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Importance of Mental Health Awareness for Elementary School Students

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Senior Capstone

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Abstract

There are a variety of benefits from including school-based mental health awareness programs in elementary schools. Without proper education, students will not know what mental health is and how to seek help. Through the use of a literature review, teacher interview, and surveys, this capstone examines the importance of mental health awareness for elementary school students. Mental health can impact students' lives in such a negative way. It is extremely important for children to be aware that it is okay to struggle and learn how to properly deal with their emotions. It is also especially important for schools and educators to have access to curriculums and protocols put in place in order to best benefit the students' learning environment.

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Introduction and Background

Why do people think about particular things? What makes someone who they are? Why are some people different from others? I have always been interested in psychology, and the way people think. The brain is extremely fascinating to me, and the way people think about particular topics such as mental health and the stigmas around this topic. I am also extremely interested in this topic because I know many people that have struggled with mental health issues and I see how it affects them, their daily life, and the people that are in their life. I know the other consequences that mental health issues can have on a person and what other diseases they can lead to. I witnessed this first hand in my family, with the effects of my sister's mental health and her struggles. It is an extremely difficult topic to discuss, but I believe that it is so so important for everyone to be aware of what mental health issues are, and how we are able to support the ones we love.

I also am really interested in this topic because of the experiences I have had while service learning here at California State University Monterey Bay. During my very first semester of service learning, I was placed in a kindergarten classroom in a local elementary school. There was one little boy who definitely struggled more than his fellow classmates. One day when he was at school, he stated that he wanted to kill himself. Hearing this broke my heart. How can a kindergartener say this? How can they know what this means? What is their home life like? These were all questions that rushed to the forefront of my mind as soon as I heard this. This is one of the reasons why I want to specifically focus on elementary schools. I believe that mental health awareness is important for everyone. Focusing on children who are in elementary school could hopefully impact their outlook on mental health and the stigmas surrounding it. Elementary school can be a very stressful time for children, as it is when they are first starting

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out in school and trying to get into the groove of things. In regards to kindergarten, that could be the first time they are ever in school. It is important for students to understand their emotions and what those emotions may mean.

The following research shows a lot about this idea of mental health issues and disorders among children. Flaherty (1996) says, “The estimated prevalence of psychiatric disorders among children is 17-22% with a diagnosable mental disorder, and 12% clinically maladjusted” (p. 341). Flaherty (1996) also discusses how 7.5 million out of 63 million children are in need of mental health services; thus, showing the crisis and necessity of mental health awareness in elementary schools. These numbers are extremely high and should be alarming to anyone who sees them. Why do so many children struggle with mental health issues and how are we able to help support them in being aware of these disorders? Rossen and Cowan (2014) discussed the various mental health issues that are common in young children, which include depression, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), emotional behavior disorders, and obsessive compulsive disorder. Students who have a mental health disorder typically engage in more risky behavior, such as physical aggression and bullying. This shows the impact that mental health issues can have on a young child and influence their everyday life behaviors. It is important for schools to implement mental health awareness and self-care tactics in order for students to avoid this kind of behavior. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) recognizes the “direct link between students’ mental and behavioral wellness and overall positive student achievement, school climate, high school graduation rates, and the prevention of risky behaviors and disciplinary incidents” (ESSA Mental and Behavioral Health Services for School Psychologists, n.d., para. 2). The fact that a well-known organization, such as ESSA supports

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mental health school-based programs is another reason for educators, parents, and students to take this issue seriously. This demonstrates that others have found this topic to be of importance.

The primary question I propose to seek the answer to in my project is: *How is mental health awareness important for elementary school students?* The secondary questions I propose to answer include: (1) *What does research say about the importance of mental health awareness for elementary school students?* (2) *Why is it important for students to be aware of mental health issues?* (3) *How does mental health affect students' learning, developmental growth and overall well-being?* (4) *How do teachers know that their students have mental health issues?* (5) *Given student mental health issues at hand, are there procedures in place at school for teachers?* (6) *Are there resources for teachers to help students with mental health issues?* My purpose for this paper is to understand the impact and effects of mental health on elementary school students, and what the benefits are of implementing mental health awareness in schools.

