Prioritizing Mental Health:
Communicating with Attending Skills in our Schools

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Introduction

Students are struggling with mental health (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression) and educators cannot ignore how this impacts their teaching. Navigating interactions with students who are dealing with mental health challenges can be a difficult task for any teacher or school staff member. However, it is crucial to provide students with the support they need to manage their mental health in ways that promote academic achievement. Education communities must be proactive in helping students build strong supportive relationships in order to reach desired mental health outcomes.

There is strong empirical evidence linking the impact of mental health to measures of physical health (Ohrnberger et al., 2017). Mental and physical health were once viewed as dualistic embodiments, distinctly separatable aspects of one's wellness for a great deal of history. Mind-body dualism was common up until 1849, when the first public health draft on healthy mental and physical development of citizens was developed in the Berlin Society of Physicians and Surgeons (Bertolete, 2008). More recently and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health movement has grown and inspired research that focuses on various holistic aspects of what constitutes human wellness (e.g., emotional, intellectual, physical, social, spiritual, environmental, occupational, financial). Rather than solely focusing on physiology as a separate entity of wellness, a holistic approach considers the combination and interactions of overt behavior, social connections, and environmental factors that impact human flourishing. Policies and practices implemented by schools that create space for a holistic wellness approach also include the need to address mental health. Addressing wellness from a holistic approach can have a profound impact on individuals' health and overall academic achievement (Deaton et al., 2022). The environment in which we live, work, and go to school has a tremendous impact on our quality of life. Teachers and school staff continue to need additional resources and training to support student mental health in the classroom. By prioritizing the promotion of mental health and providing accessible resources and support, schools can contribute to creating healthy and supportive environments that increase academic success for our student populations.

The purpose of this manuscript is to continue the conversation on the importance of establishing stronger mental health outcomes through the use of effective communication strategies (i.e., attending skills). Through effective communication a teacher can build stronger interpersonal relationships, which can help augment and support student mental health (Zheng et al., 2023). Attending skills such as observation, reflecting feelings, empathetic listening, and open-ended questions can help create space and opportunity for students to be heard and feel more affirmed in the classroom (Ivey et al., 2019). The article aims to cover these attending skills as a means to help educators develop stronger teacher-student relationships in the school environment. As a caveat, this article is not an exhaustive listing of mental health strategies, rather an introduction of techniques (i.e., attending

skills). The purpose of using these attending skills is to help teachers be more effective with communication, especially with students who may need additional care and compassion at school. By providing a safe and supportive environment through strong interpersonal relationships, school stakeholders can have a positive impact on the lives of those who might be struggling with mental health challenges.

The Importance of Mental Health Support

Knowing how to support students with mental health issues is essential considering the shortage and insufficient counseling services currently in schools (Shaeffer, 2022). In a recent survey, only 55% of U.S. K-12 schools provide students with diagnostic or assessments to identify mental health disorders. Fewer schools (42%) provide students with treatment opportunities for these mental health challenges (Shaeffer, 2022). Students face a tremendous amount of potential academic stress from a variety of school-related variables (e.g., homework, pressure to achieve good grades, poor teacher/student relationships, ineffective communication, poor peer-to-peer interactions). Academic and social stressors can have a significant impact on a student's ability to navigate daily responsibilities, especially when combined with serious mental health challenges such as anxiety or depression.

Mental health challenges have increased in the lives of students since the COVID-19 pandemic (Li, 2022). During 2020-2021, 65% of students reported having challenges with their mental health, rating it as 'poor' (Ezarik, 2021). Furthermore, 22.1% of children between the ages of 3 and 17 experience mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral deficits or stress which can impact academic performance in the classroom (Deaton et al., 2022). Additionally, for individuals aged 10 to 24, suicide rates continue to rise in recent years and have increased 52.2% between 2000-2021, with suicide being the second leading cause of death for this age group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Mounting evidence illustrates that students require more assistance with regard to their mental well-being. Schools can act intentionally and help close the student mental health gap through a holistic approach that includes emphasis on building appropriate and strong human connection.

