

# Time to teach the politics of mental health: Implications of the Power Threat Meaning Framework for teacher education

Catriona O'Toole

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*The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) provides teachers with a holistic and compassionate understanding of the origins of emotional distress, which can support them in becoming more attuned and responsive to their own inner lives as well as those of their students. It has radical implications for how we teach wellbeing and mental health in schools and other educational settings.*

The Mental Health of children and young people has been identified as a global public health challenge (Fazel, et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2007). As a result, schools across much of the Western world have been identified as key sites for delivery of mental health interventions, and wellbeing has become a cornerstone of national curricula across educational sectors. In Ireland, for instance, the new Junior Cycle Framework mandates that wellbeing receive 400 hours of timetabled engagement over the first three years of secondary school, while time allocated for other subjects has dropped (Maths and English, by comparison require 240 hours; NCCA, 2017). While a commitment to these areas is welcome, there is growing disquiet about the way in which this new agenda is being taken up in educational settings (e.g. O'Toole, 2017; Simovska, 2015; Spratt, 2017; Watson et al., 2012; Wright & McLeod, 2015).

Within my own work, I too have become increasingly concerned by the ways that traditional models of mental health, when applied to school settings, have the potential to become oppressive and tyrannical (Devanney & O'Toole, in press; O'Toole & Simovska, 2018; O'Toole, 2017). Students are now faced with frequent exhortations to be upbeat, to persist in the face of challenges, to display a growth mindset, to be enterprising and resil-

ient; all of which can, over time, give rise to an atmosphere of toxic positivity, particularly for those whose life experiences don't easily lend themselves to feelings of cheery enthusiasm. At best, school-based mental health education consists of little more than well-intentioned but rather bland advice (get a good night's sleep, exercise, limit time spent on social media, talk to trusted friends, and so on). At worst, it promotes the idea of 'mental illness as an illness like any other', thereby reinforcing a biomedical explanation whilst legitimising a wide range of individualistic and decontextualised intervention programmes. Many schools, for instance, offer brief (e.g. six or eight week), manualised psychosocial interventions; indeed, there is now a growing industry in the marketing and delivery of these types of school-based interventions by private companies (Rossi et al., 2018). While students may learn something about recognising and managing their emotions, they are extremely unlikely to engage in critical enquiry about the origins of these emotions; for instance, into the ways that power structures (e.g. advertising and entertainment industries) have a vested interest in manipulating and maintaining particular attitudes, beliefs and emotions; or the ways that feelings of diminishment, shame, anger and sadness are bound up in the experience of inequality and adversity.

In all these ways, school-based mental health interventions tend to obscure broader social and structural inequalities. Mental health problems are firmly located within the individual child rather than within structures and networks of power and privilege. All of this serves to reinforce a victim blame ideology and play into the hands of a political system that is happy to abdicate responsibility for addressing inequalities. Educational policy and practice are hugely impacted by these same political systems and are increasingly in the thrall of a neoliberal ideology; an economic rationality that emphasises competitiveness, efficiency, accountability and rigorous testing regimes (Apple, 2000). Very little of this is conducive to the mental health of students or their teachers. Yet by emphasising the dispositions and mindsets needed to succeed within this system, school mental health initiatives merely reinforce the status quo. In effect, what is packaged as wellbeing and mental health school initiatives can instead be used to prop up a narrow neoliberal agenda in education, aimed primarily at maintaining academic standards and ensuring future labour market participation.

The PTMF suggests something far more radical. I was deeply heartened to have sight of it just two weeks before commencing the first delivery of a new teaching module. With its remarkable breadth and depth of scholarship, the framework provided a robust, consolidated and coherent position on mental distress, and a sound basis for meeting the module's core objectives outlined below.

