



# Teacher Readiness

**Teacher attitudes, opinions, and perspectives towards facilitating positive mental health in the classroom.**

## Facilitating Positive Mental Health in Inclusive Classrooms

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Classroom teachers play a significant role in the lives of their students. Outside of the home, students spend a large portion of their day in school, making their interactions, experiences, and school environment a predictor of their well-being and success.<sup>19</sup> With the implementation of inclusion within public education, it is important that teachers be prepared to meet the needs of all students including those with mental illness and/or problems. Teachers need to learn how to teach students who experience difficulties with their mental health, as it is estimated that by 2020, the prevalence of neuropsychiatric disorders in children will continue to rise, making them one of the five leading causes of childhood illness, disability, and death.<sup>26</sup>

With the rising prevalence of mental health problems in young people, teachers need to be aware of how to recognize and support students with mental health problems as it may impact their lives and classroom setting. Mental health problems can affect students: emotional well-being, ability to learn, and may cause them to drop out of school.<sup>16</sup> Untreated mental health problems can have a significant impact on classrooms and school communities through: discipline and safety, disruptions in instructional time, and teacher stress; and can cause the individual student to experience difficulty following instructions, concentrating, engaging in school work, and maintaining self-control.<sup>24</sup>

## Research Tells Us

~Mental health is a positive sense of well-being and the ability to enjoy life and deal with challenges one may encounter.<sup>4</sup>

~Mental illness is when a person experiences difficulty with their thinking, ability to regulate their emotions, or behavior which affects their mental functioning<sup>1</sup>

~1 in 5 adolescents between 13 years of age will have a serious mental illness.<sup>17</sup>

~On average, at least one student in the classroom is mentally ill.<sup>13</sup>

~1 in 5 students who need mental health services receive them.<sup>3</sup>

# Teacher Readiness to Facilitate Positive Mental Health

## Teachers' perceptions of mental health problems:

- Feel burdened
- Lack confidence supporting mental health needs
- Experience difficulty identifying mental health problems
- Are uncomfortable discussing mental health problems or emotional health<sup>10</sup>

In Canada, 1 out of 5 children who need mental health services receive them.<sup>2</sup> Teachers, when properly educated, can help detect problems early and make referrals that connect students with interventions, and allow those students to reach their full potential in school and life. Several studies have been conducted on educators and results all found that teachers lack information, training, and confidence, which hindered their ability to support students' mental health problems.<sup>10, 15, 21, 22</sup>

### Newfoundland and Labrador Context

In order for students in Newfoundland and Labrador to receive supports for emotional, mental, and/or behaviour disorders, a student must be diagnosed by and under the continuing care of an appropriate medical or mental health professional.<sup>8</sup> In 2016-2017, the Premier's Task Force on *Improving Educational Outcomes in Newfoundland and Labrador* was conducted to review the current education system. Results from the task force found that stakeholders felt that too many students with mental health problems were not receiving the support and education that they deserve. Most teachers who responded to the task force reported they did not have the knowledge or background information to successfully meet the mental health needs of their students while delivering a full curriculum to a wide range of student abilities in current classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

### Mental Health Literacy

A mental health literacy online institute was offered as a professional learning opportunity to teachers employed within the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District. The mental health literacy institute was developed by Dr. Stan Kutcher and other Canadian university personnel to help teachers gain an understanding of mental health problems and the impact it has on the education system.

**Mental health literacy encompasses knowledge and skills to “increase the understanding of mental health and mental health disorders, reduce stigma, help recognize and prevent mental disorders, and facilitate help-seeking behaviours.”<sup>25</sup>**

**“Too many students with mental health needs and academic challenges are not receiving the support and education that they deserve.”<sup>9</sup>**



## Benefits of Engaging in a Mental Health Literacy Institute

Schools are considered a starting point for providing services to students with mental health concerns. Teachers are at the forefront of witnessing the effects that mental health problems have on students; however, teachers do not have adequate knowledge and resources to meet the needs of students within their classrooms.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to offer professional development to in-service teachers on mental health problems, disorders, and illnesses. Teachers need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, as they are often the first ones to notice and refer students to mental health services. In order for teachers to feel adequately prepared to recognize and support students with mental health problems, Bachelor of Education programs and professional development opportunities need to support teachers in recognizing mental health problems, and familiarize them with the supports and services available to children with mental illness or problems.

