

Developing a Wellness Community of Practice

During this shared time with you, I want to explore how you and colleagues might engage with the development of a wellness community of practice. I also will share how such a community of practice might become a central activity in keeping teacher mental health and wellbeing 'in check'.

Some of what I will highlight will be familiar to you, but other aspects will be new or take an alternative viewpoint. What is important to recognise is that it is within the gift of each and everyone of us to keep mentally and physically well as we progress through and beyond the Covid19 pandemic challenges.

The use of self in supporting mental health and wellbeing

You will be familiar with the term "teacher modelling" when engaged with learners, and this is part of maintaining good practice within learning and teaching contexts. However, "teacher modelling" is not readily applied to ourselves, and certainly not within the context of ensuring personal mental health and wellbeing. The use of "self" in supporting personal health and wellbeing is greatly undervalued, but is an essential element in ensuring that you keep your personal wellness in check.

In simple terms, you are a unique resource in modelling effective mental health and wellbeing practice, and as a resource you can keep your own personal mental health and wellbeing in check whilst developing the unintended role model for others in your workplace or home setting. The skill of reframing negative experiences and perceptions into positive ones is one that is instinctive to teachers, and this can form the basis of what might be developed further in creating a personal mental health and wellbeing check.

Presenteeism

Teachers are generally unaware of the seriousness and common occurrence of presenteeism. Presenteeism is where a teacher attends their workplace, but does not engage fully, or performs below par due to an underlying state of unwellness. The unwellness is most likely due to a feeling or state of stress, anxiety, or other mental health challenge, but could also include other forms of illness too. The physical effects of presenteeism on the body can include headaches, high blood pressure and gastro / intestinal irritation. Presenteeism is of huge concern as teachers rarely recognise the early warning signs until it is too late. The outcome is usually long periods of absence from work, but it is preventable by implementing three key elements.

The first is maintaining a healthy workplace and home environment....this is something that is the most simplest and obvious intervention. Having oxygenating plants within your personal space; access to drinking water to replenish lost body fluids, or use of ergonomic seating to promote good sitting posture are all excellent examples.

The second is maintaining a healthy mind....this is where we choose to follow some or all of a set of principles that ensure that our mind remains healthy. Mindfulness;

being realistic about our personal strengths and challenges; reminding ourselves of the qualities that make us individually unique are good examples.

The third is maintaining a healthy body....now I am not advocating we all engage with gym workout activities (albeit that these are beneficial) but being more pro-active in maintaining a healthy body. Engaging in some form of exercise; the fluids we drink: what we eat; and the quality sleep we have are all good examples.

Take a few moments to reflect on your workplace context within the current virus pandemic. What Healthy Workplace, Healthy Mind and Healthy Body examples spring to mind that could be simple for you to implement, thus contributing to positive mental health and wellbeing?

If you require additional time to complete the reflection you may select pause at the end of the music, then press play again.

There are no right or wrong responses to your personal reflection and your response will likely be different from other colleagues' reflections. What is important to realise is that some exercise is better than none; fluids that temporarily affect our mood (those with caffeine or alcohol) require to be realistically managed; and eat healthier meals and snacks to keep energy levels up and contribute to feeling positive throughout the day.

Informal Collaborative Support (ICS)

When you have attended a professional learning event, you have had an opportunity to engage in collaboration; meeting with others and participate in meaningful discussion. At such events, what is valued highly is the opportunity to network, which always provides longer lasting solutions to shared learning and teaching challenges. At times, some have struggled to provide 100% positive feedback on the professional learning theme, and this can be for two reasons...

The first is that our frame of mind might not be in the place it should be, producing an overwhelming feeling of a waste of time..

The second simply relates to the content and delivery of the theme that is a mismatch for the attendees, producing an overwhelming feeling of a waste of time.

Whatever the rating of the professional learning event, what is always rated highly by teachers is the level of Informal Collaborative Support (ICS).

ICS is the unintended short-term networking that happens by chance, that evolves into meaningful long-term networking. Teachers engage positively with ICS as it is not organised by others or imposed on them. The simple success of Informal Collaborative Support is down to like-minded colleagues finding a common interest and developing meaningful networks that grow and evolve. ICS is very common, although most teachers are not aware it exists. The personal benefits of engaging positively with ICS should not be underestimated, as this will impact on workplace practice, increase engagement with underpinning research and stem feelings of professional isolation within the current pandemic challenges.

Developing a Teacher Wellness Community of Practice

Although teacher wellbeing in the workplace continues to be highlighted in the media, it is unclear who has overall responsibility for teacher health and wellbeing. The Health and Safety Executive publish advice and directives to industry lead bodies and employer Human Resource / People Operation and Development sections (or their variant names) will confirm they have a generic health and wellbeing policy (which will include mental health), but that seems to stop there with the expectation that employees will action what may be required should they become overwhelmed within the workplace. For teachers, it seems even more vague, although some outstanding resources are available from NHS Scotland and charity status organisations.

Take a few moments to reflect on your workplace context within the current virus pandemic. List the online resources from the NHS and charity status organisations you might access if you or a colleague began to feel overwhelmed within the workplace.

If you require additional time to complete the reflection you may select pause at the end of the music, then press play again.

There are no right or wrong responses to your personal reflection and your response will likely be different from other colleagues' reflections. What is important to realise is that although teacher specific resources are being developed (like those available through the GTCS and other education focused organisations) there are many examples of generic free resources that could provide contextualised support for teachers. This is where Informal Collaborative Support (ICS) can provide a huge benefit for teachers in developing a network that shares the signposting to a range of resources that support teacher mental health and wellbeing within the workplace.

The concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) is familiar to colleagues, so the establishment of a Teacher Wellness Community of Practice based on the principles of Informal Collaborative Support and Community of Practice seems a logical development in providing support for teachers through and beyond the viral pandemic challenges.

The features of a Teacher Wellness Community of Practice based on ICS and CoP principles would then require.....

- closed membership (a defined group of teacher colleagues) Such a group could reach out to other closed membership groups as and when required.
- individual consent to being part of the community
- individuals having equal partnership
- all adhering to confidentiality
- shared engagement with allocated tasks
- shared investment of time

The main challenge for a Teacher Wellness Community of Practice is the retrieval, sharing, dissemination and archiving of information, so an obvious way forward would

be to engage with cloud-based 'app' technology that can be accessed through multiple platforms. Teachers are already utilising such technology, and their innovative engagement with this in supporting learning and teaching could easily be adapted to support each another in relation to workplace wellness through and beyond the viral pandemic challenge. The protocols of online security would still require to be implemented, but no different from the protocols that are being adhered to by colleagues within their current engagement with cloud based technology.

If teachers do not look after themselves, look after one another, then how can the very best support and encouragement for learners be provided. Success remains within your grasp.

Keep safe and thankyou.

Until next time.