



"Reducing the psychosocial impact of the financial and economic crisis"

Centre Borschette. Brussels 27 April 2009

Brief:

'Chris Harrison could present the school perspective: how children and families are affected by the crisis, how schools experiences this and how the crisis underlines the need to strengthen health and resilience in children, and to integrate schools into social networks; clear proposals for actions from your side would be much welcomed...'

'A guiding term through the event could be "mental capital" as the cognitive and emotional skill available in society. Themes could be the need of highlighting health as a value in its own right and a resource for long-term economic and social success, and ways for protecting and strengthening in particular mental capital through the crisis, through actions across key sectors...'

For schools, the negative impact of the current economic crisis on the level of mental health and well-being in the wider population is difficult to quantify – and, the signs and form which such an impact would demonstrate are far from easy to immediately distinguish. However, a common theme which is emerging is that in many countries school leaders do recognize that whenever there are significant changes in the socio-economic circumstances of their local community such difficulties rapidly begin to affect the parenting ability of parents and that this then, in turn, directly affects the well-being of children both in and out of their school(s). Furthermore, school leaders consistently report that they fully recognize that the impact of unemployment on families is most marked on those with low incomes and whose ability to avoid longer-term unemployment

outcomes and consequences is limited as a result.

Many countries reported the impact of previous downturns in their economies and the long-lasting impact on some within their local school communities. A reminder of this has to be US research evidence from the last significant economic downturn which indicated that when 3 million children and their families slipped into poverty levels at the time of 1990s recession around 25% remained at that level a decade later and with all the associated impact on children's social, emotional and educational outcomes. Such a 'long term drag' was estimated to result in an economic 'loss' of \$1.7 trillion over the lifetime of these children... about 0.3% GDP or \$35 billion each year. What is more difficult to cost is the rise in domestic and child abuse, the impact of reduced medical and dental health care and the on-going impact of trying to manage family debt on such a large scale.

The biggest and immediate impact in many schools in today's economic recession is often evidenced in the lives of women, children and single-parent families where by the age of 9 years in my school around 50% children are already from broken homes (At the age of 5 years some 25% children have not got both parents living at the family home).

The current stresses and strains on relationships are reflected in the following UK statistics:

- Debt management enquiries to Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) +33% in 2009
- Priority debts become housing, heating and local taxes – food, diet and nutrition come second as families strive to keep the home together
- The current economic crisis is NOT a middle-class recession – it is hurting the poor more than the rich
- Part-time employment options are reduced – with a higher impact in areas of traditionally high unemployment where multiple part-time employment is the norm for many families
- 5% rise in unemployment for 18-24 year olds in first 3 months of 2009 (and the biggest and fastest rising rates are in the UK in areas such as Wales (19.7%) which never fully experienced the UK's economic boom – The Work Foundation)
- Negative equity in the value of the family home 'forces' families to remain on benefit in areas where work is already scarce – therefore, unable to move to find work

Additionally, in recent times the work ethic and work itself has become so central to the fundamental definition of success in life at the economic, social and emotional level - with success and confidence criteria measured in terms of how many young people are able to enter higher education, the world of work and are able to maintain a positive social life and fulfilling relationships with others. Because we are in times of recession we risk losing these very foundations of a positive social/work environment where self-confidence, self-esteem and success give meaning, purpose and structure to those in our communities.

Rising levels of unemployment and, particularly where unemployment becomes long-term, often has a first and immediate impact on reduced work experience and employment opportunities for the young school leaver. Of the 2 million unemployed in the UK, 800,000 are under the age of 25 a figure likely to rise rapidly with this year's school leavers adding to the lists. Youth unemployment matters because it restricts skill improvement at a key time in development and results a greater likelihood of being out of work later in life and with a lower earnings profile when work is finally obtained. *The outlook, therefore, for this year's school leavers is an area of real concern in all our members associations across Europe* – an area which requires urgent planned, co-ordinated, action if we are to avoid disappointment, dismay and disenchantment with the world of both work and employment for our youth of all abilities (This summer's school leavers will also need to be able to begin to repay the long lasting financial debts incurred by their parent's generation).

