Chapter 29

Supporting Students' Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being in Inclusive Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Many governments, organizations, and school boards have recently committed to focusing their attention on children's Mental Health and Emotional Well-being (MHEW) (e.g., Kidger, Gunnell, Biddle, Campbell, & Donovan, 2010; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). Although often left out of the conversation, teachers play a critical role in supporting and fostering children's MHEW. The purpose of this chapter is threefold: (1) to introduce educators to a critical mental health literacy (CMHL) approach, (2) to identify the teacher's role in supporting MHEW in inclusive classrooms, and (3) to support educators in their efforts to provide inclusive classrooms that accommodate all needs, including MHEW, through the introduction of mindfulness and critical media literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health and emotional well-being (MHEW) can have a serious impact on learning (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009). Many governments, organizations, and school boards have made commitments recently to focus their attention on children's MHEW (e.g., Kidger, Gunnell, Biddle, Campbell, & Donovan, 2010; Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC], 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2013b). Schools are recognized as significant access points to mental health, and a push for services that are more community-based supports the inclusion of schools in the goal of reach-

ing more children who are experiencing, or may experience, mental health issues (CCL, 2009; Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly, & Montgomery, 2012; Kutash, Ducknowski, & Lynn, 2006; P4E, 2013). However, researchers are currently sounding an alarm, suggesting that teachers and schools are not yet equipped to deal with the issues that arise concerning students' mental health (Bostock, Kitt, & Kitt, 2011; Kidger et al., 2010; Rothi, Leavey, & Best, 2008; Short, Ferguson, & Santor, 2009).

Overall, the purpose of this chapter is threefold: (a) to introduce educators to a critical mental health literacy (CMHL) approach, (b) to identify the teacher's role in supporting mental health and emotional well-being in inclusive classrooms, and (c) to support educators in their efforts to provide inclusive classrooms that accommodate all needs, including mental health and emotional well-being, through the introduction of mindfulness and critical media literacy.

BACKGROUND

Recent research indicates that up to 20% of children meet the criteria for a diagnosis of a mental health disorder. Of children living with a mental health disorder, fewer than 25% are receiving intervention/treatment (Lemstra, Neudorf, D'Arcy, Kunst, Warren, & Bennett, 2008; MHCC, 2014; OME, 2013b; Waddell, Offord, Shepherd, Hua, & McEwan, 2002). It is also quite possible that the number of children experiencing mental health issues is underreported, as children, especially younger ones, are often below the threshold for diagnosis because they do not yet meet the criteria.

McEwan, Waddell, and Barker (2007) argue that "evidence suggests that childhood is the optimum time to influence determinants of social and emotional well-being" (p. 471). Although often left out of the conversation, teachers play a critical role in supporting and fostering children's MHEW. They have the potential to be one of the influential determinants of social and emotional well-being about which McEwan et al. (2007) write. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) (2013) "an essential advantage of school programming is the opportunity to promote positive mental health of all students rather than focusing solely on those identified as having mental health problems" (p. 5). Due to daily teacher-student interaction, teachers are often able to recognize early signs when a child is struggling or has a change in attention, social interaction, work habits, or mood. Teachers are also in a position to model behaviours and social interactions that can help students learn how to better handle difficult situations. In addition, teachers are expected to accommodate the needs of all students—an expectation that is legislated in many regions.

Authors such as Cohall, Cohall, Dye, Dini, Vaughan, and Coots (2007), Kutash et al., (2006), Short et al. (2009), and People for Education (2013) reiterate the importance of schools as key venues for delivering and promoting particular health messages related to student and teacher well-being. In Cohall et al.'s (2007) study, an overwhelming majority of teachers confirmed that they had been approached by students at least one to three times per semester regarding personal health/emotional issues and had overheard students discussing health issues in the halls at least once a week. Consequently, these types of interactions charge teachers with a front-line level of responsibility. This responsibility reframes the role of the teacher as being much more supportive than many would believe (Graham, 2013; Rothi et al., 2008), but it does not translate into a medical or diagnostic role.

Walter, Gouze, and Lim (2006) argue that a lack of information and training for teachers is the greatest barrier to overcoming the seeming increase of mental health issues in schools. Unfortunately, their

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