

The importance of teacher awareness of student mental health in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

The primary goal of this paper is to present, examine and exemplify the versatility and inclusiveness of the term 'mental health', i.e. the role of mental health as an integral component and affective factor in learning English as a foreign language. The most common mental health disorders and their early signs and symptoms are listed and described. Furthermore, the importance of teacher awareness of student mental health in the EFL classroom is elaborated as well as what and how much teachers should know about mental health and bullying so as to recognize and address them if need arises. It can even be said that the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures exacerbated this issue, and a suggestion to move forward could be building student resilience. Not only do teachers but also parents and guardians play a crucial role in their children's education, so how they can help protect their children's mental health has been additionally discussed. This paper will enrich the existing pool of theory on student mental health with the results and discussion from research conducted via interviews among 50 EFL teachers from various high schools in Skopje (North Macedonia), concerning their views on teacher awareness in respect to student mental health in the EFL classroom. The interview responses show an optimistic trend of increase of teacher interest in student mental health and empathy for students, albeit lack of institutional support. It is hoped that this paper will open avenues of thought for EFL teachers to probe even more into mental health in the EFL classroom. It is also important to acknowledge that while the overarching objective is to foster and promote mental health awareness among all educators across the board, this paper distinctly accentuates the significance within the domain of teaching EFL. This emphasis stems from the authors' perspective: one being an aspiring EFL teacher, and the other currently holding the position of an Assistant Professor (tertiary education). The aspiration is to highlight EFL teachers as influential figures capable of catalyzing transformative change for the future.

Keywords: *mental health, bullying, resilience, students, awareness, EFL classroom*

Introduction

The concept of *mental health* has been a hot topic of many discussions in ELT especially in the past few years. The World Health Organization (2022) defines *mental health* as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity; a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." Moreover, UNICEF (2022) writes that "mental health is an integral component of health and well-being, influencing academic, social and economic outcomes across the lifespan; it is a basic human right that exists on a

complex continuum.” Our emotional (happiness, interests, approach to things), psychological (our own personality, character, ego, cognitive processes), and social (contributions to society, social cohesion and coherence) well-being represent important components of mental health, affecting how we relate to other people, how we handle difficulties and challenges, and how we make the right choices, which is why it is imperative to look after it.

Looking after one’s mental health, protecting it and promoting it can create the needed balance between daily responsibilities and a healthy mindset, while also creating an environment that supports mental health conversations and rejects stigmas. Apart from treatment and counseling, which play a strong role in student recovery journey, having inspiring people surrounding them in their social life and schooling can help create a healthy mindset. There are in fact many factors and triggers that can affect student mental health. The National Alliance on Mental Illness estimates that almost 1 in 5 young adults experience mental health problems each year. Moreover, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is safe to assume that the percentage of young adults with mental health problems is even higher (NAMI n.d.).

The first two decades of life is a critical period for the development of foundational competencies that can shape a learner’s mental health trajectories. At this stage of rapid development and learning, children and adolescents are highly susceptible to environmental influences. Experiences and environments can in fact harm mental health (UNICEF 2022). This is the reason why we chose, in particular, EFL teachers in high school (students aged 15-18) to be participants in the research further described in this paper.

I. Common mental health disorders (states)

Mental disorders all differentiate in the intensity of the effect they have upon students. They are characterized by a combination of abnormal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behaviours, and relationships with others. Some common mental health disorders are anxiety disorders, mood disorders, psychotic disorders, and eating disorders (MedCircle 2020).

a) Anxiety disorders

The fearful anticipation of further danger or problems accompanied by an intense unpleasant feeling (dysphoria) or physical symptoms is known as an *anxiety disorder* and is a common occurrence in both children and adolescents (Youth.gov 2022). Anxiety can be defined as a mental and physical state characterized by specific emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioural symptoms; an adaptive reaction which mobilizes the organism and helps it defend, attack or avoid an anxiety stimulus; characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry (Král’ová 2016, 3; Spielberger 1972, 482). Anxiety disorders are responsible for affecting students’ energy levels, concentration, optimism and view on life, dependability, mental ability, performance, and overall physical health. It can make normal situations feel as though they are life-threatening due to persistent and excessive worry and fear, like socializing, public speaking or simply going outside one’s comfort zone. It can affect the relationships students form with their families, friends and teachers, and with that, their impending future.

Mental health professionals identify generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder as some of the types of anxiety disorders all accompanied with feelings of intense fear. The essential feature of GAD is excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events or activities, often accompanied by restlessness, being easily fatigued, having difficulty concentrating, irritability, and disturbed sleep patterns. Students with panic disorder experience spontaneous panic attacks (attacks of sudden short-lived anxiety) in relation to a certain situation or event, without any apparent cause. They often take action to avoid being in certain situations to prevent those feelings, which may develop into agoraphobia (Breier et al. 1986). These unexpected panic attacks can be very traumatizing, which tends to leave students in fear of a recurring attack. Social anxiety disorder, also referred to as social phobia, is

characterized by an intense fear of social situations that results in considerable distress and fear of being judged by others and being embarrassed or humiliated, hence leading to avoidance of social situations (Liebowitz et al. 1985).