If we are to learn from the mistakes of past recessions and downturns in the economy we

recognize that to lose a job results in lost confidence and self-esteem and impacts negatively on a person's ability to return to work at a later date. It also highlights the statistic that with 1 in 4 adults likely to experience mental ill-health at some point in their lives *prior* to the current economic crisis; the redundancy and money worries, the strain on family relationships, and the triggers on stress increases the risk of developing depression at a time when we are in totally uncharted waters in terms of the numbers of people/families affected by the current crisis and the likely timescale. The need for decisive action should focus on avoiding the 'fall-out' from the financial crisis becoming a 'head on' social crisis with all the associated effects on the most vulnerable workers and low-income families arising from rising unemployment..

Within this context, schools have an important part to play. In many places – and, especially in rural, countryside, areas – schools are often the largest employer in the community. In my part of England, for instance, the Local Authority, Suffolk, is the major employer – far outstripping any manufacturing or commercial enterprise. Similarly, in Scotland the job market is changing with nine out of ten job vacancies being in the service sector. The two largest employers in Edinburgh are the City Council and local Health Service thereby giving a clue as to the skills set required for the future in an area where jobs for secretaries, clerical workers and skilled or unskilled machine operators are increasingly limited. Over the past decade schools have recruited, trained and 'upskilled' many support staff to work in the school environment – usually as a result of the greater inclusion of Special Needs pupils into mainstream school. The care and attention to detail – the investment – in these staff is multiplied over and over again as they are predominantly drawn from and remain within the local school community. This social capital should be preserved as effective 'educational ambassadors' supporting the widening role of the school in the community. Therefore, what schools do as *employers* matters to the lives of many in the immediate community served by

the school. As significant employers schools have choices they can consider or make – to replace one member of staff in a vacancy or to support two part-time post holders whereby families can benefit from the work opportunity and associated well being derived from being in work. In recent years the ‘growth’ of teaching support for teachers in the classroom has led to the significant rise in the schools workforce to the extent that many school staff teams include a greater number of staff in the school who are not qualified teachers – already, many members report concerns that reduced funding allocations to schools will result in less teachers, less teaching support and higher pupil numbers in classes. Such a reaction to the economic downturn will result in increased stress and work pressures on all working in our schools alongside the potential loss of significant community -generated social capital developed as a result of much time and investment by schools. In the coming months we need to see care *wherever there is a response to the economic crisis which places a lot of emphasis on the cost of things and not much, or less, realisation of the value of things.*

However, positive action should include recognition that a significant difference to past periods of recession is that today’s teacher and school staff have a greater awareness to the emotional and social aspects of a child’s development. In 2009, teachers in our schools are far more responsive and aware of pupil’s emotions and changes in mood and schools do strive to provide opportunities where children feel more confident and able to talk about their feelings – indeed, pupils are already talking about the credit crunch, economic downturn, recession and banking crisis. School Councils, Student Forums and Class Circle Time are all features of contemporary schooling and do provide opportunities for children to express how they are feeling about their home situation and are an effective way to promote and encourage open discussion about the pressures children experience in and out of the home and school. What we do know is that it is important that children can find ways and have the confidence to express how they are feeling about their worries

and concerns in life - and that a calm and reassuring school ethos and culture presents the conditions where open discussions about other life challenges can happen as well. Where staff in schools give children the opportunity, time and a framework to practice and apply the necessary skills to deal with their own feelings by sharing how we all cope with life's challenges we are, in effect, offering them access and insight into strategies that work for all of us at times of stress. Such opportunities for open communication present quality time where staff can notice changes in pupil behaviour at home, at school and particularly the quality of interaction with their friends/peers.

In December 2008 the English Schools Minister, Jim Knight, predicted that the stress of redundancy would 'start to be reflected in behaviour in schools...' Put simply, if it's affecting pupil well-being it's going to affect pupil behaviour whether they are in the school, the home or in the local community. However, although identifying feelings and having the opportunity to discuss worries is helpful, but it is not enough on its own. Positive action is also evidenced by the UK government's allocation of significant additional funding to fund an additional 3600 therapists and 100s more nursing staff to provide counselling support to people who are seen as at being at risk of developing mental health problems arising from the recession and resultant job loss.