### **Wellbeing, mental health and education module**

I designed the module, 'Wellbeing, Mental Health and Education' as part of a Master of Education programme. Students were qualified teachers working across educational sectors (early childhood, primary, secondary and informal educational settings like prisons) and many held, or were aspiring to, school leadership positions. The module had three overarching objectives: Firstly, to present a critical approach to understanding

wellbeing and mental health, challenging the highly individualistic, decontextualised and reductive biomedical models that currently dominate mental health research and practice. I sought to develop awareness of ways that emotional distress is underpinned by adverse experiences – like poverty, trauma, displacement, racism, sexism, homophobia and 'ableism' – as well as by the stresses of living in what many consider to be an increasingly individualistic, competitive, materialistic and sexualised culture. The PTMF provided the ideal basis for this exploration. Students were asked to read the overview, along with sections of the main document – particularly Chapter 4's subsection on 'Childhood adversity'. They also read shorter journal articles and blogs on related topics. Themes were then summarised and discussed in class.

From there, I wanted to engage students in exploring the implications of these insights for the nature and scope of mental health initiatives in schools and other educational settings. My students are not mental health professionals or aspiring therapists; hence my aim was to support them in thinking educationally about mental health; to grapple with what these new conceptualisations might mean for curriculum and pedagogy, and for their own pedagogical relationships with the students they teach. With this in mind, students were assigned educational readings on the purposes of education, critical pedagogies and critical health literacy; and the final summative assessment for the module (the assessment had three parts: forum dialogue, group presentations and individual essay) required students to articulate an informed stance on wellbeing and mental health, and discuss the implications for their own educational practice.

Thirdly, since there are many challenges to teachers' mental health (Jennings et al., 2017), I wanted to create a pedagogical space in which participants were afforded opportunities to intimately connect with their own experience and engage with the struggles, perspectives and experiences of their students. Equally important is to recognise that our own and others' experiences are profoundly inter-

dependent: Wellbeing is not and never can be an individual affair. We used mindfulness and other contemplative activities (e.g. mindful breathing, compassion meditations and body scans) to address these aspects, which I discuss in more detail below.

Informal feedback on the module suggested that many students found the language and terminology in the framework very different from what they usually encounter in mental health discourse. For example, a shift from discourses of disorder, maladaptation, symptoms and deficits to a language of distress, power, threats and survival strategies. They felt this supported a different sensibility or orientation in their encounters with their students. For instance, one teacher who works in prison education considered that although it is easy for us to dismiss people in prison as ‘deviant’, ‘immoral’ or ‘dangerous’, the PTMF reframes the way we might look at them. We are forced to recognise that behaviours arise in response to adversities and injustices, and this in turn reorients us towards more compassionate, open-hearted encounters with students.

Similarly, the shift from asking ‘What is wrong with you?’ to ‘What happened to you?’, or from asking ‘What are your symptoms?’ to ‘What did you have to do to survive?’ is profound and immediately impactful. These simple questions that elegantly summarise the core tenets of the PTMF invite us to think anew about the nature and scope of mental health prevention and intervention efforts. It is here that teachers recognised that the framework has the potential to be transformative in education; to offer an alternative to the oppressive conceptions and practices that pervade the current system.

The module will be offered again in the 2019–2020 academic year. I also plan on drawing from the framework in other programmes offered in our department, including initial teacher education and school guidance and counselling. In future sessions I want to deepen students’ engagement with the PTMF and facilitate more nuanced and critical discussions about the implications for educational practice.

### **The benefits and implications of the Power, Threat Meaning Framework for education**

The PTMF represents a radical alternative to medical and diagnostic models of human behaviour and experience. In recognising that patterns of emotional distress and troubling behaviour are part of a continuum of human experience and in acknowledging these aspects of experience emerge as coping or survival strategies in response to particular adversities arising within contexts of power inequalities, the path is paved for a more humane, compassionate and holistic understanding of distress.

While the PTMF has relevance for pupils and staff who have not experienced more obvious ‘traumas’, one of its implications would be to move to a model of trauma-informed practice in education. Indeed, there is a pressing need for greater awareness of the nature, extent and consequences of trauma, and for environments where students can experience a felt sense of safety and belonging (O’Toole, 2018). However, there are only a small number of guidelines on trauma-informed practice designed explicitly for schools. Those that are available tend to focus narrowly on the impact of trauma on memory and learning, and their guidance is limited to a series of prescriptive bullet-pointed recommendations for school staff. They also tend to privilege neurobiological explanations, and brush over the issues of power and inequality that are centred in the PTMF.