Anxiety when associated with learning a foreign language is termed *foreign language anxiety (FLA)*, related to the negative emotional reactions of learners towards foreign language acquisition (Horwitz 2001). FLA is generally viewed as a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to foreign language learning; causes being, among others, limitations to learner self-expression, negative self-evaluation as a learner, and threat to learner self-identity (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986, Young 1991). Nowadays, *mental health* being the umbrella term, ever since the 1980s when Krashen (1981) hypothesized that affective factors (anxiety, motivation and self-confidence) correlate with success in foreign language learning, one of the most examined affective variables in the field of EFL learning has been in fact FLA.

b) Mood disorders

Major depressive disorder, or depression, is a type of mood disorder characterized by low or irritable mood or loss of interest or pleasure in almost all (learning) activities, which causes inability to concentrate, lack of energy, feelings of hopelessness, and even physical aches and pains (Vantage Point 2022). Another mood disorder is bipolar disorder or manic depression, with significant changes in mood, concentration and energy, swinging between extreme happiness and severe depression.

c) Psychotic disorders

Psychotic disorders affect the mind and are characterized with distortions in thinking and awareness, emotions, and sense of self. Schizophrenia is a disorder that makes people interpret reality abnormally. It is characterized by a combination of symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions, disordered thinking and paranoid behavior that affects students' daily functioning. Schizo-affective disorder is a mental disorder that is a combination of both schizophrenia symptoms, like delusions or hallucinations, and symptoms of a mood disorder, like depression or mania (MedCircle 2020).

d) Eating disorders

There are different types of eating disorders, each having a unique set of symptoms, but all of them are characterized with severe body image and food issues. Anorexia nervosa is a disorder that causes people to eat fewer calories, restricting food intake to a point of self-starvation to achieve weight loss. Bulimia is an eating disorder that includes self-induced vomiting, laxative use, or excessive exercise as an attempt to get rid of ingested food. Binge-eating disorders develop as a coping mechanism after a stressful situation (Ibid).

Having a mental health disorder does not imply a student has done something wrong in their lives up to that point or that they are broken or unfixable. A mental health condition is not a result of an isolated situation or event but rather multiple, linked situations. It can be a result of genetics, family or environmental influence, a traumatic childhood, a biochemical process in the brain, etc. Recovery is always possible, especially if diagnosis and treatment are started early, thus the significance of EFL teachers being aware of the comprehensiveness and range of affective factors influencing a student's learning process and viewing students as human beings.

II. Bullying

Bullying is when people repeatedly and intentionally use words or actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress to their well-being. These actions are usually done by people who wield influence or power over someone else, or who want to make someone else feel less powerful or helpless. Bullying is repeated and unwanted aggressive behavior caused with the intent to potentially

hurt, embarrass, and offend a person's self-worth (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011). With the rise of modern technology, a new form of bullying (*cyberbullying*) has risen to the surface, which can seriously harm students' mental health as it happens online during or after school hours, reaches a wider audience, and is often done without any acknowledgement by parents. Harmful information can be uploaded without any consent, and cliques are formed to spread lies and rumours, make threats and put students at great risk online. Bullying happens for various reasons – it can stem from someone who is deeply insecure about themselves and likes to point out other people's problems in a way to help themselves feel better; others bully because they like to be socially dominant and accepted by their peers as a person of power. When bullying is not stopped, discussed, or challenged by anyone, especially teachers, it can create an unsafe and damaging environment where such behaviour is seemingly accepted.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022) notes three types of bullying:

- **Verbal bullying** – Name-calling or writing hurtful things about someone to tease, taunt or threaten them.

- **Social bullying** – Also referred to as *relational bullying*, involving hurting someone's reputation or relationships by publicly embarrassing them or excluding them from cliques on purpose. This type of bullying is not easily noticed by EFL teachers since it is conducted out of their sight, however perceptive teachers might pick up on subtle clues in the EFL classroom (e.g. students' body language).

- **Physical bullying** – It involves physically hurting a person's body by hitting, pinching, spitting, or pushing them, in addition to taking a person's private possessions and breaking them, as well as making mean and rude hand gestures.

The ongoing cycle of bullying can have short-term and long-term negative effects on the victim's mental health. It can be a very traumatic experience for everyone involved, which is why it is imperative to address this as early as possible. Both teachers and parents can work together to ensure safety and prevent future bullying, raise awareness on the subject, and educate students to report such behaviour. Bullied teens are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, negative learning outcomes, and sometimes long-term damage to their self-esteem and confidence. They might experience feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness, isolation, rejection, shame and in some extreme cases, they might develop suicidal thoughts (Australian Human Rights Commission 2011).

