

IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS –AN INDICATIVE STUDY

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Abstract : There has been a number of mental health policies at the national level yet the teachers /school administration are terribly under-equipped to handle mental health issues on large scale due to lack of awareness of the teachers-parents-school community in mental health issues coupled with serious dearth of mental health professionals. The present study was conducted to explore whether the teachers and different stakeholders of the Educational System are sensitized towards issues related to mental health of the students along with the availability of student friendly infrastructural and teaching strategy that would foster sound mental health in sound body. The sample comprised 15 female and 15 male teachers of Secondary Bengali Medium Government Schools (WBBSE) of Howrah, Hooghly, Chinsurah and Burdwan Districts. Personal Information Blank and Interview Schedule were administered.

IndexTerms - mental health, sensitization, teachers, students, Indian government school.

I. Mental Health Promotion in School

INTRODUCTION

The need of psychological well-being of children of all age group especially those of adolescent age for their emotional, social, cognitive development is well understood these days. Children are assets of a nation and to ensure proper moral, psychological, emotional development of them is extremely important. Effective intervention to improve a child or adolescent's resilience, promote their mental health, treat their mental illness or disorder can act to a great extent such that the child will grow and become a responsible, and resilient human being in future. In present time, mental illness has become such a burden to healthy living globally, that addressing mental health issues of younger generation is essential to provide a long standing remedy to this malady.

DEFINITION OF MENTAL HEALTH

Good mental health is also more than just the absence of a mental disorder, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, or anxiety. According to World Health Organization (WHO), health (and mental health) can be defined this way:

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Mental health is an integral part of this definition.”

A widely accepted definition of health (and mental health) is psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's definition: the capacity “to work and to love”

The Public Health Agency of Canada defines mental health as,

“The capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.”

Good mental health, therefore, is the foundation for an individual's and a community's effective functioning and wellbeing. A person who is mentally healthy has a state of wellbeing in which he or she realizes his or her own abilities, is able to cope with life's normal stresses, can work regularly and productively, and is also able to make a contribution to the community.

II. Mental health promotion

Mental Health Promotion means creating environments that promote and sustain positive mental health for everyone. Schools are an ideal platform to promote mental health for children and youth because it provides an opportunity to reach large groups of children during their formative years of cognitive, emotional and behavioral development. An effective school base mental health program can be very useful in this regard. It must be integrated into school curriculum, targeted for multiple health outcomes, aimed for all students to ensure personal skill development of everyone. It must involve parents and community, and also be spread over a period of time to ensure persistent guidance.

III. Importance

1. According to World Health Organization one in every 5 child has a mental health issue. One-half of all lifetime diagnosable mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, Merikangas, & Walters, 2005). If problems are identified early and intervened at the right time, it will be more cost effective, as further breakdown can be prevented and adult treatment and rehabilitation programs which are much more expensive can be avoided. It is possible to prevent the majority of behavior disorders in preschool and school environment itself.
2. It is well known that mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and family problems often are the root causes of poor academic performance, disciplinary issues, and truancy. For adolescent age students, the first signs of mental illness or emotional distress can emerge in the school environment. Hence mental health promotional activities and supportive measures followed in school environment can improve academic performance and personal relationships with family and friends, increase engagement, achievement, decrease bullying, aggression, school drop-out, distraction from class work.
3. Such programs will ensure personal skill improvement of children. Their ability to regulate emotion, coping with problems and difficulties in life, problem solving skills will be enhanced. It will enhance empathy and generate respect for diversity in them.

IV. Whole School Approach

According to NCB (National Children's Bureau) the school environment can be extremely stressful for both teacher and pupil, which in turn can lead to poor emotional wellbeing and mental health. In response to this three years ago NCB established the Partnership for Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools bringing together interested organizations to support, share and inform one another about what matters and what works for schools in supporting children and young people. The partnership produced 'what works' guidance on emotional wellbeing and mental health and made it widely available to all schools.

The key message from the guidance is the importance of a whole school approach. That includes support for students and staff, working across the curriculum and involving pupils, governors and parents.

A whole school approach is cohesive, collective and collaborative action in and by a school community that has been strategically constructed to improve student learning, behavior and wellbeing, and the condition that support these.

