Dr Kate Philip is the Senior Research Fellow, The Rowan Group, University of Aberdeen. Jenny Spratt is a Research Fellow with The Rowan Group, University of Aberdeen. Prof. Janet Shucksmith is Professor of Public Health at Teesside University and Prof. Katherine Weare is based at the University of Southampton. For correspondence please e-mail: k.l.philip@abdn.ac.uk

Kate Philip, Jenny Spratt, Janet Shucksmith and Katherine Weare

The school as a location for the promotion and support of mental health

Concerns over the poor mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in the UK have prompted a proliferation of responses in terms of policy in England, Scotland and Wales (Scottish Executive 2001; DES 2004), many of which emphasise that mental health is 'everybody's business'. Government concern has prompted a range of interventions many of them based on partnership approaches and with the aim of drawing children, professionals and parents into debates. However there are important questions raised by these new developments.

Firstly the evidence base for success of such interventions remains weak overall (Craig, 2009). A recent review by one of the authors has also indicated a paucity of evidence around targeted mental health interventions in primary schools. (Shucksmith et al, 2007). There are also important questions about both the relationships between stakeholder groups, and the different and sometimes contradictory understandings of childhood, parenthood and community held by different professional groups working with children and young people. (Spratt et al, 2009).

Seminar series

In order to examine the implications of these questions, funding was secured from the ESRC to organise a seminar series which set out:

· to explore the implications of new research
· to evaluate critically the existing evidence
· to strengthen the theoretical basis for current work

Researchers from the Rowan Group at the Universities of Aberdeen and Teesside organised this series in collaboration with Southampton University. Four seminars were held at locations across the UK with active participants in the field drawn from statutory, voluntary, national government sectors and from the fields of education, public health, psychology, social geography and social care. Around 20 participants attended each seminar. Speakers included established members of the research community, and policy makers of national significance in both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The school setting

The central issue running across the seminars was an exploration of how current anxiety over the mental health of children is enacted in the school setting, and what the consequences are for children, young people and their families. Schools are traditionally settings where pupils are the passive recipients of things which are 'done to' them, most key decisions being made on their behalf by school staff. What, then, are the implications for children and their families when schools begin to claim joint ownership of something as personal and individualised as mental health?

The potential of the school

A focus on the potential of the school on the school in its community and to act as a site for interagency delivery of mental health services formed the basis of the first seminar. The seminar looked at the impact of

environment and community on the mental health of young people in the UK, It also examined the difficulties that teachers and other educators faced in gearing up to their new responsibilities. This included exploration of the challenges of working in collaboration with the community level provision at tiers 1 and 2 of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

In-school approaches

The second seminar looked at in-school approaches to mental health and wellbeing, opening with an overview of work in the field and following this with an examination of evaluation approaches and collaborative approaches to fostering children's social and emotional skills.

Children's rights

The third seminar drew on work around children's rights and perspectives on mental health, both areas which have remained under-researched to date. Clearly where mental health becomes a key issue for schools it is imperative to examine how different professional understandings of children's competence and rights come into conflict or are resolved.

Implications for parents

The fourth seminar critically examined the implications for parents and families of linking mental health promotion and the delivery of mental health services with schools. Notions of 'health promoting schools' are underpinned by an assumption of good relations between parents and schools. Yet most attempts to draw parents into closer contact with schools are initiated and managed by the schools, and are controlling rather than liberating. Much of the communication between home and school assumes middle class norms and values. Thus the school's notion of partnership can be one-sided, with a lack of recognition that parents may hold different values (Oulette et al 2004)). Partnership with parents may be additionally problematic where the parenting practices or aspects of the home environment are seen to be undermining the child's positive mental health.

Feedback

Feedback from the seminars suggests that participants gained new insights on the range of approaches taken across the UK, which was combined with better understanding of methodological issues and debates around the evidence base. In addition a special issue of the journal *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion* will bring together findings from the seminar series. Presentations from all four seminars can be found on the website:-
www.abdn.ac.uk/rowangroup/activities

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