

MENTAL HEALTH

The consequence of mental health in the classroom has never been more permanent, especially with the current issues still facing Covid-19. The current 2021-2022 academic year was the first year since the pandemic whereby the students and staff have been able to return to face-to-face teaching. A major adjustment from both sides of the education sector (students and staff) that have contributed to the rise of mental health (WHO,2022).

Therefore, as educators we have a responsibility to not only become more efficient in the way mental health is identified but also how it is handled and how we respond to this ensuring that both the individual(s) directly and indirectly impacted by this are safe and feel safe through this process.

For the purpose of this blog post I will focus on investigating how as educators could we do more to support these students who are struggling? and what can we learn from this to ensure that these kinds of situations are reduced/escalate?

Whether it is the current stigma around mental health or whether it is the actual mechanics whereby students are able to get access to and receive the right support. Current issues around timing; the transition between making safeguarding and other professionals aware, to ensuring that students are supported immediately afterwards. As teachers in education, we have a responsibility to create safe spaces for students; a place where key contentious issues can be discussed, explored and potentially resolved (PS12). Education isn't just about the subjects we teach learners but educating them about how to deal with life independently. Upon reflection and further discussions with members of staff at placement, one of the most revealing things that came out from that experience, was the realisation that as a culture, we are currently unable to discuss these concerns and thus students are unable to feel supported. Consequently, this means that students often don't feel they can talk about their feelings and issues openly. There is a potential for the education sector to become a hub where students are able to feel that they can talk openly about their concerns in the classroom and with their peers, through integrating opportunities where the students can do this in the lesson or even as part of a weekly workshop (PS14,17).

Looking beyond the links between how learning social and emotional skills can improve attainment, performance and academic progress as outlined in a 2014 study conducted by Public Health England (PHE,2014), there is another key component to consider. With the increase and encouragement of a practice inclusive towards enforcing wellbeing as part of the curriculum, lessons and the wider education culture, instead of it being separate will ensure that students feel more inclusive with their emotional, social and personal needs. Creating this kind of environment will enable students to feel more able to express their emotions and to seek help more naturally instead of feeling ultimately that they cannot. Other benefits of this would extend to positive integration within the education institution, enabling students to build positive and meaningful relationships. By creating a non-judgemental environment that extends throughout the institutional culture, it will ensure that students are encouraged to openly hold dialogues about their issues and concerns, consequently, breaking away from negative stigmas attached to mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. Leo identifies to address these mental health issues across the education sectors, researchers recommended improving student

connectedness with other students as well as with staff, identifying that those educational institutions should focus on implementing social and emotional learning (Leo, 2022).

It is clear there isn't enough done to support students with mental health and other concerns. Creating supportive spaces and environments in the classroom, developing practical strategies that can be implemented within and outside of the classroom as well as ensuring a more efficient transition between raising the initial issue and the student obtaining the support needed, in a timely manner (PS04,06).

From further discussions with educational professionals, it was identified, the role of the teacher has become more open, rather than specialised, meaning that teachers are not just a point of reference for students to learn from but also a guide and facilitator of their emotional wellbeing. Therefore, if teachers are more encouraged to accept wider responsibilities such as, counselling for example, it could help facilitate a more open and safe culture by positively promoting wellbeing and wider support (PS10,11,14).

We cannot support students outside of education, but we can create life-long systems to ensure the students can use these strategies outside of academia (PS02). A 2018 study by Department for Education (DfE) identifies, 'a number of evidence informed programmes, involving whole-school approaches and or staff training were identified within the behavioural and anti-bullying policies, that were broadly aimed at establishing positive learning environments' (DfE, 2018). The challenge now, is to build on from these experiences and develop best practices to ensure that students feel safer, welcomed and heard. For future CPD I want to work with the placement institution to identify ways in which I can create a more inclusive and safer environment through incorporating wellbeing integration, into my teaching, adapting from other good practices, expand and developing these into the classroom and develop strategies for creating a more inclusive and open learning environment for students (PS01,04,08,14,20).

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