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MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: A CASE STUDY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF
STUDENTS AT AN ALL-MALE, CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL IN THE WESTERN
UNITED STATES

By

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A DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Teenagers today in the United States are facing many challenges. These challenges include issues surrounding their mental and emotional health. They are at an age where they are experiencing various growth areas and changes in their lives. While their parents are often viewed as the primary caregivers, teenagers spend much time at school and in various school-related functions. This is why school personnel are a vital resource for students needing mental health assistance. Teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators can play a critical role in getting the help students need. While many teenagers may need mental health attention or assistance, it is essential to understand where these issues come from and why they are occurring. Both boys and girls experience mental health issues, yet those issues may, at times, be different, and the solutions to those problems may differ depending on the sex of the student. Most high schools in the United States are co-educational, meaning boys and girls attend the school together. However, there are many schools, both private and public, that are single-sex, meaning only one sex attends that specific school. Focusing on males will make it easier to understand the issues they specifically go through in their lives. This dissertation will focus on boys and the issues surrounding their mental health. Special attention will be given to educators, counselors, mental health coordinators, and administrators, and the aim is to see how they understand mental health issues with their students.

Keywords: mental health, teenagers, boys, school, professional development, Catholic.

Dedication

With deepest gratitude and love, I dedicate this dissertation to everyone who helped me through this experience. Firstly, my parents, John and Christina, helped me tremendously through this exercise over the past four years. Their steadfast support to help me during this time knows no bounds. They have supported my educational endeavors and assisted me in caring for my son when I was busy with this paper. Additionally, they have always encouraged my academic pursuits and given me the tools to succeed by motivating me to attend the most prestigious universities. Thank you for all your support over the years!

I also want to dedicate this paper to my son, Sean. These past four years have been a journey, and I hope this research will also help you. I hope to be more present to you moving forward and help you attain your dreams, as my parents helped me reach mine.

Finally, I want to dedicate this paper to my colleagues, students, mentors, and chairs for their help with this research. I wanted to write about this important topic because I care about my students' futures. Working at a place that cares deeply about its students has been a joy. I feel blessed to be working at a place that has supported me during my time there. My work is my second home because of the people and memories. It is truly a special place for me. Thank you to all of you for helping me with this endeavor!

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Finally, thank you to my students! Teaching you can be challenging sometimes, but seeing you grow into a thriving, compassionate young man brings me great joy. I know the future is bright for you all, and I wish you all the best of luck. It has been a pleasure to be your teacher!

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MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Mental health has been a topic of discussion among teachers, parents, and students for several years since the COVID-19 pandemic. Because there has been an increased focus on mental health, school personnel are aware of it and can help students who struggle with it. According to the researcher, there has been a noticeable increase in students taking extended leaves of absence due to various mental health problems. This phenomenon was rare a decade ago but has increased, especially in the past several years. These extended leaves of absence negatively affect students' learning since they are not in the classroom and cannot learn in person with their teacher or classmates physically present. In addition, students tend to feel more pressure to succeed and drive themselves to take more rigorous courses, even if it compromises their mental health and well-being.

Discussions surrounding mental health were relegated more to the doctor's office and in private settings. However, there has been a cultural shift in the ways people talk about mental health publicly and are willing to share more about their mental health with others. Since society has shifted its views, it does not seem nearly as embarrassing or shameful that people are eager to share these struggles. Schools often encourage their students to share any struggles they may be having so that they may get the help they need to work on their mental health struggles.

Statement of the Problem

The implicit issue of teenage mental health has to do with the development and overall well-being of students. Mental health issues affect these students' day-to-day lives, work, and relationships with others, including their peers and parents. Teenagers experience tremendous growth and development during this period of their lives, and it is

essential to have adults assist them in their developmental years. What remains unknown is what is causing an increase in the number of students experiencing mental health crises in the past several years. What problems do students face that cause them to struggle with mental health issues? Are these problems exacerbated by the school environment, their peers, teachers, curriculum, or any other pressures? There is a critical need to understand this issue from the educator's perspective so they can have the tools necessary to work with these students to overcome mental health struggles.

In his book *Of Boys and Men*, Richard Reeves describes how young men lack the motivation to attend college and succeed compared with their female counterparts (2022). While it is a positive sign that young women are driven to succeed and attend college, it is also somewhat alarming how teenage boys do not feel the same way. Additionally, in his work *Boys Adrift*, Leonard Sax points out that one of the challenges of school is the overall structure of the school system and how it is geared more toward girls than boys (Sax, 2016).

Sax mentions how boys tend to be more physically active than girls, yet learning is often seen as more passive than active. Generally, it is difficult for boys to sit in a classroom for nearly six hours, listen to lectures, write, and read daily. They tend to want more activity and physical engagement in their young lives. As more schools focus on academic rigor, they must pay more attention to classes such as physical education. Sax notices that boys tend to lag behind girls in educational achievement and learning outcomes in school. As a result, it is up to the leaders, including administrators, teachers, coaches, and counselors who work in these schools, to help students learn the information in the classes and help them develop healthy skills and mental awareness.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the lived experiences of faculty and staff on mental health students' struggles within the school and classroom environments and the effects it has on their overall lives.

Research Question

How do faculty, staff, and administrators notice an increase in the mental health struggles of students in the school environment? Additionally, what factors cause mental health problems to increase among students in that school environment?

Aim of the Study

The aim is to understand mental health from the perspective of staff, counselors, and administrators, and see how it has become particularly acute within the classroom setting. This paper explains how narrative and phenomenological approaches to this study are the most appropriate methods for analyzing the research question.

This study aims to understand what problems students have in the classroom when it comes to mental health. The significance of this study is to develop an understanding of the problems associated with teenage mental health so that adults at the school can come up with solutions to overcome the challenges students face with mental health issues. The results of this DIP study help adults working with teenage boys develop a set of recommendations to address the problems students have with mental health issues at school and in the classroom. The problems students experience include they end up missing multiple classes, failing to turn in work, not learning the material, not engaging with their peers or teachers, struggling to develop healthy relationships, and dealing with issues such as anxiety, depression, or any other type of learning disorder.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms are used within the study:

Mental health: This research paper uses the definition of mental health that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) uses for its general meaning: “Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices” (CDC, 2024). While there are more specific details and definitions regarding this term, this broader definition is utilized when discussing mental health in this research study. It is difficult to quantify or measure mental health struggles. One way to measure mental health struggles is to inquire how many students at the school have taken extended leaves of absence and how many students see the mental health counselor and coordinator regularly at the school.

Teacher/Faculty: Refers to the individuals teaching the students in the classroom.

Counselor: This refers to the school's guidance counselors. Each counselor has approximately 100 students, and each student has the same counselor for four years.

Administrator: Refers to the school's assistant principals, directors, president, and principal.

Health and Wellness Coordinator: Refers to the individual who oversees maintaining and improving students' overall mental and emotional health and wellness.

Learning Specialist: This term refers to the school's employees who work at the learning center. These individuals work with students with learning differences, meaning students who need accommodations to assist them in their learning outcomes. Examples of these learning differences include students with ADHD, dyslexia, and other related disorders.

Student: This refers to active learners at the school who are aged 15-19.

Methodology Overview

Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives, insights, and lived experiences of high school boys who struggle with mental health issues. This study pays particular attention to the perspectives of the adult community working in the school. Mental health issues and struggles affect teenage boys both in the short-term and long-term aspects of their lives. Understanding the problem remains critical so that teachers, administrators, counselors, and other adults working in the school can address this issue and assist current and future students who are struggling with mental health issues. This study focuses on how the classroom and school environment contribute to students' mental health and well-being.

Field Site, Participants, and Procedures

This phenomenon was explored using a qualitative research design. Nine teachers, counselors, and administrators working at Catholic, all-male high schools in the western United States will be interviewed. These interviews included former teachers in various disciplines, guidance counselors, the health and wellness coordinator, learning specialists, assistant principals, and school principals. They were conducted through Zoom and lasted around one hour for each interview.

Design of the Study

Regarding the qualitative design of this study, the researcher focused mainly on a phenomenological approach. This is because this approach offered strengths in understanding the topic of this study. In addition, a narrative approach was also helpful for this type of study. Toolis and Hammack state, "Narrative engagement refers to a

process through which youth make meaning of inherited meaning systems and either appropriate or challenge the status quo through their narrative construction” (Toolis & Hammack, 2015, p. 52). Narrative inquiry tends to focus on the stories people tell about their lives. This method also led to a better understanding of how faculty and staff view and express their experiences with mental health difficulties. Collecting and evaluating these narratives revealed how people create meaning around mental health in an educational setting, providing insights into the larger sociocultural and institutional narratives shaping these perspectives.