Research on the consequences of bullying has found that children and adolescents who have been bullied can experience negative psychological, physical, and academic effects on their mental well-being (Youth.gov 2022). The psychological negative effects of bullying can be very traumatic and difficult to overcome. The most common ones are depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, self-harming behaviour, alcohol and drug use, aggression and involvement in violence or crime. The ongoing stress of bullying may lead to disturbed sleep patterns, dizziness, stomachaches and headaches, heart palpitations, chronic pain and somatization, which can occur when psychological issues are converted into physical symptoms. The negative academic effects of bullying are the most obvious indicator that a student might be struggling with mental health issues, which need addressing, e.g. not attending classes, having bad grades and a bad attitude towards learning. This cycle of bullying and poor mental health is not always inevitable, but it can be prevented if teachers and parents learn how to notice bullying and help students by diffusing the situation.

III. The importance of student mental health awareness for the EFL classroom

Students should be made aware that mental health well-being is more important than perfect academic performance and that their self-worth is not measured based on good grades and positive teacher feedback (praise). As a background concept, mental happiness plays a crucial role in the gradual rise of academic progress (Ferdous and Shifat 2020). EFL teachers' attitudes towards mental health can help shape students' perception of mental health disorders, demolish and reject mental health stigmas,

encourage open conversation, provide a safe environment, and help students empathize with others. Teachers need to also be aware of their own prejudices and labelling practices against people with mental health disorders, and not force such attitudes on their students. Having educational trainings in relation to mental health at schools affects students' health positively and helps them gain a new perspective about life, which in turn enhances a pattern of positive thinking in adolescents. It is of crucial importance for schools to be very sensitive when providing these services to students (World Health Organization 2022).

a) What should EFL teachers know about student mental health?

High school students spend most of their time either at home or at school, therefore it is inevitable that teachers or parents will encounter signs of disturbed mental health amongst some. By recognizing such signs and symptoms of disturbed mental health, teachers and parents can make a huge difference. These signs and symptoms vary from person to person, depending on the disorder and can be often dismissed as typical and normal adolescent behavior, which is why it is crucial for both parents and teachers to notice them at an early stage so they can be diagnosed properly and observed closely.

Common signs of mental health illness in young adults can include the following (NAMI n.d.):

- Excessive worrying or fear;
- Feeling excessively sad or low;
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning;
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable 'highs' or feelings of euphoria;
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger;
- Avoiding friends and social activities at all cost;
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people (empathy);
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and with low energy;
- Changes in eating habits, such as increased hunger or lack of appetite;
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that do not exist in objective reality);
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behaviour or personality ('lack of insight' or anosognosia);
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomachaches, vague and ongoing 'aches and pains');
- Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress.

The warning signs for mental health problems differentiate for everyone but if there are questions or concerns about a student's behavior, both teachers and parents need to know who to turn to, such as the school principal, school psychologist, administrator, or a social worker.

b) How can EFL teachers recognize early signs of disturbed mental health in students?

In today's modern world, students are expected and pressured to have their futures planned out by the time they graduate high school (with good grades), while still trying to figure out and process life around them, manage relationships with peers, and deal with society's standards and the tough prejudices of social media. With such big expectations comes a lot of pressure and stress, which they are unprepared for.

NAMI (Ibid) states a few symptoms of disturbed mental health in young adults that may include the following:

- Changes in school performance;
- Excessive worry or anxiety;
- Hyperactive behavior;

- Frequent nightmares;
- Frequent disobedience or aggression;
- Frequent temper tantrums.

Some of these symptoms can be easily spotted if it is constant, repeated behavior and should be addressed by the teacher immediately. They can be noticed in students' academic performance, regular low grades, reacting negatively or with apathy to most activities, tasks and homework in the EFL classroom, irregular attendance to classes, sitting alone and not socializing with peers, etc. Disturbed mental health can also make students hyperventilate, bite their nails, express feelings of irritation, anger and distress, have trouble concentrating, have visible panic attacks, and withdraw from the class and teacher.

There are four main factors that contribute to poor mental health in students, those being:

- **High academic expectations** – Set either by their family or themselves. Students feel stressed by the overload of information they need to learn and the pressure to succeed with a high grade. Most are also anxious that a poor grade in English will ruin their future, especially since English is learned as a foreign language from kindergarten in North Macedonia.

- **Modern technology** – Social media platforms allow teenagers to stay connected and close from the comfort of their homes. Outdoor sports are replaced with video games, potential risks of online dating are not regularly discussed, there is risk of exposure to upsetting content and cyberbullying, etc.; all of which contribute to poor mental health. Popular social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook) put a lot of pressure on the 'perfect' body image and lifestyle, which leads to constant comparison with unrealistic goals.

