onsite in schools. Gains were observed in children's language development, as well as parental involvement and teacher self-perception of their language teaching skills (Hayes et al., 2012).

Universal Prevention (UP) (all children and teachers)

UP1) Promoting a positive school climate: Bullying prevention and developing teacher conflict resolution skills

Beran (2008) concluded that preadolescents who are bullied are at some risk for demonstrating poor achievement, although this risk increases substantially if the child also receives little support from parents and is already disengaged from school. Swearer et al.'s (2010) review of international research on bullying highlights that studies have demonstrated that children who are bullied are more likely to avoid school (e.g. Olweus, 1993; Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996) or even leave school early (Fried and Fried, 1996). A direct relation between early school leaving, nonattendance at school and being bullied there has also been made by children through qualitative research in Ballyfermot, Dublin (Downes 2004). The issue of the need for development of Irish secondary school teachers' conflict resolution skills has been highlighted in a plethora of reports based on students' voices (Fingleton 2004; Downes 2004; Downes et al., 2006; Downes & Maunsell 2007; Irish Parliament and Senate Report 2010). This is now potentially to be at least partially addressed in the Irish context with the restructuring of pre-service teacher education to lengthen the preparation time of secondary school teachers to a two year Higher Diploma.

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