As Saldana and Omasta point out, “Phenomenology is the study of the nature and states of lived experiences. This approach distills interview data to their essences and essentials primarily to determine what something ‘is’ or ‘means’ to a collective body of participants” (Saldana & Omasta, 2022, p. 135). Narrative inquiry’s emphasis on the temporal dimension complements phenomenology’s emphasis on the immediacy of the lived experience. This dual approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of high school students’ mental health by collecting both the existential aspects of their lived experiences and the narratives that frame those experiences within a larger context. Exploring this intersection between narrative inquiry and phenomenology may enhance this research by providing a multifaceted understanding of mental health issues in an educational setting that includes deep, subjective essences of individual experiences and the larger narratives that give these experiences meaning. Narrative and phenomenological inquiries assisted in understanding student mental health issues.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases

Delimitations are “factors that prevent you from claiming that your findings are true for all people in all times and places” (Bryant, 2004, p. 57). Because of the sensitive

nature of this research, it was essential to note that not all experiences of mental health are treated the same or experienced in the same manner. Additionally, each adult's experience in helping teenagers with mental health struggles is not treated in the same way. When interviewing various teachers, counselors, and administrators, it was crucial to understand that each person's role varies for each student. For example, teachers and counselors may see students more regularly than administrators. Furthermore, each interviewee's information may differ depending on which students they mention or recall in the interview process.

A standard limitation of narrative and phenomenological research is the difficulty in analyzing and interpreting data due to a small sample size. This study explored the experiences of nine individuals at a Catholic high school in the western United States. Each participant in this research possessed an experienced background and expertise in their respective field. They also have diverse experiences that have shaped them into who they are today. Finally, the people being interviewed may not feel comfortable sharing or being completely honest about their experiences dealing with students' mental health struggles. This may be due to the sensitive nature of this topic or the lack of knowledge in how to deal with students and their mental health. The researchers made sure the interviewees' identities were kept confidential.

Another limitation is the nature of the study and the personal bias of the interviewees. To mitigate bias, the researcher conducted confidential research at a Catholic, all-male high school in the western United States. This helped the researcher obtain more accurate and unbiased information. Neither the school nor the participants were named to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, this school is in an urban city with a diverse student background. Students come from a variety of cultural, socio-economic,

and religious backgrounds. Diversity is important because the participants work with diverse students and must adapt to each student's needs and backgrounds.

Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

This study was meaningful because the researcher works at an all-male Catholic high school. It is essential to see the personal strengths and struggles students go through regularly. Unfortunately, teenagers are sometimes stigmatized in our culture because of their occasionally reckless behavior or lack of clear communication with adults. However, they are developing during an essential part of their lives, and it is up to adults, including educators and those who work in high schools, to help them through this period. Teaching high school students is not only about giving them the lessons and material they need to get into college, but it is also about developing their critical thinking, developing their skills for independence, and helping them grow into caring and compassionate adults who make a positive impact in their communities and the world.

Summary

Mental health issues affect many individuals in various ways. Understanding this problem in young people, particularly teenagers, is especially important. It is necessary to assist them in their life experiences and help them develop the skills and tools to become responsible and independent adults. The next chapter of this DIP study focuses on various literature reviews to help understand this problem in more detail and investigate the research and studies conducted by multiple individuals, groups, and experts in recent years.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review aims to provide information related to the study of mental health in teenage boys. Research performed in recent decades highlights the importance of this issue, especially when it comes to the development and health of young people. However, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the perception and significance of mental health and its impact, especially on teenagers. Many parents, as well as teachers, realize the effects of poor mental health on teenagers. While both boys and girls experience mental health issues, this research will focus specifically on boys. This research focuses on males because the researcher works at an all-male secondary school. When it comes to the topic of mental health, both boys and girls experience different issues. It is important to note, however, that the way each sex is treated for mental health issues may differ. Overall, girls do experience mental health issues more often than boys. In fact, “according to survey findings, which included data from more than 17,000 students in 152 public and private schools, 57% of teen girls reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless in the past year...In contrast, 29% of teen boys reported feeling this way in 2021” (Slomski, 2023, p 1243). There is a question as to why girls experience mental health crises at nearly double the rate of males. One hypothesis may be that girls are more willing to share mental problems more openly than boys. Whatever the case may be, it is essential to understand why boys experience mental health issues and what can be done to help them. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research when it comes to the issue of mental health in teenage boys, which is why this research will focus specifically on this group.

Many students across the United States spent over a year in isolation, learning via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students did not have the capability or possibility to interact with their peers, engage in sports and clubs, meet with others in person, or be in a classroom setting for much of that time. Students were forced to stay home, isolated from the outside world. Many households were not accustomed to having every member home simultaneously for long periods. As a result, students did not know how to cope with mental health issues during this period because they did not have the resources they needed to get help for their problems.

The pandemic may not have caused the mental health crisis in teenagers. However, it most likely exacerbated the problems they experienced and opened the eyes of their parents to the importance of their children's mental health. Once students returned to their campuses and classes in person, school personnel realized the difference it makes when students learn in person versus online. There became a need to care for the student holistically, meaning the school was not simply a place to become educated in basic skills like writing and math. Instead, schools became places where students needed emotional, social, and academic support.

As a high school educator for over the past decade, I have noticed a growing trend in students deciding to transfer schools, take extended leaves of absence, or miss school regularly. For the past couple of years, I have witnessed several of my students choosing to leave school because they had some mental health issues going on in their lives. Although there can be various reasons a student may have a mental health-related issue, those problems are often confidential because of privacy laws. It is crucial, however, to understand this issue from the perspective of adults working in schools to help struggling students.

While COVID-19 may have exacerbated the mental health crisis in our culture today, it was by no means the only factor that contributed to this crisis. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce factors that contributed to the mental health epidemic that affects teenage boys in the United States. There are primarily two reasons for this focus. There are differences between boys and girls when it comes to mental health issues and how they affect each sex. According to Slomski, while girls may report having mental health issues at a higher rate than boys, it is imperative to understand the causes leading young men to their mental health plight. Secondly, I have worked at an all-male Catholic high school for over seven years. Previously, I worked at a co-educational Catholic high school for three years. Teaching in both environments has helped me understand the differences between how boys and girls interact and learn in the classroom and the overall school environment.

In his work, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* Michael Gurian points out how the different sexes learn. He points out that boys understand spatial and number variables more quickly than girls in math. In contrast, girls do better in language and arts, while boys tend to dislike reading and language since they usually learn to read later than girls and do not speak as much as girls (Gurian, 2001). Single-sex education provides a better way for both sexes to learn optimally since the teachers can gear their lessons to a specific sex rather than to both sexes at the same time. While most high schools in the United States operate in a co-educational setting, it would be beneficial to research the ways single-sex education can improve the overall learning experience of both boys and girls and understand if single-sex schools do a better job of promoting better mental health among both boys and girls.

It is essential to consider all areas that may have contributed to mental health struggles with school-age teenagers. The information in this chapter was analyzed and synthesized after carefully reading research sources, articles, and journals. Ultimately, this chapter includes a theoretical framework, the factors of mental health, and a summary and analysis of the literature. This theoretical framework guides the dissertation to understand the topic of mental health among teenage boys. While COVID-19 plays a prominent role in this topic, this chapter will include prior research because mental health problems were affecting adolescents before the pandemic. Regarding the range of literature, the researcher mainly used literature after 2000 because of its relevance, and it is the most recent literature created. While this list of theories is not meant to be comprehensive, it is a start in the right direction to help young men in their struggles with mental health and how schools can assist them through those struggles.

Teachers' Perceptions of Student Mental Health

Mental health problems can sometimes go unnoticed because they often appear in the mind, so it is difficult to diagnose them with the naked eye. Teachers and other individuals working in schools have noticed an increase in the number of students either struggling with mental health issues or seeking help with their mental health. This is because more students are taking leave of absence, and counselors can share that students struggle with specific problems. Educational institutions are becoming places that provide not only educational services but also health-related services. This includes services related to mental health and similar issues. "There is a concern about how schools can support students' mental health" (Roeser & Midgley, 1997, p. 115). Student mental health is a problem across all socioeconomic spectrums. This is especially true in areas where there is low socioeconomic development. It turns out that mental health

affects teenagers no matter their socioeconomic status. While it is true that families with financial means may be able to help with their children's health issues, it does not mean that those teenagers are immune to mental health issues.

According to Roeser & Midgley (1997), nearly two-thirds of teachers believe one of the teaching jobs concerns their students' mental and emotional development. More is needed to focus on academic learning for their students. Many of those teachers admit that they do not have the professional training or resources to help the students who are struggling with mental health issues. In addition, teachers currently working in schools say that there are not enough resources at their schools to deal with students struggling with mental health. Needed resources include counselors, therapists, educational materials, and psychological experts trained in emotional health.

A school's primary function is to provide academic knowledge to its students. That is still the case today, yet schools are becoming places where students seek moral and emotional guidance. Students often work with their teachers and share information about their own lives. They also work with counselors, coaches, and other adults at the school regularly. Outside of their parents, these individuals are often the student's only other adults they know personally and see frequently. Students may confide in these adults' triumphs and struggles, so it is crucial to help these adults get the training and assistance to work with students who are vulnerable to the mental health issues they experience.

Theoretical Framework

The Centers for Disease Control defines *mental health* as follows: "Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make

healthy choices” (CDC, 2024). Mental health remains a critical component of a healthy lifestyle. Unfortunately, many young people experience an increase in mental illness. “Mental ill health is the leading cause of disability in the WHO European Region. It is estimated that one in four people will experience a mental health condition at some point in their life, with about half of all mental health problems having their onset before the age of 14” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). It is important to note that most teenagers enter high school around the age of 15, so some teenagers are already entering with mental health issues present in them as they enter high school.