- **COVID-19** – The pandemic has been and will continue to be responsible for many mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, agoraphobia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), etc., as young people have been unable to attend school and see their friends and family (Hapsari 2021).

- **Peer pressure** – It can detrimentally impact student school performance, leading to distractions and a decline in expected educational outcomes. To mitigate this, students must develop self-awareness, surround themselves with positive influences, and foster open communication with their EFL teacher in order to navigate the challenges posed by negative peer pressure. By doing so, students can maintain their individuality, make informed decisions, and thrive educationally in a supportive environment (Jain 2023).

For a student to approach their EFL teacher and ask for help can often be very difficult and challenging as they might feel like a burden and not wish to bother their teacher with their problems. This is the case in North Macedonia because student mental health is to this day considered a taboo subject, discussed behind closed doors, and at an institutional (administrative) level employees are neither familiar with nor welcoming to this subject. A safe and open environment, though, can play a crucial role in helping a student deal with their problems, regardless of how insignificant these problems may seem in their eyes. Teachers should educate themselves first on this subject and then teach their students to recognize mental health issues, as well as productive ways to deal with these issues, encourage well-being and a healthy mindset, and help students access online mental health resources. In addition, teachers can take steps to be culturally sensitive, and work with both students and their families to make sure the students are receiving the best help available. This is how a positive classroom culture that values diversity of thought and character traits is promoted.

c) What role should parents have in their child's (mental health) education?

As a parent, you want to make sure your child's learning environment is set up, so they are not only academically successful but mentally healthy and unburdened as well. Grades and positive feedback (praise) should not be the primary focus at parent-teacher meetings, but rather teachers should take their time to discuss student mental well-being in the classroom. Educating parents about mental health

awareness, early signs and symptoms, help programs and common disorders among teenagers is a good first step for their role in their child's education and well-being. Parents can encourage, motivate, and even influence their children to do well in school. Parents should also be aware of what their child's teacher is and should be doing to help and support them, how they are progressing and reacting to what is taught to their children, what they should not be doing and discussing, and what they as parents can do to help.

INcompassing Education (2022) discusses the role parents should have in their child's education:

- **Monitor children's progress at school** – Parents should constantly monitor and be aware of their child's academic performance, school attendance, behaviour and teacher's evaluation.

- **Coordinate with teachers** – Parents should ask for feedback on not only their child's academic performance, but also on their emotional and social growth.

- **Attend parent-teacher (PT) meetings** – PT meetings are important for discussing and developing programs that support and encourage students' motivation to learn.

- **Have one-to-one talks** – Open communication is essential in every relationship, whether it is between a parent and a child or a teacher and a parent. An open conversation should be encouraged to help solve problems and discuss their solutions.

- **Participate in school activities** – Parents should often participate in their child's school activities or homework as a way of getting to know the relationship their child has built with the school, the environment they created, how they interact with each other, how they react and deal with difficulties, etc.

- **Be a role model for learning** – Parents are children's role models in every way. By encouraging learning and offering constant guidance, parents can help create a healthy relationship between children and education.

- **Connect with what your child learns to everyday life** – As a way of fostering creativity, curiosity, and a desire to learn.

A supportive learning environment should be created – one that safeguards mental health and all learners feel included, supported and valued. Effective integration of mental health in high schools can improve educational outcomes; increase learners' mental health literacy; promote learners' social and emotional learning; and help identify at-risk learners and provide support (UNICEF 2022). Students need to have a sense of belonging to help them feel connected with their peers and accepted by their teacher. Promoting resilience and developing competence in the classroom is extremely helpful for overcoming current and future mental health challenges they might face. When students feel safe and heard at school, they also feel free and comfortable to speak up on bullying, harassment, or a mental health struggle. A continuous flow of positive feedback on their accomplishments, no matter whether they are big or small, reinforces a positive attitude towards school, supports good mental health, and builds confidence and self-esteem. Teaching students to help others encourages healthy social behaviours, positive recognition, and friendships. Finally, providing mental health support programs and establishing a crisis support team builds a healthy point of view for conversations about mental health, ensures safety, and demolishes stigmas.

d) Developing student mental health and bullying awareness in high schools

Establishing an open line of communication helps students form a deeper connection with the teacher, encourages trust and a safe environment where students may find it easier to admit they are being bullied and seek help from their teachers. Thus, it is crucial for every high school EFL teacher to be educated on how to effectively respond to and treat cases where bullying occurs. Teachers should have the chance to participate in seminars and workshops on student mental health so they can afterwards transfer their knowledge to their students. High schools could include anti-bullying programs in their curriculum as a way of raising awareness and educating students on this subject. EFL teachers should

take time to regularly discuss bullying and student mental health with their students. These subjects may be sensitive for some students and triggering for their mental health, which is why it is important not to put students on the spot to talk about it but rather have them open up when they feel comfortable to do so. Teachers should always emphasize where students can seek help if they are being bullied and how they can protect themselves.

