



The Teacher's Role in Addressing Mental Health Issues of Students

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ABSTRACT

Tremendous gains in understanding mental health among young people have occurred over the past decade, yet it remains a high policy priority. Schools are identified as crucial for interventions to support mental well-being. However, the intended promotion of mental health in schools has not resulted in significant changes in many countries. It is often sidelined, with limited policy and practical guidance available for schools. Moreover, insufficient professional development and training hinder efforts to identify and improve student mental health effectively. Various resilience-based frameworks, such as the 10 Key Competencies to Survive and Thrive and the Four Attitudes of the Stress Interview, have been created to assist educators. Despite this, sustained attention to mental health in schools is lacking, leaving many teachers unsure about how to integrate it into the curriculum or school initiatives. (O'Reilly et al., 2018) (Shelemy et al., 2019)

Keywords: Mental health, educators, health education.

1. Introduction

Society has begun to address mental health in education, yet multifaceted barriers impede effective action. An understanding of mental health dynamics could help educators support student needs, yet significant disparities exist between theory and practice. Teachers express reservations about their preparedness to assist students, facing time, resource, and knowledge constraints (Reilly et al., 2018). They also grapple with complexities stemming from stigma, confidentiality, and ethical dilemmas (Shelemy et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, teachers remain proactive, frequently adopting a supportive stance toward student well-being, underscoring the importance of guidance in their potentially life-altering endeavors.

The following sections examine the specific roles and responsibilities teachers undertake in relation to mental health. The emphasis lies on early identification and classroom observations, the creation of supportive environments, the safeguarding of constitutional and ethical rights, and professional development pathways that enable teachers to fulfill these obligations.

2. Theoretical underpinnings of student mental health

Student mental health issues are a significant concern worldwide. In Hong Kong, the government has launched the School-Based Mental Health Support Scheme to establish comprehensive school-based support policies. Teachers may play a key role in addressing students' mental health. The secondary school curriculum is designed to enhance students' academic and personal development, with an increasing emphasis on their mental health. A recent study indicated that teachers in the secondary sector viewed mental health and academic achievement as equally important (Reilly et al., 2018). However, the ongoing impact of the pandemic has compounded pre-existing mental health challenges, with much room for supporting students' mental health via classroom teaching (Y. C. Lai et al., 2022). Guidance from educational policies, relevant theories, and empirical studies investigated.

According to a research team at the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), several conceptual definitions of the theories of student mental health apply to the Hong Kong educational context. Education-related and universally recognised theories, such as the developmental, ecological, social-ecological, and resilience frameworks, drive education practice in Hong Kong. Applying these theories may stimulate students' comprehension and acquisition of knowledge, thereby endorsing their mental health. Three theoretical student mental health constructs warrant special attention: well-being (positive feeling, function, and engagement in activities), distress (theoretical health problems leading to substantiated education disruption), and stigma (negative attitudes about health issues preventing students from seeking assistance). Such constructs can also serve as essential reference points for educators without mental health expertise.

3. Roles and responsibilities of teachers

Teachers occupy a crucial position in the promotion of students' mental health. Not solely instructional facilitators, they form constructive relationships with students, fostering the deep levels of trust and regard upon which students' well-being often hinges (Shelemy et al., 2019). Teachers serve as signposts, signalling when students need help, and helping them seek relevant services. Substantial barriers, however, impede these efforts. Teachers report a lack of time or space for mental health-related conversations, diminished collaborative opportunities with mental health teams, and inadequate parental engagement. They also cite uneven training and resourcing. Some teachers possess pre-existing understanding of mental health; many others must forge their own ideas and strategies (Reilly et al., 2018). A survey of 600 secondary teachers indicated that almost 50% considered leaving the profession due to mental health concerns.

School and teacher responsibility for mental health remains a charged issue. Stakeholders address diverse expectations ranging from promoting awareness and reducing stigma to supporting students with severe problems and suicidal ideation³]. Scopes of responsibility shift across educational stages. In England, funding initiatives aimed at designating a 'mental health champion' in every secondary school and at delivering training to support well-being and resilience highlight the enduring responsibility of teachers and schools within an increasingly complex landscape.

