

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS

Conference organised under the auspices of the Ambassador of Malta to Estonia and Finland, His Excellency Dr Kenneth Vella

25th November 2022 at the Catholic Institute, Floriana

Your Excellencies Dr Kenneth Vella and Mr Paul Teesalu
Dear colleagues and friends

It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation by His Excellency Dr Kenneth Vella to speak at this conference on understanding mental health and wellbeing of students.

I must also commend Mater Boni Consigli School for teaming with a number of collaborators in this important Erasmus project.

I must congratulate you on the wise choice of your topic today, as mental health and wellbeing are definitely, extremely relevant to the lives of students and our young people today.

While preparing for this contribution, a landmark report by UNICEF called ***The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind*** affirms that:

“Almost one in five European boys aged 15 to 19 suffer from mental disorders, followed by more than 16 per cent of girls the same age. Nine million adolescents in Europe aged 10 to 19 are living with mental disorders, with anxiety and depression accounting for more than half of all cases”.

This is devastating data indeed!

We are now also very aware that the COVID-19 pandemic had a compounding impact on children's physical and mental health, creating an unprecedented global crisis in our lifetime. Very few people have been immune to the worry, the stress, and the pressure caused by the pandemic due to living in lockdown for quite a long time.

However, research is showing us that children have suffered the most.

The fact that:

- Children could not meet with their friends due to school lockdown.
- Children could not hug their grandparents.
- Some Children also lost family members due to covid or otherwise during this time.
- Others could not access online classes due to lack of the necessary digital equipment at home.
- Others missed out on eating a healthy meal each day.
- Some Children suffered for losing the feeling of safety while at school, and had to be for months on attend in troubled and turbulent environments in their own homes.

We must also be aware, that in reality, long before the COVID-19 pandemic, parents, teachers and other professionals working with children and young people, were speaking of the growing concern of the mental health needs of children and adolescents.

COVID-19 has put the mental health and well-being of an entire generation even more at risk.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD report called ***Combating COVID-19's Effect on Children***, clearly states that children living in poverty and vulnerability are likely to suffer more from mental health issues during the pandemic. It also states that exposure to poverty, social exclusion, and high levels of anxiety in early life can significantly affect their mental well-being, for years and even for decades later.

On the other hand, the World Health Organization estimates that about 25% of the world's population experiences a mental health problem at some point in their life.

And that in about half of the cases, development of symptoms starts before a child's 14th birthday.

The European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, also states, that it is therefore important to develop evidence-based interventions that can help address mental health issues in children.¹

Evidence is showing us, according to the WHO European Region, that there is a high and increasing rate of mental and behavioural health problems in adolescents.

¹ European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Bruckmayer, M., Phillips, W., *Children and mental health: preventive approaches to anxiety and depression: European platform for investing in children*, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/730847>

According to the latest Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey, 29% of 15-year-old girls and 13% of 15-year-old boys in European countries reported “feeling low” more than once a week; also, more than one in ten adolescents were regular weekly drinkers by the age of 15 (9% of girls and 16% of boys).

The study also showed that half of all mental health problems in adulthood have their onset during or before adolescence.

Even at such a young age, depression and anxiety disorders are among the top five causes of the overall disease burden (measured in terms of disability-adjusted life years).²

As the Director General of WHO, says and I quote, “***Good mental health is absolutely fundamental to overall health and well-being.***”

Childhood is a critical stage of life for mental health and well-being, and the stress, fear, and uncertainty, adds to the significant negative effects on children’s mental health.

Any trauma can make children feel sad, scared, isolated, anxious, angry, and un]certain of the future.

We are meeting today on a very important international day, that is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls, which falls precisely on the 25th November.

The horrendous tragic femicide emanating from domestic violence, make this year’s commemoration even the more important for us in Malta, and in

² Source: Adapted from Global Burden of Disease study 2015 (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation) for prevalence and from WHO Global Health Estimates 2015 for suicide.

particular to this conference, as infants and children's mental health is most effected and impacted in the face of domestic violence.

Research shows us that infants are effected in their needs for attachment, in their sleeping habits, create eating problems and higher risk of physical injury.

While preschool children are left with feelings of lack of safety, separation and stranger anxiety, risks of regressive behaviour and insomnia and parasomnias.

School-aged Children risk feelings of self-blame, somatic complaints, aggressive behaviours, and regressive behaviours.

Adolescents most likely indulge in school truancy, substance abuse, early sexual activity, and delinquency.

I would like to briefly share with you the experience by the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society in collaboration with The Malta Trust Foundation, while conducting an important Child Participation Process with children in early years, aged between 3 and 6 years. This process was conducted during last summer with 260 children with an equal distribution of girls and boys, in 9 schools including Gozo and who came from 29 diverse ethnicities.

