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Teachers' Perspectives on Strategies for Overcoming Challenges in Working with Students with Depression: Findings from Qualitative Research within the *Heads Up* Project

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine teacher's opinions on strategies for overcoming challenges in working with students with depression. Method: The data is part of the international Erasmus+ project, Heads Up: Mental Health of Young People at School (2022-1-PL01-KA220-

YOU-000090100). Between March and June 2023, four semi-structured group interviews were conducted online with Polish public school teachers. All participants met specific inclusion criteria: they worked as teachers in grades 4–8 or secondary school, had at least five years of teaching experience, and served as class teachers. The interviews followed pre-developed instructions and involved 28 participants, primarily women and diploma teachers aged 30 to 60 years. A two-stage coding process, using the MAXQDA 2022 program, was employed for data analysis. Results: Four key solution areas were identified for addressing challenges in working with students with depression. First, strengthening support systems for teachers through the involvement of specialists was considered essential. Second, clearly defining teachers' responsibilities when supporting students with depression was emphasized. Third, enhancing student-teacher relationships, fostering collaboration among teachers, and implementing targeted activities for students were highlighted as effective strategies. Fourth, effective cooperation between the student's family, the school, and external mental health professionals was recognized as crucial for providing comprehensive support. In conclusion, effective cooperation among the student's family, the school, and external professionals is essential. Further research into teachers' experiences in supporting students with mental health problems could inform the development of effective support strategies for teachers, ultimately enhancing student functioning in school.

Keywords: teachers, depression, depressed student, student mental health, ways to overcome difficulties.

Introduction

The teaching profession is recognized as one of the most stressful (Smith et al., 2000). Teachers are responsible for students' development, including ensuring their safety and health (Polish Parliament, 2017). Although much research has examined traditional sources of teacher stress, such as workload, classroom management, and administrative responsibilities (Ghasemi, 2025), less is known about the emotional demands of supporting students with mental health difficulties (Harding et al., 2019). One of the challenges in the teaching profession is working with students with mental health disorders (Matsumoto & Fujino, 2024). Supporting students in emotional crisis, can be highly demanding in terms of emotional engagement and can evoke a sense of personal responsibility for students' safety (Gunawardena et al., 2024).

Although teachers are not trained mental health specialists, they are often the first to identify early signs of distress and play a crucial role in promoting social and emotional well-being in schools (Hymel et al., 2017). In Poland,

this supportive function is formally recognized, as educational regulations require teachers to provide both pedagogical and psychological assistance to students, especially those with special educational needs (Ministry of National Education, 2017).

In Poland, systemic solutions are in place to support students experiencing mental health difficulties. Every school is required to employ a school psychologist and a school counsellor. Additional support is provided by psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, which work in close cooperation with schools. Also, various mental health prevention programs for children and adolescents are being implemented, and supporting students' mental health is a priority of the Polish state's educational policy for the 2024/2025 school year (Nowacka, 2024).

Given the growing prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people, most teachers are likely to encounter students experiencing depressive symptoms during their professional practice (Dey et al., 2022). Depression accounts for 7.5% of years lived with disability, being the single largest contributor to non-fatal health loss among all diseases worldwide (WHO, 2017). According to the European Commission, in the WHO European region, depression affects around 3% of children and 8% of adolescents, while 30% of adolescents are estimated to have sub-clinical depressive symptoms (Ostaszewski et al., 2021; Prevention of Depression in Children and Adolescents, 2021).

Recognizing the symptoms of depression is essential for early identification by teachers and other adults working with youth. Depression is an affective disorder that consists of persistent lowered mood, anhedonia, reduced energy, and fatigue, which occur for at least 2 weeks (APA, 2013). Other symptoms characteristic of adolescents with depression include irritability, affective reactivity, atypical appetite and sleep, peer group alienation, experimenting with addictive substances, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. Suicide attempt risk among adolescents with depression reaches as much as 30% (Popek & Remberk, 2021).

Both psychological and environmental factors contribute significantly to the risk of developing depression. Psychological factors include low self-esteem, high self-criticism, and cognitive distortions (Popek & Remberk, 2021). The most common environmental factors are academic difficulties,

victimization or bullying, exposure to violence, various forms of abuse or neglect, low levels of physical activity, the loss of a loved one, parental rejection or low involvement, and low socioeconomic status (Selph & McDonagh, 2019). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the negative consequences of social isolation and loneliness (Loades et al., 2020) that resulted in a twofold increase in depression and anxiety among young people (Racine et al., 2021), underscoring the need for adequate psychological care and educational support for children and adolescents returning to schools.

