

Tackling the Mental Health Crisis among High School Students: The Critical Role of Educational Leaders in Promoting Wellness of the School Community

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Abstract: *Adolescent is the critical stage with emotional turbulence, identity formation and facing high stakes academic pressure. These factors led to mental health issues impacting the social and personality development of individual especially during high school. Hence, the role and responsibilities of school administrations upsurges to build conducive environment apart from achieving high academic achievement. This paper focusses on the role of educational leaders in maintaining the well being of students and teachers, thus promoting mental health and overall wellbeing of school community. With the increase in academic pressure, peer and parent pressure and puberty characteristic, school students are suffering from different type of mental issues such as lack of concentration, anxiety, depression etc. These issues are more complexed with the social isolation, lack of physical exercises, gaming and more addicted to internet. In such scenario, the role of educational leader is more crucial to mitigate the problems of mental health among young generation students. Consequently, implementation of students and teacher's friendly strategies such as counselling, identification of mental health problems, training to educators, resource library for students and teaches, promoting collaborative approaches etc can mitigate the intensity of mental health issues curbing the suicidal incidence and emotional problems.*

Keywords: Mental health, Educational Leadership, Wellness, School community, Adolescents

I. INTRODUCTION

A growing number of high school adolescents are experiencing mental health problems including stress, anxiety, and depression because of social pressures, scholastic demands, and the complexities of puberty. As high school students are motivated by shifts in social dynamics, academic expectations, and technological innovation, it becomes essential to provide them with the tools, guidance, and support they need to navigate these changes effectively. But due to excessive use of technology, unsupportive environment, excessive use of social media and academic pressure affecting their mental wellbeing, leading to stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. Therefore, it's crucial for educators and school leaders to address these challenges with proactive strategies that foster resilience, mental well-being, and academic success. While social media and online education provide new opportunities for interaction, there are concerns as well, since problems like social media addiction can affect students' focus, sleep, and mental health (Coşa, I.M., et al., 2023; Choudhury, T. & Choudhury, R., 2023). Rising educational standards and fierce academic competition further draining students, with high expectations from parents, teachers and peers fueling stress and anxiety (Chodkiewicz, A., & Boyle, C, 2017). As a result, mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, are increasingly common among students worldwide (Santomauro, D. F., et al., 2021). Factors such as sleep deprivation, peer victimization, and negative school climates further exacerbate students' mental health struggles, early school start times, heavy workloads, and excessive screen time contribute to poor sleep, which worsens students' stress and cognitive function (Sampasa-Kanyinga, H., et al., 2020). Additionally, inequities in educational resources limit opportunities for many students, heightening feelings of unfairness (García-Carrión, R., 2019). This mental health crisis requires urgent, multi-faceted solutions involving supportive policies, mental health education and school environments that prioritize well-being.

Collaboration between schools, families and policymakers is essential to help students build resilience and thrive within modern educational landscape.

The students at high school are in adolescence stage that is characterized by identity formation, emotional instability, stress and storm (Uzun, G. Ö., 2022). It is a critical period of emotional and psychological development, marked by heightened sensitivity, identity exploration and vulnerability to stress, which can manifest as anxiety, depression or behavioural issues. The different type of mental problems is psychological distress, anxiety, depression, academic stress, suicidal tendency, substance abuse crisis (drugs or alcohol), coping mechanism crisis, bullying and harming self. Subsequently, these emotional crisis leads to low academic achievement, behavioural and maladjustment problems in school as well as in social circle (Anniko, M. K., 2018).

The World Health Organisation (2024) reported the determinants of mental health, emphasising that globally, one in seven individuals aged 10-19 has a mental disorder, which constitutes 15% of the global mental disease. Depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems are among the primary contributors to disease and impairment among teenagers. Suicide ranks as the third predominant cause of mortality among individuals aged 15 to 29 years (WHO, 2024).