The reason the issue of mental health is essential has to do with the fact that mental health is closely related to physical health. “A healthy lifestyle can help reduce the risk of developing many chronic physical and mental health conditions. It also helps manage the symptoms of mental health conditions (for example, regular exercise can improve one’s mood and concentration)” (WHO, 2019). The guiding theoretical framework used for this dissertation includes the theories of loneliness, teaching methods, drug use, social media, loss of socialization, sleep deprivation, and increased competition to get into elite universities.

Theory for Loneliness

Loneliness is defined as being without company or cut off from others in society (National Institute on Aging, 2001). While this may not sound like a severe issue, problems persist when one feels lonely for long periods. People tend to desire a sense of community and belonging with one another. There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. Being alone means the physical state where one is physically isolated from others. Loneliness implies an emotional state where one feels alone or disconnected.

Someone can physically be around other people but can also experience a feeling of loneliness.

Classifying loneliness as an epidemic or public health concern seems rather strange. Nevertheless, this is precisely what the United States Surgeon General stated in his report on loneliness. Social disconnection is a problem that many people experience, especially young people. He writes, “Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death...the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished” (Murthy, 2023, p. 4). Loneliness is not only the feeling of being alone but also the feeling of being isolated from others.

Social engagements and connections have been declining, while time spent alone has increased since 2003 (Murthy, 2023). According to Murthy (2023), single-person households have more than doubled from 1960 to 2022, while more people have smaller families than previous generations. While there are several factors due to these trends, it remains that many people in today’s climate suffer prolonged periods of loneliness and isolation. Loneliness can lead to mental health issues like depression and anxiety, but it can also lead to physical health issues as well. This is one of the reasons why social engagements are necessary for a healthy lifestyle.

Robert Putnam (2000) points out that civic engagement, political and religious participation, and social capital have declined in America since the 1950s. Many factors are attributed to this trend: busyness and time pressures, increase in two-career families, residential mobility, rise in television viewing, and increase in the number of individuals

owning phones and other devices to connect to the internet. Because social capital and the ways people have gotten together have been declining over the past several decades, there has been a rise in the number of individuals who experience loneliness. By getting rid of interactions with one another in person, people need to understand the repercussions this has on their mental and physical well-being.

Another area for improvement is how people who move frequently have weaker community ties, and communities that experience high turnover rates have residents who need to be more integrated within their communities (Putnam, 2000). People tend to isolate themselves from others because they may not trust others in their communities or understand that other people are there only temporarily, so what would be the purpose of forming bonds that may not last? There is no strong desire to go outside the home when the home already has all the technology and other necessities it needs to communicate with the outside world. Going to the local movie theater or arcade is unnecessary when those features are already in the home. As a result, teenagers have become more isolated from the outside world in a physical way, but that isolation can lead to loneliness and other mental issues. Teenagers are more connected with the world virtually, but more physical connections are needed.

Theory for Teaching Methods

Educators have a responsibility to teach all their students. Usually, each classroom has an even number of boys and girls, though some can vary. There are some schools, however, that teach students by gender. These single-sex schools usually have been religious-based. However, approximately 322 single-sex public schools operate in the United States (Rose et al., 2023). While there can be several reasons why some students choose to attend single-sex schools, the purpose of this research is not focused on that

issue. The question that arises is: Do boys and girls learn differently? Michael Gurian and Leonard Sax write in detail on this topic and discuss why and how boys and girls learn differently.

Classrooms are typically created in homogenous settings, meaning there needs to be more room for creativity or different ways of learning. Schools are often structured in a way that stifles differences in lesson plans, the courses a student can take, how a classroom is physically laid out, and how assessments are performed. Students are taught that there may be only one way to learn. However, it is essential to point out that the classroom is often diverse, meaning students tend to know and see the world differently.

Boys and girls tend to learn in different ways. While this is not universal for both sexes, it concerns how they learn best. This has to do with their biological, emotional, and social differences. Boys' brains tend to develop slower than girls' (Sax, 2016). Because of this, girls usually are ahead of boys in terms of their academic achievements. As a result, teachers, administrators, and even the students themselves notice how girls tend to be ahead of boys in the classroom, and the lessons are typically geared toward the girls' learning capabilities. Boys are usually left behind in terms of academic goals and achievements (Sax, 2016).

Another factor that separates boys and girls is how schools are structured and how boys and girls tend to excel in specific disciplines. "Decades of psychometric testing, observation and imaging techniques have revealed that, in general, female brains process language activities more easily, earlier and faster than males, while males more readily excel at spatial-mechanical and gross motor skill tasks...these differences explain why girls outperform boys in reading and writing, and why boys tend to gravitate toward physical activities and video games" (Magon, 2009, p. 11). Much education involves

sitting at a desk and completing work by writing or reading. This is one reason there should be more movement and physical activity when it comes to learning in the classroom.

Unfortunately, it is common for students to get bored during school. The reasons for this vary according to each student, but the common thread is that school may not activate specific parts of the brain, which is true, especially among boys. Some suggestions include giving boys opportunities to move during class, allowing for greater competition in the class, and lowering the temperature to 69 degrees in the classroom (Magon, 2009). Boys tend to enjoy competitions among themselves, so they learn better by competing against one another. They also tend to move frequently, so they must get the necessary exercise and movement during the day. Also, lowering the temperature helps boys learn better because males tend to have higher body temperatures, which means they are more awake when the temperature is lower (Magon, 2009). While it may be challenging to implement these changes in the classroom since females are usually also present in them, it is essential to note that the classrooms should be an equitable space for both boys and girls to learn in the most optimal way possible.

Theory for Drug Use

Drugs can refer to a variety of substances that adolescents use. The National Institutes of Health defines drugs as “Any substance (other than food) used to prevent, diagnose, treat, or relieve symptoms of a disease or abnormal condition. Drugs can also affect the brain and the rest of the bodywork and cause changes in mood, awareness, thoughts, feelings, or behavior. Some types of drugs, such as opioids, may be abused or lead to addiction” (National Institutes of Health, 2024, June 1). For this research, the term *drug* will be used to refer to substances such as alcohol, opioids, vaping, and marijuana.

Also, drugs will refer to medications such as Ritalin and Adderall to help with issues such as ADD and ADHD.

While looking at the research when it comes to teenage drug use, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely which drugs teenagers take and the increase or decrease of that specific drug. One of the reasons the evidence is scant has to do with the theory that the drugs teenagers use have changed over the past several decades. “Of clear and particular importance, cigarette smoking by adolescents...continued to decline sharply in 2001” (Johnston et al., 2003, p. 215). However, this study noted how even though adolescents decreased their cigarette smoking, they often picked up another drug to use instead of cigarettes.

Opioids are a type of pain-killing medication. Their use has been increasing in recent years due to their addictive power. In fact, “the opioid epidemic crosses into all U.S. demographics, hitting adolescents particularly hard. Between 2001 and 2014, rates of opioid use disorder diagnosis increased by approximately sixfold in people between the ages of 13 and 25” (Peavy, 2021, p. 1). One of the reasons opioids are popular is because they are relatively easy to obtain; they dull pain and cause a sense of euphoria. Opioids such as fentanyl can cause respiratory problems that could eventually lead to death.

Another drug that has gained popularity among adolescents recently has been the use of vape pens. “An e-cigarette, vape pen, or other electronic nicotine delivery system heats a liquid of nicotine, flavoring, propylene glycol, and other additives into an aerosol you inhale through a mouthpiece” (Cleveland Clinic, 2022, August 22). While the number of teenagers who smoke cigarettes has declined in the previous decades, the number of teenagers who vape has been increasing. “The United States is seeing an

explosive rise of adolescents' vaping and renormalization of smoking. Recent national surveys demonstrate a drastic increase in e-cigarette use among high schoolers" (Jones & Salzman, 2020, p. 56). Vaping contains nicotine, which is an addictive drug. Nicotine's adverse effects include breathing and respiratory problems, cognitive deficits, and impairment of memory and brain function. Furthermore, vaping can be considered a gateway to other drugs, such as marijuana.

With the increase in teenagers taking drugs such as opioids and vapes, the question becomes why they take these kinds of medicines. Because many of these types of drugs are easily accessible, teenagers do not have difficulty finding them. While it is unfortunate that teenagers resort to using these kinds of drugs, it is imperative to understand why they resort to using them. Schools and parents are practical resources in educating adolescents on the dangers of using certain drugs. By warning them of their effects, teenagers can understand why they are dangerous and what they do to the body and mind. One reason they may use them is the amount of stress they experience. One way to help teenagers with drug use is by steering them to other methods of reducing their stress healthily and positively. It may not be as simple as telling them not to do drugs, but rather, it may be necessary to steer them to other healthy activities to do instead.