The mental health literacy institute employed in the focus study is a web-based, self-paced curriculum consisting of six modules. Modules addressed: mental health awareness; the connection between mental illness, mental distress and mental health problems; understanding mental health problems and illnesses and their treatments; and how to reduce stigma in the classroom, and seek help. It was offered to teachers within the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District as it was identified that there was a lack of mental health literacy curriculum within existing Bachelor of Education programs across Canada. Canadian research demonstrated positive effects on improved mental health knowledge, a decrease in mental health stigma, and an enhancement in help-seeking efficacy when mental health literacy was implemented and promoted in schools.<sup>5, 12, 20</sup>

**Survey results indicated that teachers' had improved knowledge surrounding mental health, a more positive attitude towards mental health, and reduced stigma after taking part in the mental health literacy institute.**

### Youth Mental Health Statistics

- 20% of students in any “average” classroom will experience a mental health issue that may impede their learning or behaviour.<sup>6</sup>
- Supports received by 70-80% of students with mental health problems are through special education services within the school.<sup>24</sup>
- In 2012-2013, youth in NL spent a total of 2, 972 days in hospital because of a mental health related diagnosis.<sup>18</sup>

# Teachers' Knowledge, Attitude, Opinions, and Perspectives on Mental Health and Professional Development



A total of 79 educators enrolled in the mental health literacy institute, with 36 educators completing the pre and post-survey (23 of whom were able to be matched based on anonymous linking questions). The surveys measured: knowledge, attitudes, and opinions of mental health; teachers' perspectives on the delivery and content of the mental health literacy institute; and their wants, needs, and preferred modality of learning in regards to future professional development opportunities.

Results showed a positive increase in mental health knowledge and attitudes but no significant difference in opinions. Attitudes, a way of thinking about something, in a favorable or unfavorable way based on one's own beliefs, may have changed as educators indicated previously learning about mental health and an interest in learning more.<sup>23</sup> Opinions are more difficult to change as it is one's preference based on personal judgement, which is not founded on fact, proof, or certainty.<sup>14</sup> Opinions are deeply rooted in early years and ingrained from a young age. Studies have shown that young people are an attractive audience for changing opinions because they can be targeted before unhealthy opinions and perceptions can be fully developed.<sup>20</sup>

Teachers in this study (58%) felt adequately prepared and qualified to support any mental health issues they may be exposed to and knew where to access resources for their students with mental health issues. The majority of these educators (89%) had been involved with a student with mental health issues and felt that teachers should know how to support and refer these students to mental health services, while approximately 30% felt they had the knowledge and skills to recognize and support students with mental health issues. Educators did not feel their Bachelor of Education program or professional development opportunities prepared them to support or recognize mental health issues.

Participating in the Mental Health Literacy institute made teachers:

- ~ better prepared to support and empathize with students with mental health issues
- ~ more knowledgeable about how to support students with mental health problems

Educators requested future professional development addressing:

- ~ mental health
- ~ teachers' mental wellness, burnout, and self-care
- ~ strategies to help students cope with mental health issues and stress
- ~ anxiety

# Role of the Teacher

## The Role of the Teacher Concerning Mental Health Issues

With respect to mental illnesses, the role of the teacher is to have the knowledge to be able to identify possible signs or symptoms of mental health problems and mental illness, refer appropriately, and work effectively in the classroom and in collaboration with other professionals such as school counsellors, psychologists, and mental health clinics, to assist and support the students who have been identified, not diagnose a mental health issues or illness.<sup>11</sup>

### What Teachers Can do

Teachers can facilitate classrooms that support positive mental health and use language that is void of stigma and judgement. For students with a diagnosis, teachers should collaborate with parents, and healthcare professionals. Students with mental illnesses who are undergoing treatment will need a supportive educational environment that is free of stigma, and provides necessary accommodations.

### Teachers' Mental Wellness

Mental health literacy is vital for supporting students with mental health problems, but it is also beneficial in promoting the mental well-being of educators. Teacher well-being is crucial to the mental health of their students. Teachers cannot support and care for their students if they are not taking care of their own mental health. Teacher mental health is equally as important as student mental health, as teachers who have mental health problems can suffer from stress, absenteeism, and other health problems.<sup>24</sup>

## Accommodations:

"adaptations to the learning environment which address particular student needs."<sup>7</sup>

- ~preferential seating
- ~beverages in class
- ~prearranged or frequent breaks
- ~predictable/routine schedule
- ~extended time
- ~quiet alternate setting
- ~advances notice of assignments
- ~written assignments instead of oral presentations

# Mental Health

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