Teachers recognize the importance of their role in supporting students who struggle, although they often feel insufficiently prepared and lack the necessary skills to adequately address students' problems (Reinke et al., 2011; Deaton et al., 2022). These difficulties include a lack of essential knowledge and training in the field of mental health, large class sizes that limit the possibility of providing individual support, and time constraints resulting from heavy workload demands (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). The sense of responsibility for students' health, combined with emotional burden and a lack of preparation, can negatively impact teachers' well-being and reduce their willingness and ability to support students facing mental health challenges (Sisask et al., 2014). Also, teacher well-being is closely linked to how they perceive and evaluate student behaviour, which in turn significantly affects their ability to identify and respond to signs of an emerging psychological crisis (Aldrup et al., 2018; Madjar et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to study teachers' experiences to better understand how to provide effective support, ensuring they are equipped with the appropriate resources and training to competently manage these complex situations.

The aim

The study aims to examine teacher's opinions on strategies for overcoming challenges in working with students with depression. The article presents part of the results of a qualitative study conducted in Poland as part of the international *Heads Up – Mental Health of Young People at School* project.

Participants

There were 28 interviewees (27 female) and all participants held higher education degrees. The participants, aged 30–60, varied in teaching experience: five had 5–10 years, eight had 11–20 years, nine had 21–30 years, and six had over 30 years of experience.

The majority of teachers (60%) were chartered (diploma) teachers, which is the highest level of professional advancement in Poland. According to the type of school (multiple answers possible): 14 teachers worked in primary schools (grades 4–8), 10 in high schools, 10 in technical secondary schools, three in first-level vocational schools, and one in a second-level vocational school. Moreover, nine teachers worked at schools in large towns (>100,000 residents), nine in medium-sized towns (20,000–100,000 residents), four in small towns (<20,000 residents), and seven in village schools.

The majority of interviewees (26) taught a variety of subjects, such as Polish, English, and various types of vocational training. Two participants were support teachers. Additionally, 23 interviewees served as class teachers during the study year when the interviews were conducted. In the study group, in the last 5 years prior to the study, there were: 20 teachers (71%) who worked with students diagnosed with depression, 13 teachers (46%) who worked with students after a suicide attempt, 2 teachers (7%) worked with students who had committed suicide.

Methodology

The research project Heads Up – Mental Health of Young People at School was funded by Erasmus+ (2022-1-PL01-KA220-YOU-000090100) and conducted by the Foundation of the Mother and Child Institute (coordinator – Poland), the University of Warsaw (Poland), Palacký University Olomouc (Czech Republic), and Pavol Jozef Šafárik University (Slovakia) from 01.08.2022 to 31.08.2024. It was approved by the Bioethics Committee at the Institute of Mother and Child (No. 2/2023, 26.01.2023).

A purposive sampling method was used for the qualitative part of the project. This article presents only part of the collected data that concerns Polish teachers. The study inclusion criteria ensured that all participants worked

in grades 4–8 of primary public schools or in secondary schools, were professionally active at the time of the interview, had a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience, and had served as class teachers for at least 2 years. Further details on recruitment and methodology can be found in the report from the project (Małkowska-Szcutnik et al., 2024).

From March to June 2023, four online audio-recorded group interviews were conducted. The pre-developed interview dispositions were used. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed, among other things, to rearrange the order of the questions, and follow up on themes raised by participants that were important to them and may not have been included in the interview dispositions (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed, except their first sections including information about the project's goals. In the transcribed text, interviewees were assigned numbers. All identifiable data were anonymized.

Data coding and analysis were performed using the MAXQDA 2022 program. During the analysis, a two-stage coding process was used: preliminary and selective. Codes were generated during the data analysis. Common thematic areas were selected from the entire research material. One of the thematic areas described in another publication (Małkowska-Szcutnik et al., 2024) was the difficulties in working with a student with depression: teachers' psychological functioning, relationship with parents of a student with depression, systemic determinants, determinants of the school's physical environment. This article will describe the ways of dealing with these difficulties as indicated by the respondents.

Results

Table 1 shows the common thematic areas, sub-areas, and codes with frequency levels for the thematic area on how to deal with difficulties in working with a student with depression.

Table 1. Thematic subareas and codes

Thematic subareas	Codes	Frequency
Support for the teacher as an external resource	Specialist support for teachers	12
	Definition of roles and responsibilities	11
	Practical training	9
	Psycho-education materials	4
	Peer support for teachers	2
The ability to build teacher-student relationships as an internal resource for teachers	Teacher-student relationships	4
Teachers and parents cooperation	Building cooperation with the parent	14
	The school as a source of support for the parent	6
	Parent education	3
Activities aimed at students	Conference/workshops/extracurricular activities for students	10
	Peer support	7

Source: Own elaboration.