So, what are useful strategies to help ourselves and our families cope with the present situation? We know that we are living in times where millions of families will be challenged in ways that can cause significant negative effects to their lives. Reported negative effects within families are those which lead to changes within the dynamics of family life itself such as husbands becoming irritable and wives becoming depressed, as well as more extreme problems such as mental health issues, alcoholism, drug abuse and domestic violence. And, children are often the first to notice

changes in adult behaviour such as seeing their parent come home from work or meetings upset or noticing that their favourite after-school or lunch box snacks are no longer part of the weekly shopping list.

We also notice that families which were already struggling before the present crisis may be hit the hardest because those friends and family members that can usually be counted on in times of need are also affected by their own economic challenges. Schools have always provided a secure, calm and safe place for many vulnerable children in our communities – and, where there is instability and uncertainty in the family home and a loss of community support structures, we know that this results in children and their families being less likely to have the support of social networks to support effective parenting. We also know that where children are living within homes where there is economic uncertainty and stressed-out parenting, they are more vulnerable to depression - with their expectations, confidence and motivation lower as a result – and, that there is evidence (Evergreen State College) that economically distressed parents are more likely to use harsher methods to discipline their children.

Key messages from schools at this difficult time will always try to focus on:

- Staying positive and recognizing the importance of families, friendships and social networks
- Making time to be at home with children to talk about day to day events – and, maybe needing to present alternatives to balance the received media messages
- Investing in family time with simple activities such as board games, walks, reading and story time
- Preparing fresh, healthy meals together – avoiding pre-prepared and convenience meals
- Supporting the family unit – whatever the 'shape' looks like – to talk together, to listen and learn with and from each other... It's good to talk...!

Chris HARRISON – President European School Heads Association (ESHA)

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(8 minutes)

“What can the EU do to promote mental health of older people”

Summary of the presentation by Anne-Sophie Parent, Director, AGE-the European Older People’s Platform, 13 June 2008

Various factors make older people more vulnerable to mental health problems:

- The physiological ageing process which results in an increasing risk of dementia (increased risk both for the ageing individual and partner/carer)
- Adverse effect of overmedication and polypharmacy among the elderly
- Drug-alcohol interaction
- Increasing dependency which results in an increased risk of elder abuse
- The isolation and social exclusion faced by an increasing number of older people today due to modern lifestyles
- Abrupt change from employment to long term unemployment of (early)-retirement (losing sense of purpose in life)
- Lack of professional training in geriatric and gerontology
- Lack of training and support for informal carers
- The gender dimension: very older women are at higher risk

AGE welcomes the EU Pact on Mental Health and commits itself to support all actions implemented to promote better mental health for all.

As part of the Pact on Mental Health, Member States should agree to commit themselves to increase the number of Healthy Life Years by one year in 2013. This would encourage them to adopt a holistic approach to healthy ageing, including the promotion of good mental health in old age.

If the EU is to “foster good health in an ageing Europe” in the period 2008-2013, it should address each of these factors that affect older people’s mental health. In addition to the recommendations listed in the policy brief, EU action is needed in the following fields and the Pact should include to use existing EU instruments to:

FP7:

- Research on old age dementia cause, treatment and prevention. Research should also cover the social and financial impact of old age dementia. (FP 7)
- Research on medication use for the elderly: EMEA should set up a “Geriatric Committee” similar to the “Pediatric Committee” to analyse effect of medication on the elderly, including polypharmacy and overmedication, and share information across the EU with healthcare professionals.

- Raise awareness of care professionals and older citizens/informal carers of potential interaction between medication and alcohol (a problem often overlooked in older people)

OMC Social Protection/Social Inclusion

- Social exclusion of the elderly both in urban and rural/remote areas and examples of good practice across the EU
- EU Strategy to fight against elder abuse: the EU should develop quality guidelines for long term care to help prevent elder abuse (OMC on Social Protection and Social Inclusion)

ESF and Lisbon Strategy:

- Promote active ageing and a more positive of ageing workers;
- Promote health and safety at work including stress reduction;
- Promote more flexible retirement and early preparation for retirement (ESF and Lisbon Strategy)

Health Strategy and Grundvig programme

- Develop geriatric/gerontology training at EU level as exist for paediatrics

This paper was produced for a meeting organized by Health & Consumer Protection DG and represents the views of its author on the subject. These views have not been adopted or in any way approved by the Commission and should not be relied upon as a statement of the Commission's or Health & Consumer Protection DG's views. The European Commission does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this paper, nor does it accept responsibility for any use made thereof.