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# Mind matters: Mental Health Literacy as a Pathway to Adolescents' Well-being

Arman Fatma

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Educational Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

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## Abstract

Mental health is an integral component of overall well-being of any person. It plays a crucial role in individuals' functioning, productivity, and social participation. In recent years, increasing mental health challenges among school-aged children and adolescents have drawn attention to the importance of mental health literacy (MHL) within educational settings. This paper presents a comprehensive review of literature on mental health literacy with a specific focus on adolescents, teachers, and parents within the school ecosystem. The review highlights the critical role of teachers and parents in identifying early signs of mental health difficulties, reducing stigma, and promoting appropriate help-seeking behaviours. The paper further examines the emphasis placed on mental health and well-being in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and critically analyses the gaps between policy intentions and implementation practices.

**Key words:** Mental health, Adolescents, well-being, policymakers, teachers, parents

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## Introduction

According to the WHO constitution, "*Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*". This definition implies that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities; it is a state of well-being in which an individual recognizes his or her own abilities, is able to cope with life's normal stresses, to work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community. Mental health is an integral part of general health, has intrinsic value for the individual, society, and culture, and is vital to the well-being and operation of individuals, families, communities, and societies. Mental health is seen as affecting one's abilities to function and make the most of the opportunities that are available, and to participate fully with family, workplace, community and peers.

There is a close link between physical and mental health, as they affect each other directly and indirectly. It has a mutual relationship with the well-being and productivity of a society and its members and is essential for the well-being and functioning of individuals (GOI, 2020). It refers to the state of a person's mind, both their emotions and thoughts. The term thoughts refer to our cognitive functioning which includes different mental abilities like learning a new concept, exercising powers of reasoning, remembering or retaining information, problem-solving and decision-making skills as well as being able to pay attention.

A healthy mindset will be a greater investment for an individual. A healthy mindset is the key to achieving universal health, equitable access and human rights, social inclusion and equality, and sustainable economic development (Votruba et al., 2014). A goal of mental health establishment, health literacy is referred to be a health determinant factor (Nutbeam, 1994). The ability to access, absorbs, and comprehends fundamental health information and services in order to make informed health decisions are known as health literacy. It has evolved into a contributor to health status (Nutbeam, 2000).

### **Mental Health Literacy (MHL)**

The concept of mental health literacy was first proposed by Anthony Jorm in 1997. He explained that mental health literacy is science and belief of recognizing problem, management, or prevention. Jorm explained there were several components in mental health literacy such as 1) specific problem recognition or difference of a psychological distress type, 2) having proper knowledge and beliefs about certain risk factors and causes, 3) having proper understanding and knowledge about self-help intervention, 4) having knowledge and belief about professional assistance availability, 5) having attitudes to seek accurate assistance, and 6) having knowledge to seek information about mental health (Rosen et al., 2007). Initially, mental health literacy concept appeared in medical education in 1970 in the United States of America. This interest of topic has been increasing since 1990.

### **Importance of Mental Health literacy**

Mental health literacy (MHL) is increasingly recognized as a critical skill for educators to foster the emotional well-being of students. Beyond emotional well-being, MHL empowers teachers to create inclusive learning environments, improve classroom management, and address behavioural issues effectively. It also enhances educators' ability to identify early warning signs of mental health problems, thereby enabling timely interventions that support students' academic success and overall

personal growth. Moreover, promoting MHL within schools contributes to building a culture of empathy and resilience, extending benefits to families and the broader community. Thus, MHL includes the knowledge and skills required to identify mental health issues, reduce stigma, and promote appropriate help-seeking behaviours.

Studies by Jorm (2000) and Kutcher et al. (2016) highlight the critical role of MHL in reducing stigma and fostering help-seeking behaviours. Teacher-focused studies emphasize the need for professional development to equip educators with the skills to support student mental health effectively. Additionally, MHL empowers educators and parents to promote a positive school culture by integrating mental health topics into classroom discussions, reducing misconceptions, and encouraging open dialogue about mental health.

By fostering a supportive learning environment, MHL not only enhances individual student outcomes but also contributes to overall school performance and community well-being. This holistic approach is crucial for addressing the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges among students and equipping teachers and parents to be proactive facilitators of change

### **Relevance of MHL for Adolescents**

Adolescents face unique social, emotional, and academic challenges. Middle school students typically fall into early adolescence, a critical stage of development encompassing the ages of 10 to 14 years. This period is marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes, making students more susceptible to challenges like anxiety, stress, and self-doubt. Addressing these issues early can yield long-term benefits for their emotional resilience and overall well-being.

Developmental theories provide valuable insights into this stage. According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, early adolescence corresponds to the "Industry vs. Inferiority" stage, where children strive to develop a sense of competence and accomplishment. Without proper support, they risk feelings of inadequacy. Teachers and parents play a crucial role in fostering this sense of competence and mitigating negative emotions. Similarly, Piaget's cognitive development theory identifies this stage as a transition into formal operational thinking, highlighting students' increasing ability to process abstract concepts and reason logically. However, they require structured guidance to manage stress and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

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Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory further emphasizes the importance of supportive environments, including families, schools, and communities, in shaping adolescents' mental health and overall development. Together, these theories underline the necessity of mental health literacy among teachers and parents, who collaboratively influence students' developmental outcomes. By addressing mental health challenges during this critical stage, educators and families can create an environment that nurtures emotional resilience, identity formation, and academic success. Given these developmental vulnerabilities, adolescents represent a critical population for mental health promotion and early intervention.