Literature Review

In order to conduct research for my capstone and synthesize my work, I have developed a literature review of what supports my research topic. This review is based on already conducted research on my topic and will include statistics on how many children are impacted by mental health issues. This review will look at the positive benefits of implementing mental health awareness tactics in the classroom.

There are millions of elementary students that attend school all across the United States today. Through the extensive research on mental health issues within young children as well as the impact it has on children's schooling experience, I have learned how important it truly is to have some sort of awareness programs placed in schools. Through the research I learned more about mental health issues and the benefits of mental health awareness programs in schools.

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There is also an extremely negative stigma around mental health illnesses.. An article written by Bulanda et al. (2014) indicates that, “Mental health stigma is understood as the result of four social–cognitive processes: cues, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination” (p. 74).

There are many views that we see about mental health issues on tv, media, and in our society. All of these misconceptions about mental health can lead to major prejudice towards people with mental health issues (Bulanda et al., 2014). According to Salerno (2016), “Stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness and low mental health literacy have been identified as links to social adversity, and barriers to seeking and adhering to treatment among adolescents suffering from mental illness” (para. 1). There is the possibility of improving the stigmatization around mental health awareness by implementing school-based programs. “Stigma surrounding mental illness remains a significant barrier to help-seeking behavior, case recognition, and effective treatment” (Lauria-Horner et al., 2004, p. 209). With the reduction of stigmas around mental health issues, students will also not be as nervous in going to seek help for any issues that are at hand.

There are multiple articles written by school teachers that talk about the importance of mental health awareness in schools. McLean (2019) talks about how many students are in school for the majority of days, so it only makes sense how a curriculum around mental health should begin at school. Barile (2020) says, “Mental health awareness is an important issue for all educators, who are often the first line of defense for their students. Education professionals have recognized the impact that a student's mental health has on learning and achievement, and they realize that there's a great deal that can be done to help students with mental health issues” (para. 1). For many teachers, they feel that they have this responsibility to be there for their students and have a first-hand impact on the impacts mental health has on their learning.

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There are many negative impacts on students' lives if mental health awareness is not implemented into schools. Rossen and Cowan (2014) say, “the consequences of untreated mental health problems are significant and can ripple across a classroom or entire school community. They can touch every aspect of school life including discipline and safety, school climate, family engagement, instructional time, and teacher stress.” Mental health does not only affect students' lives, but also others around them. It may affect students the most, but they are not the only ones impacted, especially in a classroom setting. “Students can also have difficulty regulating emotions and maintaining friendships, which can lead to a sense of isolation and disconnectedness. Some can be so immobilized by fear, depression, or anxiety that they avoid school completely” (Rossen & Cowan, 2014). Without being aware of how to properly control one's emotions, students can be left feeling helpless and hopeless. A study was done by Yamaguchi, et al (2011) of possible strategies that are able to be used in schools in order to destigmatize mental health and bring awareness to the topic. There were positive impacts on the students that participated in these studies in regards to their outlook on mental health and willingness to seek help. Yamaguchi, et al (2011) notes “actual behavioral changes, and reported that students voluntarily visited the local centre for people with mental illness after the educational intervention, [and] evaluated the participants' awareness of their own mental health or help-seeking intentions” (para. 14). This shows the importance of educational interventions, and school-based mental health awareness programs to positively impact students' outlook and feelings towards mental health.

There are many opportunities to implement mental health awareness in schools. Many schools are now realizing the importance of mental health awareness and implementing curriculums into their classes. McLean (2019) says, “Many children feel anxious, ranging from

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mild symptoms to more severe forms, such as panic attacks. When these symptoms are ignored, they can lead to depression, lack of performance and increased risk of substance abuse” (para. 13). Many students are anxious because of schoolwork, friendships, and being bullied. By implementing mental health awareness and teaching students how to cope we will not be ignoring these symptoms. A study was completed in Chile where a mental health program Skills for Life (SFL) used standardized tests to conduct research on the impact and risk factors mental health has on future academic achievement (Murphy et al., 2015). This study really provided a wonderful example on how positively beneficial programs such as SFL can be if implemented properly.