"The past couple of decades have seen a continuous increase in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnoses" (Abdelnour et al., 2022, p. 468). This increase in ADD/ADHD results in more teenagers taking prescriptions for ADHD and ADD. Boys tend to be diagnosed at a higher rate than girls due to their exhibiting hyperactivity more often (Abdelnour et al., 2022). Drugs like Ritalin and Adderall are customarily prescribed to individuals struggling with ADHD and ADD. These drugs control the brain so that

they help it concentrate more deeply. There are side effects, however, of taking these medications. These side effects include high blood pressure, restlessness, problems getting to sleep, and even stunted growth in children (Robinson, 2023).

According to WebMD (2024), one of the reasons why people take drugs such as Ritalin or Adderall is because those drugs help individuals with their concentration. There are many more stimulants for today's adolescents than in previous generations. From televisions, computers, smartphones, and social media, teenagers today have many items that distract them and vie for their attention. It is no wonder that it is more difficult for teenagers to focus on doing their work or concentrate on a particular task.

Social Media

Social media is prominent in today's culture, especially among teenagers and young adults. Gallup conducted a poll that stated, "Just over half of U.S. teenagers (51%) report spending at least four hours a day using a variety of social media apps such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter)" (Rothwell, 2023). Social media remains a popular forum for individuals to communicate with one another, share pictures and information, and interact with others in a virtual world. While social media makes it easier and faster to communicate with others no matter where they are, it has negative consequences. Jonathan Haidt (2024) points out four harms that social media does to young people: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction. Furthermore, Haidt points out how youth today are being raised in a more phone-based rather than play-based culture, meaning more young people spend their days looking at their phones rather than going outside and playing with their friends.

A negative consequence of social media involves “stranger danger” and how predators prey on the youth. “While the majority of online social network users frequent sites for...innocent purposes, a nefarious few are beginning to infiltrate the sites to prey sexually on vulnerable youths. Although the problem of sexual predators over the internet is not new...the sheer popularity and visibility of the online social networks have caused widespread concern among the public, media, and lawmakers” (Guo, 2008, p. 617). In fact, a news story discussed the tragic suicide of a 13-year-old boy in South Carolina who was involved in a “sexting” incident with the site Snapchat (Benson, 2024). While parents warn their children not to go with any strangers while they are out in public, parents seemingly forget that predators are also present in their adolescent’s virtual world.

A reason why teenagers prefer engaging with social media is that they have more freedom associated with it than with in-person interactions. Teenagers often have difficulties expressing themselves and have concerns about whether others will accept or reject them (Huvaïd & Maywita, 2022). Teenagers may feel rejection is more straightforward to receive via social media than receiving it personally. In addition, parents may not be able to monitor every activity on their children’s phones, which is why teenagers may be more comfortable engaging with others online rather than in person. Because parents may not be fully aware of which sites their child visits or with whom they interact, they are left in the dark about what happens in their child’s virtual world.

Social media use itself may not lead to depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues. However, it is important to note *how* someone uses that technology. A study looked at the relationship between social media use and mental health. An essential finding of this review suggests that attitudes or behaviors may lead to more significant

influences on depression, anxiety, or other distress that affect the mental state of teenagers (Keles et al., 2020). While the focus can often be on the quantity of time spent using social media, the other important factor is the quality of time spent using it. However, using it to engage with their peers and communicate with them could lead to a healthy use of social media. As a result, social media itself may not be directly causing mental health issues, but the way it is used may very well be affecting the mental health of teenagers.

It is essential, then, to have adults such as parents and teachers assist and guide teenagers on how to use social media appropriately rather than just handing them a phone and assuming they know how to use it. A good analogy would be how society teaches teenagers how to drive: they learn by taking a course, followed by a test, and then training behind the wheel with an experienced driver before receiving their license. This is not to say they need all that training for social media use. Some guidance is prudent and wise.

While parents find it difficult to monitor every detail and aspect of their child's social media use, it is vital to remind parents constantly of the dangers posed by social media and the people who use it. Young people should be cautious about what they share online and with whom they share their information. Once information is posted online, taking it back or stopping it from being shared with others is difficult. It is understandable why teenagers use social media, but they should not forget the dangers it may pose to their lives if they are not careful with it. Like any tool, it can be used for good or bad.

Loss of Socialization

“Adolescence is characterized by heightened sensitivity to social stimuli and the increased need for peer interaction” (Orben et al., 2020, p. 634). This period in one's life

is vital to developing relationships because those relationships can positively impact one's social and emotional development. In fact, "compared with children (aged <10 years), adolescents spend more time with peers than with their family and form more complex peer relationships. The importance of obtaining peer social approval increases, and peer influence is heightened in adolescence" (Orben et al., 2020, p. 634). Teenagers may not realize it, but social interactions can benefit their health.

In-person communication with others is often more beneficial and effective than talking online. This is due to how people usually pick up nonverbal cues and body language. Also, seeing them leads people to understand each other better. Of course, it may be easier for teenagers to communicate online because there is a lack of emotion and visualization associated with texts. There is time to think about forming a response instead of providing an immediate response, and there is often a certain level of anonymity associated with online communication. Teenagers may communicate more often via social media or online. However, that type of communication should not be a substitute for in-person interactions.

While online interactions between teenagers may be increasing, offline interactions are declining. "The share of high school seniors who gathered with friends in person 'almost every day' dropped from 44 percent in 2010 to 32 percent in 2022" (De Vise, 2023). While the COVID-19 pandemic most likely played a role in this decline, it was by no means the only factor that played a role. This trend has declined since the early 2010s, coincidentally, when smartphones began to be widely used among teenagers. The virtual world has replaced gathering places like shopping malls, movie theaters, and local parks. Today's teenagers spend less time with personal interactions and more time online.

While this may not be a loss of socialization, it does signal a different type of socialization that may not be a perfect substitute for personal interactions with others.

Teenagers today spend their time differently than teenagers in the past. “If we look back over the past 200 years, the most striking historical change in young people’s use of time is that youths spend much less time on labor activities today than they did in America’s agrarian past” (Larson, 2001, p. 160). The labor activities that teenagers do have been replaced by more schooling. Furthermore, on average, teenagers in the United States spend less time doing homework than their counterparts in East Asia and Europe (Larson, 2001). Much of their free time today is devoted to using media such as televisions, computers, and smartphones.

While teenagers in previous generations spent more face-to-face time interacting with one another, today’s teenagers spend more of their free time virtually, including playing video games, scrolling through social media, watching television, and surfing the internet. How teenagers interact with one another has changed significantly over the past decade, especially with the invention of the internet and smartphones. It may be true that they communicate just as frequently today as before. Still, how they communicate has changed in that their communication is done less often with face-to-face interactions and more often via the internet, phone, or texting.

Sleep Deprivation

People spend nearly one-third of their lives sleeping. While this may be a mundane activity, it is nevertheless a critical and necessary component. Sleep regenerates the mind and body, supports healthy brain functions, removes toxins and waste, and helps in healthy development and growth. Sleep is vital for children and adolescents because they experience the fastest growth and development of their minds and bodies during this

time. It is also a time when they are most vulnerable to outside influences that wreak havoc on their minds and bodies, such as toxins and diseases. The National Institute of Health (2022) recommends that teenagers receive 8-10 hours of sleep each night.

Unfortunately, teenagers have been getting less sleep over the past several decades. “Only about half of them regularly get more than seven hours of sleep” (McCarthy, 2018). While multiple factors contribute to this trend, three stand out: increased phone use, heavier workloads, and earlier school start times. It is common for teenagers to stay awake late at night, whether spending time with friends or using their phones, computers, or gaming. Maintaining a well-balanced life becomes challenging when one’s sleep rhythm is disrupted. With insufficient sleep, teenagers become more susceptible to both physical and mental health issues. A lack of sleep can lead to mood swings, diminished critical thinking and judgment, and even anxiety or depression. A teenager’s brain is still developing; adequate rest is essential.

As mentioned, half of teenagers spend approximately four or more hours looking at their phones daily. This does not include watching television, playing video games, or staring at a computer monitor. All these devices, some types of light bulbs, and even the sun emit *blue wavelengths* or blue light (Harvard et al., 2020). This blue light is beneficial during the daytime because it helps enhance attention and mood. However, excessive exposure to this light can be harmful at night as it suppresses the body’s natural ability to fall asleep. Staring at screens and other electronic devices at night can lead to sleep loss because it takes longer for people to fall asleep. One solution would be to limit screen time for teenagers and help them prepare for sleep by dimming lights and turning off televisions, computers, and video games.

Another factor of sleep deprivation concerns the starting time for school. While many traditional jobs begin at 9 am, most high schools start their day around 8 am. Because of this, many of those students must get up earlier than that to get ready, have breakfast, and get to school. Furthermore, students may also be involved in other activities, such as sports and clubs, which require them to arrive at school even earlier than the starting time. Students end up getting less sleep because of this type of schedule. However, this schedule has been discussed, as well as how it affects students' well-being. California became the first state in the nation to implement a law requiring public high schools to begin classes at 8:30 am at the earliest, while middle school starts at 8 am. This law went into effect in July 2022 (Karlman, 2022). Even though there may be a slight difference in starting time, the benefits outweigh any risks. Teenagers need the proper amount of sleep, which is a step in the right direction. Of course, parents also need to be aware of getting their teenagers to sleep at a reasonable hour. Just because school begins later does not mean that teenagers should be up later.

