

Teachers as First Responders: Navigating Classroom Experiences and Mental Health Challenges

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Abstract

Educators have been responding to student mental health emergencies on the front lines more frequently in recent years, frequently taking on tasks that have historically been done by mental health professionals. This change emphasizes how important it is for educators to possess both the pedagogical know-how and the practical approaches needed to address mental health issues in the classroom. This abstract examines how teachers are increasingly acting as first responders when it comes to helping students with mental health concerns. The study shows that a variety of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and symptoms associated with trauma, are commonly encountered by educators. These problems might show up as emotional anguish, behavioral challenges, or academic difficulties, and they all call for a sensitive and understanding approach. Important findings indicate that although a large number of educators are dedicated to promoting the mental health of their pupils, they frequently lack thorough training in crisis intervention and mental health first aid. The study comes to the conclusion that establishing supportive school settings requires a cooperative strategy combining educators, mental health specialists, and legislators. Schools can better assist students' learning by increasing teachers' preparation and providing the tools they need.

Keywords: Educators, mental health, anxiety, depression, Classroom Experiences.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes mental health as a state of well-being where each person recognizes their own abilities, can manage life's challenges, works efficiently and effectively, and is capable of contributing to their community. Mental health is a vital aspect of overall well-being, especially during childhood when its importance is paramount. Children and adolescents are highly susceptible to mental health issues due to the swift developmental changes they undergo. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that mental health disorders represent a substantial part of the global disease burden among young people, with an estimated 10-20% of children and adolescents around the world affected by these conditions (World Health Organization, 2021). Furthermore, a growing number of children and adolescents are experiencing anxiety, mood disorder, and other mental health problems as a result of the strains of modern living, social media impact, and increased academic achievement pressures. (Twenge, 2019).

Teachers hold a crucial position in the lives of children, frequently interacting with them more than any other adults outside of their families. As the primary point of contact in a child's daily life, teachers observe, detect, and address early indicators of mental health concerns.

Keeping the rising rate of mental health issues among children in view role of teachers as first responders is increasingly important. Supportive and proactive teachers can help diminish the impact of mental health challenges on students' overall well-being. When a student in the classroom presents with a mental health concern, instructors are often the first to respond. Teachers, healthcare professionals, and school personnel are all affected by the burden this causes on schools. More generally, it means that the school system has to take care of the mental health of the children. Identifying and addressing mental health issues in children early on is essential to prevent long-term negative effects. Without proper treatment, childhood mental health disorders can lead to several adverse outcomes, including poor academic performance, social isolation, substance abuse, and a greater risk of mental health problems in adulthood (Merikangas et al., 2010). Mental health experts have always been concerned about education, and schools have long been concerned about the social and emotional development of their students. Therefore, it is important to enhance mental health awareness and integrate mental health services within schools and communities to promote children's mental health and development.

Role of educators as first responders

Over the years, a teacher's main responsibilities have been to oversee classroom behaviour and provide instructional material. But there's an increasing expectation that educators also assume professional-level obligations, especially when it comes to early detection and referral of pupils who may have mental health issues (NHS Health Advisory Service, 1995).

Teachers are more likely to encounter students with special educational needs (SEN), which are typically associated with behavioral, emotional, or social issues (BESD), as a result of the Department of Education and Skills' expanding emphasis on school inclusion (Department of Education and Skills, 1997). Teachers now have to deal with a wider range of abilities in the classroom in addition to teaching the curriculum, which calls for more differentiation in instruction and student management techniques. There is an increasing expectation that schoolteachers should go beyond their traditional role of delivering the national curriculum and take on additional responsibilities as primary-level mental health professionals. In this capacity, they are anticipated to play a role in the early detection of children's mental health issues and to ensure that these children are referred to the appropriate support services when necessary (NHS Health Advisory Service, 1995).

