

Mental Health and Wellbeing in Education: The Crucial Role of Teacher-Student Relationships

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Abstract

The mental health of students has become a crucial aspect of overall well-being, particularly within educational environments. This paper examines the crucial role of teacher-student relationships in educational institutions in promoting students' well-being. Drawing on studies and practical educational insights, the paper highlights emotionally supportive and empathetic teacher-student dynamics that can foster resilience, alleviate anxiety, and improve overall academic outcomes. The importance of mental health and well-being in education is actively promoted by the NEP 2020 and the NCF through various initiatives and support systems to help students navigate and overcome the challenges they face. By focusing on this aspect, educational institutions can train teachers with the essential skills to support students' well-being. Similarly, educational institutions can plan intervention programs and other related activities accordingly to help improve students' mental health and well-being. This paper can help educational institutions to establish a holistic approach to the educational system and recognise students' mental health as an essential aspect of their academic achievement.

Keywords: Mental health, well-being, teacher-student relationship, social-emotional learning.

Introduction

The mental health and well-being of students are central concerns in education. Mental health is crucial in shaping students' overall development, social interactions, and academic success. A key aspect is the student-teacher relationship, which substantially influences the students' emotional, psychological, and cognitive growth. Research from Roorda et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of strong teacher-student relationships, which have garnered growing attention, as educational institutions are places where students spend a significant amount of time with their teachers. The urge to connect with teachers and know them can have a considerable impact on students' well-being and academic achievement. A supportive and nurturing relationship between teachers and students can foster a sense of safety, trust, and belonging, which is essential for students' mental health and overall well-being. However, an unsupportive environment can contribute to stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. Hence, it becomes necessary to prioritise the development of positive teacher-student relationships and create environments that promote social-emotional learning, resilience, and overall well-being. By doing so, teachers can help students establish a solid foundation for academic achievement, mental well-being, and life-long success. Understanding the mechanisms that drive healthy teacher-student relationships is crucial for institutions and policymakers. Becker et al. (2017) highlighted that teachers who exhibit higher levels of mindfulness tend to foster supportive and positive relationships with their students. This practice will enable teachers to attune to students' needs and emotions, thereby enhancing teacher-student relationships. Importantly, findings also reveal that emotional intelligence is a critical mediator in this relationship. Teachers who have higher emotional intelligence are better at navigating the complexities of the teacher-student dynamic by effectively recognising and managing emotions, both in themselves and their students. Emotional intelligence can facilitate empathy, understanding, and effective communication, which are crucial for establishing and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships (Wang, 2023).

The way teachers engage with their students has a significant impact on learning outcomes and substantially contributes to the overall classroom atmosphere. It is essential to emphasise training teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to support their students in fostering a healthy relationship between teacher and student. Researchers have emphasised that teachers who exhibit higher levels of mindfulness are more likely to foster positive and supportive relationships with their students. Mindfulness practices, which encourage present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance, enable teachers to be more attuned to their students' needs, emotions, and experiences, leading to enhanced teacher-student interactions and a more positive classroom climate (Becker et al., 2017).

The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships

The type of relationships students have with their teachers significantly influences their mental health. Good relationships between students and teachers can foster a sense of security and belongingness for emotional growth. Students who feel they are understood and supported by their teachers perform better academically, experience less anxiety and depression and have better social skills. However, unsupportive and insensitive relationships can make students feel isolated, anxious, and disengaged from their studies. This kind of relationship can become a recurring pattern of mental health problems that can last throughout a student's academic career. It can also make students feel and view their teachers as controlling and dominant figures rather than encouraging mentors.

Evidence from various studies indicates that supportive teacher-student relationships are associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems among students. This collective evidence from meta-analysis reveals a strong connection between teacher-student relationships and students' well-being, both psychologically and academically (Roorda et al., 2011). Emotionally supportive teachers contribute to academic achievement, students' self-esteem, and emotional regulation.