This critical essay tries to explore and analyse the significance of mental health for students and educators for creating conducive environment in high school and highlighting the role of educational leaders in mitigating the mental crisis, thus increasing productivity and promoting wellbeing of students as well educators. Recognizing the significance of mental health in holistic development, especially in the post-COVID era, this essay emphasizes the need for integrated mental health strategies that support resilience and well-being for entire school communities.

Critical need for Educational Leaders to address mental health crisis:

Given the ongoing growth in youth's mental health concerns, school administrators urgently require taking preventive measures to mitigate these problems. Studies demonstrate that mental health significantly impacts performance in school (Shankar, N. L., & Park, C. L., 2016), social engagement (Zhou et al., 2020) and overall student success. By highlighting mental well-being, educational leaders can establish a comprehensive approach that not only enhances academic performance but also fosters a sense of belonging and emotional resilience in students, ensuring their holistic development. The impact of such effective leadership in mental health extends beyond individual schools, shaping broader educational policies and practices.

World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships, and shape the world we live in" (WHO, 2022).

By recognising the importance of prioritizing mental health for High School Educators and Students, following are the benefits of fostering positive mental health for students and educators:

- **Fostering academic achievement:** Supporting students' mental well-being positively impacts their academic performance, as mental health is directly linked to motivation, concentration and cognitive function. Therefore, it allows students to achieve their full potential (Högberg, B., 2024; Van Ryzin. et al., 2024)
- **Optimistic social and emotional development:** When schools prioritize mental health, students are more likely to experience positive social and emotional growth, which contributes to healthier relationships, empathy, and self-awareness (Krok, D., & Telka, E. 2019; Burešová, I. et al., 2020; Rincon Uribe. et al., 2022).
- **Reduce behavioural problems:** Proactively addressing mental health in school helps reduce behavioural issues as students receive support to manage their emotions and behaviours constructively, leading to a more harmonious learning environment (Mitchell, B. S. et al., 2019; Andermo, S., Hallgren. et al., 2020).
- **Early identification, intervention and prevention of mental illness:** Schools with mental health programs can identify and intervene early in cases of mental illness, reducing the long-term impact of untreated mental health issues and promoting better lifelong outcomes (Colizzi, M. et al., 2020; Fusar-Poli. et al., 2021)

- **Creating comprehensive and Holistic approach of Education:** A focus on mental health contributes to a supportive school culture, promoting safety, respect, and positive interactions among students and staff, which enhances the overall school climate (McGorry, P. D. *et al.*, 2022).
- **Achieve long term outcomes:** Prioritizing mental health in schools is associated with positive long-term outcomes, including improved academic success, better employment opportunities and healthier adult relationships.

Similarly, **Mental health is important for educators** leading to positive behaviour, increased work capacity, better engagement with students, enhancing teaching learning process, improving teacher's retention, job satisfaction, creating supportive learning environment, projecting as role models, reducing stress and burnout, enhancing decision making, supportive with colleague, improving student's outcomes (Harding, S. *et al.*, 2019; Capone, V., & Petrillo, G., 2020; Ibrahim, R. Z. A. R. *et al.*, 2021).

Consequences of Neglecting Mental Health for Students, Educators, and the School Community: The impact of not addressing mental health can lead to a long-term effect not only on educators and students but also on school ecosystem and effectiveness of schools. Subsequently ignoring the issue can create an atmosphere of stress, dysfunction, anxiety and lessen productivity. In **high school students**, this will result in poor academic, social and emotional well-being. Brännlund, A. *et al.*, 2017 study revealed that negative relationship between mental-health problems and educational outcomes was found. It can challenge the cognitive development and learning ability of students due to stress. They experience subdued focus or concentration in their study, memory, low motivation in classroom, increased absenteeism, dropout, decline in grade, unsocialized behavior and other health issues including depression, abnormal behavior. The social isolation can have long-continuing outcomes on their self-esteem, resilience, and ability to form healthy associations in adulthood (Orben, A., *et al.*, 2020; Christiansen J. *et al.*, 2021). Due to behavioral problems, they may experience the struggle in coping with stress and anxiety that can result in disciplinary issues.

