

Mental Health in Schools - This short film explores mental health in schools.

KEY:

TR: Tony Reid
TOL: Trish O'Lynn
KK: Dr. Karen Kerr
FC: Fintan Connelly
KG: Kathryn Gilbert
LD: Dr. Laura Dunne
P1: Pupil 1
P2: Pupil 2
P3: Pupil 3
P4: Pupil 4
P5: Pupil 5
P6: Pupil 6
P7: Pupil 7
P8: Pupil 8
P9: Pupil 9
P10: Pupil 10

(MUSIC)

TR: My name's Tony Reid I'm head of Maths in St. Louise's.

TOL: Patricia O'Lynn I'm the co-ordinator of the Moving Forward, Moving On project which is a Post-16 employability project for young people leaving alternative education.

KK: My name is Dr. Karen Kerr and I am a lecturer in the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast.

FC: My name's Fintan Connolly. I am the Managing Director of TakeTen Ltd.

KG: My name is Kathryn Gilbert I am a Programme Manager with CCEA.

LD: I'm Dr. Laura Dunne and I'm a lecturer in the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast.

(BELL RINGS)

We asked students if school is stressful?

P1: I think school is a hugely stressful place to be. I think it contributes to the majority of stress that most young people will face during their life. I think there's a lot of pressure to achieve grades. Children can feel that they're only valued as a grade and not as an actual person who needs to develop.

P2: I think it's definitely really stressful. I think it has the potential to be a really enjoyable experience but with the combination of social anxiety and peer pressure, having to deal with every day, and then especially when you get older the added stress of exams as well.

- P3: It is stressful. I find it hard to think that some people don't think it's stressful at all because, it is tough.
- P4: School's supposed to be the happiest days of your life but when adults are reminiscing they must forget about the stress of exams and the stress alone of just making friends on your first day and getting through six years of hard work.
- P5: I would say that it's enormously stressful. I mean not just with grades because I know that's the main focus when it comes to stress in school, but with bullying. It's all very well for a school to say, well we have an anti-bullying policy, but that doesn't mean it works and that doesn't mean that there's no bullying.
- FC: School can be a very stressful place to be, and it will depend on a school's pastoral care policy and it will depend on attitudes of the teachers and it will also depend on how a child feels the moment it walks into that school. School can be stressful if you find learning difficult. It can be stressful if you have difficulties with relationships with teachers, but school can also be difficult and stressful if you are carrying in your stresses from home. If you are sitting in a classroom, or in the school environment and you are worried or you're anxious, or you're upset about something, you won't be able to learn efficiently and then that can create all sorts of problems within the school environment and the classroom environment. Some people become disruptive, then start to have behaviour problems, then it starts to be an altercation between the teacher and the pupils, and then that disrupts the rest of the class. All of a sudden, very quickly in a classroom environment you can end up with a very stressful environment. Not just for the teacher but for the rest of the pupils as well.

Are schools equipped to deal with the issues?

- KK: I think lots of teachers are well equipped and there are some fantastic teachers out there who work extremely hard with the children and young people in their care but I would say maybe there are some other teachers who are struggling and it's not because they don't want to help, or, sometimes it's just that they don't really know how.
- FC: I think it needs to go back to teacher training, in some aspects and I think some teachers need better training in child psychology.
- KG: In school the challenge is for the teacher to feel skilled enough, confident enough, and have enough time to design and develop and implement a curriculum that actually meets many of these specific needs.
- KK: A lot of the principals would have said the main barrier is money. The system's overloaded and it's very difficult then, to get every single child referred because there is only so much money available.
- KG: There are a lot of resources in the system, resources developed by CCEA, but also there's a lot of resources coming through from other organisations and charity groups who are actually tackling more specific issues. These are non- statutory, therefore it's not compulsory for teachers to deliver this material. It is there to allow them to design an effective programme that meets the needs of their pupils.

FC: Because teachers need support too. They really do need support because they are overwhelmed and teachers now are expected to be so many different things. They have to be counsellors. They have to be social workers. They have to be behaviour management specialists and that's all before they even start to teach.

TR: We have people of all abilities and it's trying to make them all feel safe. I mean school's meant to be a safe environment. For some, the school is the safest environment that they're going to be in, rather than their home.

What do students think of mental health provision in schools?

P5: I think there needs to be more conversation within schools about mental health to avoid that bullying, to avoid that shaming of people who are suffering from mental illness.

P6: Because I am aware that there are services there to help. Although I think the main issue is that there is a stigma attached because I probably wouldn't go and use them if I did need the help.

P7: I was so low and I felt so down. I was spoken to by one teacher, a teacher who is very close to me in school but I wasn't spoken to by any professionals or anything so that got me down. So I kind of had to build myself up, myself. I wasn't given any support in school.

P8: I've seen people, in my year for example, who have had issues of like mental health and emotional wellbeing and a lot of them, they just really haven't had adequate counselling. One of our counsellors left because she was on maternity leave and she wasn't replaced and a lot of these people just end up dropping out.

What about young people who leave mainstream education?

TOL: AEP stands for Alternative Education Provision and AEP really is an alternative to mainstream schooling. So while I think all the professionals in alternative education agree that mainstream schooling's the best place for young people to be educated, for some young people it just doesn't work.

P9: School was hard as everybody judged you, and when I went to Pathway, they made you fit in.

TOL: Alternative education exists to help young people who can't make it in mainstream. It's characterised by smaller classroom sizes, close relationships, outside providers coming in to do a revised curriculum where it's not purely academic. It's also based on social, emotional and behavioural development for young people that are falling a bit behind.

P10: The only support I had was from my family but that's not really enough, you need support that's going to help you to get there. It's like Pathways is giving you the support to help you get everything in order.

TOL: With everything in life you have risk factors that can cause an illness, or a disorder and then you have protective factors that prevent it from happening and in alternative education that's what we're focussing on. We're trying to build resilience in the young people we work with.

The future?

LD: Really having a toolbox to rely on, and I mean that in terms of not only the young people, but also the staff in schools. So an example of this would be, if you are struggling post transition, you've come from Primary School into Post Primary School, you're finding things difficult, maybe you're being bullied, what has prepared you for this? And increasingly we're finding that many young people who experience difficulties post transition when we follow them up later on are still experiencing difficulties. So really, there's a role in terms of Primary School helping young people from a very early age to equip themselves with the skills that are needed to cope right through, not only their education, but beyond.

FC: If you can improve impulsive behaviour patterns, improve mental health issues, and improve young people's emotional health as well. Then all of a sudden you are saving huge amounts of money further down the line and if we can get the government to understand that now and start to employ these interventions at an early stage and right throughout the education process then we start to equip all of our young people with much, much better skills to take them through life.

(MUSIC)