Children were encouraged through the animation of a book, written Dr Paulann Grech, psychiatrist by profession, for Children in early years, to speak of their experiences, by being asked "What worries you?" and, "how do you cope with your worries?".

There were a variety of answers recorded throughout the 9 schools, however most of the responses fell into common themes.

Children spoke of their worries and fears around matters related to animals, family members, viruses/other sicknesses, world-wide events, residual fears from past experiences, and worries over more abstract notions, such a fear of the dark.

This is a clear indication of the need for more in depth awareness around mental health wellbeing. There is an urgent need to consider a holistic strategy, from the early years and even earlier for that matter.

Here I ask:

What are we effectively doing about such a situation?

What can we do as professionals, practitioners, and civil society organisations?

How can our authorities go further, than what is being done already for more effective impact?

I therefore believe that the initiative taken up by Mater Boni Consiglii School is already a good step towards a necessary process to address the mental health of students through this ERASMUS initiative.

Your initiative in encouraging children to follow a fun journey through Triumfland, a journey that will empower them and teach them the necessary skills to build resilience, is a great initiative.

Resilience is defined, as **the ability to bounce back from stress, adversity, failure, challenges, or even trauma.**

It is a skill that children can learn and develop as they grow. Children can be empowered with the necessary skills to build resilience as they develop.

I believe that when children have the skills and the confidence to confront and work through their problems, they learn to be confident to overcome difficult issues.

The more children feel confident, they become strong and capable to bounce back on their own, and hence become more resilient.

I strongly believe that schools have a unique opportunity to empower children with the necessary life skills. Although, of course, I agree that schools need to teach the academic curriculum to the children under their care, but schools are best placed to go beyond this curriculum.

I therefore believe that the initiative taken by Mater Boni Consiglieri School is a great opportunity for further development, into a possible tool kit, which can then be shared with others.

I together with the Foundations that I lead, be more than ready to collaborate and cooperate in supporting any initiative of the sort to create the necessary prototype for further initiatives in our schools to address mental health and wellbeing across our country.

Empowering Children with the necessary skills will equip children with resilience for life.

We should also strive to create a health-promoting environment where schools provide not only a learning setting but also a platform for promoting health, including healthy lifestyles, health literacy and wellbeing.

Various studies show that socio-emotional learning programmes, through life skills learning, improve socio-emotional functioning and academic performance as well as, reduce risky behaviour.

On the other hand, we need to focus on the health care needed to prevent mental ill health and promote mental health and wellbeing.

Early identification of mental health or behavioural problems is key to good recovery, with access to appropriate, evidence-based psychosocial treatment and support.

That is why I am a strong advocate for the advancement of perinatal mental health, because I believe that the basis of mental wellbeing of a child starts at the very first moments of life.

Similarly, the nurture, love and care given from the very beginning of life plays a major role in the health and wellbeing throughout life.

Let me share with you some of the important recommendations and aspirations about mental health, that were submitted by Children through a Child Participation Process, that The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society conducted and published through a Children's Manifesto, just a year ago, on the 20th November 2021, on World Children's Rights Day:

Article 37. Strengthen, restructure and resource free child mental health services in the community.

Article 38. Create adequate social and psychological support systems for the growing problem of juvenile delinquency.

Article 40. Ensure that all psycho-social and health care services that are available in Malta are likewise available in Gozo.

Article 42. Change the focus of the education system from simply academic achievements to putting at the forefront non-formal and informal education such as media literacy, soft skills, lifestyle lessons, budgeting, self-care, mindfulness, and mental health.

Article 70. Enhance financial and psycho-social state support for families below the poverty line and those who are at risk of poverty.

Article 78. Develop initiatives and campaigns on body positivity and self-esteem, that challenge the negative effects of the media portrayal of the ideal body image and its effect on mental health and healthy living.

I am informed that there are some psychology students participating in this conference, and therefore I would like to finish off, by addressing them specifically.

Dear Students, you are students today, but soon to be our Professionals and Practitioners of this country. You will have a huge responsibility in shaping the society of the future.

Please always keep in mind that Children are the most vulnerable in our society, that we need to remember that we are not part of a society when we are of age, but that it matters greatly that we address issues from the earliest possible in life, and therefore we need to address challenges from birth, to ensure a healthy, resilient and prosperous sustainable society to live in.

Finally to us adults we must remember that

Children are braver than we believe,

They are stronger than they seem and

They are smarter than we think.

However, they need to be empowered and help in their development to acquire the necessary skills. They need to be encouraged to seek and reach out for help. They need to be told that they should speak up if they are not feeling ok. They should be motivated to believe in themselves.