There are already some systems and acts that are put in place to ensure every student succeeds. These are seen through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The ESSA, “provides significant opportunity to increase access to comprehensive school psychological services to help improve student and school outcomes...[and] expands emphasis on and funding for efforts to meet students’ mental and behavioral health needs” (ESSA Mental and Behavioral Health Services for School Psychologists, n.d., para. 1). It is wonderful to already have this act put in place because it shows the recognition and importance of discussing mental health. There is funding already put in place by the ESSA for schools to use for support and improvement, for example, the use of school psychologists. Other ways schools are able to use funding include, “school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports, and trauma-informed and evidence-based school-based mental health services” (Pellitt, 2016, para. 4). The NCLB acts main goal is to promote educational services for all children and to advance school-based mental health (Daly & Burke, et al.). Although this act has been put in place to help benefit students' mental health, there are

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some complications with the process of implementation. Thus, showing the necessity for a better implementation system around mental health awareness.

Methods and Procedures

To really learn more about the impact of mental health awareness or lack thereof on elementary school students, I turned to local elementary schools in the Monterey area. Throughout my time at California State University Monterey Bay, I completed multiple service learning courses. I was able to turn to the schools I completed my service learning at as a resource to help me complete my research. Along with looking at local elementary schools, I also turned to already conducted research in order to help me become more knowledgeable on the topic of mental health and see what research already had to say about mental health awareness in elementary schools.

I interviewed one fourth grade elementary school teacher (see Appendix A), and surveyed 125 participants over the age of eighteen (see Appendix C). I decided to make all of the interviews and surveys online in order to allow for the most flexibility with the participants. I chose to interview these participants because I felt they would give me the most insight and knowledge that would be beneficial to my capstone paper. Through the teacher interview (see Appendix A) I was able to understand what kinds of resources were available to the students and teachers at the school in regards to mental health. From this interview, I also learned about the impact and roles that teachers have in influencing the students' awareness of mental health. From the survey to college students and above, I gained a better understanding of when people learned about mental health, and what resources their schools had.

When developing my interview questions, I wanted to use words such as “how” and “what” allowing for open-ended answers. I wanted both the teacher and other participants to be

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able to explain their answers, rather than a simple “yes” or “no”. Although a few of my questions were solely “yes” or “no” questions, I had follow-up questions to gather more information. After establishing my interview questions, I then had to come up with who I wanted to interview. I knew that I wanted to interview elementary school teachers, as well as elementary school students.

When developing my survey questions, I used a process similar to my teacher interview questions. I knew that many of my participants were going to have busy lives, so I wanted to make sure the survey took less than ten minutes to complete. I did not want to use close-ended questions, because that information would not be as beneficial to me if I were to use open-ended questions. With the benefits of technology right now, I decided to create my survey using a Google Form. This way, I was easily able to send my survey to my participants, and they were able to take it at a time that worked best for them. I really also enjoyed the use of Google Forms, because I was able to easily compile my data into a spreadsheet with just the click of a button.

Both the literature review as well as the research I conducted truly helped me gain a better understanding of mental health awareness of elementary school students. In addition, this research helped me answer my secondary research questions. All of the information, both gathered and researched, was thoroughly analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of learning about mental health. The results from my literature review and interviews will be discussed in the next section.

Results and Discussion

After spending a few weeks establishing my interview and survey questions, I was able to collect all of my necessary data. From the interview and surveys, I was truly able to understand what it was like for both teachers and students alike in the classroom around mental health issues

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and awareness. The purpose of this capstone was to identify and describe an issue that I saw relevant to elementary schools today. There has been a great deal of research already done on this topic and how we are able to implement school-based mental health awareness programs into schools. After extensive research and data collected in the field, I believe that I am now able to properly answer my secondary questions.

(1) What does research say about mental health awareness for elementary school students?

There is a lot of research that has already been completed about mental health awareness for elementary school students. I have discussed a lot of this in the literature section of this paper.

