



Book Reviews

The theme of the *Special Issue* is climate change, so this book is particularly relevant to educators. Alison Woolf, author of *Better Mental Health in Schools: Four Key Principles for Practice in Challenging Times*, takes account of the global difficulties that face us all and shows evidence-based ways in which educators can help children and young people to navigate their way through this difficult time. She shows awareness of the universal social and emotional pressures that all young people in the present century face and explains how these can increase the psychological and behavioural difficulties of individual pupils. As an experienced practitioner, she is aware of the complexity of the task that schools are required to do in fostering positive mental health in their students. However, she indicates the value of a whole-school approach and provides many illustrations of how teachers can enhance their students' emotional health and well-being while, at the same time, taking care of their own mental health.

Helen Cowie
Reviews Editor

1. *Better Mental Health in Schools: Four Key Principles for Practice in Challenging Times*

Author:	Alison Woolf
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This is a time of great concern about the emotional health and well-being of children and young people in today's world. The future is uncertain, and the present contains many dangers and threats. Alison Woolf begins by identifying the struggles that families and their children face, whether with individual difficulties, community pressures, financial problems, worries about climate change or other global challenges, such as war, pandemics and economic downturns. With all these issues in mind, she presents a book for practitioners in schools based on her extensive experience as a play therapist and of working therapeutically with children and teachers. This book is timely since it addresses the crucial role that schools play in supporting the mental health of children and young people, while acknowledging the pressures that this inevitably puts on teachers. She proposes four principles (the four Cs) that underpin her approach - *cognition, compassion, containment, connection* – each of which is given a chapter that puts it in the context of school.

Her overall proposal is that school staff can create a supportive environment in which children will thrive and develop, while at the same time protecting their own emotional health. She provides evidence-based guidance on how this might be done through the four principles.

Cognition: Here Alison Woolf focuses on Theory of Mind and mentalisation as essential capacities, and she charts how these capabilities develop in school settings as the child matures through myriad opportunities to communicate with other children, compromise when necessary, recognise differences of opinion and perspective, and become aware of how others think and feel. She explains in some detail how important it is for the teacher to understand the factors that underlie a child's behaviour, arguing that, if we understand what motivates behaviour, we will have deeper insights into those children's needs. When the teacher finds a way to convey to a child whose behaviour is problematic the message "I hold you in mind", this, she argues, could be more productive than dismissing or punishing that child. While acknowledging how difficult it can be for the adult to respond in this way, she illustrates how it can be done through many examples drawn from practice. So, from her perspective, the capacity to mentalise is essential for teachers as a way of gaining insight into the pupil's impact on the teacher and the teacher's impact on the child. Teachers who have more self-awareness, she argues, are more likely to understand how pupils' needs, emotions and

behaviours can lead them to react in ways that are deemed to be inappropriate or unhelpful in the classroom context. When such understanding is lacking, there is a greater risk that a cycle of distrust and stress will emerge on both sides.

Compassion: The need for compassion is universal at some points in life, so where better to learn about how to demonstrate it than in the classroom where children spend so many hours of their day? Compassion on the part of the teacher, argues Woolf, is intrinsic to good practice. She demonstrates how the process of giving and receiving expressions of compassion can enhance the well-being of both teacher and pupil through such personal skills as being warm and non-judgmental, helping others, showing genuine interest in the experiences of others, and celebrating the uniqueness of each person. Essentially, this is about being present for other people and it creates a route to better mental health in both students and teachers, as a wide body of research indicates.

Containment: Here she indicates the importance of helping children to regulate their emotions and describes a range of interventions that can create a supportive class climate which will nurture this process, leading to calmer classrooms which underpin successful learning and positive relationships among the children. The theme of “being present” for a child is further developed in the principle of containment. By this, Alison Woolf means a relationship between adult and child in which the adult maintains a space where the child who is experiencing dysregulated emotions is kept safe and soothed. In this way, emotions that seem uncontrollable to the child, such as anger, fear or anxiety, can be “held” until the child returns to a state of equilibrium.

Connection: Attachment theory underpins Alison Woolf’s discussion of the crucial importance of relationships in the classroom. She explores a range of activities that can foster positive connections among the pupils and shows how the teacher can enable all children to feel that they belong in their school. She notes that some of the most challenging behaviours that the teacher encounters in the classroom can be referred to as insecure attachment behaviours. So, from this perspective, relationships in school are extremely important for children’s social and emotional development, and a sense of belonging forms a solid foundation – a secure base – from which the child and the adolescent can explore, learn and grow. Woolf provides a wealth of information on how the teacher and the school can enhance a sense of belonging for all students.

This is a valuable book which is grounded in practice, but which has a strong core of research evidence and theoretical constructs to support its four principles. Alison Woolf takes account of children’s individual needs but places these in the wider context of community, economics, society, and global politics. Ultimately, she argues, “... schools nurture pupils to become agents of change that will benefit their society as well as themselves” (p. 110).

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