Table 1.1: An outline of whole school approach to mental health promotion

Social and Physical Environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allow and encourage students to participate in decision-making. 2. Foster an atmosphere of trust, tolerance, co-operation and empathy. 3. Have a welcoming, student-centred environment (e.g. sofas, decorative plants, student artwork, quotes and photos on display). 4. Showcase student achievement and unity. 5. Design physical spaces so that students can access facilities, manoeuvre within them, and participate fully in planned learning activities.
Teaching Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide students with an enhanced understanding and appreciation of diversity. 2. Incorporate culturally-relevant themes into instructional practices and activities. 3. Offer students the chance to learn and practice social skills. 4. Accommodate individual learning needs and preferences. 5. Support autonomy by minimizing control, listening to and validating student perspectives.
Healthy School Policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide alternatives to zero-tolerance policies that allow for continued school connectedness and restoration. 2. Ensure that all students and staff members are held accountable for upholding and modeling rules pertaining to respectful behavior.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Have policies that contribute to the physical and emotional safety of all students. 4. Accommodate the learning and social needs of all students, including those with exceptionalities. 5. Offer ongoing professional development related to positive mental health. 6. Establish a Healthy Schools Committee to look at creating healthy school policy, including priority health topics such as positive mental health.
Partner- ships Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interact with the home regarding student learning issues. 2. Collaborate with families in the design of school improvement and learning initiatives. 3. Adopt policy to ensure collaboration with community and government organizations. 4. Offer opportunities for participation in school-community action groups or committees.

V. Review of Literature:

According to Stewart, Sun, Patterson, Lemerle and Hardie (2004) the role of the school has been regarded, both nationally and internationally, as an important environment for promoting the psychological wellness and resilience of children and youth. Schools provide a “critical context for shaping children’s self-esteem, self-efficacy and sense of control over their lives” (p. 27). As children move into their early and later teen years, schools may play an even greater role than the home context in influencing youth, given the powerful influence that teacher support and peer networks have within the educational settings (Stewart, 2008; Stewart et al, 2004).

Positive school-based experiences for children involve providing them with opportunities to experience academic success and supportive, caring interactions with adults who work collaboratively including educators, caregivers, family members and those from the wider community (Morrison, LeBlanc & Doucet, 2005). Children’s and youths’ relationships with adults and peers that contribute to psychological well-being are characterized by interactions that convey genuineness, empathy, unconditional caring and affirmation (Brendtro, 2003).

Supportive caring interactions with teachers begin with student centered teaching method. Reeve (2006) asserts: Autonomy-supportive teachers facilitate by identifying and nurturing students’ needs, interests, and preferences and by creating classroom opportunities for students to have these internal states guide their behavior. In contrast, relatively controlling teachers interfere with students’ self-determination because they ask students to adhere to a teacher-constructed instructional agenda that alienates students from their inner motivational resources and instead defines what students should or must do (p.228). Research has revealed some key aspects of autonomy-supportive teaching like linking students’ interests, preferences and strengths with learning content and instructional activities, creating opportunity, activity so that students can learn with their peers, can work with materials, interact and design approaches to work, praising instances of progress and accomplishment (Reeves, 2006).

Davis and Yang (2009) highlighted the importance of maintaining ongoing communication and contact with parents, caregivers and families over the course of the school year. Key reasons include to make parents aware of what is happening in school regarding the curriculum, to build trust, positive school-home relationship, collaborative problem solving.

Influence of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities in building a student’s character is immense. Participation in academic and co-curricular activities increases bonding because students are reinforced by their own success experiences and enjoy the opportunity to affiliate with peers and teachers who share their interests (Hawkins and Weis, 1985). Also, Youths’ participation in structured community-based and recreational activities serves to enhance social skills, encourage positive peer interactions, create a sense of belonging beyond the family context and decrease social isolation (Morrison et al., 2005).

According to Weare (2000) mental health is a broad and multi-faceted concept and may not be defined by a single statement. She says that we need to look at the concept as socially constructed and socially defined. The notion that mental health should essentially be considered as a vital part of overall health, is gaining impetus. The notion that the physical, emotional and social needs of an individual should be recognized and maximized to reach his potential is gaining widespread acceptance. According to a WHO report ‘mental health promotion involves actions that support people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles and which create supportive healthy conditions or environments for health’.

According to Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009), developing plans to positively impact school-wide and classroom climate requires designing actions that contribute to the enhancement of students' engagement socially, academically and intellectually. They define student engagement as "the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at school (social engagement), participate in academic and non-academic activities (academic engagement), strive to meet the formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious personal investment in learning (intellectual engagement)" (p.7) child and youth engagement and empowerment are critical considerations for facilitating positive development or change (Deci & Ryan, 2007)

On execution of the present study a comprehensive knowledge about different measures or activities implemented, or followed by school and the teachers of Government schools to promote mental health of the students can be acquired. The knowledge and experience shared by the teacher are real life examples on different aspects within the context of schools. Problems faced by the teachers and how they handled those, or their opinion on different aspects relating to promotion of good mental health in the students-all these are useful knowledge for a 'to be teacher' for guiding his students in future.