According to Mental Health by the Numbers (2019), “1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year. 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among people [as young as] 10.” The American Psychiatric Association states, “Fifty percent of mental illness begins by age 14” (Parkeh, 2018). These statistics are astounding to see how young mental health issues begin. This shows just how important it is to implement awareness in elementary schools to help possibly prevent students' mental health issues from worsening over time. Teachers also describe the importance of mental health awareness and how it can reduce factors that are related to students' illnesses. McLean (2019) talks about the importance of early intervention and possibly signs that appear. He says, “It can reduce the severity of the illness, and it may even be possible to prevent or delay the development of a major mental illness. Some of these signs are apathy, feelings of disconnection, nervousness, unusual behavior, withdrawal, mood changes and a drop in performance” (para. 23). Barile (2020) states, “Teachers and students should be provided with

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ways to recognize signs of developing mental health problems, and there should be opportunities around the awareness and management of mental health crises” (para. 8). Both of these teachers describe the importance of mental health awareness and how it can reduce factors that are related to student’s illnesses.

There are many views that we see about mental health issues on TV, media, and in our society. All of these misconceptions about mental health can lead to major prejudice towards people with mental health issues (Bulanda et al., 2014). According to Salerno (2016), “Stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness and low mental health literacy have been identified as links to social adversity, and barriers to seeking and adhering to treatment among adolescents suffering from mental illness” (para. 1). There is the possibility of improving the stigmatization around mental health awareness by implementing school-based programs. Barile (2020) indicates that, “Mental health awareness is an important issue for all educators, who are often the first line of defense for their students. Education professionals have recognized the impact that a student's mental health has on learning and achievement, and they realize that there's a great deal that can be done to help students with mental health issues” (para. 1).

Overall, the research seen in my literature review section does show the benefits of having school-based mental health awareness programs implemented. Although there has been a good amount of research done on schools that already have programs or curricula put in place, there is always room for improvement. None of these programs are perfect. The research on how many students and young children are diagnosed with a mental health issue shows how important it is to have these school-based mental health awareness programs in place. There is an overwhelmingly positive response seen in students when these programs are in schools.

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(2) *Why is it important for students to be aware of mental health issues?*

Both research and surveys indicate how important it is for students to be aware of mental health issues. Mental health does not only affect students' lives, but also others around them. Rosen and Cowen (2014) reveal that mental health may affect students the most, but they are not the only ones impacted, especially in a classroom setting. "Students can also have difficulty regulating emotions and maintaining friendships, which can lead to a sense of isolation and disconnectedness. Some can be so immobilized by fear, depression, or anxiety that they avoid school completely." Without being aware of how to properly control one's emotions, students can be left feeling helpless and hopeless.

Based on the survey (Appendix C), one of the questions I pose to participants was, "In your opinion, how would mental health awareness tactics in the classroom benefit students?" Although this is their opinion, research has also backed up these ideas and how they would be beneficial for students. This is seen in my paper both in the above question, as well as the literature review. Based on the data, there is an overwhelming amount of responses from this survey and interview question. Every single person that participated in this survey believed that in some shape or form awareness around mental health should be implemented in the classroom and it would benefit the students. Not only should it be implemented in classrooms, but the sooner the better. One respondent said:

Educating children about the definitions of different feelings and emotions so they can identify with them and figure out better what next action they should take if the feelings are consistently negative. A lot of children with anxiety, depression, etc just think it's "normal" until someone else tells them otherwise. Therapy should be seen as an opportunity for growth rather than being seen as what crazy people go to. Normalizing mental health and the different things people have to do to balance out their positive/negative feelings should be seen in a positive light along with understanding everyone is different. Some medication works for some people and other times it doesn't. Sometimes the counselors at school aren't qualified in what they're doing. Let the children know it's not their fault when they come across a method that may not fit them. Mental health is a journey, not a one stop shop. It's something that you will continue for the rest of your life, not something that once you get an A on you'll stop (Survey Respondent A, Personal Communication, 7 March, 2020).

