

Teachers unprepared to deal with mental health issues among students

More than 90% of those surveyed say they started teaching without adequate knowledge

June 1, 2013, Victoria – A survey of teachers in Ontario shows that more than 90% felt their Bachelor of Education degree did not prepare them to deal with mental health issues among their students.

The survey was conducted by Amy Andrews, an academic advisor at the Brantford campus of Nipissing University. The results are being presented at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Andrews surveyed teachers at three publicly funded school boards in southern Ontario. Seventy-five teachers completed an anonymous, voluntary survey containing 42 questions.

Andrews wanted to find out – among other things – how much knowledge teachers have about mental health, what they perceive their role in mental health education to be, and whether they felt their own education prepared them to deal with mental health issues among their students.

Andrews says almost all the teachers surveyed – 92% – reported that they had had to deal with a mental health issue in the classroom at one point.

But a slightly larger proportion – 93.3% – did not feel their Bachelor of Education degree adequately prepared them for that. To the extent they were able to deal with mental health issues in the classroom, it was not because of their education, but because of the experience they gained over several years in their job.

Nearly 91% said they relied on special education teachers, school psychologists, counsellors or parents for help when faced with a student experiencing a mental health issue. And 57.4% said they knew where to go to access mental health resources.

Participants also reported a lack of confidence in their knowledge on the subject of mental health, and identified several barriers to overcoming their knowledge deficit, including lack of readily available resources and increased costs of professional development courses.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), one out of every five Canadians will experience a mental illness at some point. Children are particularly vulnerable, and suicide among young people is of particular concern. Yet the CMHA says 80% of the children who need mental health services do not receive them.

Mental health is an increasingly visible issue – what Andrews calls a “hot topic in education.” She says it’s not enough for schools to rely on the teachers’ on-the-job experience to deal with sensitive mental health issues. They need to be more knowledgeable, and more involved.

“Teachers are natural implementers of strategies, so their role is crucial,” says Andrews. “I feel our role as educators is to be able to reach out to every student.”

For more information, story ideas or to schedule an interview, please contact:

Laura Markle
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
613-282-3489
lmarkle@ideas-idees.ca

Mélanie Bécharde
Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
613-894-7635
mbechard@ideas-idees.ca

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