In addition, EFL high school teachers can encourage students to practice language skills by introducing educational activities that cover the subject of bullying and its effects on mental health. For example, an anti-bullying lesson in an EFL classroom could begin with a reading activity: a text about bullying that covers all the important vocabulary. The text can be from the point of view of a victim of bullying, describing the everyday challenges of going to school to face their bully. As the students are silently reading the text about bullying, the teacher writes the key vocabulary on the board. After reading the text, the teacher can engage the students in a discussion about bullying. Types of questions to ask students would be: Have you ever been a witness to bullying? How do you think the bullying affected the victim? How could you have helped the situation? Why do students bully? How should teachers prevent bullying? What can parents do to help? For homework, teachers can ask students to write a paragraph about bullying starting with the sentence: "I care about raising awareness on bullying because..." This lesson's aim would be awareness-raising of school bullying in the context of vocabulary expansion or even a grammar focus (conditional sentences, e.g. If I were in this situation...)

This example of a lesson shows how the topic of mental health can be integrated into an EFL lesson. In this regard, EFL teachers have an active role in shaping students' knowledge and attitude about mental health. Schools are the best place to start the mental health conversation and develop comprehensive programs because they are the strongest social and educational institution and have a profound influence on children. Additionally, schools are crucial in building self-esteem and a sense of competence, so when teachers are actively involved in these programs, their teaching can reach and help many future generations (Hendren et al. 1994).

e) Conversations about mental health in the ELT classroom

Educating ourselves as teachers is the first step to understanding the importance of mental health awareness, and then it becomes our responsibility to transfer the same knowledge to our students and future generations. Talking openly and freely about mental health in the EFL classroom not only demolishes stigma and misinformation but also nurtures a healthy mindset, a willingness to learn and perform well and encourages students to help each other be and do better. Bryson (2022) describes five tried-and-tested methods for teachers to promote mental health inside the EFL classroom: listen and be flexible; offer community support and resources; practice mindfulness; draw; and get outside. Mental health awareness is an important topic for all teachers, who are often the first line of defense for their students. Since students spend 5 days a week at school, it just makes sense to have mental health awareness become part of the school subjects. Teachers can educate the students on the symptoms of mental health issues, provide a safe environment, encourage good health, and help students access mental health resources. They can also teach positive behaviours and encourage helping others.

In 2019, the Department of Education's officials in Florida (USA), together with First Lady Casey DeSantis, proposed what can be considered a life-saving curriculum initiative concerning statewide schools to have students from grades 6 to 12 take at least five hours of mandatory mental health lessons per week (Rode 2022). Students would receive education aimed at helping them identify signs and symptoms of disturbed mental health, and education on how to find the right resources to help themselves and others. The initiative would allow school districts to choose what they wanted to teach their students and highlight issues of bullying, substance abuse and suicide prevention. If the teaching material was too advanced, school districts could also choose to hire professionals and counselors to help guide them through the subject of student mental health. The initiative first came into debate after

a school shooting happened in Florida that resulted in multiple casualties, including two student survivors who out of guilt and disturbed mental health, took their own lives. The question remains whether this could have been prevented if this policy had been implemented at a much earlier stage, teaching and encouraging students to reach out for help or notice signs of disturbed mental health in their peers. Concerning the sensitivity of this subject, it is of crucial importance to do anything to help students rather than do nothing. Raising awareness of student mental health will not only help demolish stigma but also may help save lives.

f) Moving forward through resilience

Capstick (2018) quotes the '3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan' when writing that "resilience is the ability of individuals, households, communities, and societies to withstand shocks and stresses, recover from them and work with national and local government institutions to achieve transformational change." The main objective of early psychological research into resilience was to identify the individual personality traits and wider factors of adverse life circumstances, and then to identify the processes that could underlie positive adaptation. Research by UNICEF (2016) has uncovered three underlying influential factors: the community, the family, and the individual. The Cambridge Dictionary defines *resilience* as the quality of being able to return quickly to a previous good condition after problems. James and De Laurentiis Brandão (2019, 3) state that how resilience is conceptualized is in fact complex, viewing it as "a cyclical construct, involving dynamic processes of interaction over time between person and environment."

In ELT there has been a particular focus on learners building individual resilience, reflecting increasing concerns on learners' mental health. Although the concept of *resilience* is not a novelty in ELT, during the COVID-19 pandemic it definitely gained traction and permeated the period of school closures. The emergent definition as a learner's ability to withstand adversity and crisis has since been developed, as resilience is now viewed in its multidimensional nature – with an increasing use of the term *academic resilience* – including not only coping strategies for learners but also ways to achieve good educational outcomes despite unavoidable adversity. In addition to a language skills focus, today's context inevitably entails equipping learners with a set of broader skills, such as successful self-management, linking study skills to developing self-awareness, well-being development, and making them better decision-makers, which are several teaching aims that EFL high school teachers should strive towards. Resilience from a learner's perspective thus takes center stage, especially how it will prepare students for entering the workforce in their near future.

