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Life well Lived

Mental health is described by WHO as:

... a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community

The World Health Organization definition is like a social work viewpoint. It is presented as the state of individual well-being, personal productivity and successful coping, in a social context of contributing to the community. Since the definition does not suggest a medical condition, it is useful for school social workers in promoting "mental health" in schools, regardless of the culture and without invoking a clinical viewpoint.

Prevalence of mental health problems in the school population
Schools everywhere are concerned about pupils who are not coping with the stress of school. Teachers must teach children with somatic problems, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, behavioral problems and signs of troubled relationships. Requirements to include all children in school mean that teachers are challenged to deal with the emotional needs of these pupils.

- A study by the Dubai Health Authority: Revealed that one in five teens showed symptoms of depression, and several suicides raised alarm http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/health/teen-mental-health-issues-growing-in-the-uae-1.1663780.
- A 2013 study in Vietnam: "The most prominent findings of this qualitative descriptive study were the perceptions of the students that mental health problems occur frequently and that different stakeholders need to pay attention to the mental health of pupils. Depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts were seen as major problems by all stakeholders and many painful examples were shared." Full article: http://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-13-1046.
- A German study: The prevalence of mental health problems in children and adolescents in Germany is about 10%. Full article: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4850518/.

The Downside of a Focus on Mental Health Problems
Studies such as these focus on mental health problems, rather than on mental health. Frequently pupils who are having difficulty in growing up are labeled with various diagnoses that can affect

their own and other people's expectations of them. Although school social workers recognize the drawbacks of this approach, the severity of pupils' problems plus expectations from the schools makes it likely that school social workers spend most of their time counseling such identified pupils, managing chronic behavioral problems and helping teachers cope with pupils' special needs. The downside is a tendency for school social workers to be diverted into crisis management and away from a balanced role supporting mental health through prevention and early intervention.

Schools that Support Social and Emotional Wellbeing
Teachers and school administrators understand that children do not succeed in school without good mental health and social and emotional support. Despite pressure to focus solely on academic results, many teachers believe that mental health is just as important as academic achievement and they express frustration that they do not have the time or the skills to provide what the pupils need http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/we-dont-have-time-for-mental-health-teachers-20150501-1mxtk2.html.

Schools need national policies to help them develop measures to foster mental health. In 2016 the European Union promoted joint action on mental health in schools, and member states were invited to take action http://www.mentalhealthandwellbeing.eu/assets/docs/publications/Framework for action_19jan (1)-20160119192639.pdf. Policy recommendations included promoting schools as a place to support the mental health of all young people and for *effective* intervention. The recommendations were general, but point to the principle that schools are a vital place for building mental health, emphasizing the importance of programs that are shown to be effective.

What *is* Effective?
A New Zealand study reviewed international literature in order to draw conclusions about effective mental health promotion for young people, specifically Maori youth. The principles that emerged for working with Maori youth seem to be applicable to all. Although empirical evidence is limited, there are some factors (summarized below) that are believed to be associated with success www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/ResourceFinder/Review-of-evidence-about-effectiveness-of-mental-health-promotion-programmes-targeting-youth.pdf.

- A holistic approach addressing both the environment and the individual
- A comprehensive approach with multiple interventions in multiple settings addressing multiple determinants
- A long term approach, preferably over several years
- Interventions informed by theory and evidence
- Culturally appropriate interventions, with input from the relevant communities at each stage of the programme
- Interventions appropriately targeted to the age and gender of the target audience
- Youth participation, and a philosophy of youth empowerment
- A skilled workforce

What school social workers can do
Like the WHO definition of mental health, the New Zealand study points to the social work model. It is hard to imagine a school mental health plan without involving school social work. Developing policy, creating a plan, involving youth and families, implementing culturally appropriate intervention and ensuring balance between individual lives and the life of the school are usual parts of the school social work role. The best part is helping children enjoy and share their lives.