Role of Teachers in Emotional Support

We often come across students taking their teacher's name as their role model and wishing to become like them in future. Beginning with this line, we see the significant role teachers play in the lives of students. The significance of teachers' role in helping students build their dreams and shape their lives. Hence, providing a safe space, emotional support, and motivation will enable students to perform well both academically and personally. At the same time, it becomes essential for teachers to understand that the emotional and psychological well-being of learners is as important as their academic progress. Salter et al. (2024) explore the bidirectional relationship between adolescent anxiety and the quality of teacher-student relationships. They found that supportive teacher-student relationships, characterised by warmth, care, and encouragement as perceived by students, are associated with lower levels of anxiety. In contrast, relationships characterised by excessive dependence, conflict, and lack of motivational support will result in higher levels of anxiety in students.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has strongly emphasised the importance of teacher-student relationships in promoting the mental health and well-being of students in educational institutions. The importance of enhancing teacher-student relationships is crucial, and institutions should provide teacher training, counselling services, and socio-emotional learning to establish a nurturing environment that fosters students' psychological and emotional growth. Teacher training will identify and address mental health concerns, further enabling teachers to recognise and support the emotional needs of students, thereby enhancing the overall learning process. Additionally, educational institutions must provide counselling services to help students who are struggling emotionally (NEP, 2020).

NCF 2005 and NCFF 2022 also emphasise that a teacher is not only an imparter of knowledge but also a facilitator of holistic development for students, by nurturing a safe, respectful, and emotionally responsive classroom environment. Teachers can build strong, empathetic relationships with students, rooted in trust, non-judgment, and mutual respect. These kinds of relationships can help students feel valued and understood, especially during emotionally challenging

stages such as adolescence, the crucial development stage in one's life. NCF encourages teachers to recognise early signs of stress, anxiety, or emotional distress in students and respond sensitively by creating a space where students feel comfortable expressing themselves. Additionally, teachers must avoid punishment and forceful disciplinary actions, instead adopting more compassionate and collaborative approaches to dialogue that help students develop resilience. Further recommendations on teacher training programs to include modules on mental health awareness and counselling basics so that educators are better equipped to support the emotional needs of students. By fostering emotionally supportive teacher-student relationships, both the mental well-being and empathetic relationships with students will significantly contribute to the student's mental health and academic success (NCF, 2005; NCFF, 2022).

Consequences of Neglecting Mental Health

Romer et al. (2011) highlighted in their study that educational policy discussions often overlook the impact of emotional health on academic success, despite its significant influence on academic outcomes. The evidence showed how mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and stress can interfere with students' ability to perform academically. It highlights the need for integrated policies combining education and mental health support, promoting a more holistic approach to improving national educational achievement. By including emotional well-being in school systems and educational policy to address mental health as a foundational element of overall student development.

Failing to prioritise mental health in educational settings can impact students' overall development, both academically and in personality development. Students can struggle with mental health issues that can have a higher risk of academic failure, absenteeism, and dropout rates. The students in the class can be the teacher's children or their family members. When students' mental health is not taken care of, it may impact teachers' well-being simultaneously, as they share an equal environment in educational institutions. Both the role of student and teacher are related and

influence each other's mental health. Hence, neglecting these aspects can have long-term effects beyond school, impacting future employment opportunities, relationships, and overall quality of life.