How can EFL teachers help build their students' academic resilience? This can be done through raising discussions about the importance of the overall context and the big picture in life, life-long learning, diversification of their skills, having a critical stance, breaking things down into manageable baby steps, planning and prioritizing, strategizing, organization and communication skills, self-reflection, finding their unique voice, essential work-life balance (even nutrition and healthy habits), dealing with inevitable deadlines and stress, procrastination, the imposter syndrome, reconsidering failure, teamwork and collaboration (or 'buddying up'), and creating a strong network of friends for both mental support and professional exchange.

IV. Methodology

a) Research tool

We gathered qualitative data and gained insight into the level of awareness, knowledge and interest on the topic of student mental health among 50 EFL teachers from various high schools in Skopje (North Macedonia) and with varied years of teaching experience. This was achieved through doing interviews (in

the time frame between March and June 2022) in order for us to profoundly understand the teachers' opinions, beliefs, attitudes and suggestions for including mental health into the EFL classroom with the purpose of demolishing stigmas. The interviews were conducted in a flexible open-ended format, allowing each teacher to take extended turns, followed up with responses further probing their thoughts (Kasper 2015). The research participants were informed beforehand of the specifics so they could fully understand the terminology, their role and their further contribution. We were aware of the time-consuming and energy-consuming nature of this research tool, however the responses provided us with much food for thought on the current prevalent beliefs and how they could be applied for future changes, hopefully in the high school curriculum for EFL. The broadly formulated six questions were the following, and teachers were asked for specificity on their part:

Q1: Do you think it is beneficial for EFL teachers to discuss mental health regularly in the classroom? Explain why.

Q2: What resources, activities, techniques, or methods can EFL teachers use to teach and support student mental health?

Q3: What would you do if a student approaches you asking for help regarding their mental health?

Q4: What should EFL teachers know about mental health?

Q5: What should high schools do to raise awareness of student mental health?

Q6: How do you help build student resilience in the EFL classroom?

We were both well aware that in North Macedonia there is lack of (institutional) support for EFL teachers when it comes to bringing awareness to this topic in the EFL classroom since it is still largely considered a stigmatized taboo subject unworthy of attention. Teachers and parents therefore are not generally capable of early detection of a disturbed mental health symptom in a student, which only leads to more difficulties the student will face in adulthood. It is precisely with this reflection in mind that we started delving into student mental health. In the following section, the responses from the six questions will be discussed.

b) Discussion of responses

Q1: Do you think it is beneficial for EFL teachers to discuss mental health regularly in the classroom? Explain why.

Having regular discussions about the subject of mental health during any class can greatly benefit both students and teachers as it can help bring awareness to the topic, dispute stigmas and encourage students to ask for help when needed. Simultaneously, in an EFL classroom setting, students can practice active speaking and listening and expand their vocabulary.

The feedback we received from teachers on Q1 was in favour of them having regular mental health discussions during EFL classes. Specifically, 46 teachers agreed that with these discussions they can nourish their student's mental well-being. 5 teachers even said they had already introduced this topic during their classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. One teacher said: "As a teacher with 20 years of teaching experience, I noticed that 1 in 5 teenagers have a diagnosable mental health disorder that is severe enough to impair how they function at school or in the community." Another teacher added: "By listening, teachers can create an opportunity to encourage students to seek help if needed. Everyone experiences mental health issues at some time in their lives, especially youths, and it is vital not to underestimate the importance of discussions if students need a safe space to talk. I usually start the conversation by telling them that I have noticed that they don't seem their usual self and describe the changes I have personally noticed in their mood or behaviour. Then, the conversation proceeds to flow naturally." On the other hand, 4 teachers decisively stated that they don't see any benefit of having these discussions during their EFL classes, justifying their opinions by saying they are EFL teachers, not trained psychologists.

Q2: What resources, activities, techniques, or methods can EFL teachers use to teach and support student mental health?

To clarify, our intention was to find out how teachers can help raise awareness of this subject through teaching EFL, not introduce it through preaching or imposing their own opinions regarding student mental health.

