"No one talks about it": Experiencing a mental health difficulty as a primary school teacher in Ireland

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Background

* Up to one in four people experience a mental health difficulty at some point in their lifetime (Health Service Executive, 2007)

* More people in Ireland die from suicide each year than in road accidents (Health Service Executive, 2005, p.4)

* The level of funding currently allocated to mental health stands at 6% of the health budget, which is in comparison to 13% in the 1980s (Casey, 2016)

Depression

Anxiety

Mental Health Difficulties

Stress

Burnout
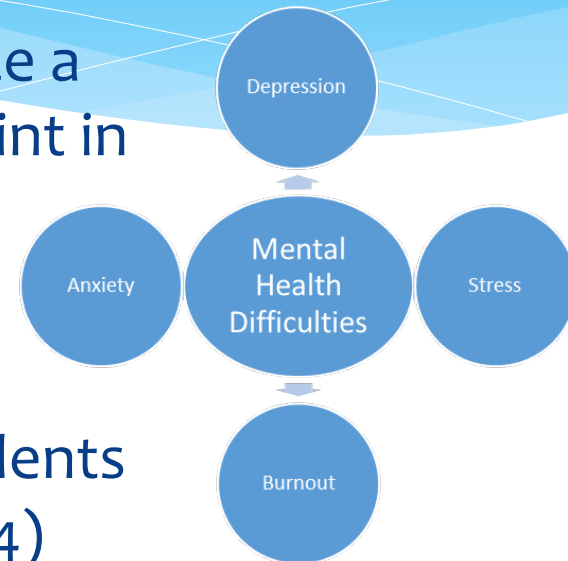
Teachers and mental health difficulties

* Mental health difficulties were the most common reason for Irish teachers retiring due to ill-health between 2002 and 2005 (Maguire and O'Connell, 2007)
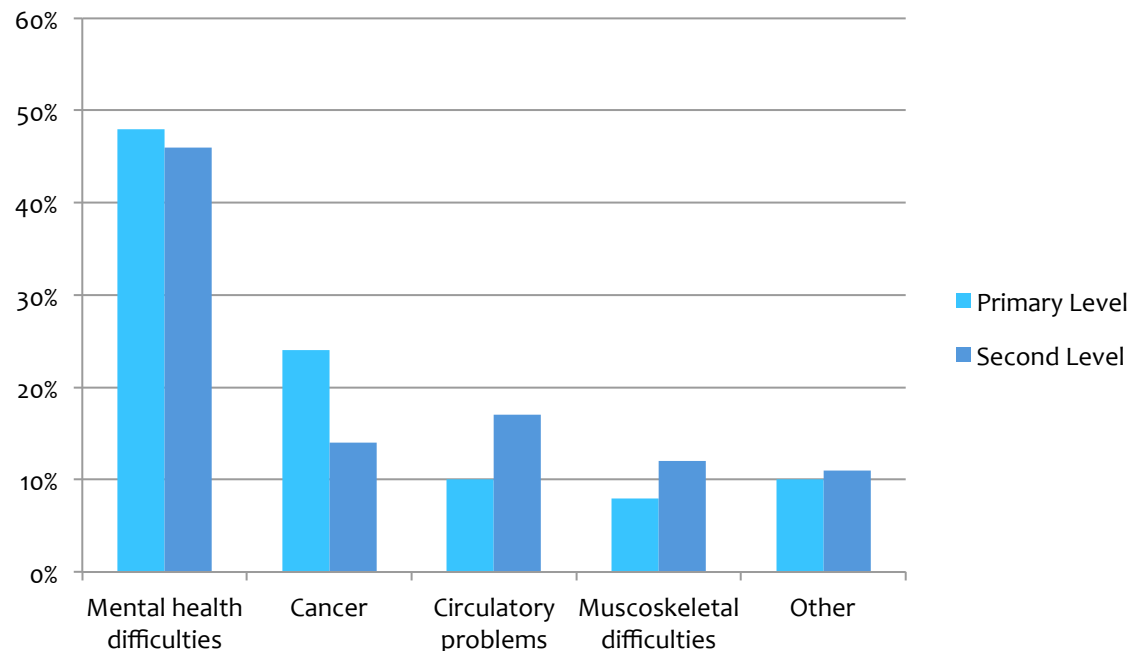
Research methodology

* The aim of the research was to give a voice to teachers who had experienced a mental health difficulty while working in the profession in Ireland
* Participants were self-selected
* 12 teachers initially made contact and consented to participate
* 2 asked to be interviewed via email but did not respond
* 1 did not attend interview
* 2 did not participate due to ongoing mental health difficulties
* 7 took part in the semi-structured interviews