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I feel that this respondent truly summed up perfectly what many of the other respondents stated as well. Another main reason that many believed it would be important is because it destigmatizes mental health, and it lets students know that they are not alone. It is extremely important for students to realize that they are able to seek help when they need it.

According to the one teacher interview (Appendix A) teacher A was able to give me insight on this question as well. Teacher A said:

Students today are bombarded with multiple stresses in their personal lives. From divorced homes, poverty, multiple families living in one household, domestic violence, etc. Kids with trauma come to school and don't know how to act. They just know they are upset and angry and don't know how to act. When students are aware of their own personal feelings and how to deal with them it empowers them to take charge of their personal well-being and not feel so helpless. Mental issues are so important each and every day, that is why we have and teach a social emotional curriculum (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 5 March 2020).

There is an extreme amount of pressure that is already put on kids at school, and from their home life. Being aware of what mental health is and tactics for students to use in order to cope with the possible mental health issues would greatly benefit students.

(3) How does it affect students' learning, developmental growth and overall well-being?

There are many positive benefits from implementing school-based mental health awareness programs in schools. If the programs are not implemented in schools, they can have negative impacts on students' learning, developmental growth and overall well-being. From a study done in Chile on the benefits of academic achievement with the implementation of a school-based mental health awareness program; Murphy et al (2015) revealed the "results suggest that mental health measures may be among the most important predictors of future academic performance for elementary school children and may therefore be useful in identifying students who might benefit from preventive interventions" (p. 253). This study really provided a

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wonderful example on how positively beneficial programs such as SFL can be if implemented properly. In an article, Cowan (2012) explains, “May is National Mental Health Awareness Month. This is a great time to highlight the importance of mental wellness and school-based mental health services to children’s positive learning and development” (p. 28). Using a month out of the school year to solely focus on mental health awareness can greatly benefit students learning and development. Based on the survey (Appendix C), the survey respondent said:

Students may also feel less ashamed when admitting if mental health is impacting their school work, or even might be able to recognize that their mental health is impacting their work in ways they didn’t realize. Bad mental health can impact energy and focus, which are both really important in the success of a student. Personally, without those two things, bad mental health made me feel stupid and hopeless, but it wasn’t until someone explained to me how mental health affects your ability to function properly and learn that I realized I wasn’t dumb, I just needed help (Survey Respondent B, Personal Communication, 8 March 2020.)

This response was received from someone who has struggled with mental health issues. This survey response was as a first-hand account on how implementing awareness in their classroom could have benefitted their learning experience, academic achievement, and overall well-being. Students should never have to feel as if they are alone or “stupid” for not doing well in school. There are many factors that play a role in students learning. Feedback and insight were also received from teacher A interview. Based on teacher A interview (Appendix A). She stated:

If a student is unaware of how to handle his/her emotions it can severely impede their learning. As an adult we are able to regulate our emotions with techniques such as exercise, therapy and or talking to a friend. Children need to be taught empathy, self-care, and compassion to themselves and others. If they don’t have these skills it is likely they will not be able to function in daily school life properly (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 5 March 2020).

Children do not yet have the skills and tools to regulate their own emotions. When students become frustrated for not understanding a particular topic in school, it can take a toll on their mental health. Listening to this teacher speak, it is important for students to be aware of their emotions and how much their emotions can truly impact their own learning. From both the

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survey and teacher interview, as well research from literature review, this really shows how important it is for children/students to be aware of mental health issues.

(4) How do teachers know that their students have mental health issues?

There are various ways in which teachers are able to become aware of whether or not their students have mental health issues. From the teacher interview (Appendix A), teacher A said, “Students who typically have a mental health issue will have either a 504 or an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in place” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 5 March 2020). A 504 plan is used for students with disabilities or mental health issues in order to ensure academic success. That way they will know of any predetermined conditions of their students (if possible). This will most likely happen when the student has been diagnosed outside of school. If the student is diagnosed in the school, then they will receive either a 504 or IEP later. These are a few ways the teacher described to me they know that their student has a mental health issue.