VI. Objective of the Study:

- To highlight key aspects from the responses that comes up as specific measures or activities taken by school or teachers for good mental health of the children.
- To suggest ways to improve the mental health of students especially in Indian government school.

VII. Research Question

- What are the perceptible challenges faced by school teachers in maintaining good mental health in schools?
- What are the key aspects that come up as specific measures or activities taken by school or teachers for good mental health of the children?
- What are the probable ways and means to improve the mental health of students in Indian setup?

VIII. Sample of the Study

Sample for the present study were 30 Assistant Teachers from 3 different Government schools from Burdwan and Hooghly districts of West Bengal. The schools were namely TeliniparaBhadreswar High School Bhadreswar, Deshbandhu Memorial High School Chinsurah, Debipur Boys High School, Burdwan. Of the 30 Assistant Teachers, 15 were males and 15 teachers were females.

IX. Methodology of the Study:

For the present study the researcher has selected Survey Technique to understand the challenges faced by school teachers in maintaining good mental health in schools. Questionnaire was prepared and interview was conducted for the purpose. The questions for questionnaire were-

1. How far the classroom atmosphere is congenial to students? In what way do you make it student friendly?
2. What step do you take to make the classroom physically comfortable?
3. How do you promote trust, tolerance, co-operation and empathy amongst students?
4. How do you make students psychologically and emotionally safe?
5. How do you make students participate in decision making process?
6. Do you support corporal punishment? Justify.
7. How do you manage the students coming from different socio economic background?
8. Does your school have policies that contribute to the physical and emotional safety of all students? Specify.
9. How far do you accommodate the special needs of the students with exceptionalities?
10. What facility do you have in school to address the needs of physically handicapped students? Specify.
11. Does the school organize any program to promote positive mental health? What role do you play?
12. Does the school organize programs like yoga, Pranayam or other exercises to promote sound mental health?
13. How do you sensitize students against smoking, drug addiction or any other misconduct?
14. How far do you collaborate with the parents in promoting mental health amongst students?
15. Is there any partime or fulltime Psychological counsellor?
16. What sort of cultural and co-curricular activities are organized to promote positive mental health?
17. Are there any value education classes or program organized for the students?
18. Is there any orientation program or short term courses to equip teachers about mental health of the students?
19. How do you control students from not getting addicted to electronic gadgets, social networking sites?
20. What steps do you take to develop self-esteem and emotional intelligence of the students?
21. State your opinion regarding mental health of the students.

The responses were categorized into the following breakups of the whole school approach-

Social and Physical Environment of the school

a) **Classroom Atmosphere**: The classroom atmosphere is not so conducive for the students taking into aspects the condition of government schools. However there are efforts from the teachers to do the most by the use of colorful pictures, chart, model etc. to draw attention of the students and they can enjoy their learning practices. Teachers think their classroom atmosphere is not congenial to students. Lack of proper infrastructure has been blamed for this. Here also they have stressed on engaging students in sports, cultural activities to make atmosphere student friendly. Also they have highlighted on interaction between teachers and students and amongst the students themselves. This is a basic requirement to promote friendliness. One teacher specifically mentions calling students with their names which definitely reduces gap between a student and his teacher.

b) **Physical Comfortability**: The teachers help the students to resolve problems and make them comfortable. This is an important aspect since lack of proper infrastructure like lack of adequate light, airflow; sitting arrangement can bring inattentiveness to study. Any shortcoming is addressed by bringing those to the notice of the school authority and the headmaster. Also students are instructed to maintain cleanliness in classroom, to use dustbin to litter garbage. To make the classroom physically comfortable the teachers take proper initiatives by arranging sufficient benches, fans and lights. They advise their students to open the windows and doors so that classroom will be airy and they can prevent themselves from suffocation.

c) **Trust and Tolerance**: The teachers make their students involve actively in every activities of the school. They believe that active participation of the students maximizes trust, tolerance, empathy and cooperation among themselves. To promote these qualities all of the teachers have stressed on group work, i.e. engaging students in various activities like social-welfare work, quiz, sports, and subject-related projects by dividing them into groups. In these sort of activities a goal is set to student like winning a match, finishing a project, and they face challenges, problems as they try to achieve their goal. Since problem is common to all, this will bring mutual co-operation, trust, and tolerance to thrive in difficult situations, empathy towards fellow member. One teacher has proposed a personal level effort to inspire people with stories and personal experience which also can act as an enforcer to a great extent. Students can be engaged in co-operative learning where a student will help out his fellow student. This requires a significant involvement of the teacher in the process to ensure proper guidance.

d) **Decision Making**: Decision making at times gets delayed due to the existing procedural protocol. However, the teachers give the students freedom to take decision so that they should be capable of choosing the right solution in any situation they faced.

