

**‘The Mental Health Agenda: Implications for the School Setting’
Friday, March 17 at 8.30am
Catholic Institute, Floriana.**

The event is being organised by Minds Ahead UK in partnership with Mater Boni Consiglieri St Joseph School, Paola.

Your Excellency Dr Kenneth Vella
Mr Dean Johnstone
Dear Friends

Firstly, I would like to congratulate H.E. Dr Kenneth Vella for his tireless endeavours in promoting and addressing the important concerns of Mental Health in schools. I also would like to commend you Dr Vella, for your efforts in developing such meaningful collaborations, such as with: Minds Ahead UK and Leeds Beckett University.

According to UNICEF, in every part of the world, poor mental health causes so much suffering for children and young people, and it is the highest cause of death, disease and disability, especially for older adolescents.

Research is showing us that half of all mental health conditions start by age 14, but most cases go undetected and untreated.

Local data provided in 2019 by the Ministry for Health shows that 8% of the total Maltese population are affected by anxiety and 7% are suffering from depression.

This is pre-pandemic data.

We know that the **pandemic have worsened children's mental health or exacerbated existing mental health issues among children**. The pandemic caused disruptions in routines and social isolation for children, which can be associated with anxiety and depression and can have implications for mental health later in life.

A number of studies show an increase in children's mental health needs following social isolation due to the pandemic, especially among children who experience adverse childhood experiences.

Being at home and away from school and separated from peers during crucial developmental phases, young children and adolescents were clearly among the people most negatively impacted, in various ways, by the pandemic lockdowns. But early indications offer some additional, less-expected observations. Among them are that even before the outbreak hit there had been a trend of rising mental health disorders among young people.

Within this context, the two Foundations which I founded and chair, namely the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and The Malta Trust Foundation, have collaborated to embark on a joint Summer School initiative, during summer 2022, aiming at raising awareness and empower children from the early years with life skills, and resilience to prevent mental health issues, mainly to equip them with ways of coping positively in stressful situations.

This was a very first initiative in Malta, regarding what affects the mental health of children during early years.

Some interesting findings came across which I would like to share with you to stimulate your thoughts further.

A total of 260 children took part in this initiative, of which 131 were girls and 129 boys aged between 3 and 6 years of age.

The students come from diverse nationalities and have diverse abilities.

The findings show that children, even at such a young age, already worry about life surrounding them.

Children at this age told us that they worry about their pets, their family members.

They worry about viruses, wars, volcano eruptions.

They worry when someone is angry or shouts at them, when they do something new for the first time, when they have a lot to do and do not have enough time to it, and when they struggle to communicate due to language barriers.

When these children were asked about how they cope with these problems, the children responded that support from their parents is important for them, some mentioned breathing exercises, others by thinking of something that makes them happy, by playing, by being creative, by checking the information, by keeping active.

The responses shed light on the current situation of the mental health of children in early years in our country.

We are now at the stage where a group of experts, academics and practitioners are evaluating these results so as to put together a set of recommendations for the necessary advocacy work, that needs to be done to influence policy, as it is well known that early intervention is key to address the risk of mental health challenges later on in life.

Being aware of gaps, in the necessary psycho-social support services in our education system, and of the direct impact on mental wellbeing that continues in later years, The Malta Trust Foundation took the lead seven years ago, by developing the provision of services in schools, in collaboration with the psycho-social interdisciplinary teams in state schools, through the Blossom project, as we call it.

So the Blossom project aims to reach out to students who demonstrate behaviour, and psychosocial issues.

Teachers also often report incidences of pupils turning up to school hungry, tired, or psychologically troubled by incidents taking place at home or in their social environment.

The assessment of the project identified outcomes that ultimately are an eye-opener to the real-life situation of the needs of children in our society.

In schools where the Blossom project is run, a medium of 20% to 26% of children are accessing the counselling services.

Through our counselling services, we are also supporting teachers from burn-out, parents, and very recently, in Qawra, we are piloting a reaching out initiative also to the community.

Children accessing counselling services are presenting issues of behaviour, relationships, family dysfunction, truancy, bullying, self-harm, suicidal ideation, emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, domestic violence, gender issues, bereavement, physical and mental health, anger, anxiety, depression, rejection, and low self-esteem.

It is a bleak picture indeed!

Early intervention is of utmost importance, however a proactive/preventive approach is urgently needed.

We need to ask ourselves what can and what needs to be done.

We need to work together.

We need to invest all possible resources to address these issues that have the potential to spiral into multiple challenges in later life.

We need to focus on the empowerment of our children from early years to develop the necessary coping, and resilient skills that can help them through their life difficulties.

I truly believe that in face of such realities, that our children and young people are being burdened with, we definitely need a holistic approach in building a strategy, a plan and the necessary decisions to be taken to develop meaningful policies with all the important resources.

We surely need to work with parents, guardians, teachers and the outer community.

We need to empower them to realise that beneath every behaviour there is a feeling, and beneath each feeling there is a need. When we meet that need rather than focusing on the behaviour, we begin to deal with the cause not the symptom.

Sometimes parents avoid talking about upsetting experiences, thinking that doing so will reinforce their children's pain or make things worse. But telling the story is often exactly what children need to make sense of the event and move on to a place whereby they can feel better about what happened.

However, we cannot assume that parents by being a parents would know how to go about such experiences, and it is exactly because of this, that we also need to invest in parents, by supporting them to become aware how to deal with such situations.

So we definitely also need, to create more awareness so that parents, communities, and our society in general, can work together to support all the necessary initiatives that need to be taken in the best interest of our children and young people.

Undoubtedly, we need to tackle the situation holistically.

In this regard, I believe in the potential of our schools that can provide a safe haven for children, beyond academic learning, but also to offer the potential for life skills learning, for building a supportive environment where every child is valued, respected and loved.

I believe that schools have the potential in creating supportive physical, social, and academic environments that promote mental wellbeing of both student and staff.

As a society, we must realise that our children's mental health is more important than their grades.

We need to let them enjoy their childhood, to let them be creative, to let them play often.

In short, we need to let them be CHIDLREN.

Finally, I augur you all much success in your endeavours to support our children's mental health, and in particular, I would like to convey my deepest appreciation to you, Dr Vella for all of your efforts in creating these spaces for learning and exchange among professionals, experts, academics, practitioners and our future psycho-social professionals in our country.

I augur you a successful discussion and much learning.