In addition, there are also prominent signs that teachers may be able to look for in their own students. If teachers are in any way suspicious about their students having a mental health issue or being at harm, they should reach out to their support system at the school in order to ensure the student receives the proper tools. Barile (2020) says, “I noticed that Melina no longer did her homework, and she didn't even try on her essays. Previously meticulous in her appearance, Melina would come to school disheveled, wearing the same clothes. When I tried to speak to her, she was uncharacteristically distant and withdrawn. Because I had some training in mental health awareness, I knew Melina was in some sort of trouble” (para. 2). She is describing clearly visible signs that many teachers will also be able to see. Barile states how she has had

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some training in mental health, so if a teacher does not have any training then maybe a change in attitude is the first thing they can recognize in their students. Not all of the signs will be the same, but they may look similar.

(5) Given student mental health issues at hand, are there procedures in place at school for teachers?

Certain procedures are followed in order to make sure students get the proper help suited to their particular circumstance. From the teacher interview (Appendix A), there are procedures in place at a local elementary school for teachers to take when they become aware that their student has a mental health issue. Teacher A said, “If a student is suspected of having a mental health issue as a general education teacher I can make a recommendation for a referral for an SST, Student Study Team, to further assess the situation.” (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 5 March 2020). As one could see, at this particular school, there are procedures in place for teachers to take when assessing student’s mental health issues.

(6) Are there resources for teachers to help students with mental health issues?

Based on research, there are resources available for teachers, such as curricula and programs that can be implemented in the school. A study was completed in Chile where a mental health program Skills for Life (SFL), Murphy et al (2015) used standardized tests to conduct research on the impact and risk factors mental health has on future academic achievement. Their “results suggest that mental health measures may be among the most important predictors of future academic performance for elementary school children and may therefore be useful in identifying students who might benefit from preventive interventions” (p. 253). This study really

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provided a wonderful example on how positively beneficial programs such as SFL can be if implemented properly.

There are resources that teachers have available to assist students with their mental health issues. From the one teacher interview (Appendix A), insight was gained on one current elementary school in the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) and the many other resources that were available to them in regards to mental health. Teacher A said that they also benefit from these resources because it provides them with the appropriate teaching strategies specifically for that student. For the most part, both the students and teachers are able to benefit from these resources. However, they sometimes have their downfalls. Teacher A stated that there are some challenges in regards to the timing of the assessment of the student to when they initially receive the resources necessary for them to succeed. If that particular strategy does not work, then the student will be reassessed and the process will start over. This seems extremely time consuming for the teacher, student, and staff at the school.

Based on the survey (Appendix C), feedback was also received from teachers. Because this was an anonymous survey, I was unaware of whom took it and whom they were. Although it was an anonymous survey, I gained great insight from experiences many of my participants had, which was extremely beneficial to my capstone paper. I think that this is a wonderful resource for teachers to have at hand in order to better support all of their students, especially students that struggle with mental health issues. One survey respondent said:

I am a kindergarten teacher. At my school we adopted a program this year called Second Step that helps children develop social and emotional skills. We also have a counselor available that we can refer students to (with signed parental consent). I currently have two of my kindergartners working with the counselor. One for social issues and the other for emotional (Survey Respondent, Personal Communication, 8 March 2020).

After reviewing their response, I conducted more research on what Second Step was, and found out that they are programs in which schools are able to purchase the program to either use in

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their individual classroom or school/school district as a whole. The following image from Second Step's website gives a brief description of what this program is (See Appendix D). Overall, this program will truly benefit student's emotional well-being. Second Step offers programs ranging from pre-K to middle school, as well as "out-of-school" time for kindergarteners to fifth grade. The elementary school program focuses on the following:

A Foundation for Life

The elementary years bring exciting new challenges and opportunities. It's the ideal time to nurture social-emotional competence and develop foundational learning skills.

The Second Step K-5 Suite provides a fully integrated framework for protecting elementary school students and promoting their social, emotional, and academic success. By combining our Bullying Prevention Unit and Child Protection Unit with our foundational Second Step Social-Emotional Learning, we've simplified an approach for safe, supportive schools. Each component's lessons are age-appropriate, easy to teach, and fun to learn. Online resources and training are also included.