Increased Competition to get into Elite Universities

Teenagers feel pressure from their parents and their peers to excel in school. Adults such as parents and teachers promote this pressure by encouraging students to attend college after high school. While it is common for teenagers to attend college right after high school, it is not the only path to adulthood for these young people. Teenagers often feel a sense of urgency to compete with one another to get into elite or prestigious universities. An elite university can be characterized as one that is ranked highly in the press, has high standards, and tends to reject more applicants than it admits.

Because elite universities tend to have lower acceptance rates, students often resort to extreme methods to get into those universities. Examples of these methods

include taking courses that are considered more difficult, doing more activities such as clubs and sports, volunteering, and working outside of school. Students in rigorous academic programs experience higher stress than those in general courses (Suldo et al., 2009). This may be because rigorous classes often require more work, and students taking those courses do so because they want to attend a specific college or make their resumes appear better than their peers. In addition, students taking more rigorous courses tend to spend more time doing homework for those courses.

One of the challenges is that for many elite universities, the number of applicants has steadily increased over the past several decades while the number of those admitted each year has remained steady. Because of this trend, the admission rates at many elite universities, including the Ivy League, have remained extremely low. Students must then resort to extreme measures often to stand out and be considered for these schools. Some stories explain how summers used to mean menial jobs and lazy days by the pool for teenagers, but those days have given rise to resume-building, academic work, and service projects to change the world (Bound et al., 2009). Teenagers' jobs are often viewed utilitarianly, meaning they only perform them to enter an elite university. Instead of enjoying free time with their friends and families, they usually spend that time accomplishing tasks that enhance their resumes.

From 1992 to 2004, there was a rise in the number of high school students taking calculus to help them get into college, and similarly, there was a doubling of the number of students taking advanced placement (AP) courses during that same time (Bound et al., 2009). These students take these courses to help them get into that college. Another reason students take AP courses is to get those courses taken care of before they enter college. The course may be too demanding for them or require more work than they can

handle. Often, their peers may take AP courses, which means they may also want to take them. There are more suitable reasons to take those courses. Every student learns differently, so they should take the classes that help them the most while staying within their capabilities.

There has been a steady increase in students taking standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT. In recent years, there has been a concerted effort among some universities not to require these standardized tests because they may not reflect students' learning outcomes, or some students may need help with standardized tests. However, some schools are bringing back standardized testing because it can help predict college grades and differentiate between applicants (Corcoran, 2024). As a result, students desire to be well-prepared for these exams, so they may want to take more rigorous courses that prepare them for the test.

In addition, the number of seniors in high school who reported doing community service has increased dramatically. In 1987, approximately 45 percent of seniors admitted to community service; in 2000, that number increased to 70 percent (Bound et al., 2009). Whether these students are performing community service for altruistic reasons or because they want to pad their resumes, it remains important to note that they spend this time doing service, which can affect their time accomplishing other tasks. Overall, it is commendable that more teenagers are performing community service and giving back to their communities.

As students spend more time taking more advanced courses and standardized tests, does this greater competition increase learning? Are students learning for its own sake? Instead, students believe that the purpose of school is to obtain the highest grades in their most challenging courses while also scoring high marks on their standardized

tests. Because the rewards of learning seem to be extrinsic, this places much pressure on students to perform well rather than to learn the material simply because they enjoy learning it. This often makes students look at their peers not as collaborators in the classroom to learn with each other but rather as competitors to get into a select number of spots at elite universities. This type of competition can be unhealthy because it fosters competition rather than collaboration.

Summary

Mental health issues remain a critical problem facing adolescents today. Teenagers, while they can sometimes be stubborn or difficult to work with, are individuals who need help maturing into healthy adults. They are vulnerable because they are still in the growth and development phase. Because of this critical time in their lives, it remains vital that they develop healthy habits, learn how to cope with stress in appropriate ways and learn to socialize with others. Mental health is closely tied to an individual's physical health, so healthy sleep and a well-balanced life are critical for teenagers. There are steps parents can take when helping their children develop healthy habits, and there are things schools can do to assist teenagers with their mental health issues. The focus of this research will be to identify ways in which schools, particularly adults working in these schools, take steps to ensure the health and well-being of their students. The overall health of the students ought to be a top priority for all adults working in high schools.

Schools must develop strategies for teaching adolescents how to learn in the most optimal ways possible. It is also necessary to educate adolescents on how to use social media correctly and on the dangers that drugs can cause to their minds and bodies. Schools are becoming places where not only education is taking place but also where it is

necessary to have health services available for the students. In some cases, schools have stepped up their efforts to combat mental health struggles by hiring and promoting professional development, but more can and should be done in this area. In conclusion, understanding the problems associated with student mental health will lead to better solutions on how to deal with students who struggle with mental health issues.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

High schools are where education takes place, but they are also places where teenagers spend most of their time away from their homes. It is becoming more common for teenagers to ask for help at school. Teenagers often rely on other adults for support outside their families, and those adults are usually at the school as teachers, coaches, and counselors. When teenagers face problems, they may rely on their parents or other family members for support, but they may also reach out to the people working at their school. This research paper will focus on adults working in high schools. Teenagers spend much of their time in their schools, so it is essential to understand if their mental health issues are affected by what is occurring in school.

The purpose of this study is to understand the problems associated with the mental health of teenagers, specifically males. The focus will be on an all-male Catholic high school in the western United States. The primary setting for this study is an urban high school that is all-male and Catholic. A qualitative method of inquiry is employed utilizing both phenomenological and narrative designs. Interviews with adults working in these schools were conducted. Interviews took place via Zoom as the primary data collection method. The data was gathered and organized using qualitative software to analyze and visualize the data. In learning about mental health issues affecting teenagers, this study attempted to understand the issues facing adolescents today and help schools work with students who are struggling with mental health issues. Data collected remained confidential to hide the identities of any students, interviewees, or schools mentioned in the study.

Research Question

How do faculty, staff, and administrators notice an increase in the mental health struggles of students in the school environment? Additionally, what factors cause mental health problems to increase among students in that school environment?

Method

This study uses a qualitative research design. Primary data was collected from semi-structured interviews with various faculty, staff, administrators, and counselors employed by Catholic, all-male high schools in the western United States. The researcher briefed all participants on the purpose and intent of this study before the interview date to provide an opportunity for participants to retrieve, recollect, and review salient artifacts from their mentoring and education experiences with their students. Each participant interviewed is a full-time employee of their respective school. Of course, I sought permission from the school to interview employees of that respective school. Interview questions focused on the area of mental health and their experience of working with students who are either struggling with mental health issues or who they believe may be struggling with mental health issues. Identities remain confidential to ensure privacy and honest feedback.

Unless a student is specifically diagnosed with a mental health disorder by a professional, it can be challenging to determine if they are struggling with mental health issues unless they express it explicitly. There may be instances where a student is experiencing a mental health disorder, but it remains unknown to others. It's crucial for adults working in schools to pay attention and notice when students are having difficulty, especially if they observe or hear anything out of the ordinary. Interview questions centered on participants' observations in and around the classroom, focusing on what they

see and hear from their students. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, students were not identified, participating schools were referred to confidentially, and interviewed participants were assigned unique number combinations.

Research Design Overview

The study involves a qualitative research effort employing both phenomenological and narrative approaches to explore the lived experiences of high school students facing mental health challenges and to determine the extent to which the interview participants recognize an increase in those struggles. It includes semi-structured interviews, coding, and analysis of the collected data. Semi-structured interviews consist of a mix of open-ended questions, allowing the interviewer to delve into specific themes or follow-up queries related to the predetermined questions. This method enables interviewees to express themselves and add any insights they feel are relevant to the discussion. Coding uses computer software to analyze the interviews to identify significant themes, words, or comments that interviewees might have overlooked during the conversation.

Both phenomenological and narrative approaches helped me understand this issue more deeply. A phenomenological approach explores the personal lives of the adults who work in the schools and how they know the mental health struggles of their students. As Saldana and Omasta point out, “Phenomenology is the study of the nature and states of lived experiences. This approach distills interview data to their essences and essentials primarily to determine what something ‘is’ or ‘means’ to a collective body of participants” (Saldana & Omasta, 2022, p. 135). Narrative inquiry’s emphasis on the temporal dimension may complement phenomenology’s emphasis on the immediacy of the lived experience. This dual approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of high school students’ mental health by collecting both the existential aspects of their

Lived experiences and the narratives that frame those experiences within a larger context, which were reviewed to answer the research question and better understand mental health.

Participants

The participants in this study include individuals working at a Catholic, all-male high school in the western United States. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, there are approximately 1,200 Catholic high schools in the United States. This research can be helpful for all those individuals working in high schools with male students. Participants include administrators such as presidents, principals, assistant principals, and deans. Also included are other adults from various disciplines who have worked at their schools for at least two years and those who have worked in education for more than 20 years. The researcher also included counselors and mental health coordinators because these individuals have expertise and experience in working with students who struggle with a variety of issues, including mental health. The participants being interviewed had various experiences and backgrounds regarding educational and professional expertise. Coding the interviews is helpful because the researcher can distinguish among everyone's titles, roles in the school, and work experience. These people were invaluable resources for this study because of the knowledge and experiences they bring.