4. Early identification and response to mental health concerns

The classroom is often the first environment where teachers and administrators notice a student might be struggling with mental health (Shelemy et al., 2019). Within the classroom setting, educators are uniquely positioned to recognize shifts in students' behavior and learning patterns, enabling early identification of indicators related to mental well-being (Y. C. Lai et al., 2022). While challenge and opportunity coexist, certain indicators more commonly present across a range of students prior to active referral. These signs appear across a range of behaviours: academic, social, and emotional. The risks associated with misidentifying a student's need can frequently be avoided through careful observation of the entire classroom. Such consideration further allows for cultural sensitivity when determining behaviours that might indicate a student is struggling with mental health.

Before embarking on student observations, all stakeholders should be apprised of the exact steps that will be undertaken when making a referral for further support. While some schools employ highly specialized personnel, many within the education community occupy generalist roles. Whenever possible, all documentation and consent should be secured prior to contact wherever necessary to inform education professionals of the intended approach. All relevant documentation should be forwarded, allowing external education professionals to direct the conversation to those observations deemed most necessary.

4.1. Classroom observation and indicators

Across the globe, there is a rise in mental health issues among students. Mental abundance, wellbeing, and readiness for learning can diminish when students are undergoing personal distress, emotional disturbance, compassionate anxiety, or may be victims of stigma, bullying or domestic issues. Teachers tend to go beyond the traditional role of teacher and signpost students. The construct of mental health ranges from positive abundance through various levels of distress to ill-health and consists different components. Teachers play a key psychosocial role and can observe students systematically and in real life. The extent and degree of teachers' knowledge competence and normative perceptions towards mental health in a developing country determine the extent teachers are able to naturally carry out the role.

4.2. Referral pathways and collaboration with professionals

In addition to identification and support, teachers assist students by referring them to a range of internal and external services. Some schools employ counselors or other mental health professionals, and psychology departments in higher education institutions often use university students as volunteers, providing group and individual inquiry and counseling services. In severe cases, local services may be contacted for assistance. Teachers typically document their concerns, the student's behaviour, and the steps taken accordingly. Prior to any intervention, a consent form is obtained from the student's parent or caregiver, the approach and the professionals involved (Y. C. Lai et al., 2022).

The case of an undergraduate cohort on the verge of graduation highlights the importance of this procedure. Anxiety and other mental health issues were repeatedly mentioned throughout the sessions. However, teachers were hesitant about the intervention's potential impact on students' professionalism and experiences. Teachers acknowledged the necessity for these students to acquire sound coping mechanisms—

handling distressing course materials and difficult events—yet the desired intervention profile remained partially undefined. Clarifying the situation was similarly needed for older students, who may prefer to maintain anonymity.

5. Creating supportive classroom environments

Creating supportive classroom environments The teaching profession requires teachers to create supportive classroom environments that can enhance students' well-being and address mental health concerns. Social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks such as CASEL and other programs provide an effective means to achieve this goal. These frameworks focus on widespread preventive programs which foster the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to maintain mental health throughout life, and implement teaching strategies that can be transferred into daily classroom practice when teachers are trained to do so. The successful implementation of these frameworks depends on the degree to which school leaders ensure that schools possess the necessary resources, and on the extent to which teachers and support staff remain committed to the chosen framework. Research shows that the implementation of universal SEL programs is associated with the improvement of various student outcomes. Creating supportive classroom environments also involves the adoption of inclusive practices to reduce stigma relating to and prevent mental health problems. These practices encompass anti-stigma education aimed at deconstructing stereotypes, promoting open discussion relating to mental health that also involves the wider school community, establishing communication with families concerning school programs and practices, and consideration of students' individual needs in relation to classroom space and support. (Shelemy et al., 2019)

5.1. Social-emotional learning frameworks

Adolescents must deal with a rapid succession of emotional, social, and physical transitions as they switch from childhood to adulthood. This change can lead to mental health problems influenced by peer relationships and school experiences. Hispanic students indicated that racial tensions and problems involving peers were the leading causes of emotional distress. African American students experience mental health problems but are less likely to be diagnosed due to environmental stimuli that tend to normalize student behavioral problems. In K-12 education, 74% concur with the statement that “mental health issues affect student’s learning,” but only 34% believe that their institution addresses this problem. Students exposed to bullying, racism, homelessness, family separation, violence, and abuse experience emotional stress that adversely impacts learning (A. Menor, 2018). In 2016, the Los Angeles County Office of Education sponsored the First Annual Mental Health Matters Youth Conference to assist the community in recognizing, discussing, and addressing rising mental health issues confronting students.