Teaching and Learning Method

a) **Socio Economic Background Of The Students**: The teachers conduct with the students tactfully by hurting nobody and them feel they are all alike though their coming from different socio economic background.

b) **Programme**: School arranged different programmes and co-curricular activities like yoga, pranayam, recitation, singing, drawing to make their students involved to promote their abilities and skill.

c) **Value Education**: The school organizes one or two value education classes in every week to make the students honest and moral.

Healthy School Policy

a) **Corporal Punishment**: The teachers do not support corporal punishment because they think corporal punishment makes one beast rather than to be a good human being. They feel that love and sympathy are more powerful than the punishment to control a class.

b) **Students With Special Needs**: The students with exceptionalities they take special care by arranging extra classes and by involving the students in different co-curricular activities.

c) **Psychological Counsellor**: School does not have any permanent or temporary counselor. But the school authority along with the teachers does counseling whenever needed by the students.

d) **Parent Teachers Meeting**: For promoting mental health of the students the school arranges guardian meeting once in a month. They think that not only the school but also the parents play important role to develop mental health of the students.

e) **Awareness against Addiction**: The teachers aware the student against drugs and smoking as it is very injurious to health. They think that the students in their adolescence period don't know the bad effect of this addiction.

Infrastructural Facility in School

School has adequate facilities to promote good mental health. The school has its own playground, sufficient number of classrooms etc. The school also has wheel chairs and other equipment for the physically challenged students.

An overall statistics about the positive and negative remarks based on response by teachers on the various domains are as under-

Table 1.2: Overall statistics about the positive and negative remarks based on response by teachers

Domains	Positive %	Negative %
Social & Physical Enviroment Of School	85	15
Teaching & Learning Method	80	20
Healthy School Policy	76	24
Infrastructural Facility In School	80	20
TOTAL	80.25	19.75

X. Interpretation:

From the analysis some key initiatives taken up by the teacher that can promote mental health of students can be identified-

1. Students should be engaged into group based activities, cultural programs, and co-curricular activity, yoga classes.
2. Students should be alerted with examples so that they don't get addicted to bad habits.
3. Value education can be imparted to students by means of stories, biography of eminent personality, real life examples etc.
4. Instead of corporal punishment, or harsh scolding, students should be made aware what is right or wrong in a good manner. Teacher should always remain alert such that bullying, mutual hatred between students do not exist inside school environment.
5. A more student-centred learning method need to be followed to encourage students' participation.
6. Students should be assigned duties, responsibilities like ensuring cleanliness of the classroom, by engaging them in various school activities.
7. Parents should also be participating in this mental health promotion process so that outside the school also the child gets a friendly, congenial environment. Parents should stay alert about the mental health of their child and guide them properly.
8. Teachers need to maintain a friendly relationship with the students. This way student will feel free to communicate with their teachers. This will help in teaching learning process and also any mental, intellectual, emotional, problems or shortcomings faced by any students can be minimized effectively. This way a teacher can become a true 'friend, philosopher, and guide' to the students.

XI. Recommendations:

1. Appointing part-time or full time counselor should be considered with utmost importance since help of an experienced or qualified personnel to address various issues like troublesome or offensive behavior of a child can be extremely useful and fruitful.
2. Separate value education classes must be arranged. Life-style education classes suitable for appropriate age group can be arranged especially for students belonging to adolescent age.
3. Full time or at least part time 'Special educator' or qualified personnel must be employed for 'special' children.
4. Infrastructure of the school must be improved so that students feel comfortable inside class room.
5. Part-time teachers can be employed to maintain a good student-teacher ratio till Government employs permanent teachers in vacant posts.
6. Transactional analysis be included in school curriculum so as to make them aware of egostates, strokes, types of transactions etc.
7. Educational technology be harnessed to develop mental health of students by using various apps in education like google classroom, edmodo, hot potato, edutech etc.

XII. Limitations of the study:

Many responses does not quite clearly relate to what was intended to ask. Those become bad data and they are duly excluded from qualitative analysis and treated accordingly in quantitative analysis.

XIII. Conclusion:

Role of a school in nourishing mental health of a child is well understood these days and providing a favorable environment is considered immensely important in this regard. Quite naturally, the teachers play the biggest role in this matter apart from school authority or parents of child. With the execution of this study, various activities or measures adopted by the teachers of a school to promote good mental health of the students of the school have been found. Some other aspects which are needed to take care of can also be realized. Overall, a comprehensive idea to promote positive mental health among the students is gained from this fieldwork.

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