As mentioned in the response to my second question in this discussion the teacher stated, Mental health issues are so important each and every day; that is why we have and teach a social emotional curriculum, thus, showing how multiple schools are taking advantage of a social-emotional curriculum. It may not be the same one, but it shows how teachers are aware of the importance and impact these curriculums have on their students. This is a wonderful resource for teachers to take advantage of or even ask their own school's principal to consider purchasing in order for student's to implement awareness around mental health issues.

Through my research of interviews and surveys, I have genuinely learned about the positive benefits of mental health awareness in elementary schools. I believe that there is an impact that curricula can have on students' mental health as well as the overall stigmas around

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mental health and seeking help. From having such a personal experience with this topic, I am able to see the negative impacts in a student's life if they are not aware of the emotions they are feeling. As a future educator, it will be my goal to ensure my students feel safe in my classroom and that it is a safe place to discuss how they are feeling with no judgements. By implementing a social-emotional curriculum into the classrooms, students will be able to learn more about mental health and will hold a positive impact in their life. Although, with all these positives there were some negatives in regards to the research I personally conducted.

Problems and Limitations

There were a few problems that I encountered throughout my research. The first issue being the teacher's I reached out to did not allow their students to participate in the anonymous survey. I understood the concerns they had about surveying their students about mental health (see Appendix B), because after all it is an extremely touchy topic. I also understood that kindergartners for example should not be questioned about their mental health, because I do not want to expose them to something their parents may be upset about. This is why I only asked teachers who taught elementary grades three through five, but even then they were still not willing to participate.

Because of the problem stated above, I wanted to conduct some sort of survey to learn about anyone's schooling experience. This is when I created my survey to ask current college students and anyone older about their schooling experience from elementary school to high school, and when they learned about mental health (see Appendix C). I was overwhelmingly excited at the wonderful responses I received. Although they were not from elementary school students like I had hoped, I was glad to have at least some data collection that I conducted on my own.

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Another problem I encountered included the teacher interviews. I had emailed about five teachers from various elementary schools in the Monterey Peninsula area. I received responses from a few of the teachers saying they were willing to participate in the interview, but ultimately I only received one response. I conducted these teacher interviews via Google Forms by sending them a link. I sent the link to all the teachers who said they were willing to participate, but still only received one response. I was hoping to have received more information and input from teachers of elementary school students.

The last major problem that I faced was the pandemic we are currently facing, which is COVID-19. This of course abruptly stopped all in-field research and really limited me on what I was able to do research wise. Due to this situation, California State University Monterey Bay's President shifted all instruction to online modules via Zoom for the rest of the semester. In addition, the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom, put a shelter in place order for the state through the end of April 2020, as well as a social distancing requirement of 6 feet. With all of these restrictions put into place our interviews and surveys were all suspended by my capstone professor. Thankfully, I had already conducted some surveys and interviews to help with my project.

Recommendation

My recommendation would be to provide elementary schools with the tools and resources to implement a school-based mental health awareness program. These recommendations will be extremely useful and of interest to anyone who is involved in an elementary school such as teachers, principals, nurses, other staff, parents and the students. I believe by providing a curriculum that is based on mental health and social emotional components, such as Second Step would be extremely beneficial. I believe students need to be aware of their emotions, and that it

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is okay to feel sad or hurt sometimes. It is also really important to understand how to react when you feel those emotions. Students need to be taught emotional self-regulation, and this can be done in schools through the use of curriculum. One way this can be done is by having a feelings/emotion chart in the classroom so students are able to point to an image of how they are feeling, if they are unable to express it with words.

I would also recommend the implementation of professional counselors in the school that are easily accessible to the students. It is important for students to feel that they have a safe place on campus to go and there is someone who is able to help them. Also, having a counselor at the school is a great way to lead students to other resources in the community. The counselor will be able to meet with the teacher, student, and parents to ensure the student is succeeding. With the use of a school counselor as well, it can relieve some of the pressure on the teacher to help the student that is struggling.