Teaching candidates in North America do not receive adequate preparation to implement social-emotional learning in pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 educational levels (E. Johnson, 2016). To address emotional stress impacting the educational prospects of students, teachers must incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction in K-12 education. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recommends that educators engage in SEL, yet the pedagogical practices that emphasize SEL among teaching candidates remain limited. Emotions influence learning and students' abilities to form

relationships with educators and peers. Positive emotions affect negative emotions and contribute to psychological well-being. Teachers face regulation challenges when attempting to manage inconsistent, ambiguous, and intense emotional experiences.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning outlines a framework that provides guidance on delivering explicit instruction rooted in programs, practices, and strategies that anticipate the developmental and contextual needs of pre-kindergarten through Grade-12 educators. Social-emotional-learning programs such as 'I Can Problem Solve,' 'Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies' (PATHS), and 'Second Step' positively impact social and emotional skills in students. The Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Network offers both Student and Educator Emotional Intelligence assessments, which determine areas of proficiency and development. Emotional intelligence competencies influence emotional quality, regulation, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills among students and educators.

5.2. Inclusive practices and stigma reduction

Creating a supportive classroom environment for all students is integral to their mental health development. Research has shown that the importance of a compassionate teacher-student relationship, the need for pedagogical differentiation, and the existence of social networks in school are among the top indicators of mental health development that can be fostered in school practices. Inclusive practices, strengthening peer relationships, family engagement, accessibility, and anti-stigma education are important components of a comprehensive approach that can counter stigma and provide a welcoming school environment for students with mental health concerns (Y. C. Lai et al., 2022).

The educational system continuously promotes mental well-being among students, enhancing the learning environment and the quality of education. Complete strategies have been wide spread worldwide on promoting mental well-being (Cautillo, 2018). A series of actions to alleviate non-academic pressures is therefore needed to avoid the emergence of mental distress within academic settings. On top of this, the incorporation of mental health literacy in the educational curriculum for preservice training is a healthy response to the underlying factors leading to mental distress in students.

6. Policies, ethics, and safeguarding considerations

According to a survey of school teachers' experience of mental health support, safeguarding procedures shape their actions and influence their emotional bond with students (Shelemy et al., 2019). The provision of supportive relationships, identified as a valuable dimension of well-being promotion, is perceived as significantly mediated by safeguarding frameworks. Teachers observe that safeguarding policies restrict the informal and spontaneous interactions that promote healthy student-teacher relationships, and instead necessitate a formal and structured engagement with pupils. Public authorities define key aspects of this role, nevertheless, teachers, remain largely free to identify and address pupils' mental health needs.

Investigation of the perspectives of young people reveals a range of views on the educational system's role in promoting mental well-being (Reilly et al., 2018). Educational practitioners are regarded as the most suitable institution, given the spending of a considerable amount of time with students and the responsibility of shaping their socialization process, psychological, and moral values. Public services, social workers, and

the family are identified as alternative options of assistance. School-based counselling services, in particular, should be well integrated to avoid fragmented approaches to mental health support. Prior to full integration, however, consideration should be given to wider systemic issues affecting the delivery of mental health care, such as the degree of family engagement in educational matters, the availability of jobs in deprived areas, and public transport.

7. Professional development and training for teachers

Teachers occupy a critical position of influence in respect of pupil mental health. Though their primary focus remains on educational objectives, they increasingly recognise their role in supporting students' mental wellness. Teachers perform four key functions: identifying and responding to emerging difficulties; fostering a supportive, inclusive classroom environment; ensuring compliance with safeguarding legislation and related policy; and fostering school-wide strategies that encompass broader systemic considerations (Shelemy et al., 2019). Attention to these aspects can enhance students' emotional well-being and bolstered capacity to navigate life's challenges.

