



Developing Policies for Mental Health Support in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Mental health plays a crucial role in students' academic performance and overall well-being. Schools, as primary social institutions, have a significant influence on students' mental health through their policies, environment, and support systems. This paper examines the need for comprehensive mental health policies in schools, with a focus on prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies. It highlights key challenges such as stigma, lack of resources, and inadequate training for school staff. Additionally, it examines the critical components of effective mental health policies, including multi-stakeholder involvement, structured policy frameworks, continuous professional development, and data-driven evaluation. By implementing well-designed policies, schools can create an inclusive and supportive environment that promotes resilience and well-being among students. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating mental health support within the educational framework to address mental health disparities and enhance students' academic and social success.

Keywords: Mental health policies, school-based interventions, student well-being, academic success, mental health support, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Children, adolescents, and young adults spend approximately 7–9 hours per day, 180 days per year at school. Schools' physical, emotional, and social connectedness climate shapes the ways students think, feel, and behave. Schools are not isolated silos, and what happens in schools is integrally related to what happens in families, communities, online spaces, and the broader society. As a result, schools confront a wide range of issues relevant to education and schooling, including anxiety, depression, eating-disordered behaviors, and neurodevelopmental conditions, including attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, learning disorders, and other disorders that affect behavior, mood, and/or thought; these issues are major challenges to mental health work due to their ability to affect students' thoughts, emotions, behaviors, personal relationships, and their overall quality of life and educational trajectory [1, 2]. Mental health is a state of well-being and the ability to cope with the stresses of life and contribute to community life, and mental health is an important component of a student's academic and personal success. Schools should not ignore any mental health condition or problem that causes distress or disrupts the learning productivity trajectory, and students who are struggling to learn due to mental health conditions should be offered timely, appropriate, evidence-based assessments and support. In this query response, it is hypothesized that all school staff are informed about mental health and have constructive ways to talk about mental health problems, distress, and related topics. Further, it is possible for members of the school community, including students and their families, to police access to mental health services and supports that, if provided, could help students meet academic, school-related social participation, social-emotional, and life skills goals [3, 4].

The Importance of Mental Health Support in Schools

This study investigates the development of school mental health policies in the Sri Lankan context to create healthy learning environments for students. The mental health of children and youth has become a critical concern worldwide, as early manifestations of mental health-related problems occur in schools. However, few students concerned about mental health are referred to professionals, and several research

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works have shown that students with mental health issues do poorly in academics. Many struggling students also have social skills deficits, as social relationships are predictors of mental well-being in adults. If effectively identified and treated in childhood, many of these mental health disorders that students experience in schools could be prevented from manifesting into lifelong psychiatric disorders, which can reduce life satisfaction, and functional abilities, and even increase the risk of developing physical health concerns. Although the policy has focused mostly on identification and treatment, research to date indicates that promoting resilience and coping strategies and altering curricula to create a mental health-promoting school can prevent the manifestation of mental health problems in schools as well as promote mental well-being in general over time [5, 6]. The social milieu of students living in a school environment is critical for their general mental well-being. Several studies have demonstrated a strong negative correlation between academic stress, specifically high-stakes examinations, social problems, and mental health. A few studies in the past have also revealed that achievement and other mental health-related problems in high schools in Sri Lanka are associated with various forms of vulnerability among students. These vulnerable groups of students will most likely find it hard to concentrate on learning as well as to attend school regularly for an uninterrupted number of years to obtain an education. Several reports and articles have clearly outlined that there are a large number of students who tend to come to school in a highly stressed and vulnerable state, especially in rural areas in Sri Lanka. A recent session conducted by the Ministry of Education on the review of mental health promotion in schools highlighted that social and emotional learning is fundamental not only for mental health but also closely linked to successful scholastic achievement as reflected in the school educational framework [7, 8].

Current Challenges and Gaps in Mental Health Support

Mental health services are crucial in promoting well-being and improving social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students. However, schools face several gaps, which lead to unmet mental health needs, reduced school adjustment, and poorer academic, social, and mental health outcomes for students. High rates of stigma surrounding help-seeking for mental health problems exist in most schools, among both students and staff, which prevents students from seeking the help and support they need. The capacity to deliver mental health services in schools can also be limited by the availability of financial resources and trained staff. Those who work in schools also receive little or no training in child and adolescent mental health assessment [9, 10, 11]. Some students may have better access to school mental health services compared to others. Factors such as socio-economic level, ethnicity, and student need have been found to correlate with mental health problems. Many schools do not have fully developed policies for support; existing policies are often limited to making special provisions for assessment support for examinations. Lack of, or underdeveloped, policies lead to ineffective school responses in supporting young people in crisis. Educators often lack awareness and knowledge of children's mental health and are often unclear about the severity of concern and implications for service use, and they are hesitant to report such cases to health agencies. This is particularly important because young people might consult teachers or other members of the school's welfare staff as they are more accessible than mental health services. The lack of sufficiently developed services and policy change from national to regional boundaries also act as a barrier, particularly for looked-after students [12, 13, 14].