To ensure confidentiality and honesty, participants were assured that their names and places of employment would not be recorded or used. Only the interviewee was able to identify the individuals and their responsibilities. They were also reminded that they were free to decline participation in the interview. Additionally, participants were not obligated to answer any questions to which they did not know the answers or did not wish

to respond. Participants were informed that there would be no compensation for their interviews, and the researcher would not receive compensation for the research being conducted. The researcher would provide the findings to participants upon their written request.

Upon acceptance of the proposal for this study, the researcher contacted the participants and scheduled a time for the interview. This was done in a survey that combined individual school data. Interviews lasted no more than one hour each. Interviews occurred online via Zoom. Before the first meeting with the interviewee, the researcher created the questions and script and approved by the dissertation committee. Any follow-up questions were geared specifically for the research question to be answered. Participants were allowed to speak freely and openly about their expertise. Furthermore, I did not notify anyone who participated in this research so that they would be able to share information.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Given the time constraints of educators and the busyness of teachers' schedules, it was imperative to schedule these interviews promptly and finish them as thoroughly and concisely as possible. While face-to-face interviews are ideal, the researcher realizes that it is essential to complete them, which means that Zoom interviews were necessary for some participants. I asked the interviewees to do interviews via Zoom unless they explicitly stated otherwise. This made data gathering more manageable and helped organize the data better. The questions asked of the participants are included in Appendix A. There were follow-up questions, depending on how the participants responded to the questions. While it is ideal to perform the interviews in the summer months, it was necessary to perform interviews during the evenings, weekends, or on school breaks so

there was enough time to conduct the interviews promptly and thoroughly. Each interview was conducted on Zoom, recorded, and stored in a secure file only accessible by the researcher to assure confidentiality and privacy for the participants.

Data Collection

Data was collected from the interviews with the participants, any documents collected from participants, and literature collected from the literature review. Phenomenological and narrative research was conducted with a variety of participants. I interviewed nine individuals working at a Catholic, all-male high school. While more participants were possibly better, the quantity may be ideal for this research. The participants' backgrounds and experiences significantly assisted the researcher in understanding the problem and guiding the researcher to possible solutions to the problem. If participants' answers began to be repeated, I noted that and began to understand how this theme was one that many of the interviewees noticed. While it may be beneficial to have a diverse view on issues, sometimes, when a particular issue is repeated, this shows that many people identify the problem and understand it but may not know how to deal with it. The purpose of these interviews was not to get similar results but to learn from each of these individuals what they see as the problems of mental health and what their experience is of it.

The interviews took place via Zoom. The interviewee signed an informed consent agreement indicating permission to participate in the interview. This agreement included the participant's rights and the researcher's and Creighton University's confidentiality. The participants will have access to the final research paper if they choose. Once completed, the researcher will provide a link for them to read the final dissertation.

Data Collection Procedures

Once individuals agreed to participate in this study, an email was sent to each participant. Participants understood that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and optional. The email included all necessary information for the study, including an introduction, permission to record the interview via Zoom or on a recording device, and information about participants' rights. This letter also included a timeline for the semi-structured interview and any documents they wished to share for the research.

Participants scheduled a time for the interview and approximately how long the interview lasted. The participants' identifying information was removed before the final research report. All interviews recorded for this research were password-protected for the security and safety of the participants. I referenced the recordings using number combinations to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Data Collection Tools

Most of the questions asked of the participants were open-ended. This means that participants could speak freely and openly about their views and opinions on the questions being asked. The data collected was stored safely and securely. Qualitative software compared, contrasted, and analyzed the collected data. In addition, the researcher took down any notes and other relevant information that may not be included in the recorded interview. The researcher then analyzed the data using the software *Quirkos*. This helped mitigate bias within the data.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed based on the phenomenological and narrative approaches. The data was evaluated, reviewed, sorted, and analyzed using qualitative software and the researcher's understanding and readings of the data. The researcher examined the interview participants' transcripts, quotes, and experiences. Identifying key themes, words, and phrases in the interviews was paramount to the study. Key themes were reported using qualitative software and listening to the interviewees' words and phrases. Exact quotations were included throughout the research to maintain the accuracy of the participants as well as not to distort what the participants may say in the interviews.

The contributions made by the participants were instrumental in helping to address the factors of student mental health in the schools where the participants work. The words of the participants must be taken in context and correctly represented, which is why direct quotes were included in the research. Direct quotes are a way to ensure that the data collected is valid and reliable. Because this research will consist of multiple interviews, it was essential to cross-check the information shared with the researcher to ensure that it was accurate. For example, while I interviewed leaders from the same school, they may have described the same scenarios or students but may see and experience them differently. While all participants did not need to have the same information, similarity means that participants may see the same problems and have similar ideas to share with the researcher. In addition, qualitative software may pick up on similarities from the participants' interviews.

Methodological Integrity

The participants were honest and trustworthy in their responses to interview questions. Participants knew their engagement with this research was voluntary, so they were not required to participate. Once they participated, however, they were notified that they must answer the questions truthfully. This research aims to understand student mental health issues, so hopefully, the participants desired to be honest and upfront when dealing with this sensitive issue. In addition, participants were notified that their names and identities remained confidential, so there was to be no fear of retribution or punishment because they chose to participate in this study. This also helped them be more comfortable knowing their identities were not shared with others, especially the administrators working at the school.

Ethical Considerations

This research proposal was presented to Creighton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval before any data collection efforts. The identities and school remained anonymous, considering the sensitive nature of this research and how it discusses the mental health of minors. This anonymity ensured the privacy and confidentiality of any information regarding students that may be shared in the interview process. Because this research was focused on the mental health of teenagers, it was crucial to focus on general issues rather than specific cases of mental health problems. There were not to be any questions directed toward any student or case that may arise during the interview process. The researcher kept identities confidential and anonymous if any did come up.

Personal Bias

As a phenomenological and narrative study, bias must be addressed and mitigated from the outset. The researcher works at a Catholic all-boys high school, which is why there is a vested interest in this topic. The researcher must remain aware of this bias and pose questions that do not steer toward a specific answer or point of view. A critical aspect of this research is not disclosing to the interview participants. This will prevent them from sharing information, as they will be unaware of who else is part of this research. Careful attention, honest research, and a judgment-free approach will be emphasized in this study because this issue is of the utmost importance when working with teenagers. All findings and recommendations will be based on participants' responses, not the researcher's experiences.

Summary

In conclusion, this chapter focuses on attempting to answer the research question: To what extent do faculty, staff, and counselors notice an increase in mental health struggles with students in Catholic, all-male school environments and classrooms, and what factors cause this problem to increase? This study consists of a qualitative research design utilizing phenomenological and narrative approaches to research. The participants' interviews will provide helpful and valuable information to assist in answering the research question. Understanding the lived experiences of the participants will give firsthand accounts of the mental health struggles that adolescents face in school today. Once the interviews and research begin, the researcher will add any relevant and necessary information to this chapter as it comes along. While this methodology section may not be complete, the essential information regarding methods and research must be included in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the major themes of this phenomenological inquiry. First, it reviews the study's purpose and aims, followed by an overview of the methodological approach. Next, the data analysis procedure is described, leading to a presentation of the findings. The chapter concludes with a description of the discoveries and a summary of the analysis. In line with the phenomenological inquiry, the themes are supported by verbatim interview examples, reflecting the interviewees' experiences. The identified themes are organized by how frequently the interviewees referenced each theme. These themes illustrate how adults working in high schools perceive the mental health issues their students face in daily life. The aim of outlining the major themes explored in this study is to provide a more holistic perspective and better understand how educators can support students struggling with mental health challenges.

Five themes were identified: professional development, competition among students, anxiety and depression, the need for collaboration, and the assessment of honors and advanced placement (AP) courses. Each of these themes will be discussed and analyzed in this chapter. To understand the broader picture of student mental health from the perspective of adults working in high schools, both past and present experiences were examined. The interviews revealed that mental health remains a top priority for everyone involved. The interview results illustrate how this issue can be understood in the classroom. Everyone interviewed contributed their experiences to this research. While most interviewees have prior classroom experience, none currently work full-time at the school. However, the experiences of each participant lend significant weight to this issue,

as they all work professionally with students. Each participant offers a unique perspective on teachers' vital role in students' lives.

This research does not include current full-time teachers, meaning the participants do not teach a full course load. This school's full course load consists of four or five class sections. However, it's important to understand mental health issues from the perspective of individuals who primarily work one-on-one with students. For example, counselors often meet personally with students to discuss topics privately. Students may feel more comfortable and inclined to share insights about their classroom experiences in this confidential setting compared to a room filled with peers. Additionally, students might develop a stronger connection with their counselor or another faculty member since teachers typically manage many more students.

The student-teacher relationship also involves the distribution of grades, which can lead to a different dynamic between students and their teacher compared to their counselor. This occurs because students often view their teachers more formally due to the impact of grades, while counselors do not typically have a role in that aspect of students' lives. A counselor's role is to support students in various ways, including providing guidance on college and addressing personal issues they may be facing. Counselors take a holistic approach to a student's life, whereas teachers may concentrate solely on academics. Additionally, with many teachers in the school, identifying specific themes related to mental health can be challenging since numerous teachers provide diverse perspectives on this subject. Consequently, this study centers explicitly on counselors, administrators, and other staff who work closely with students, often one-on-one.