Apart from students, **educators also play pivotal contributions in students' academic journey.** When schools are not prioritizing training support for educators to handle the emotional and mental health needs of adolescents, educators may feel overwhelmed, ill-equipped, and unsupported in addressing the complex emotional challenges that students face. Without proper training, educators may struggle to recognize early signs of distress, respond effectively, or provide the appropriate referrals, potentially leading to increased student disengagement, a negative classroom environment, and heightened risks of unresolved mental health issues for the students. Consequently, struggling with emotional instability and mental issues of students, educators' wellbeing also affected (Farmer, D., 2020; Robinson, L. E. *et al.*, 2023). This will lead to educators' emotional exhaustion, low work efficiency, defocusing academic content, incapable of navigating multiple responsibilities from classroom management to providing emotional support to students (Fathi, J., & Derakhshan, A., 2019; Anastasiou, S., & Belios, E., 2020). Moreover, without mental health support for themselves, they struggled to balance these roles, leading to increased stress, absenteeism, and even a higher likelihood of leaving the profession (Greenglass, E. R., *et al.*, 2020; Vargas Rubilar, N., & Oros, L. B., 2021; Brady, J., & Wilson, E., 2021).). High hiring and firing rate among educators due to job dissatisfaction (Doherty, J., 2020; Kim, G., 2020) further challenges the school environment, impacting students' endurance in learning (Harding, S., *et al.* 2019) and the enthusiasm of staff members.

Contribution of educational leaders in overcoming the mental crisis in high school: With a background in Human Development and a focus on adolescent developmental changes, I can contribute to mental health initiatives in the high school education system. My expertise enables me to design strategies that address the mental health of students and educators, fostering resilient and supportive school environments. By integrating developmental insights with strategic policy interventions, I aim to create a comprehensive approach that promotes mental well-being and enhances the overall educational experience.

Educational leaders play a vital role in reducing mental health crises in high schools by fostering supportive environments, planning & implementing proactive policies, and prioritizing mental well-being among both students and staff.

As an educational leader, following strategies can be planned as future pathway for ensuring the wellbeing of school communities:

Strategies for Students mental well-being:

- **Designing and advocating programme for mental health:** Foremost, as an educational Leadership need to design awareness programs on stress management, coping mechanism and emotional regulation to promote mental health awareness, emotional literacy and coping skills for students (Gueldner, B. A., 2020).
- **Establishing Counselling Cell and Support Services:** As an educational leader, provide access of mental health professionals support like counsellors or psychologists on permanent basis in educational setting. These counsellors can maintain the individual case study of students including personal, academical and behavioural records.
- **Early Detection and Intervention:** It is vital to early detect the emotional problems of students for timely intervention, as it will prevent further exaggeration of mental health crisis. For this, educators should be given proper training to recognize signs of distress like changes in behaviour, mood, academic performance, social distance. (Colizzi, M., Lasalvia, A., & Ruggeri, M., 2020).
- **Providing Compassionate and Nontoxic Environment:** Educational leaders can foster mental well-being by creating a safe, inclusive environment with bias-free policies, encouraging extracurriculars activities and training on diversity. Research revealed that positive psychology programs improved student well-being and academic performance (Waters, L., 2011).