Another recommendation I have is that teachers become trained on how to properly guide their students to the necessary help. If the school does not already have resources put in place at the school, then it is really important for each teacher to know simply what to look for in a student if they are struggling. A few common signs I found through my research are a great place for teachers to start if they do not have any training. I believe that it is important for teachers to also be knowledgeable on this topic and aware so they are able to help their students succeed. I would recommend that the school bring in professional counselors and have a staff meeting one day in which they can learn about all the various types of mental health issues, and the signs for the most common among elementary school children.

The main goal of these three recommendations is to ensure that everyone at the school has mental health awareness, particularly for elementary school students. Because there is such a

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high chance for teachers to have students that struggle with a mental illness, it is critical that they are aware of the signs and how to lead their students to resources at the school. Through these recommendations, both the teacher and student struggling with a mental health issue will be supported in the academic environment.

Conclusion

This capstone examines the primary research question: *How is mental health awareness important for elementary school students?* To answer this question, literature was reviewed along with action research that included interviews with in-service teachers and surveys on the importance of mental health awareness in elementary schools. An interview was conducted with a teacher in one local elementary school from the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, and 125 participants over the age of eighteen were surveyed on when they became aware of what mental health was. The information gathered was analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of mental health awareness for elementary school students.

The findings of this senior capstone research project reveal that, when a student with a mental health issue is able to receive help and learn how to deal with their emotions, their academics will be positively impacted. Students will be able to feel good about coming to school because their fellow peers will all be aware of mental health and how important it is to take care of themselves. School is already difficult enough for children, and struggling with a mental health issue makes the task of learning even more daunting. With various curricula, counselors, and teacher support, students are able to attain a positive school environment and outlook on mental health.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grade do you teach?
3. Why is it important for your students to be aware of their mental health issues?
4. How do students' mental health issues affect students' learning, developmental growth, and overall well-being?
5. How do you know that your students have mental health issues?
6. Are there procedures in place at school for teachers to deal with students with mental health issues? In other words, does your school have resources for children with mental health issues?
 - a. If yes, to the previous question: how do you direct students to these resources?
 - b. If no, to the previous question: do you believe your school should have resources available to students?
7. How do students benefit from these resources?
8. Are there any challenges with the current resources that may or may not be available to students?

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Appendix B

Survey Questions to Students

*This would have been the anonymous survey passed out to students if teachers were willing to participate.

1. Do you know what mental health is?
 - a. What kinds of mental health issues are there?
2. Do you have any mental health issues? If yes, what kind?
3. Do you feel comfortable going to teachers and talking to them about any struggles/mental health issues you may have?
 - a. If yes, how do you approach the teacher?
 - b. If no, why don't you feel comfortable?
4. Are you aware of any resources the school has for mental health issues?
 - a. How good are these resources on a scale of 1-10 (1 being horrible and 10 being good)
5. How would mental health awareness tactics in the classroom help benefit you learning, and overall well-being?

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Appendix C

Survey Questions

*This survey was conducted via Google Forms and taken by people ages 18+

1. When did you learn what mental health was?
2. Have you ever been medically diagnosed with a mental health issue?
 - a. If yes to the previous question, what was/is your diagnosis?
 - b. If no to the previous question, have you ever experienced symptoms of a mental health disorder?
3. Throughout your schooling experience (elementary through high school) did your school provide any resources for mental health?
4. Did any staff/teachers throughout your schooling experience help provide/support your mental health?
5. In your opinion, how would mental health awareness tactics in the classroom benefit students?

What Is Second Step?

It's a difference you can feel the moment you step through the doors to a Second Step school: a sense of safety and respect grounded in the social-emotional health and well-being of the entire school community.

Second Step is a program rooted in social-emotional learning (SEL) that helps transform schools into supportive, successful learning environments uniquely equipped to encourage children to thrive. More than just a classroom curriculum, Second Step's holistic approach helps create a more empathetic society by providing education professionals, families, and the larger community with tools to enable them to take an active role in the social-emotional growth and safety of today's children.