Purpose of the Study

This study will explore the lived experiences of faculty and staff regarding mental health students' challenges within the school and classroom environments and their effects on their overall lives.

Aim of the Study

The study aims to understand mental health from the perspectives of mental health coordinators, counselors, and administrators and to explore how mental health issues have become particularly acute within the classroom setting. This paper will explain why a narrative approach is the most suitable for analyzing the research question.

Review of Methodology

This study will utilize a qualitative research design. Primary data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews with various staff members, administrators, and counselors at a Catholic all-boys high school in the western United States. Before the interviews, the researcher will inform all participants about the purpose and intent of the study, allowing them to gather, recall, and review relevant materials related to their mentoring and educational experiences with students. Each interviewee will be a full-time employee of the school. Naturally, permission will be obtained from the school to interview its staff. *Appendices A and B* were sent to the school's principal to request permission for these interviews, which was granted. *Appendix B* contains the email sent to each participant requesting their participation in the study. Additionally, a copy of *Appendix E* was provided to each participant, outlining the purpose and scope of the research as well as the rights of those involved in this study.

Interview questions will focus on mental health and experiences of working with students who are struggling with mental health issues or may be perceived that way. A list

of questions for each interview can be found in *Appendix A*. Identities will remain confidential to protect privacy and encourage honest feedback. If necessary, participants will be asked questions with follow-up inquiries. If participants are unwilling to share or do not know the answer to a specific question, they may skip it. Every effort will be made to ensure that the questions are open-ended and reflect the participant's perspective, meaning there are no right or wrong answers. Participants will not be informed of the questions beforehand, and each will have ample time to respond to every question.

Data Analysis Procedures

I interviewed nine individuals for this research project. These individuals are employed at a Catholic all-boys high school in the western United States. The interviewees consist of members from the counseling department, learning specialists, a mental health and wellness coordinator, and administrators. They participated in interviews via Zoom, during which select questions were asked, and they were given ample time to respond. I asked follow-up questions as needed. Each interview lasted no longer than one hour. Participants were informed that their identities and the school's name would remain confidential to ensure accurate data reporting. They were also notified that the interview would be recorded and securely stored to protect their privacy, with only the researcher accessing the recordings. Additionally, they could provide artifacts to the researcher if necessary. Overall, the participants provided constructive and valuable feedback to aid this research.

After gathering all the interviews, the researcher compiled them into a secure file and analyzed each one using the software Otter.ai and Quirkos. Once the analysis was complete, the researcher began coding the interviews to identify trends or themes from the transcripts. The researcher reviewed the transcripts to pinpoint key features and

recurring themes across the interviews. To maintain the independence of each interview, he did not disclose any information shared by the participants. This ensured that no participant was privy to the information provided by others. Moreover, the researcher did not inform any participants about whom he interviewed for this research, protecting their identities and ensuring that none of them shared information.

The researcher asked each participant about their primary role in the school and their previous experience working in the field of education. While all participants currently work full-time at the Catholic, all-male high school, several also have prior experience at other schools. Their experience includes working at co-educational schools, and one individual worked at an all-female high school before joining this current institution. One participant was a community health therapist before coming to work at this school. Each participant has been with this school for at least two years, ensuring they possess relevant experience and have established rapport with the student body before engaging in this research. The participants were eager to participate in this research as it affects their students and the student body. It was crucial to ensure they could be honest and forthcoming in their responses, allowing the research to be as accurate as possible.

Demographics

The nine participants in this study included counselors, learning specialists, a mental health and wellness coordinator, and two administrators. They have all worked at the school for at least two years, with several having been there for at least the previous ten years. Currently, they work with students of all ages, from first-year students to seniors aged 14 to 19 years. The student body comprises approximately 1,250 students, and the school is in an urban area in the western United States. It reflects a wide diversity

of ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds, with around 70% identifying as Catholic. The remainder comprises various Jewish, Muslim, and non-religious students. The school operates as a commuter institution, meaning most students drive to school, while a small percentage uses public transportation or the school bus. It offers a variety of extracurricular activities, including sports, clubs, retreats, and service trips. While these activities are voluntary, many students engage in various pursuits.

Participant Profile and Description

The study involved nine individuals employed at a Catholic all-boys high school in the western United States. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, their names and identities will remain confidential. Each participant will be assigned a number to represent their identity, referred to as “Participant 1, Participant 2,” and so on. The participants include one principal, one assistant principal for academics, two learning specialists, one health and wellness coordinator, and four counselors who closely support students in their academic and social-emotional well-being. Among the participants, there are three males and six females. Two participants have been at the school for two years, while the longest-serving individual has been there for 22 years.

Presentation of the Findings

Five significant themes reflect the lived experiences of faculty and staff who work regularly with high school students. These themes represent patterns from the semi-structured interviews conducted. Although every effort was made to address as many themes as possible, focusing on five specific themes highlighted during the interviews was necessary. During the research for this paper, a natural disaster recently impacted the area, affecting a sizable population of students and faculty and resulting in several students losing their homes or being displaced. This unexpected factor contributed to the

research into the mental health issues affecting the students at this school. The following themes from this research are:

1. There is a need for professional development for teachers on how to address mental health issues.
2. Competition among students regarding their grades and getting into elite colleges.
3. Rise of the awareness of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders in society in recent years.
4. There is a need for collaboration among adults working in high school.
5. Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes and the number of classes each student takes of those classes.

Defining Mental Health

The first question I asked participants was how they would define *mental health*. Since eight of the nine participants were not medically trained to address mental health issues, it was essential to gain their perspective on the matter and how they articulated the term. Many described mental health as the ability to navigate daily life and manage their anxiety and other stressors they encounter. Like physical health, mental health relates to their mental state and what occurs psychologically within their minds, as well as how it impacts their relationships with themselves and others. While this term encompasses a broad meaning, the participants agreed that mental health is essential to student health and well-being. Here are examples of what the participants said regarding their definitions of the term:

- “Mental health is the ability to navigate events, whether mundane or extraordinary, in a way that maintains the well-being of the individual or group” (Participant 1).
- “Mental health is a neutral term that means your awareness of how you’re feeling” (Participant 2).
- “Mental health, I would define as like a person’s ability to function in their relationships, in their job...And internally, how you feel about yourself” (Participant 3).
- “I think of it as the same as physical health. Your mental health is your state of being, how you feel as you feel emotionally as you go through your everyday life” (Participant 4).
- “I would define mental health as this state of a person’s well-being mentally” (Participant 5).
- “Your ability to navigate the day and manage your anxieties and actions, manage your ability to take on new information as you navigate the day” (Participant 6).
- “It’s that any of us as human beings have the capacity, the tools, and the self-awareness to use skills to cope with our reality” (Participant 8).
- “You can manage typical stressors healthily without negatively impacting the rest of your day-to-day experiences” (Participant 7).
- “I would describe it as a person who feels safe, who feels like they can be themselves authentically in a group of people and not be embarrassed, ashamed, nervous, anxious, and are open to sharing their feelings, open to sharing their insights, their opinions” (Participant 9).

A challenge in defining specific mental health cases is the privacy issues surrounding each case. Since most of the student body consists of minors, each case must remain confidential, even from their teachers. It is up to the student or their parent(s) to share information regarding their mental health. Consequently, when the Care Management Team (CMT) communicates with a student's teachers, they use the general term *mental health* instead of citing a specific reason.

Theme 1: Need for Professional Development

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of faculty and staff developing their skills in mental health. While most faculty and staff are not experts nor specifically trained to support students dealing with mental health issues, they play a crucial role in daily student interactions. Given the significant amount of time spent with students in the classroom, faculty, and staff often notice any challenges students may be experiencing.

One of the participants in this study is the school's health and wellness coordinator. This individual plays a crucial role at the school, as this office directs most severe mental health cases. They suggested making mental health awareness more accessible and resources more available to students. They discussed how the school can promote Suicide Prevention Month and Mental Health Awareness Month. Addressing these topics in classes can also help students with their issues, and hosting lunch presentations on various mental health topics would be beneficial.

Participant 2 highlights several ways teachers can promote better mental health for their students. They state, "I think it's everybody's responsibility to care for people's mental health... Teachers should have access to training in this area to feel equipped to support students where appropriate." Even though teachers are not mental health experts nor specifically trained in that field, they still encounter mental health issues because they

spend a significant amount of time with students. If teachers cannot help students directly, they should be capable of quickly guiding them to the right professionals for help.

When describing the training regarding mandated reporting, Participant 7 stated, “The mandated reporter training occurs every two to three years, but it’s outdated and doesn’t align with more modern practices. It’s primarily delivered through a religious lens, which is commendable, but that approach doesn’t reflect how things function daily with our students. I believe faculty must have opportunities for professional development beyond just that mandated reporting training.”