### **Role of a Teacher in MHL**

Teachers are the valuable partners for mental health professionals at schools. Teachers are often the first adults to observe changes in students' behaviour and emotional functioning. Consequently, adequate mental health literacy enables teachers to identify early warning signs, provide initial support, and facilitate timely referrals to mental health professionals (Severson et al., 2007).

Mental health literacy not only aids teachers in supporting students' mental health but also enhances their ability to manage classroom dynamics effectively. Teachers with high mental health literacy are better equipped to foster a positive school climate, which is essential for both teaching and learning outcomes. They can serve as role models for students, demonstrating effective coping strategies and reducing the stigma associated with mental health problems.

By understanding the signs of mental health issues, teachers can intervene early, preventing the escalation of challenges that might hinder academic performance and peer relationships. Additionally, they might play important roles in school-based mental health intervention programs (Ringwalt et al., 2010).

Low teacher literacy at school about mental health problems experienced by learners led to serious impacts for them.

### **Role of Parents in Mental Health Literacy**

Parents play a crucial role in fostering mental health literacy (MHL), as they serve as the primary support system for children during their developmental years. Research by Jorm (2000) emphasizes that improving parental MHL enhances their ability to recognize early signs of mental health challenges in children, which in turn facilitates timely interventions. Parental MHL has been linked to reduced stigma

around mental health issues and increased openness to seeking professional help (Sawrikar & Muir, 2010).

Moreover, parents' understanding of mental health significantly influences their ability to create nurturing and supportive home environments. A study by Lawrence et al. (2019) found that parents with higher levels of MHL demonstrated better communication with their children, enabling them to discuss emotional challenges effectively. This proactive communication reduces the likelihood of internalized stress and anxiety among children.

The challenges faced by parents in rural and under-resourced areas, where limited access to information and resources restricts their ability to support their children's mental health needs effectively (Reupert et al., 2021). In such contexts, parental MHL programs that provide practical strategies and foster collaboration with schools have proven beneficial in bridging these gaps.

Parents, alongside teachers, act as co-creators of supportive ecosystems for children, as emphasized by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The alignment of efforts between parents and schools ensures consistency in addressing children's mental health needs across different environments (Swadi, 2013).

Strengthening parental MHL, therefore, becomes essential in building a holistic approach to fostering students' emotional well-being and resilience.

### **NEP 2020's Emphasis on Mental Health**

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes holistic education, prioritizing life skills, emotional well-being, and mental health. This policy uniquely advocates for integrating mental health awareness into the school curriculum through initiatives such as wellness centres, life skills training, and counselling services.

The policy's focus on holistic education aligns with global efforts to integrate mental health into school curricula. NEP 2020 emphasizes the inclusion of life skills, emotional well-being, and mental health education as core components of the curriculum. It advocates for initiatives such as the establishment of wellness centres in schools, the integration of life skills training into the syllabus, and the deployment of trained counsellors to support student, teacher and parent well-being.

Additionally, NEP 2020 underscores the importance of reducing examination stress and creating a supportive school environment to foster holistic development. It

advocates for the establishment of counselling services and wellness programs in schools, highlighting the role of teachers as key stakeholders in this process.

### **Policy practice Gaps**

Despite these goals, empirical evidence suggests that schools face significant challenges in operationalizing these directives due to a lack of trained personnel and resources. Furthermore, the policy's emphasis on fostering an inclusive and stress-free learning environment underscores the necessity of equipping teachers with the knowledge and tools to address students' mental health needs effectively. This highlights the importance of targeted interventions and continuous professional development programs for teachers.

While the policy advocates for integrating mental health awareness into the school curriculum, the preparedness of teachers and parents to implement these goals remains underexplored. Teachers often face challenges such as a lack of formal training, insufficient resources, and limited awareness of mental health issues, which hinder their ability to support students effectively. Teachers' and parents' mental health literacy and their attitudes toward fostering student well-being are crucial to bridging the gap between policy and practice.

### **Challenges Faced by Teachers and parents**

Research by Rickwood et al. (2007) and Goodfellow et al. (2022) identifies common barriers, including stigma, lack of training, and limited resources. These barriers often manifest differently in rural and urban school settings, especially in the Indian context. In rural areas, limited access to mental health resources and trained professionals exacerbates the challenges teachers face.

Schools in urban areas, while often better resourced, may encounter high levels of academic pressure and competition, contributing to stress among both teachers and students. Understanding these contextual differences is crucial for designing targeted interventions that address the unique needs of each setting.

Indian studies, such as Kumar and Singh (2018), underline the contextual challenges faced by teachers and parents in resource-constrained environments.

### **Conclusion**

Mental health literacy not only aids teachers in supporting students' mental health but also enhances their ability to manage classroom dynamics effectively. By understanding the signs of mental health issues, teachers can intervene early,

preventing the escalation of challenges that might hinder academic performance and peer relationships. Furthermore, teachers with high mental health literacy are better equipped to foster a positive school climate, which is essential for both teaching and learning outcomes. They can serve as role models for students, demonstrating effective coping strategies and reducing the stigma associated with mental health.

Evidence-based interventions, such as those reviewed by Wei et al. (2015), suggest that structured training programs and school-wide mental health initiatives can significantly improve teachers' confidence and competence in supporting student well-being. These interventions can include comprehensive professional development modules tailored to address region-specific challenges, mentorship programs to guide teachers in applying mental health strategies, and collaborations with mental health professionals to provide ongoing support. Additionally, leveraging technology, such as online mental health training platforms, can ensure accessibility and scalability, particularly in under resourced areas.

Despite growing policy emphasis and empirical evidence supporting mental health literacy, limited research has examined the preparedness of teachers and parents within the Indian schooling context, underscoring the need for focused scholarly inquiry.

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