Support for the teacher as an external resource

Interviewees emphasized that the involvement of school professionals serves as a vital resource for teachers, supporting them in managing the challenges associated with students' mental health problems. In particular, the presence of a school psychologist was considered essential not only for teachers, but also for parents: "We, teachers, need this kind of support, that there is a psychologist in the school. Well, at my place, there isn't [...]. There are two school counsellors who are very busy because these problems are piling up. More and more young people need support, but we also need a psychologist at school, not only for the teacher but also for the parent" (P16).

A frequently mentioned condition for overcoming difficulties was the clarification of the teacher's role and responsibilities, in a way that aligns with the competences acquired during their professional education. The quoted

example also highlights a recurring dilemma faced by teachers: how to provide individualized support to a student in a mental health crisis without compromising the learning opportunities and attention given to the rest of the class. This tension was described not merely as a logistical challenge but as a source of emotional and professional strain, reinforcing the need for clearer guidelines and systemic support in navigating such situations: “A subject teacher should first and foremost teach and [...] solve problems in the classroom. But is he also supposed to be prepared for everything? I’m not necessarily convinced that we should also fulfill the role of a psychologist, or a school counsellor. Not necessarily because there are also children who simply need to learn here and now” (P7).

Furthermore, some participants suggested attending workshops led by specialist practitioners as a concrete strategy for improving their ability to work with students experiencing depression and to communicate effectively with their parents. One participant emphasized the importance of training aimed at developing the skills required to support a student with depression while simultaneously addressing the needs of other students in the class, including those with special educational needs: “It seems to me that there is a lack of [...] training [...], purely practical, for example, on how to handle a group of thirty people, when we have several such cases. And actually how to handle difficult cases and the rest of the class. [...] Also, how to talk [...] to parents in such dramatic situations” (P5).

Some interviewees suggested that making reliable, practitioner-prepared materials available for the psycho-education of students would support their efforts to address mental health issues more effectively in the classroom: “It would help me if I knew that there was a good source of such lesson plans, prepared by practicing psychologists [...] concerning the most important problems [...] young people live with, for example, loneliness, depression, suicide attempts among peers” (P10). Also, one interviewee, drawing on her experience, suggested collaborating with non-profit organizations that offer useful resources to support work with all students, not only those with depression.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of peer support provided by other teachers working in the school: “The only help we have is such collegial help. That’s the only help we have, where we can talk, advise each other,

and support each other” (P18). Such collegial relationships were described as a source of emotional and practical support, particularly when specialist guidance was unavailable. By sharing experiences and consulting each other about difficult cases, teachers felt better equipped to respond to students with depression and less alone in managing complex situations. Strengthening these informal networks can enhance teachers’ confidence and capacity to act effectively in challenging moments.

The ability to build teacher-student relationships as an internal resource for teachers

The interviewees noted how important it is in their work to be able to build a trusting relationship with a student. This is fostered by being with students outside of compulsory lessons, in extra-curricular activities. Time spent together allows the teacher to get to know the student better, and facilitates integration between peers. “Basically, you don’t need extensive training courses or anything like that – just some extra hours dedicated to spending time with young people. Time for them to come, [...] watch a silly film [...] or a meaningful one, or simply to talk about what they’re curious about” (P28). However, this requires the teacher to be open to the students, to take extra time and to accept the other difficulties involved.

Teacher-parent cooperation

The participants emphasised that good cooperation with parents is a key element of effective care and educational interventions. Parents are often the first to provide teachers with valuable information about their child’s mental health, making their involvement essential in identifying students’ needs: “I think this cooperation with parents is very important here still. [...] If we can’t or aren’t even able to establish this cooperation, well it’s very difficult [...] to reach the students then, right? Because not every student wants to talk about their problems either” (P20).

In the opinion of some participants, based on their own experiences, teachers and school professionals are perceived by parents of a student with

depression as people who can help them and their child: “There is actually [...] a great deal of trust and high expectations from us as a school that we will solve the problem and help the parents with their great confusion” (P3).

Parent pedagogy was also identified as a way to overcome difficulties. Taking measures to increase parents’ knowledge and awareness of mental health, such as organising workshops, and training sessions during class meetings or allowing parents to consult a school psychologist can also be seen as preventive measures. Some interviewees noted that general knowledge about depression among the public is low: “I think there is little awareness among the public about depression. If parents were also made aware in some way [...] at the very beginning of the school year in some classes, or every now and then, they would have [...] some knowledge about it” (P25).