Attending Skills

To better support students facing mounting mental health challenges, schools can consider implementing training on various attending skills (Table 1). Attending skills are a set of helpful communication techniques that a teacher or health professional can use to support the mental health of an individual (Ivey et al., 2019). Attending skills are considered complimentary techniques that have the potential to help improve interpersonal relationships with students, and thus help augment and support mental health and wellbeing for individuals. There are a handful of attending skills that can help create a foundation for strong and genuine relationships. These attending skills include observation, reflecting feelings, empathetic listening, and open-ended questions. Each of these skills can be used individually or in conjunction to enhance mental health and help create supportive school environments. Additionally, teachers can model these communication skills in a variety of situations (i.e., lecture, class discussions, activities, before/after class, between class periods, and during in-class transitions).

Observation

This attending skill focuses on identifying both the verbal and non-verbal cues of a person to create a better understanding of what they may truly be thinking and feeling. It is not uncommon for young people to struggle with communicating their needs and opinions to authority figures, which can result in a reliance on non-verbal communication through body language and tone (Ivey et al., 2010).

One example of utilizing observation in a school setting is noticing if a student is lingering in the classroom after class has concluded. Perhaps they have a question but do not feel confident to ask. By noticing this behavior, a teacher can take action and approach the student to ask if they need help or have any questions. Not only does this observation skill enable teachers to respond more appropriately, but this can also create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment for everyone when the teacher reflects on students' body language during the lesson.

Table 1. Attending Skills List

What are attending skills?
Attending skills are considered complimentary techniques that have the potential to help improve teacher-student interpersonal relationships and thus, support the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Why are attending skills important for educators to use when interacting with students?
Students who are struggling with mental health challenges need to feel safe and secure in the classroom. When students feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, they are more inclined to participate and engage in classroom activities.

1. Observation – paying close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues of a person. Being mindful of body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions can help improve the communication process with students.

2. Reflecting feelings – identifying and acknowledging a person's feelings can be extremely powerful in forming strong interpersonal relationships with students. Using reflective feeling statements can help students feel safe and respected, allowing for the formation of strong human connection between teacher and student.

3. Empathetic listening – teachers can demonstrate empathetic listening through a variety of techniques such as using encouraging language, paraphrasing student comments, and summarizing key words that are spoken during classroom dialogue. These techniques affirm support and value for student input, thus allowing them to feel comfortable, welcomed, and deeply understood by the teacher.

4. Open-ended questions – one can use probing or open-ended questions to help expand conversation and therefore allow for deeper understanding. Questions such as, "Why do you think that to be true" or "Can you rephrase that statement" can be powerful ways to engage students to expand or clarify their thinking. In essence, allowing students more voice open opportunity for them to feel more connected to what is being discussed in the classroom.

Reflecting Feelings

Teachers can utilize this skill to acknowledge and express a deeper understanding of a student's experience. Emotions are the source of our thoughts and actions, which means that identifying a person's feelings creates a meaningful connection for understanding and further action (Ivey et al., 2010). There are a few different ways a student may express their feelings, some of which involve plainly stating how they feel with emotion vocabulary such as "I feel depressed," or may imply their emotions through more vague descriptors/word choices such as "I just want to sleep forever." Students may also use non-verbal cues such as body language and/or a combination of these (Ivey et al., 2010). Teachers can help reflect with a student in the form of a compassionate statement or by asking clarifying questions to check in with them to confirm their needs. For example, if a student lists items they are currently juggling in their personal life that are making it difficult for them to complete schoolwork, the teacher can reflect/identify

their feelings with a compassionate statement such as, "It sounds like you've been overwhelmed for a while and have been making a great effort to prioritize your responsibilities." This kind of statement identifies the feeling of being overwhelmed and indirectly expressed in their statement, meanwhile simultaneously highlighting positive attributes about the student. In this way, teachers can help students feel heard and supported in order to succeed academically and personally.

