Coping in the classroom

An occupational health risk for teachers

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Our research and development programme

IOSH, the Chartered body for safety and health professionals, is committed to evidence-based practice in workplace safety and health. We maintain a Research and Development Fund to support research, lead debate and inspire innovation as part of our work as a thought leader in safety and health.

In this document, you'll find a summary of the study we carried out with the educational community, 'Coping in the classroom – an occupational health risk for teachers'. The report focuses on the issues and support requirements of educational staff working with students who have health, behavioural, emotional or transient needs. It is part of a suite of activities centred on improving workplace health.

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Coping in the classroom

What's the problem?

Teaching can be a rewarding but challenging profession. Pupils have different experiences and abilities, and come from various backgrounds. Therefore it's particularly challenging for teachers not only to educate pupils, but also to control behaviour, maintain a positive learning environment and ensure students' health, safety and wellbeing.

A growing number of pupils have special educational needs (SEN*). There are nearly 1.5 million pupils (almost 18 per cent) without assessments in mainstream schools alone.[†] In addition, stress is consistently found to be the main cause of work-related illness in the education sector.[‡] So we were interested in exploring the support and resources available to teachers.

The most common type of issue among pupils with SEN in primary schools is speech, language and communication (24 per cent), while in secondary schools it is moderate learning difficulties (almost 22 per cent). However, this group of pupils also includes those with physical disabilities and chronic medical conditions.

With help from the IOSH Education Group and the Child Safety Education Coalition (CSEC[§]), we carried out a scoping study to find out more about the type of support teachers would find useful. The project had three main goals:

- to clarify what aspects of coping in the classroom could be a source of stress for teachers
- to clarify with the educational community whether a free resource addressing issues with students with health, behavioural, emotional or transient needs was needed and would be useful
- to identify what form such a resource should take.

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* SEN refers to pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn or access education than most children of the same age.

[†] www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001007/sfr14-2011v2.pdf

[‡] www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress/index.htm

[§] CSEC has been disbanded and now forms part of the Learning About Safety by Experiencing Risk Alliance.

What did we do?

The project involved running a focus group followed by two workshops.

Focus group

Teachers from primary and secondary schools were invited to attend through the Heads, Teachers and Industry (HTI) organisation. A semi-structured format was chosen for the focus group, consisting of case studies and questions (see Table 1). This helped encourage the supply of rich information, gave participants freedom to speak and share their views. It enabled a more flexible approach to guiding the discussion and getting the greatest amount of relevant information.

Eight teachers, who worked in mainstream or SEN provision or both, participated in the focus group. They were divided into two groups, both of which took part in four sessions. At the end of the focus group sessions, the transcripts of the discussions were analysed qualitatively.

Workshops

Two workshops, attended by 28 participants, were then held at the Association of Colleges (AoC) conference* to see whether participants could identify with the key issues emerging from the focus group.

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* AoC Annual Health & Safety Conference 2011, Thursday 9 June, The International Centre, Telford.

Table 1
Focus group sessions

Session	Activity
Session A	Participants were given several scenarios featuring: - two behavioural problems (ADHD and cerebral palsy) - an example of a transient family problem - an emotional problem associated with teenage pregnancy - health problems (diagnosed and undiagnosed deafness) - emergencies in the classroom (epilepsy, peanut allergy and asthma). Participants were divided into two groups and asked to consider the scenarios individually, think about what they would do and how it could affect the class. Views were then shared and discussed within the individual groups and with the group as a whole.
Session B	Participants were asked to consider the question, 'have you come across a situation that has caused you concern?' They added their experiences to four flip charts headed: - health - behavioural - emotional - transient needs.
Session C	Participants were asked, 'with hindsight, what would have helped you with this issue?' They looked at the flip charts and considered the question before using Post-it notes to add their ideas to the flip charts.
Session D	A group discussion considered a number of questions: - what would you like to see included? - what form should a resource take? - is there any other resource you would find useful? - what are the health and wellbeing issues facing teachers and how are these impacting on staff effectiveness?

What did our researchers find out?

The focus groups enabled members to reflect on and discuss their experiences. Participants identified the issues they found stressful and what kind of resources they would find useful.

The following issues emerged from the data:

- conflicts when using personalised teaching – the need to acknowledge different learning styles and include more kinaesthetic learning was often met with a lack of understanding when trying to implement new approaches
- difficulties faced by newly qualified teachers and the need to promote resilience
- administrative delays in getting the necessary services or equipment
- the school-family interface, which included issues about children as carers, drug and alcohol abuse, risk-averse parents and lack of communication between children and their families
- bullying and fighting fuelled by 'Facebook'
- violence faced by teachers and sometimes uncertainty about how to intervene
- problems faced by some teachers in coping, particularly when dealing with vulnerable and dysfunctional families
- fear that asking for help in coping would be seen as a sign of weakness
- bureaucracy and paperwork associated with risk assessment, not only for school trips but also within the school: participants felt that there was no focus on significant risks or on the benefit of taking the risk.

