Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff through professional supervision structures

Trauma Informed Schools – Discussion paper #1

June 2019

Foreword

This paper is about health and safety gone mad. Just not **that** sort of health and safety.

Perhaps it is just easier to spot the dangers in a building site. Bricks and masonry are solid, heavy and visible, industrial power tools advertise their risk through loud noise and deep vibration, while exposed electrical wires and falls from high places can be fatal. Maybe this is why safety is taken so seriously in such environments; large hoardings on the external barriers advertise the minimum requirements workers need for entry into the site, and those requirements are backed up by extensive health and safety legislation. Certificates need to be acquired, trainings received, and hard hats, steel toe-capped boots and ear defenders are a typical dress-code minimum.

I have never seen a psychological equivalent of that hoarding, and it is interesting to reflect on what that workplace hoarding might look like; a warning of the dangers implicitly recognised by the employer but typically ignored. For example,

I have always been struck by one of the typical interview questions asked of workers being employed in education, health and social care, which is, 'What do you do to look after yourself outside of work?' The question implicitly suggests that the work being offered carries a stress that is going to require some kind of antidote. However the question also implies that it is not going to be the employer that provides this help. The right answer to this question, one that I have yet to hear, is surely, 'That is not really any of your business. But I am interested to know what aspects of the job made you ask this question, and what measures you have in place to look after me while I am at work.'

This excellent paper shines a light on the all too invisible emotional and psychological elements of working in education. Since all education is relational in nature, on occasion those relationships may reflect and re-enact within the classroom, a range of adversity, trauma and hardship that has occurred outside of school. This psychological heavy machinery may be invisible, but that invisibility does not prevent it from having the capacity, like its noisier building site equivalents, to cause both acute injury and long term distress. The paper describes a staff group who are experiencing high levels of stress with little opportunity or place to have it recognised or cared for. The structures in place follow the inverse care law, where at a child protection case conference for example, it is the person with the highest level of contact with the child (the teacher) that typically receives the lowest level of clinical supervision.

Every interaction with a child carries the potential for change and for long-term impact on that child's life outcomes. But interacting can be hard, it can give rise to vicarious trauma and adversity, and can lead to burnout and withdrawal, both of which can be disastrous for teacher, student, and for their relationship. Teachers are supremely placed to provide positive educational, social and therapeutic relationships to children who have experienced trauma and adversity, but to do so effectively and over time, their own care simply must come first.

This paper is timely in arguing that in order to do this a proper care infrastructure needs to be in place. The provision of this, perhaps from existing healthcare organisations such as the NHS, could lead to an integrated education system that placed the health and social care needs of pupils and teachers alike at the heart of its operation. The benefits here could

be multiple; from improving the well-being and mental health of teachers, to reducing the number of referrals to other services such as health, but most importantly perhaps, to addressing the attainment gap and improving both the educational and life outcomes for those children who have experienced the most difficult of beginnings.

So what might the psychological equivalent of that building site safety hoarding look like in an educational setting? Perhaps it would state that unless the teacher has regular and protected time for psychological supervision or reflective practice, that unless they are receiving regular training updates around the consequences of trauma and adversity on pupil well-being and attainment, and unless the outcomes they are to be measured upon are grounded, co-produced and realistic, then they are not allowed into the building.

Such a move could prove very popular!

**Dr Adam Burley
Consultant Clinical Psychologist**

Context

Traumatic events have been defined by SAMHSA as *"an event, a series of events or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening."*[1] How we respond to the impact of trauma, and crucially how we support those who have experienced trauma is high on the policy agenda in Scotland; in their 2018/19 Programme for Government the Scottish Government committed to developing an adversity and trauma-informed workforce.

This is an important issue for Barnardo's and one we care deeply about. We are currently part of the national conversation on becoming trauma-informed and have committed to a transformational programme of work to become a truly trauma-responsive organisation. We have over 150 years' experience working with children and young people who have experienced early trauma and adversity, and we know the impact this work can have on the adults who care for these children.

Staff working in educational settings are not exempt from the impact of trauma. They will be working with children on a daily basis who have experienced significant adverse life events and traumatic experiences. The emotional impact of this work creates a very real need for a safe, reflective space to manage the vicarious trauma that can occur as a result.