For Teachers: Reducing overexertion and Enhancing Support Systems

- **Regular Professional Development and Training:** Conducting training and workshops at regular interval that is essential to keep them motivated and equipped with the new skills needed to meet the challenges faced in classrooms (Ohrt, J. H et al., 2020).
- **Implementing Supportive Structures:** As an education leader, implementation of the policies and programme related to mental health in educational institute for creating supportive and responsive environment. It can include referral services for emotionally disturbed students and introducing professional development sessions focused on mental health crisis teaching practices. This strategies will emphasize understanding and responding to students' experiences and emotional needs, which is crucial for creating a safe classroom environment (Mitchell, B. S., et al., 2019; Cilar, L. et al., 2020).
- **Providing classroom management strategies:** Strategic training to teachers on classroom management focussing on the mental health for instance rewarding the child as positive reinforcement, encourage open communication, resolving conflict, become active listener, encourage students' autonomy (Mohamed, S. M. 2017; LaBelle, B., 2023).
- **Resource Library for Teachers:** Development of online resources such as articles, videos & guides on topics like adolescent mental health, signs of common mental health issues and strategies for supporting students. These resources will empower teachers to independently deepen their understanding of mental health, enabling them to develop own strategies for effectively addressing mental health needs within their classrooms. (Cox, A., & Brewster, L., 2020; Yamaguchi, S., et al., 2020)
- **Monthly Support Circles:** initiation of monthly support circles where teachers can discuss challenges, share experiences and seek advice from peers and mental health professionals. These meetings would also serve as a space for teachers to learn from each other and gain new strategies.
- **Wellness Programs for Teachers:** To support teachers' own mental health, implementation of wellness programs, including stress management workshops and mindfulness sessions. Healthy teachers are better able to support their students, and this also reinforces a culture of mental wellness across the school (Woloshyn, V., & Savage, M., 2020; Volanen, S. M. 2020;).
- **Workload Management and Well-being Initiatives:** Management of workload of teachers and providing sufficient classroom preparation time to prevent the teacher's overburden is very crucial strategies to maintain well of educators as well as students. Promoting manageable workloads and offering regular mental health

days helps teachers to maintain their well-being results in increasing work efficiency and retention of efficient teachers.

For the School System: Building a Sustainable, Resilient Framework

- **Establishing a Whole-School Approach to Mental Health:** Educational leaders can try to integrate the mental health as a core element of the school's mission and vision and effort to embed the mental health issue in programme and planning of school curriculum and administration (Shankland & Rosset, 2017)
- **Developing Crisis Response Etiquettes:** Creating well defined guidelines and emergency response team related to mental crisis will ensure the wellbeing of students and staff.
- **Inclusion of Meditation, Yoga and physical activities for administrator, educator and students:** Meditation and yoga facilitates to channelize the energy in positive direction and keep the mind and soul in positive spirit (Whelan-Berry, K. *et al.*, 2021).
- **Promoting a Collaborative Culture:** Educators can try to promote the team and collaborative approach including classroom teachers, parents, counsellor, psychiatrist, health professional and school administration (Long *et al.*, 2020; Nabella, S. D. *et al.*, 2022; Ze, J., 2023).
- **Advocating for Funding and Resources:** As an educational leader, arrangement of the additional funds from school board, community organization or government for this type of programme. The adequate fund and resources are required for hiring mental health professionals, training staff, or implementing wellness programs.
- **Monitoring and Evaluating Mental Health Initiatives:** Lastly, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of mental health programme and policies is very necessary for providing conducive environment. This may involve gathering feedback from students and staff, analysing data on mental health incidents or student engagement and staying informed of best practices in mental health education.

II. CONCLUSION

Mental health focus in high schools will foster academic success and support overall well-being of students, educators. Educational leaders play a pivotal role in implementing policies and programs that encourage open discussions, reduce stigma and provide effective resources for those in need. By prioritizing mental health policies and strategies, schools can create an inclusive culture where students feel safe, understood and valued, allowing them to reach their full potential both academically and personally. Equally important is the well-being of educators, who, with the right support and training, can better manage their responsibilities and create a positive classroom atmosphere that contributes to a resilient school community. An obligation to mental health is not only a preventive measure but also a foundational investment in the future of education, setting a precedent for compassionate and responsive educational environments.

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