In recent years, educators have increasingly found themselves on the front lines of student mental health crises. Teachers are increasingly encountering students with a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms. These issues can manifest in various ways, such as emotional distress, behavioral problems, and academic struggles (Reinke et al., 2011). Teachers are in a unique position to recognize these indications in children and begin the appropriate treatment because children spend a large amount of their day in school. To effectively address the mental health needs of their pupils, teachers must have the necessary training, tools, and support. Teachers are expected to identify these symptoms and respond appropriately to support their pupils as first responders. But because they haven't had extensive training in crisis management and mental health first aid, a lot of educators say they feel unprepared for this position (Roth, Leavey, & Best, 2008).

IDENTIFYING THE MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Identification at an early stage is vital because it enables prompt action, which can stop these problems from getting worse and lessen the chance of unfavourable long-term effects (Reinke et al., 2011). Instructors who are vigilant and knowledgeable about these clues can be extremely beneficial in determining when a student might require further assistance.

The Department for Education and Employment (1994) published guidelines for the detection of EBD. These guidelines include the following signs of psychological or mental health issues in children, with a focus on behavioural difficulties: signs of emotional turbulence (e.g., unusual tearfulness, withdrawal from social situations); age-inappropriate behaviour or that which appears otherwise socially inappropriate or strange; behaviour that hinders the student's or their peers' learning (e.g., persistent calling out in class, refusal to work, persistent annoyance of peers); and difficulties in forming and maintaining positive relationships (e.g., isolation from peers, aggressiveness toward peers and adults). Although teachers frequently struggle to give a precise diagnosis of emotional and behavioural disorders, or BESD, there is evidence (Daniels et al., 1999) that suggests they are aware of the symptoms listed in the DfEE publication (1994).

EARLY INTERVENTION

When mental health issues are detected, teachers are frequently in charge of carrying out the first interventions. Providing extra academic support, modifying classroom management strategies, or creating a secure and encouraging environment for the child to express their emotions are a few examples of these approaches. Furthermore, educators have the option to include social-emotional learning (SEL) in their curricula. Research has demonstrated that SEL enhances students' academic performance and emotional health (Durlak et al., 2011). However, the teacher's expertise with and training in mental health first aid has a major role in how effective these interventions are. Insufficient training could make teachers feel unprepared to deal with these circumstances, which could result in the child receiving insufficient support (Roth, Leavey, & Best, 2008).

COLLABORATING WITH MEDICAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

To guarantee that students receive the required interventions, educators should be knowledgeable about the referral procedures in place at their schools and collaborate effectively with mental health specialists. By working together, they can ensure that child's mental health needs are met while also relieving some of the stress placed on educators, enabling them to concentrate on their primary responsibility as educators. Teachers are not specialists in the field of mental health, however they can be extremely important in the early phases of mental health care. Collaboration with psychologists, school counselors, and other mental health professionals is therefore crucial. Owing to this collaboration, students' mental health problems may be addressed more thoroughly, guaranteeing that they get the help and assistance they need (Atkins et al., 2010).

TRAINING TO DEAL WITH STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Teachers have to keep up to gain expertise in mental health literacy in order to effectively carry out their duty as first responders. Teachers should graduate from training programs with the ability to identify warning indications of mental health problems, carry out basic intervention techniques, and comprehend the process of referring students to mental health services (Reinke et al., 2011). Additionally, schools ought

to give instructors access to mental health specialists who can counsel and support them. Systems that offer assistance for educators are equally essential. It can be emotionally draining to address mental health concerns in the classroom, therefore educators need to have access to services that promote personal wellbeing. Understanding the interconnectedness of these elements in fostering a positive school climate, schools should establish settings that support the mental health of both teachers and students.

VARIOUS CLASSROOM CHALLENGES AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Students suffer from a wide range of sensitive mental health issues. Teachers identify anxiety, depression, and symptoms associated with trauma as some of the most prevalent problems. According to Loades and Mastroyannopoulou (2010), anxiety might manifest as continuous worry, trouble focusing, or avoidance behaviors, whereas depression can manifest as social disengagement, poor energy, or a reduction in academic performance. Managing symptoms of trauma, such as hypervigilance, anger, or emotional outbursts, can be especially difficult in an educational environment.