82% of the interviewees agreed they would start with a speaking activity in their EFL classes and have a weekly discussion about the subject of student mental health. Some added that such a warm-up activity had been extremely important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schooling was conducted online. Activities such as watching and then discussing TED talks, doing role-plays and group work tasks were mentioned as well. Furthermore, the resources/links they would mostly rely on and share during class were articles published by the World Health Organization or written by established mental health professionals. Showing empathy and willingness to listen were amongst the most notable benefits of this. A teacher stated: "Speaking activities are the most effective ones. We can discuss certain age-appropriate and contemporary issues through games or even Agony Aunt (authentic samples). Students find it easier to relate to unknown peoples' problems if they are reluctant to share their own opinion or experience." Another teacher said: "Students should be encouraged to do self-reflection and try to reflect on the mistakes and successes from the previous week at school. I consider student self-reflection as part of mental health."

Furthermore, concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, one teacher said: "The pandemic has affected the mental health of millions of students across the world. We are teaching students remotely, so we should take as many steps as we can to ensure that they have access to the mental health resources they need. We should encourage positive, reflective thinking; we should use interactive remote learning tools in our lessons and remind them that this too shall pass. There are many things we can do as teachers to address our students' mental health issues during this challenging time. We should try to engage students in our EFL classes by adding interactivity and motivating them through use of smart learning tools". For example, one activity could be to view life through pink-tinted glasses. Students would have to write in the Zoom chat box a few 'bright spots' or things they liked that day, things they were grateful for. Another example would be for students to write down their own 'three circles of control'. They would need to focus on what they can control on the inside, instead of all the factors on the outside that they simply cannot change. Thinking of all the things they do have control over right now will make students feel more empowered. The majority of teachers interviewed agreed on the point that bringing structure to digital lessons would definitely bring ease to students' minds since routine and structure can provide relief in these uncertain times. 18% of the interviewees, however, agreed they would not teach and support student mental health during their EFL classes.

Q3: What would you do if a student approaches you asking for help regarding their mental health?

Taking into consideration our personal experiences in high school, this question was of great importance to both of us. Bullying was a topic that was never discussed in high school in our day, let alone its negative effects on student mental health. When approaching our respective EFL high school teachers, who we had both considered to be educated, and asking for help regarding our mental health, we were advised to "simply forget and move on".

The feedback we received on this sensitive question showed that most high school teachers tend to use the same approach, i.e. 32 teachers thought that active listening is the most important thing they can do in such a situation. They continued saying they would also try to offer their advice on the specific problem and then refer the student to the school psychologist for additional professional consultation. Some also added that having the student's parents be present should be mandatory during that

consultation. One teacher said: "I think that the key is simply listening and showing understanding, so I let students know that I'm supportive for them. Paraphrasing what they have said back to them can also be helpful to reinforce my understanding for the certain situation. Parents should be informed so we can both join forces to help that student through mutual collaboration. My high school has wonderful psychologists who are always there for the students." Another teacher added: "Whatever method you choose to practice, be sure that you are cognizant of how you can increase the teen's sense of self-worth. Praise them often for their hard work, don't put them on the spot in front of their peers, and give them the opportunity to answer questions aloud when possible. The results won't be far off."

However, 4 teachers remained distanced from this question saying their job as an EFL teacher is language-related only and they would not try to help the student in need but rather suggest who else can address their issue. One teacher even said: "I have so many problems of my own that I don't want to try fixing students' problems on top of mine."

High school students with mental health struggles find it very difficult to open up in front of a teacher and ask for help regarding their struggles, so when they do open up, regardless of our educational background or beliefs, it is of crucial importance to just listen and be present when they share their personal struggles since they came to us because they trust us and believe we can help them.

Q4: What should EFL teachers know about mental health?

With this question, we were interested in finding out the level of interest EFL teachers have for learning more about this topic as well as understanding what they as teachers believe they should know about mental health.

We were positively surprised to find out that the responses of 46 EFL teachers were that they would want to be educated on early signs and symptoms of disturbed mental health in students and how to recognize and carefully act upon them. A teacher said: "Everything. We as teachers know that our students' mental health has a great impact on their overall behaviour, socialization, learning process and achieving of academic success". In the words of another teacher: "We are not specialists on mental health, but having basic knowledge would be advantageous for the students we teach. It is often a relief for them to know that we're aware that they are going through a tough time and are willing to listen and be there to help if needed. Teachers should be knowledgeable about management of mental health crises." Moreover, many teachers agreed they would want to know where they can turn to when the problem is out of their realm of expertise. According to a teacher: "I think ELT teachers should be equipped with an arsenal of online resources for student mental health, but we should never forget to consult the professionally trained colleagues and always ask for their help when needed."

However, few teachers responded that they should not spend time learning about student mental health when it is not in their job description and they are not qualified for that, hence demonstrating narrow-mindedness.

Q5: What should high schools do to raise awareness of student mental health?

School is a place where students socialize, learn, and grow in a safe environment. Having mental health awareness classes, seminars or discussions can shape future generations to better understand themselves and the world around them, boost their social skills, help them grow emotionally, and recognize early signs of disturbed mental health in themselves or others. These discussions can help in ending stigma by openly talking about mental health and not treating this subject as a taboo one.