Activities aimed at students

Interviewees suggested organizing various types of workshops, conferences, events, and meetings with mental health professionals and practitioners, inspirational people, or coaches to strengthen students’ mental health, provide them with knowledge about the signs that may indicate depression, and to inform them when and where to seek help: “It seems to me that [...] for students, for young people in particular, it would be useful to have such workshops with a specialist who would say: if you have such, such, such symptoms [...], then seek help” (P11). They also pointed to the value of school-based initiatives such as regular relaxation classes and the inclusion of practical stress management techniques in the curriculum. These actions were seen as beneficial not only for students’ well-being but also as preventive measures that ease the burden on teachers by fostering mental health awareness in the school community and reducing the number of crises they must manage without sufficient support.

Some of the participants pointed out the importance of peer support and acceptance for the functioning and healing process of a student with depression, even during their absence from school or hospital stay: “The children were very concerned by the way they supported their friend in the hospital afterward” (P13). Some participants recalled situations when students reported worrying signs in a classmate’s behaviour to the school counsellor or

they provided first aid in crises. One participant highlighted initiatives led by the student council, emphasizing its active role in raising mental health awareness within the school community: “A big role is played by the student government, [...] through various student-led activities, when we celebrated an autism day, a day of this, a day of that, [...]. The kids themselves by stepping into the role of organiser, by exploring the topic, they are also sort of sensitised [...] to those around them” (P18). Student-led initiatives contribute to building a supportive and informed school environment, which can ease the pressure on teachers by fostering early peer intervention and shared responsibility for mental health awareness.

Discussion

This paper presents the results of a qualitative study conducted among Polish teachers on their opinions on how to overcome difficulties in working with a student with depression. Four key solution areas were identified for addressing challenges in working with students with depression. First, strengthening support systems for teachers through the involvement of specialists was considered essential. Second, clearly defining teachers' responsibilities when supporting students with depression was emphasized. Third, enhancing student-teacher relationships, fostering collaboration among teachers, and implementing targeted activities for students were highlighted as effective strategies. Fourth, effective cooperation between the student's family, the school, and external mental health professionals was recognized as crucial for providing comprehensive support.

The results of McDonough's (2024) research showed that half of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that screening for mental health, referring children and families to school-based services, and conducting behavioural assessments are part of their role. Respondents were more likely to agree that they had sufficient knowledge to work with a student with mental health problems but less likely to rate their skills in this area highly. Furthermore, they found that as teacher training on mental health increased, more teachers believed that addressing mental health concerns was part of their role and understood the importance of students' mental health issues. The largest barrier identified by teachers was an insufficient number of school mental health professionals.

Collaboration between parents and teachers in the context of working with a student with mental health difficulties is important (Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). It is the student-parent (Tan et al., 2023) and student-teacher relationships that are some of the most important factors in the well-being of young people (Fredrick et al., 2017). Cooperation between parents and teachers should result in an exchange of observations and information about the student's functioning (Nadeem et al., 2016). Difficulties in the relationship with students' parents exacerbate stress for teachers and can further negatively affect the atmosphere at school (García-Carrión et al., 2019).

Teachers who work with a student experiencing a mental health crisis may themselves be exposed to problems caused by deteriorating well-being (So-hail et al., 2023), or even secondary traumatic stress (Ormiston et al., 2022). This stress results from teachers interacting with the student's trauma (Es-sary et al., 2020). The support provided to teachers by school and non-school professionals is therefore important (Hollett et al., 2021). Psychological care directed at teachers is not systemic (Ford et al., 2012). Most often they have to rely on sharing experiences with other teachers or school management (Nwoko et al., 2023) or seek support individually (Tarabulus & Yablon, 2023).

With regard to our results, it is worth referring to the results of other qualitative studies carried out by the Dabrowski et al (2025). In this study, when asked about ways to cope with the difficulties of working with students with mental health problems, teachers mentioned: support educators from leadership; implement effective policies, focus on educator wellbeing; recognize diverse groups of students; mainstream evidence-based mental health initiatives, build mental health capacity, improve access to resources and collaborative and share accountability. In the work cited above, these areas were defined as recommendations for supporting the work of teachers (Dabrowski et al., 2025).

Conclusions

Working with a student experiencing depression and suicide risk is stressful and related to feelings of helplessness. The study showed that there is a need to define the role of the teacher in working with a student with depression and to provide systemic support for teachers in this area. Effective coopera-

tion among the student's family, the school, and professionals working with the student outside the school system is essential. Conducting further research into the needs of teachers in relation to working with students with depression and other health problems should facilitate the creation of support for this professional group and thus improve students' functioning in school.

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