

Mental Health Advocacy for the Young Music Educator

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Author's Note

I have no conflicts of interests to disclose. The inherent biases found within the results of this research derive from interviews of a majority neurotypical, rural Midwest music educators, many of which represent the cis-female gender demographic. Many of the anecdotes are from a handful of perspectives and do not represent all dimensions of mental health. The content of this presentation is not the solution to circumstances, but may be adapted to unique situations as needed. The advice demonstrated in this presentation has been formulated during my second year of education, and models advice presented in a “for young educators by a young educator” format. This information was presented at the virtual AIME Conference on January 30, 2020, and this article summarizes the content presented at this conference during this session. Any questions, concerns regarding this article, or requests for supplemental materials should be sent directly to the author at brennaohrmundt@gmail.com.

Although American collegiate programs adequately prepare music educators for their first few years of education in regards to content, many new educators struggle to balance their careers and personal lives. The stressors of a new environment and high expectations pose a strain on young educators who may feel unprepared or inadequate for their position. This, combined with possible pre-existing mental health concerns, could create an unhealthy state for the music educator’s mental health. This article will disclose valuable information collected from surveyed educators and anecdotal evidence in order to equip future teachers with valuable advocacy techniques to utilize in the first years of their career.

Throughout the duration of this article, a “young music educator” includes new educators of all ages. In this article, a young music educator refers to a person within their first three years of music education; the physical age of the educator is not reflected in this term, solely the years of experience. The stressors that affect a beginning music educator can be influential for adults in their 20s similarly to those in their 50s.

Advocating for Mental Health as a Priority

One of the key components to mental health awareness in the school district is to advocate for one’s mental health needs. Advocacy comes in many forms, but ultimately derives from communication; discussing one’s needs and desires with trusted colleagues. Initiating the conversation can be intimidating at first, especially in districts where mental health feels stigmatized. These discussions are invaluable to the development of mental health advocacy in our schools, and can be done with faculty, staff, or other trusted colleagues within the building. One surveyed individual stated how their trusted colleague was one on the kitchen staff, and how their relationship developed over the first few years of the band director’s career and made them feel more welcomed in an environment that they had initially felt alone and lost. Relationships such as these are crucial to the overall camaraderie between staff in the district, whether they are strictly professional or purely based on interest. Each district has colleagues in the district and neighboring area that truly care about others’ well-being, and it may take time to develop these relationships. Those who work in the schools understand the obstacles that a new educator may encounter, and that support system may just be custodian or the choral teacher in a different district. The development of meaningful relationships is crucial not only among colleagues, but most importantly among students. Fostering relationships with students and building a culture surrounding mental health advocacy is key to destigmatizing the culture. A supportive community benefits all inclusive members, whether they are students or educators. As a music course, the music room houses a community, and the health of that community is vital to the success of its members. Developing a culture of valuing community care over self-care in the classroom is vital. Community care involves valuing each member’s position, and working in tandem to ensure achieving needs and desires rather than solely pressuring oneself to reach them alone. This is crucial to the music ensemble, where mutual support is key to a valuable musical experience for our students.

Advocating for Mental Health Through Curriculum

Music educators are in a special position to destigmatize mental health through our content. Teaching social-emotional subjects to our students is a way, not only to advocate for mental health awareness, but most importantly develop a community that fosters support through music making. Students may come from backgrounds that do not value emotional transparency, and music class may be their only time to learn, explore, and discuss those subjects in a comfortable environment. All grade levels are perfectly capable of discussing the emotional contexts of a piece, reflecting on the emotional impact of such a piece, and all activities in between, and must be integrated into the curriculum. These activities that one creates for their students impacts them beyond the music room walls, and educates valuable soft skills that students will continue to use past their formative years.

As a music educator, one has the special opportunity to develop relationships with students over many years, unlike our core subject educators who may only see them a handful of times. This provides us the rare opportunity to teach beyond the notes and incorporate valuable emotional skills paramount to their development. If one values the importance of advocating for mental health, then one must integrate practices into the curriculum as to the comfort level of the educator. The importance of emotional growth for the educator and the student are just as, if not more, important than the musical content provided to students.

Dimensions of Wellness – What It Looks Like for Music Educators

The closing portion of this presentation provided advice on combating various scenarios in the format of the Dimensions of Wellness, a widely used curriculum utilized by physical educators and guidance counselors. These Dimensions of Wellness are various aspects of health, including physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social well-being (*Dimensions of Wellness*, 2021). It was stressed in this presentation that all educators are unique, and benefit from a dimension more than others. For example, a focus on physical health may benefit someone more than a focus on spirituality, or vice versa. Despite which dimensions an individual may thrive in, the importance of tending to all in some capacity is key to mental health.

In regards to advocacy, if one feels that their career is suffocating one dimension of their wellness, it is imperative to advocate for that need. For example, a band director surveyed stated during their first year their hesitancy to say no to having lessons with students and would schedule over their lunch and preparatory times. A fellow colleague noticed their absence at lunch, and both advocated for the band director to have adequate lunch time to complete their duties. Easily, educators become carried away in one dimension of health and diminish others, and allowing time to reflect on how duties affect overall health is imperative. Much like music educators care for these dimensions for students, educators must for themselves as well. A supplemental material was provided during this presentation describing various techniques specific for music educators within each dimension, ranging from monitoring emotional triggers in the classroom to advocating for community support. This material can be attained by contacting the author directly.

Conclusion

In summary, mental health should always take priority throughout the duration of an educator's career. Refining techniques within the first few years are paramount to the longevity of an educator's mental health and overall comfort in a new profession. These techniques are unique to the educator, and are dependent on the Dimensions of Wellness from which one may benefit. Music educators are placed in a unique opportunity to provide affective content to support themselves and their students simultaneously in the classroom. Practicing social-emotional learning as part of the curriculum is imperative to supporting an environment where both the teacher and students can succeed. By recognizing the importance of mental health in the courses taught, music educators have the power to destigmatize mental health in and out of the classroom.

References

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