Barnardo's Scotland work in schools

Barnardo's Scotland currently works in over 400 schools across Scotland. A key component of this work is providing Family Support Workers who work alongside and in partnership with schools, embedded in the school environment, to support children and their families. In many areas this role also includes supporting teaching staff with individual cases as well as wider support around managing and coping with distressed children in a school environment. Supporting and promoting good mental health and wellbeing underpins all of this work, both in relation to children, young people and their families and education staff.
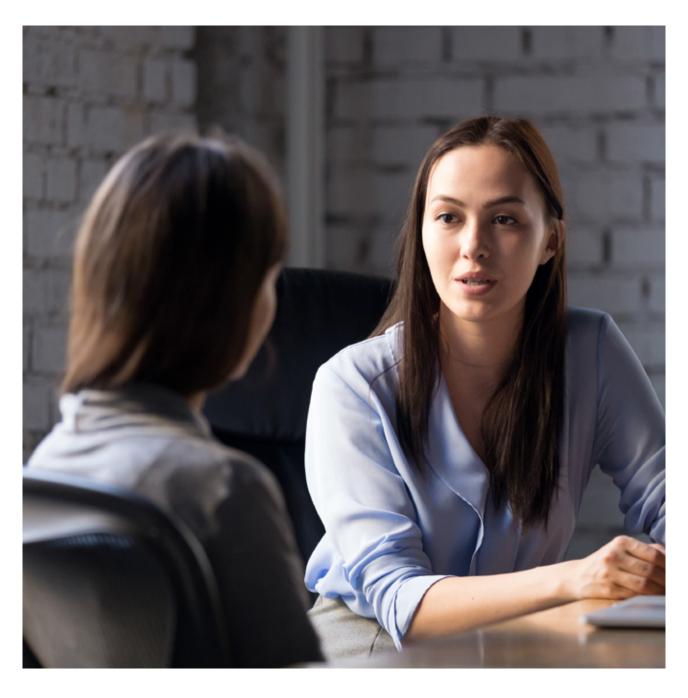
In ongoing internal consultation with Barnardo's Scotland practitioners working in schools throughout 2018/19 **a key issue highlighted was a lack of any form of professional supervision, or dedicated time for reflective practice for teaching staff in relation to their own mental health and wellbeing.** Our staff identified that for example, at formal child protection or team around the child meetings, the Head Teacher is the only professional who does not have some form of supervision support available after the meeting. This was identified as problematic in the current climate where educators are doing more now than they have ever done to support children and young people experiencing emotional distress and the external pressures on all staff are increasing.

This paper is based on the experiences of Barnardo's Scotland staff working in schools but we are also starting to hear direct requests from teachers as part of our strategic partnership work in North Tyneside in England.

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1   https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/028436.pdf

What do we want to see?

We are calling for a national conversation about the support available for the mental health and wellbeing of teaching staff. We want to see consideration given to the introduction of structures similar to those found in other sectors such as clinical practice, social work and the third sector around professional supervision.

The mental health and wellbeing of teaching staff

Professionals working in education are currently facing an increasingly difficult environment with numerous and often competing external pressures and demands being placed upon them. Closing the poverty related attainment gap is the Scottish Government's number one priority and this is being felt in schools across Scotland. Austerity continues to impact on local budgets; resources are diminishing and workloads increasing; whilst simultaneously an increased awareness across the education estate of the impact of early trauma and adversity on school-aged children is resulting in many schools radically rethinking their policies and practices.

The landscape of education has changed dramatically over the last decade and teachers now have direct responsibility for the health and wellbeing of children in their care; this is set out clearly in the Curriculum for Excellence[2], and the current policy direction around children and young people's mental health and wellbeing continues to highlight the important role schools play. Many third sector organisations are rightly highlighting the need to upskill education staff to support their pupils' mental health and wellbeing and this is providing a clear impetus for transformational change.

Teachers are supportive of these developments, but are clear that more needs to be done to support schools in this role. We conducted our own polling on how equipped teachers felt to deal with children and young people in their classroom who had experienced early trauma and adversity, and found that **79% of teachers surveyed believed more should be done to ensure that schools are able to recognise and respond to early trauma and childhood adversity.**[3]

While there has been much discussion about the role of schools in supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, we believe that the issue of support for education staff has not received sufficient attention in these debates. The impetus on schools to improve their awareness of the impact of trauma and adversity on pupils must also include an understanding of the impact of vicarious and secondary trauma on staff.