What could help?

Focus group participants felt that it was important for teachers to ask for help if they couldn't cope, and for help to be available from school special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), behavioural coordinators, teaching assistants, managers and educational psychologists. However, they felt that the best solutions come from within the school: a classroom practitioner rather than a non-teaching SENCO. Participants felt that in an individual case, the solution should come from the teacher concerned rather than be imposed by the head.

Group members commented that, unlike social care or health, education has no supervision model for working with vulnerable families and that, after attending case conferences, teachers could feel low. Peer mentoring and coaching may help teachers in this situation.

Teacher wellbeing and ways to build up resilience were seen as important issues, especially because of teachers leaving the profession early in their career and the high level of sickness absence. Participants felt that the selection procedure for those planning to teach needed to focus more on teaching skills. Placements could help trainee teachers to experience diverse educational processes. For aspiring teachers the chance to do a placement before they decided to start teacher training could be useful. Coaching and mentoring were seen as vital, but there was a problem in getting teachers to admit they needed help before they became ill.

Extending the discussion?

Workshops were held to see whether participants could identify with the key issues emerging from the focus group. All but one of the 28 participants said they identified with the issues raised in the focus group.

However, challenging behaviour in colleges was less about classroom management and more about behaviour outside the classroom, such as ignoring policies and procedures. Particular stressors in colleges included:

- disruption from students using mobile phones or wandering around during lessons or sitting in corridors
- mental health issues (caused or exacerbated by alcohol, drugs and pressures from home)
- anger management issues and a lack of respect
- conflict between community groups which had arisen from outside the college.

Health and wellbeing in colleges

Occupational health provision was available at most colleges for staff. However, colleges varied in their attitude to counselling with some only providing counselling to students. Some colleges provided 'clubs' with an occupational nurse and wellbeing clinics each year. However, these didn't necessarily reach the staff they were aimed at.

Colleges tended to be funded and focused on looking after students, not staff, and this meant that wellbeing was often approached on a reactive basis. In some colleges there was a reluctance to use the word 'stress' and work-related stress was only recorded if it appeared on a fit note as a reason for absence.

Participants discussed ways to cope with these issues, including resources such as training and advice for teachers, helping all staff to be involved in the risk assessment process and encouraging health and safety managers to contribute to stress management and wellbeing issues.

A useful resource for teachers

The discussions enabled the researchers to identify a number of possible resources that could help teaching staff at schools and colleges. It was felt that a simple, yet interactive website for teachers or student teachers would be useful, featuring scenarios or case studies and ideas for good practice.

Topics could include:

- strategies for coping with change
- developing emotional intelligence
- helping people cope with colleagues having a bad day
- information on occupational health.

What does the research mean?

- School and college staff face a wide variety of challenges in teaching students with SEN.
- Approaches and resources to help teaching staff cope with those challenges vary between schools and colleges.
- There is a lot of information available, but the mechanism for communicating it to teachers, leaders of teachers or senior leaders could be improved.
- Different attitudes to staff wellbeing and a lack of guidance on how to cope with different situations can be a cause of stress among teaching staff.
- Leadership and culture play a vital role in supporting teachers.
- An accessible resource would be useful in providing guidance for teaching staff in coping with the needs of students with SEN.
- Schools and colleges could benefit from adopting a sensible risk assessment approach.

Don't forget

Like most studies, this one had some limitations. The focus groups took a qualitative approach and explored the views of a small number of participants in depth. So while it is difficult to generalise the conclusions from the study, it does highlight aspects for further research.

It is important to bear in mind that the information gathered was self-reported and participants used were not randomly selected. A common problem with this is that it introduces potential problems of bias. Although the workshop involved a larger sample group of 28, the participants had opted to attend, making it again a self-selected approach.

Lastly, the data analysis was carried out by a sole researcher, which could lead to interpretation bias. However, this also allows greater consistency, and the key issues emerging from the focus group were triangulated by the data emerging from the workshop.

What's next?

IOSH believes that it will be useful to produce a resource to assist teachers, but there are other areas where we can contribute:

- providing a health and safety course for those involved in inspection of schools and colleges
- providing resources to schools on sensible risk assessment
- targeting college managers, school heads and governors about wellbeing issues
- helping health and safety managers in colleges to contribute to the health and wellbeing agenda.

To find out about our policy on health and safety education and training, visit **www.iosh.co.uk/Books-and-resources/Education-and-training.aspx**.

For resources on work, health and wellbeing, download our guides on 'A healthy return' (**www.iosh.co.uk/healthyreturn**) and 'Working well' (**www.iosh.co.uk/workingwell**), or visit our Occupational health toolkit (**www.ohtoolkit.co.uk**).

Our summary gives you all the major findings of the independent project report by the University of Nottingham. If you want to read about the study in more depth, you can download the full report from **www.iosh.co.uk/coping**.

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