8. School-wide mental health strategies

While teachers are crucial to the mental health of children and adolescents, the reality is that mental health is a whole-school issue. Schools can adopt a coordinated and multi-disciplinary approach to mental health, which will go beyond the role of teachers to ensure mental health needs are met within the entire school community. Mental health and well-being has been recognised in the educational sector across many countries. Strategies include whole-school approaches to improve student well-being, co-designing policies to enhance educational and mental health outcomes, and engaging the community to implement school-wide initiatives, develop resources, promote mental health, and raise awareness of the importance of promoting mental health.

In order to understand how the school-wide strategy can address student mental health at the teacher level, it is essential to consider the various approaches that scholars have recommended for whole-school mental health. Schools are essential environments for child and adolescent development and learning, and concern for students' mental health is increasing because of the documented increases in mental health issues in young people and the strong connection between mental health and school. Full-service schools are one approach that addresses child and adolescent mental health in a whole-school-system manner. Such schools offer a range of mental health services, support systems, and proactive initiatives (Y. C. Lai et al., 2022).

A school-wide, collaborative framework allows schools to adopt a multi-tiered system to address mental health. The frameworks adopted vary by country, but the idea is broadly similar. Multi-tiered systems in this context aim to establish a unified framework for endorsing and implementing school mental health programmes, while maintaining sufficient flexibility to address the unique needs and characteristics of individual schools (Reilly et al., 2018).

9. Measuring impact and evaluating outcomes

Concerning the impact of mental health strategies on pupils' mental wellness, evaluating teachers' perceptions of their role, teacher-student relationships, and barriers encountered is essential. Teachers

commonly adopt responsibilities that extend beyond conventional instructional duties; pupils are often signposted or referred to appropriate support. Among the key elements that facilitate effective support are fostering positive relationships, demonstrating genuine care, and ensuring a stable environment. Limited availability of time, difficulties in liaising with other educational professionals, and a lack of parental involvement also hinder support. The extent of training and resources influences teachers' confidence and enablement regarding mental health support, leading many to independently generate ideas due to insufficient understanding or guidance (Shelemy et al., 2019). Within educational environments, appropriate measurement of pupils' well-being and mental health is indispensable for both practicing educators and researchers. Therefore, reinforcing outcomes that indicate the impact of specific activities or programs on mental health remains fundamental. Various measures, including process indicators, can elucidate the implementation status of distinct initiatives. Creating a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing, measuring, and reporting on well-being and mental health within school settings enables monitoring of pupil conditions and evaluation of the effectiveness of specific initiatives.

10. Conclusion

Educators play a major role in observing pupil well-being, often supporting mental health beyond specific educational responsibilities (Shelemy et al., 2019). Meaningful conversations grow from good relationships, allowing teachers to show care and create a stable environment. Barriers to mental health support include limited time, coordination with other teams, and parental involvement. The degree of training received strongly influences teachers' ability to provide assistance.

Student mental health is of increasing concern and teachers are seen as both supporters and observers of pupil well-being (Reilly et al., 2018). Attention to mental health issues is required, yet concerns about workload and the adequacy of professional preparation persist. Teachers often feel ill-equipped to handle emotional matters and maintaining a focus purely on pedagogy is seen as preferable. Nevertheless, pupils face emotional difficulties and there is another renewal of interest in support, with calls for a broader understanding of what the teaching role entails. As background preparation teachers build core competencies at initial training or articulation into the profession, ongoing learning represents a key area for investing in staff should aspirations around student mental health be articulated collectively (Y. C. Lai et al., 2022).

Teachers should be considered vital for the early identification and response to pupil mental health concerns. Timely intervention in the classroom context can limit distress and prevent escalation to more severe forms. Observational activities can indicate a range of emotional, behavioural, and academic characteristics to present a more systematic approach to a topic that is often considered too personal. Professional literature supports the identification of early indicators that merit follow-up attention, alongside further empirical study of the role that classroom factors play.

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Cite this Article:

Dr. Sonam Sharma, "The Teacher's Role in Addressing Mental Health Issues of Students", International Journal of Scientific Research in Modern Science and Technology (IJSRMST), ISSN: 2583-7605 (Online), Volume 2, Issue 10, pp. 50-57, October 2023.

Journal URL: <https://ijrmst.com/>