Another major shortcoming of many resources targeted at schools is that they are misguided about – or perhaps simply disregard – the goals and purposes of education. They therefore fail to engage the educational community in ways that theories about mental health, trauma or emotional distress might be integrated with educational practice. Instead, they tend to assume, due to the increasing influence of a neoliberal agenda, that education is all about knowledge accumulation, academic attainment and producing students capable of competing in the global economy. But this is a very narrow and instrumental conception of education and one that has been subjected to widespread and sustained critique by educa-

tional scholars (e.g. Biesta, 2006, 2013; Illich, 1971). Education, according to Klafki (2000), is about the formation of one's inner life through engagement with the world and through critical reflection on the dominant social order. Education engages us in questions of how we want to be in the world, not just what we (or dominant others) want us to know. It is what enables us to become 'more fully human'.

Thus, education – in the true sense of the word – offers a space for critical enquiry into students' own understandings of key issues that affect them. As such, it offers possibilities for raising awareness of the origins and determinants of emotional distress, along with the sources of power that shape our subjectivities, our very sense of who we are, as well as and how the fabric of our inner lives is intimately connected to the broader social and cultural world. Perhaps it is time then, that the focus of mental health education shifts towards a more robust enquiry into the politics of mental health: engaging students as active citizens, in ethical discussions about the real causes of mental distress and facilitating them to take individual or collective actions that support their own wellbeing and that of others. This type of enquiry should take place not just in subjects like Personal Social and Health Education, but across the entire curriculum. Indeed, issues of oppression, domination, poverty, trauma, and adversity are themes in many of the subjects that students engage with on a daily basis – literature, poetry, history, music, art and so on.

This is not to suggest that any of this is easy. Indeed, given the autocratic structures and power imbalances that typify many schools (like so many other institutions), much of what is envisaged here in terms of open, critical dialogue simply cannot be realised. However, just as there is a groundswell of support for alternative paradigms on mental distress, there is also a strong impetus amongst many educationalists to resist regressive educational policies and create more liberating classrooms. It is crucial then that teachers are supported to identify ways they can engage educationally on matters of

mental health with sensitivity and conviction. Amongst other things this will require deeper exploration of the types of pedagogies that can support wholeness, compassion, social justice and liberation.

### **A place for critical and contemplative pedagogies**

Although most university courses confine students strictly within the realm of rational, objective, third-person knowledge, I am increasingly drawn to critical and contemplative pedagogies in my teaching, which allow for a first-person, experiential engagement with course content. These pedagogies seem particularly vital when it comes to material like the PTMF, as they provide opportunities for students to make sense of the subject matter in relation to their own lives and experiences. Contemplative pedagogies place the student at the centre of their own learning, and recognise that the lived curriculum – the content of our lives and past experiences – is as important as the content to be explored on the page (Barbazat & Bush, 2014; Zajonc & Palmer, 2010). They also support a critical consciousness of oppressive conditions, thereby educating for liberation and social justice (Freire, 1970; and for an overview see [www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree](http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree)).

As university educators, our own pedagogies and embodied presence in the classroom provide an important exemplar to our students, inviting reflection on the relationships and pedagogical approaches that they in turn wish to develop in their own teaching. Critical and contemplative pedagogies are ideally suited to creating safe classroom spaces, where struggles can be voiced and listened to without judgement, and teachers have the courage to engage students in educational dialogue about sensitive and emotive topics. In my experience, these pedagogies have set the groundwork for the personal flourishing of teachers themselves, and they have supported teachers' commitment toward nurturing a personally enriching, compassionate and socially just educational experience for their own students.

## Conclusion

The foregoing provides just a preliminary discussion of possibilities. There is a lot more to be done to ensure that mental health and wellbeing are meaningfully and wholeheartedly integrated into educational settings. The PTMF offers a robust alternative to current discourses and practices. It is important now, that advocates of this new framework engage in meaningful dialogue with educational

scholars, curriculum and pedagogy specialists, in order to think more deeply and thoroughly about the implications for educational theory and practice.

## Author

### Dr Catriona O'Toole CPsychol, PsSI

Lecturer in Psychology of Education, Maynooth University, Ireland; [Catriona.a.otoole@mu.ie](mailto:Catriona.a.otoole@mu.ie)

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