Strategies for Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing

1. To improve student mental health, mental health professionals can train educators and equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to support their students' well-being. Teacher training programs focusing on mental health awareness, trauma-informed practices, and effective communication can empower teachers to recognise signs of distress and respond appropriately in a timely manner.
2. The educational institution must create a safe space where students can express their feelings and seek support without fear of judgment or retribution. Counselling services, peer support groups, or mental health awareness campaigns can be significant to an open dialogue about mental health issues.
3. Integrating social-emotional learning in the education curriculum can help students develop essential skills such as empathy, resilience, and emotional regulation. Researchers have emphasised the importance of SEL programs in enhancing students' mental health, academic performance, and social relationships, making them a valuable addition to any educational setting.
4. The framework of SEL consists of five interrelated pillars that facilitate emotional and social development (Diack & Jennifer, 2023).
 - a) Self-awareness: the ability to know one's feelings as well as others.
 - b) Self-management: the capacity to regulate feelings and actions in different situations.
 - c) Social awareness: the ability to demonstrate compassion and understand others' perspectives.
 - d) Relational skills: the process of establishing healthy relationships with others.
 - e) Responsible decision-making: the ability to select/ decide things that align with ethical standards and adhere to social norms.

Each of these pillars is essential for the comprehensive development of students. Educational institutions can strengthen these principles using diverse approaches like

1. Teachers can develop self-awareness through reflective practices, such as journaling and meditation.
2. Teachers can develop self-management by cultivating disciplined routines, utilising stress management approaches, and engaging in goal-setting activities.
3. Teachers can develop social awareness through group conversations, cultural studies, and community initiatives programmes that promote empathy.
4. Teachers can develop relational skills through collaborative learning activities, dispute- resolution exercises, and peer mentorship initiatives (Mansur Jonovich & Davronovich, 2023).
5. Role-playing exercises, classroom debates, and discussions regarding real-world ethical challenges can enhance responsible decision-making.

Way forward

To strengthen mental health and well-being in education, educational institutions must focus on cultivating strong, empathetic teacher-student relationships as a foundation for emotional safety and academic success, such as:

Teachers should receive basic training in mental health awareness, emotional intelligence, and how to respond to signs of distress in students. A school can plan a monthly mental health work- shop where teachers can learn to identify students' anxiety, depression, or bullying-related behav- iours. For example, in the classroom, students who appear aloof, struggle to make friends, be- come easily agitated, or exhibit behaviours such as nail-biting or indifference toward participa- tion may be showing some signs of distress. These indicators can be a sign of mental health is- sues; hence, teachers can create a safe space and supportive environment for students to commu- nicate with them. Teachers can incorporate mindfulness practices, such as the 54321 grounding technique, with students and begin class with a 5-minute breathing exercise.

Teachers can focus on creating a safe and non-judgmental classroom that will enable students to communicate openly and build trust. This kind of classroom atmosphere can make students feel approachable to teachers without fear of being judged or punished for emotional struggles. For

example, teachers can plan activities such as setting up a feelings box or maintaining a register book in the classroom, where students can anonymously share their worries and concerns, which helps teachers address common issues students encounter in their lives, further encouraging discussion and support.

Researchers believe that incorporating SEL in classroom activities into lessons across subjects will help to build self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation. The teacher can facilitate a group discussion on handling similar feelings in the classroom. Further, educational institutions can plan a collaboration between parents and teachers to ensure consistency in emotional support at school and home. Example: Teachers can hold bi-monthly meetings with parents to focus not just on academics, but also on the student's emotional development, behaviour changes, and peer relationships both in the institution and at home. Each institution must ensure access to a mental health professional and a well-being coordinator to bridge communication between students, teachers, and parents. Example: The school counsellor can plan to conduct weekly group sessions for students struggling with stress, while the coordinator tracks the emotional climate in classrooms and supports teachers with strategies.

Conclusion

Mental health is a serious issue that educational institutions must address thoroughly without negligence. Prioritising mental health can create an environment that not only fosters academic success but also nurtures the emotional and social development of students. In this regard, fostering a positive relationship between students and teachers can create a supportive school environment, and implementing effective mental health strategies can play a crucial role in promoting students' well-being. Educational institutions and educators must continuously work to prioritise mental health concerns by ensuring all students have the support they need to thrive both academically and emotionally, creating a brighter future for generations to come. It is essential to work collectively towards building a supportive framework that empowers students to thrive academically and personally.

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