Empathetic Listening

Also known as active listening, empathetic listening skills are invaluable when executed with genuine care and concern for what a person is saying (Ivey et al., 2010). Components of this skill include encouraging, summarizing, and paraphrasing; all of which support the receiver in feeling comfortable, welcomed, and deeply understood by the listener (Ivey et al., 2010). To encourage a student dealing with stress, a teacher might say, "Although you're going through a lot right now and may be feeling alone in your struggle, you're not alone and you can speak with me. Let me know how I can support you." When it comes to encouraging, this is a skill that teachers sometimes purposefully refrain from offering, especially at the beginning of the school year, in order to set a firm tone in the classroom. However, encouraging students includes providing them with options and choices they can consider for themselves (i.e., empowering responsible action) rather than talking down or discouraging them.

Regarding summarizing, nowadays, people can be easily distracted when listening, leading them to interrupt or make assumptions about a person during conversation. To be fully present for the speaker, summarizing, with empathetic listening in mind, requires the listener to withhold judgment and avoid distractions. Rather than teachers mixing their own ideas with what a student has expressed, to effectively summarize in a supportive context, teachers must restate what they have heard from the student using the student's keywords. This helps convey that the listener is fully present and engaged with what the speaker is saying.

Paraphrasing with authenticity is a skill that differs from summarizing in the way that it does incorporate some of the listener's own words plus the focal words of the speakers (Ivey et al., 2010). Teachers utilizing these skills improve their chances in connecting with students. Thus, helping students feel a greater sense of belonging in the classroom and better positioned to openly communicate and approach their teachers. Students tend to speak more openly and at greater length with teachers who can listen with intent to understand. Similar findings have been observed in studies on micro counseling with nurses, counselors, and therapists, who were rated more highly on empathy, focused more on the client, and made fewer errors when they took the time to listen actively (Barnett et al., 2006). This research reveals that feeling heard and understood is a valuable component of any well-functioning teacher-student relationship.

Open-ended Questions

There are two types of ways to formulate questions that expand conversation and therefore allow for deeper understanding (Ivey et al., 2010). Open-ended questions generally start with words such as: what, how, and why. Answering these questions often requires more than one-word

answers and, usually, at least one or two sentences. These types of questions also refrain from directing to a specific answer, leaving the response to be much more flexible rather than being fueled by an agenda. Closed-ended questions are different and can be utilized to confirm understandings or to gain specific information from the person speaking. These types of questions typically start with did, do, can, will, and is (Ivey et al., 2010). The answers to these questions generally result in a yes or no answer. As helpful as inquiring could be with these two formats, too much questioning can overwhelm a person. Therefore, it is essential to utilize all these attending skills in combination.

Conclusion

These attending skills are not intended to be subject matter specific and can be used and modeled by any teacher or school stakeholder. However, the authors acknowledge that these communication techniques will need to be modified or adapted to meet the spectrum of specific developmental and contextual differences found with students in schools. The authors also acknowledge that communication skills may differ among teachers depending on a variety of personal variables (e.g., teacher philosophy, training, school context, environmental factors such as teaching inside or outdoors). However, we believe these specific attending skills can help provide additional support for strong interpersonal relationships and hold tremendous potential in helping combat mental health issues facing our students.

The importance of educators being familiar with and knowledgeable about supporting students with mental health challenges was noted throughout this article. Although not exhaustive, health and physical educators can enhance their communication skills for stronger student mental health by incorporating any or all of the attending skills: observation, reflecting feelings, empathetic listening, as well as open-ended questions. These pragmatic tools can be applied in any interpersonal setting, help establish stronger teacher-student relationships, and are intentional mental health support tools in combating the multitude of challenges found in school environments. Moreover, as mental health continues to be linked with academics and learning outcomes in our educational lexicon, it becomes increasingly important to continue discourse in making social and emotional health a priority in our schools.

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