There is undoubtedly evidence that teachers are under increasing pressure; this can be seen through levels of staff sickness and absence as well as issues with recruitment.[4] The Education Support Partnership Teacher Wellbeing Index, published in 2018, provides a picture of the levels of stress across the UK education estate. The research shows that:

- **67%** of education professionals describe themselves as stressed. This leaps to **80%** when considering senior leaders.
- **65%** say they wouldn't feel confident in disclosing mental health problems or unmanageable stress to their employer.
- **43%** of educational professionals attribute work symptoms to student behaviour issues.[5]

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2   https://www2.gov.scot/resource/doc/226155/0061245.pdf

3   http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/Barnardos-Scotland-calls-for-more-backing-for-teachers-to-support-children-who-have-experienced-trauma-in-Scotland/press_releases.htm?ref=130198&topic=1&year=&month=8&region=2&debugstate

4   https://www.tes.com/news/teacher-shortage-reducing-curriculum-admits-chief-inspector

5   https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/blogs/our-teacher-wellbeing-index-highlights-stress-epidemic

Our own frontline experience of working across Scottish schools backs this up. Where we are present in a school, we are often called upon informally to provide support, containment and regulation to teaching staff because there is a lack of any more formal structures.

This is a huge gap and one that has the potential to be damaging not only for teaching staff themselves but also for the children in their care. If educators are being asked to change and adapt their practice around supporting children who are experiencing emotional distress; mental health problems; or displaying behaviour which indicates unmet need, structural change is needed in the support provided to them as professionals.

Within their Make it Count Campaign the Mental Health Foundation have identified that teachers are already overburdened in what they are expected to do:

> **Teachers should also be taught how to look after their own mental health and supported in doing so. Alongside teacher training to support teachers' own mental health, governments should also look at mental health in schools as a workplace issue, and should develop policies that make schools a healthier place for everyone who works in them."[6]**

The Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA) also recently passed a motion at their annual congress in May 2019 relating to the mental health and wellbeing of school staff:

> **Congress calls on the Scottish Government to extend its ambition for improving Mental Health in schools to include staff as well as pupils and to commit to providing Mental Health First Aiders for all school staff."[7]**

6   https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/make-it-count-policy-briefing.pdf
7   https://ssta.org.uk/motions-passed-at-congress-2019/

The role of professional supervision

> ❝ Supervision involves talking through the impact the work has on you personally, as well as exploring decision-making. It is vital for practitioners' well-being, professional development, and management oversight. Most importantly, supervision helps you to achieve the best possible outcomes for children."[8]

Supervision is an essential element of clinical practice, social work and social care at all levels in an organisation. The purpose of professional supervision and, by extension reflective practice in these sectors is around boundaries, safeguarding, good practice, containment and staff's own mental health and wellbeing.

We believe professional supervision is essential in all sectors where professionals are supporting children and young people with complex needs and vulnerabilities, and this includes education.

Dr Karen Treisman is supporting Barnardo's as an external consultant on our organisational journey to becoming more adversity and culturally trauma-informed and responsive; as part of this paper a discussion was had with Dr Treisman who notes in her paper on Trauma-Informed Supervision:

> ❝ Trauma-informed supervision is aware of the multi-layered impact of the work being undertaken and of the context of the work.......supervision is needed to create and sustain a space where the impact of the work can be named, normalised and reflected on."[9]

Any supervision process must be strengths-based; solution focused; and put the individuals' own mental health and wellbeing at the centre. Barnardo's own supervision structures are in place to support managers to think about their team's wellbeing, how are they coping with their workload? What is their learning style and stress response system? How does this impact on their work? Are they a 'do-er' who will burn out from trying to do too much? Or maybe a 'thinker' who has great plans but struggles to put them into practice? What are the dynamics of a team, their strengths? What can be built on?

The frontline worker then uses this model to think about the children and families they are working with. What are their life experiences? How did they come into contact with support services? Are they able to regulate their feelings and emotions, and if not how can we support this through co-regulation in order to get the best outcomes for those individuals?

All of these principles can be applied in an education setting with teaching staff and their pupils for the same reasons; you cannot pour from an empty cup. Oak Practice offer supervision to senior education leaders in England, and a quote on their website states:

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8   https://socialcareinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/10/23/supervision-and-effective-social-work-practice/

9   http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/trauma-informed-supervision.pdf

> " I feel passionately that supervision is essential for senior leaders in schools. We constantly hold so much in our heads and are expected to be all things to all people when they need it. It is important that we have a confidential opportunity to give quality time to the issues that keep us awake night after night. Supervision has helped me to keep things in perspective and explore creative solutions to some of the problems where I haven't been able to see the wood for the trees. I cannot recommend professional supervision highly enough."[10]

We believe the time is right in Scotland to consider the role of professional supervision within education settings.

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10 https://oakpractice.co.uk/talking-heads/

Evidence from Barnardo's Scotland Services

A need for consistent, structural support for the mental health and wellbeing of teaching staff.