The research concluded that 46 teachers believe that schools should provide regular training courses, seminars, campaigns and support groups for student mental health awareness. One teacher added: "First of all, I believe schools should make mental health known, and organize social clubs in the school for students to share their ideas and thoughts, as well as have more panels, presentations, and guest lecturers to talk about the importance of communication about mental problems". They shared the

opinion that schools should invest in trainings for teachers: “Just talking about mental health issues is a massive step in the right direction. Sometimes students and families view those with mental health issues as outsiders and do not realize that most people struggle with such issues. We need to broaden the definition of mental health so that our students and their families understand that depression, anxiety, and other conditions are common and nothing to be ashamed of. Talking about mental health issues normalizes it and helps reduce stigma. When they hear someone else share a story that is similar to theirs, they will start to think they are not so strange themselves”.

Q6: How do you help build student resilience in the EFL classroom?

The majority of interviewees responded that pre-pandemic they had never previously touched upon this concept with their students. Some would openly talk to their students about starting to be able to focus on their life passions and intellectual indulgences in spite of the pandemic, while others through critical reading and literature would provoke raw discussions on different historical contexts and contemporary realities, relating it to the pandemic-induced isolation and alienation. Some would try to motivate their students by sharing inspirational or success stories, helping them see the big picture and in a safe online environment leading students to reflect on positive future outcomes, while others drew on personal experiences to introduce challenging topics that students were facing, thus trying to relate the content they teach to the actual context in which they teach. It is a widely held opinion among the interviewees that online teaching does indeed offer limited possibilities of interaction, but it has also enabled students to write their thoughts in the Zoom chat box, hence articulating their fears and frustrations in writing rather than uttering them, and this in turn helps to channel the discussion and directly address issues related to strengthening of students' resilience. Some also noted that being a resilient model and radiating optimism (although sometimes challenging) works wonders for students.

According to the EFL teachers, the following characteristics (in order of importance) ideally brought about academic resilience in students to help with their future employability: adaptability, flexibility, persistence, determination, toughness, perseverance, endurance, patience, focus, unwavering motivation, tenacity, grit, preparedness, curiosity, resourcefulness, mindfulness, progress, and personal growth.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, the topic of including regular student mental health discussions in the EFL classroom was discussed and thoroughly examined. We argued why we believe such discussions are a necessity and beneficial for nurturing a healthy mindset and worldview. Furthermore, the importance of teacher awareness of student mental health in the EFL classroom was elaborated, especially what and how much teachers should know about student mental health and how they can recognize the early signs and symptoms of impaired mental health. Some of these symptoms can be easily spotted if it is repeated behaviour and should be addressed by the teacher immediately to avoid serious damage to one's health. Some of the key factors contributing to students' impaired mental health were described as well as tips for improving and maintaining mental health inside and outside the EFL classroom, which teachers should be familiar with. The role of parents in their children's education and how they can help protect their children's mental health has also been briefly mentioned. Educating both teachers and students on mental health awareness will help diminish stigma towards mental health, prevent misinformation and prejudice. In this regard, teachers have an active role in shaping students' knowledge and attitudes about mental health and bullying. Schools are the best place to start mental health and bullying conversations and develop comprehensive programs because they are the strongest educational institutions and have profound influence on many children. Additionally, schools are crucial for building student's self-esteem and a sense of competence, and when teachers are actively involved in these programs, their teaching can reach and help many future generations.

We conducted research among EFL teachers from various high schools in Skopje (North Macedonia), concerning their awareness in respect to student mental health awareness in the EFL classroom, the responses of which are discussed in Chapter 5. What could be concluded from this research is that, fortunately, the majority of EFL teachers in Skopje are open to having regular mental health discussions during their classes and are themselves invested in learning more about this subject so as to help their students. The only drawback of this research was the lack of inclusion of high school teachers from other cities in North Macedonia, which could be a starting point for further future research. The interview responses show an optimistic trend of increase of teacher interest in student mental health and empathy for students, albeit lack of institutional support. It is hoped that this paper will open avenues of thought for EFL teachers to probe even more into mental health in the EFL classroom.

In conclusion, students need to have a sense of belonging to help them feel connected with their peers and accepted by their teacher. Promoting resilience in the EFL classroom is extremely helpful for overcoming current and future mental health challenges students might face. When students feel safe and heard at school, they also feel free and comfortable to speak up on bullying, harassment, or a mental health struggle. A continuous flow of positive feedback on their accomplishments reinforces a positive attitude towards school, supports good mental health, and builds confidence and self-esteem. Teaching students to help others encourages healthy social behaviours, positive recognition, and strong friendships. Finally, providing mental health support programs in high schools and establishing a crisis support team builds a healthy point of view for conversations about mental health, reassures safety, and demolishes stigmas.

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