Themes emerging from interviews
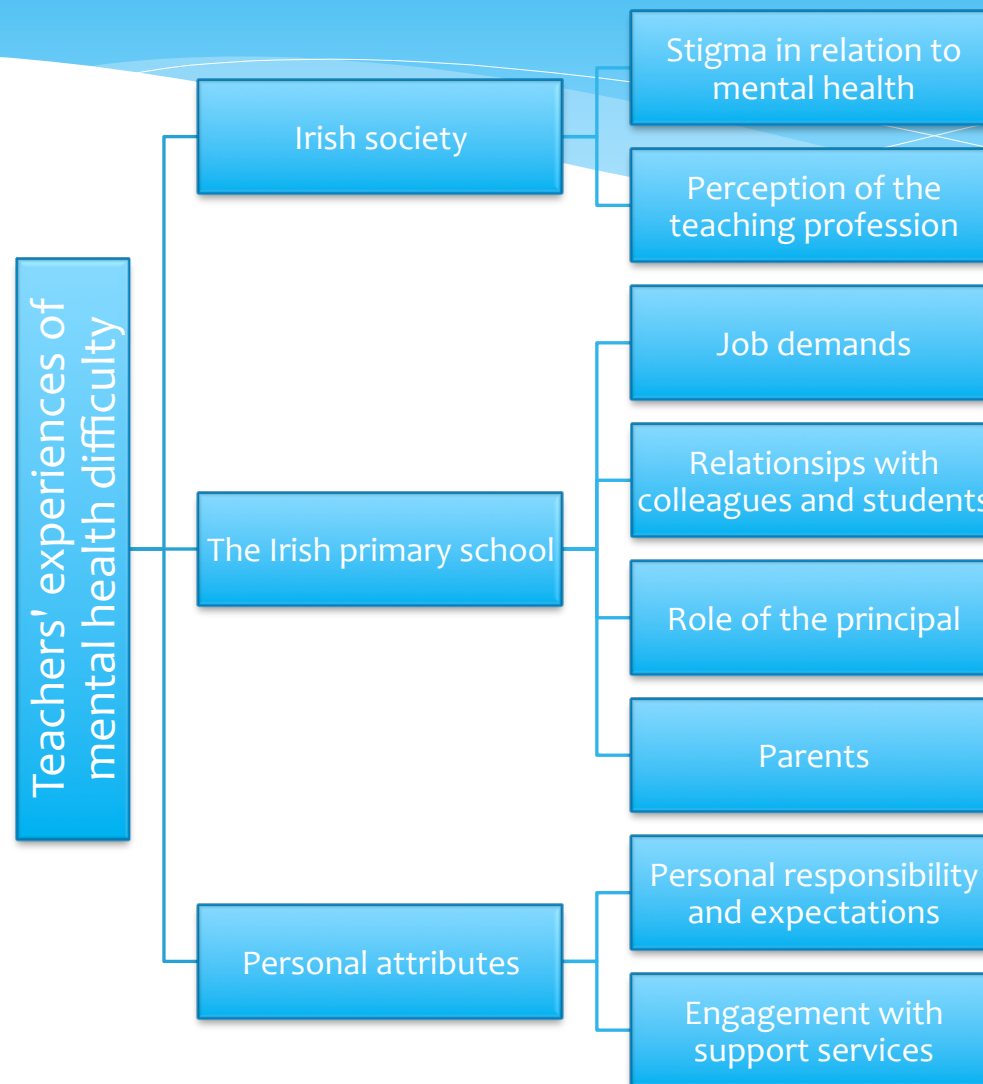
Irish society

* Three out of the seven participating teachers had never discussed their mental health difficulties with their principals

* Those three who had revealed their experience expressed an element of regret at having done so because of the reaction they received

* Four participants mentioned being afraid of parents finding out

* The perception of teaching in society as being "a very easy job"

The school setting

* The demands of teaching were mentioned by all participants (highly demanding but involving little control)
* Substitute and temporary teachers felt a pressure to be 'perfect' at school
* Children's behaviour and relationships with colleagues were both contributing and protective factors, depending on their nature
* Five participants were unsure as to the principal's role
* The participating principal felt he had "no one to turn to"

Personal factors

* Three mentioned ongoing difficulties in their personal lives, separate to their roles as teachers

* Most participants mentioned perfectionism as being a personal trait

* Being unwell while teaching caused feelings of stress, guilt and shame for the participants as they wanted to do their jobs to a high standard

Supports for teachers' mental health

* Carecall counselling service, accessed by 2% of the workforce annually (O'Regan, 2014) – described as being insufficiently advertised, too local, linked to calendar year rather than academic year

* One participant took part in a mindfulness course at school which she found very effective

* Most participants accessed private services rather than those provided by the education system

Implications

* Less than one page of the document *Guidelines for Mental Health Promotion: Well-Being in Primary Schools* (D.E.S., 2015) refers to teachers' mental health – greater emphasis on teachers' mental health is needed in policy
* Guidelines for principals should be developed
* More focus on mental health in I.T.E. and C.P.E.
* Open discussion about mental health difficulties for teachers in order to reduce stigma
* Further research in the area with a larger sample

Thank you for listening.