The key point consistently raised by Barnardo's frontline staff working with schools is the gap in provision of structural support for teaching staff around their own mental health and wellbeing. When compared with the supervision structures within Barnardo's and others working within health and social care, this gap is stark.
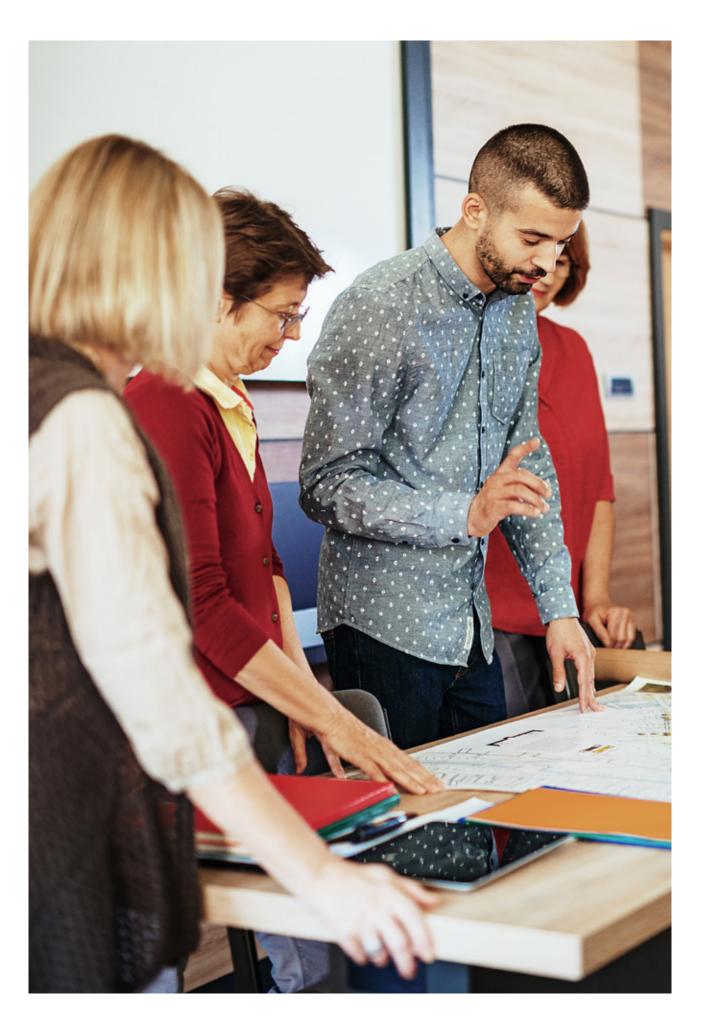
> " There is a lot of stress evident in education, a lack of supervision, teachers looking for help regulating their own stresses and they are not getting it, there is definitely a need."

A lot of Barnardo's staff highlighted how surprised they were when they started working in schools and realised teaching staff didn't receive any formal supervision. Similarly, Barnardo's staff with backgrounds in teaching reflected on the difference they felt moving from education to third sector and the benefits supervision have brought.

> " I taught for 16 years before joining Barnardo's and supervision and the idea of a lot of support was a revelation to me."

> " As a teacher, supervision does not happen, when I came to work with Barnardo's I couldn't believe I got a 1 hour meeting every month with my manager! Life saver."

Staff noted the increasing pressures education staff are under and the need for support structures to reflect this shifting landscape. Support mechanisms are needed for reflections on practice; self-regulation; and to ensure education staff can understand their own feelings and behaviours and how these might be impacting on their work and on their students.

> " A huge amount is being asked of teaching staff – they are being asked to change their responses to children, but if they aren't able to regulate their own feelings and emotions they can't be expected to contain children – we're not going to get good outcomes for teaching staff unless we do this."

Barnardo's role in supporting education staff

A reflection highlighted by most Barnardo's practitioners who took part in the consultation was the role our workers have been playing in providing informal supervision, support and containment to education staff through our work in partnership with schools.

> **"**Our experience has been, we've gone into schools and asked head teachers where they get their support and been met with tears – teachers are approaching us and asking where they can get support."

In one school a Barnardo's Family Support Worker provides informal supervision on a weekly basis to the Deputy Head Teacher, this has come about through a relationship being built. The Deputy Head Teacher has appreciated the reflective space and the impact is visible, they are able to implement different ways of working and children and families are seeing the benefit.