STRATEGIES ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN CLASSROOM

In order to properly assist children with their mental health, educators must use a variety of approaches that take into account each student's unique requirements as well as the needs of the entire classroom. Integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into the curriculum is a crucial strategy that can assist students in gaining the knowledge and abilities necessary to control their emotions, form wholesome relationships, and make moral decisions (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition to improving pupils' mental health, SEL also makes the classroom environment happier.

Teachers can support pupils with mental health difficulties by using particular classroom management approaches in addition to SEL. For instance, establishing a consistent and predictable setting can assist in lowering anxiety levels in pupils who find it difficult to adjust to schedule changes. It can also be helpful to provide a secure area for students to express their emotions and to do routine check-ins.

1. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) integration

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs help students develop essential skills for managing emotions, setting goals, establishing positive relationships, and making responsible decisions. SEL has been shown to improve students' mental health and academic outcomes by creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

2. Creation of Structured and Predictable Environment

Students' anxiety levels can be lowered and their sense of security can be increased in a predictable and structured learning environment. This calls for a peaceful, well-organized environment, consistent expectations, and well-defined procedures.

3. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) usage

By providing explicit consequences for inappropriate behaviour and rewarding positive behavior, the evidence-based PBIS approach encourages pupils to behave well. By addressing behavioral difficulties that may be connected to mental health issues, this approach can improve the learning environment in the classroom.

4. Emotional Expression and secure environment

In the classroom, educators can provide secure environments where pupils feel free to express their feelings. This could be one-on-one check-in/journal writing, art activities or specific locations where children can go to relax.

5. Implementation of Mindfulness Practices

Students can learn to control their stress and anxiety by engaging in mindfulness techniques including meditation, mindful movement, and deep breathing exercises. It has been demonstrated that incorporating these activities into everyday routines enhances pupils' focus, emotional control, and general wellbeing.

6. Collaboration with Mental Health Professionals

Teachers should collaborate closely with psychologists, school counselors, and other mental health specialists to make sure students who are struggling with mental health concerns get the help they require. Working together is crucial to creating intervention strategies that work and guaranteeing that students receive the resources they need.

7. Providing Professional Development for Teachers

Teachers require continual professional development if they are to manage mental health concerns in the classroom effectively. Techniques for recognizing mental health problems, carrying out interventions, and knowing when to send students to mental health specialists should all be covered in training programs. By applying these techniques, educators can foster a more accommodating and responsive learning environment where all students' mental health needs are met.

8. Implementing related policies and practices

Policymakers and school administrators need to place a high priority on mental health training and support for teachers in order to better equip them for their new duties as first responders. This entails offering opportunities for continued professional development and incorporating mental health education into programs that prepare future teachers. Schools should also set clear guidelines for crisis intervention and make sure that educators have access to the tools they need, like support groups and mental health specialists.

Not only are investments in these areas advantageous for specific pupils, but they also benefit the larger educational system. A more inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere can result in better academic performance and overall student well-being. Teachers that are well-prepared to manage mental health issues can contribute to this (Rothè, Leavey, & Best, 2008).

Though teachers can use these tactics, educators must be aware of the boundaries of their authority. Teachers' main duty is to support learning; they are not qualified mental health specialists. Teachers must therefore work in conjunction with school counselors, psychologists, and other mental health professionals when more serious mental health concerns are discovered, since they are able to offer the required interventions and support (Rothè, Leavey, & Best, 2008).

Challenges faced by teachers

Several teachers claim they feel unable to deal with mental health concerns in the classroom, despite their crucial role. One major obstacle is the absence of thorough training in mental health literacy, which encompasses information about mental health disorders, crisis intervention techniques, and understanding of when and how to refer students to mental health specialists (Reinke et al., 2011). Teachers may find it difficult to focus on their students' mental health issues due to their excessive workloads, time constraints, and pressure to maintain academic requirements.

Conclusion

Teachers play a critical role in detecting and addressing mental health issues in children. As the first responders, they are responsible for spotting early signs of mental health challenges, implementing initial

support measures, and collaborating with mental health experts. However, to fulfill these responsibilities effectively, teachers need proper training, resources, and support. Ensuring these provisions is vital for creating a school environment that nurtures the mental health and well-being of all students.

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