Key Components of Effective Mental Health Policies

Effective policies integrate school-wide strategies as well as more specific targeted responses and typically address prevention, intervention, and postvention. Policies providing a comprehensive approach to this range of responses contribute to a whole school approach. Policies should be developed with a variety of important stakeholders and service providers including teachers, educational support staff, administrators, parents, mental health professionals, and other ancillary personnel who come in contact with students such as bus drivers, cafeteria personnel, and school nurses. Universal school mental health policies that address promotion, prevention, and intervention are essential, and school policies must be closely linked with both existing mental health programs and policies as well as those that exist for children and adolescents in general [15, 16, 17]. Ongoing and in-depth professional development is important not only for training staff to recognize students with mental health problems but also for improving teachers' skills to deal with these students in their classes. Evaluating the effectiveness of school mental health services and policies and their related implications for student outcomes is a critical part of policy development. Regularly evaluating the impact of programs will require resources and time, and successful mental health policy development will include strategies for time management of all stakeholders. A successful policy must include outcome measures. These measures should be multi-faceted and should include youths' perceptions of services as well as data on academic use, such as tests,

attendance, and educational failure. Whenever possible, for students to have direct feedback, results should be shared with them as well. Evaluation results should be shared with all stakeholders and effect change when programs are ineffective. Policies should be reviewed and revised on at least a yearly basis. Data collection and research; mental health-related data should be collected at schools to gauge the impact of the programs schools initiate from a prevention, promotion, and intervention perspective. National surveys and needs assessment data also provide schools with information on risk and resiliency factors that can guide programs and program content. Research studies evaluating links between student mental health and academic achievement support the development of mental health programs in schools in terms of the immediate impact and morale of the school environment. It should be kept in mind, however, that approaches to researching relationships and associations among target group records and linked data raise several ethical and privacy issues. Thus, schools need to adhere to ethical guidelines around the use of individual data. If it is not possible to use school-collected youth data, data from relevant regulations may be used to gauge the impact of the policy. In any case, evaluation and research outcomes should be protected and only shared with those that they directly affect [18, 19, 20].

Implementing and Evaluating Mental Health Policies

Implementation can happen simply by following through on the steps outlined in the policy, or it might require a broader set of issues, including training those involved, reviewing and restructuring resources, and other things. There are action models that might help, but for now, to narrow our focus, consider a few simple issues, all of which need to be addressed. The resources need to be in place. If we engage with all the partners, then they all need to know what the policy is and how to implement it. All staff who will have any role in implementing a policy need to be trained – from leadership to frontline staff. Without the resources in place, undertaking training before the resources are available gives out a dangerously mixed message. There needs to be clear leadership so that all are aware that this is a priority, and someone is responsible for coordinating who does what, where, and when [21, 22, 23].

Evaluating Policies

One way or another, all policies need to be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness. Serious plans for evaluation should always be worked out from the beginning so that desired outcomes are identified and clear indicators are established so we can measure progress. Surveys of members of school communities, and particularly pupils, are often valuable, as are feedback mechanisms built into the policy itself from the start. Evaluations of services in terms of performance, measured against desired outcomes and indicators, then provide an important part of an evaluation strategy. All agencies involved should be committed to evaluating what they are doing and have zero tolerance for anything that fails to meet the agreed standards. Ongoing communications and regular liaison are essential, but so also are good systems for advocacy and ensuring that no chance to promote good practice and to celebrate success is missed. Organizations need to learn because when they have operated one policy for a year or two, it can often be improved and developed [24, 25, 26].

CONCLUSION

Developing and implementing comprehensive mental health policies in schools is essential to fostering a healthy learning environment. Schools play a pivotal role in the early identification, prevention, and intervention of mental health issues. Despite the challenges such as stigma, limited resources, and gaps in policy implementation, effective strategies—including stakeholder collaboration, structured mental health programs, and ongoing evaluations—can contribute to significant improvements in students' mental health outcomes. By prioritizing mental health within the educational system, schools can enhance students' academic performance, social skills, and overall well-being. A proactive and inclusive approach to mental health policy development ensures that students receive the necessary support to thrive both academically and personally.

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