In other schools we are supporting classroom teachers, although unanimous feedback was that these kinds of supports need to be available at all levels in a school – from senior leaders to teaching assistants and support staff.

> **"**I have a regular "catch up" with a pupil support teacher who is very much tuned in to how their students are feeling and their circumstances at home. They have been very open about struggling as they are carrying out multiple roles within the school and also offering pupils one-to-one emotional support in relation to mental health.
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> We usually have a weekly 15-20 minute chat and I think it's a way of them finding reassurance that they are doing everything they can to support pupils. They are also sometimes having emotionally heavy conversations with pupils and have started to talk about taking some of this home with them in the evenings. I'm hopeful that our short catch-ups allow them to offload and go home feeling less worried."

Our practitioners acknowledged that often our support is informal and potentially not acknowledged as 'supervision' – this may be because education staff don't feel comfortable admitting how challenging they may be finding emotionally containing children who are struggling, often because of their experiences of trauma and adversity. It is crucial that the impact this has on education staff themselves is acknowledged and supported.

> **"**Teachers need help and support as they too may have experienced trauma. The longer we have been in schools the more we think the staff & especially Head Teachers need our support."

Culture and language

Our practitioners noted that whilst other sectors can immediately see the benefit and indeed necessity of supervision structures, it isn't currently built into the culture of education, and education staff themselves may not recognise the term 'supervision'. However the very clear messages coming from our practitioners was that teachers themselves are acknowledging the need for support structures, however they are labelled.

Similarly, it was also noted that the term 'supervision' may have potentially negative connotations, and that without the right understanding of the process and purpose the language may engender feelings of defensiveness, or of being targeted; a need to be 'supervised' and checked up on rather than a model of providing support and reflection.

> **"** I have noticed that there is, at times, a fear of being judged by other staff when being open to alternative approaches. I support a classroom teacher several times a week and have worked with them around their confidence when feeling overwhelmed in situations where their pupils are at crisis point. They have struggled and felt judged by staff as opposed to supported when exploring new approaches to support the high needs of their pupils."

Considerations for practice

Our experience from working with and alongside schools is that flexibility is crucial when delivering interventions and support services. We do not believe that there will be a one-size fits all model for supervision within education and we would recommend that consideration is given to piloting different models or small tests of change.

Our practitioners highlighted several models they use, ranging from 1:1 support within school hours several times a week; to 15 minute check-ins every week; to more formal structured group supervision in a high school using The Bells that Ring model.[11] We are also aware of other models used by organisations, for example the Oak Practice Talking Heads programme in England as mentioned previously.

Equally, through the consultation process our practitioners discussed whether or not using external organisations or in-house structures would be most beneficial. Peer support could work well in a school where staff feel safe and supported but where staff aren't able to share their feelings with colleagues it is unlikely to be successful and may require support from external agencies. Similarly, group supervision may not be appropriate in some circumstances and 1:1, individual supervision would be more appropriate. In terms of physical space, for some staff, school may not be a safe space so consideration would have to be given to whether supervision could be done outside of the school premises or whether digital technologies such as skype could be utilised.

In addition we also note the importance from our own practice of buy in from all staff; a whole-school approach will be required to ensure successful implementation. Senior leaders will need to ensure capacity within the school; ensure staff have protected time; and make clear the value and importance attached to the process. In many schools this will undoubtedly require some cultural shifts and adjustments.

In the current climate we acknowledge the barriers and difficulties this may present, however we believe that in the long run, implementing supervision structures for education staff will have an exponentially beneficial impact for both staff and pupils.

11 Proctor, Kerry (1997) *'The Bells that Ring: A process for Group Supervision'* The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy

Next steps

We hope this discussion paper is the start of a national conversation about what is being done to support the mental health and wellbeing of education staff.

Conversations in Scotland around early trauma and childhood adversity have been successful in raising awareness of the importance of strong, trusting adult relationships for children and young people. In order for this to happen we must ensure that all adults in caring roles are cared for and supported themselves.

> **"** We need to contain the container, care for the carer."[12] *Dr Treisman*

Alongside national commitments to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in schools through initiatives like Mental Health First Aid and the expansion of school-based counselling, we also want to see:

- **Consideration given to the development of professional supervision structures for education staff**
- **Support and guidance for education staff on how trauma-informed practices can help to support the mental health and wellbeing of both staff and pupils if embedded as part of a whole-school approach.**

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12 http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/trauma-informed-supervision.pdf

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This paper is the first in a suite of materials highlighting key issues relating to the core principles of trauma-informed practice in an education context.

www.barnardos.org.uk