Mandated reporting is crucial since adults interact with minors at this school. This requirement applies to all adults employed in schools with minors in this state of the United States. While mandated reporting is essential, it is also important to provide training for students with various illnesses and related disorders, including mental health issues. Although teacher training cannot replace student treatment, it equips teachers with the necessary knowledge to support their students effectively.

Boys and Girls Speak Differently

Participant 5 discussed the differences between boys and girls and how their communication skills vary. This participant points out that girls convey their emotions more effectively and directly than boys, who use more “action-oriented” phrases. Boys do not necessarily articulate their feelings as profoundly; therefore, Participant 5 noted that they need to guide these boys in expressing their emotions more profoundly. Participant 5 mentioned that professional development is in the works at the school, which could assist teachers in improving their communication skills with students.

Participant 6 described a similar situation when discussing the differences between boys and girls. This participant notes explicitly the issue of stress. They explain that when boys are stressed, they tend to hold it in and may resort to coping mechanisms like drugs to alleviate that stress, while girls typically reach out to others to talk about their feelings. Because of this difference, they suggest that the school should provide spaces for boys to share their insights, including their struggles.

Theme 1 Conclusion

Leadership shapes how we should address the challenges confronting our school. It is the responsibility of administrators to supply the necessary tools to assist teachers in supporting their students with mental health concerns. While teachers cannot be the ultimate solution to this issue, they can offer resources to help their students seek assistance. Furthermore, professional development can enhance teachers' ability to communicate effectively with their students and understand how to respond to mental health issues appropriately. Knowing how teachers can encourage their students to excel without overwhelming them would also be advantageous. They must learn to maintain a healthy balance in the classroom and provide students with opportunities to express their thoughts verbally or through other mediums. Professional development can equip teachers with the resources needed to alleviate students' daily stressors, particularly those related to their academic responsibilities.

Theme 2: Competition Among Students

This school identifies as a college preparatory institution, meaning all its courses are designed to meet student's needs and prepare them for higher education. Although the school offers a rigorous curriculum, students may have the option to take honors and AP courses if accepted into them. Competition can be intense, depending on the specific

course and the number of applicants vying for a spot. Students often compete to secure those coveted positions in certain classes. While a healthy degree of competition can be beneficial, excessive competition can negatively impact a student's mental health.

Participant 7 stated, “I think their number one stressor for the kids is academics. I think [the school] is worsening those things, specifically around the conversations about college and graduation, achievements, etc. I think we emphasize where our students are attending schools and where they are getting in.” This type of pressure only intensifies the stress students are under to succeed. Unfortunately, this school puts a lot of pressure on the student rather than helping the student become more well-rounded. This school should encourage other pathways for success besides academic achievement, even though that is a significant part of the school’s identity.

The intense pressure of academics and performance affects not only the students but also the parents and their expectations. When it comes to the relationship between the competition students face and the involvement of the parents, the following are examples of what the participants had to say:

- “Parents put their sons in a school like [this one] because they want achievement, they want rigor, and sometimes that’s more than they can manage, or more than they can manage right now” (Participant 3).
- “Because of where I sit, I usually am at the end of like a journey that is often filled with disappointment...that parents [are] often disappointed with whatever” (Participant 8).
- “I get some parents who are very open-minded about mental health...And then I have some parents that hide things, and it takes a while to make progress because we’re not getting the whole picture” (Participant 4).

Most of the participants noted how parental involvement can be mixed when it comes to their sons' pressures. While some parents are willing to support and encourage their sons, other parents may be in denial of a problem or exacerbate the pressures their sons are facing.

Participant 6 highlighted the rising cost of tuition and how it places added stress on both the parents and their children. Many parents have options for their child's education; some feel comfortable enrolling their child in a local public school, while others opt for charter or private schools. However, one challenge of private schooling is the financial strain, as some parents devote a significant part of their income to their child's education. As parents allocate more funds for tuition, there is often an expectation for enhanced outcomes, which may encompass better grades, increased extracurricular activities, or assurances that their child will gain admission to a prestigious college.

Another aspect of competition is the drive to excel in various sports and extracurricular activities. Participant 6 noted that sports tryouts in today's schools appear much more competitive than they did during his time in high school. Students often get cut from teams, yet those cut today seem to take it more seriously and are more heartbroken than in previous years. Facing rejection can be challenging, but maybe students should learn how to handle it since it may happen to them in the future.

Defining Success

Participant 8 states, "Writing about this is the definition of success and how it contributes to the angst we all feel, as well as how we can truly redefine what it means to be successful." Furthermore, Participant 7 discusses how this school often markets itself as the "best high school" in the area. She notes that it may be better and healthier to say to do your best rather than "we are the best." This slight change in wording may not seem

significant, but it does matter. If success is measured by the number of honors and AP courses a student takes, then this can have detrimental effects on students who may not be capable of handling those courses.

Students often sense that they are competing against one another when measuring their success levels accurately, which is problematic. Students may take similar courses, but they may have different teachers, different workloads, and various activities they are involved with, and students learn differently. Even students who receive the same grade may have other skill levels in the same class. In addition, students should not define success by how many activities they can participate in at school. This can cause further time constraints for students at this commuter school.

Theme 2 Conclusion

People often compete in various ways, such as in sports, careers, and school. It can be challenging to eliminate competition among students. However, the school should at least recognize that competition can lead to mental health issues, as students frequently compete against one another. Therefore, a clear definition of success and the meaning of doing one's best should be communicated to students as they enter the school.

Competition can be viewed negatively, but it can also be viewed positively. Competition often fosters the best in individuals because it brings out the best in a person. However, too much competition can lead to an unhealthy obsession to be the best. It is important to foster healthy competition among the students while encouraging them to help one another.

Theme 3: Rise and Awareness of Anxiety and Depression among Adults working at the school

The health and wellness coordinator discussed how the school can promote an emotional learning class. This individual noted that public schools in California require students to take a social-emotional learning (SEL) class from kindergarten through high school. Although this school does not offer that specific class, it provides optional study periods during the junior and senior years. These study periods are meant for students to complete work and meet with their counselors if they choose to do so.

Participant 6 states, “Certainly, there’s an academic anxiety around performing and needing to get A’s in every class.” He continues by giving an example of a student who is “freaking out” because this student is receiving an “A-” in one of his classes. This kind of pressure can lead students to experience intense anxiety and depression as they place so much emphasis on their grades. When students focus excessively on their grades, they overlook other aspects of their lives that can provide meaning and purpose. Additionally, students often spend too much time concentrating on their grades instead of engaging in other activities that could help alleviate the pressure they may feel.

Participant 7 notes, “One recurring issue is the stress of academics, combined with the pressures of college and expectations from family.” Participant 7 believes that about 10% of students experience mental health issues from their perspective. These issues can show up in various forms, including eating disorders, sleeplessness, increased absences, and other irregularities that impact a student’s well-being. These problems were not nearly as prevalent several years ago as they have been in the last couple of years.

Participant 1 mentions increased awareness of mental health issues and the school's response. Participant 1 states, “We have had a significant culture shift here. The

research tells us that it takes about four years for a culture to shift.” This shift in awareness has positively impacted student outcomes and helped students navigate their mental struggles at school. These issues went unnoticed several years ago or were not addressed appropriately. However, the school has made progress in tackling challenges by hiring specific individuals to work with students on their difficulties.

Overall, participants have noted a growing awareness of mental health issues in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly heightened this awareness and sped up how schools can support students in addressing their mental health challenges. Recently, articles, books, and journals on this topic have emerged. While there are no easy solutions to mental health issues, there are ways to support students in their struggles. It is crucial to recognize that mental health issues persist for many individuals; they are aspects of life that must be managed effectively. Teachers and other school staff can assist students in managing their mental health appropriately. Addressing this issue and helping students manage their mental health remain critical components for schools to function effectively and for fostering the development of the whole person, which includes nurturing the minds, hearts, and bodies of each student.

Theme 3 Conclusion

The participants all noted that discussions about anxiety and depression are more openly conducted in today’s school environment compared to their own experiences in high school. While this openness is a step in the right direction, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the origins of this anxiety and depression. Each participant mentioned that there is both a nature and nurture component to this anxiety, indicating that both biological factors and environmental circumstances influence it. This research aims to explore the environmental factors and how to address them.

An essential aspect of this theme centers around the expectations of the student placed by the school and parents. One takeaway from the participants is how the school should communicate their expectations with the parents and what the parents expect the school to do in cases of mental health issues. Furthermore, it is imperative to listen to the parents' perspectives on why they are sending their son to this school and what their expectations are from the school. Parents should understand that the purpose of school is not to enroll their sons in the most rigorous and challenging courses if they cannot succeed in those classes. The school should explain more clearly that every class they offer is a college preparatory course.

The school and parents should emphasize the importance of extracurricular activities and other interests the student should explore. These interests can benefit the student's health by providing an outlet for the student. In addition, these activities can help the student by providing him time to spend with his peers. Some of these interests can be physically rewarding and mentally and emotionally engaging for the student. Furthermore, the school should promote "free time" for the students to spend together as a positive engagement for their mental and physical well-being. Emphasizing these other activities as opportunities for growth and learning can benefit the student's health.

Participant 6 mentioned how one of his students "freaked out" because he had an "A-" in one of his art classes and had As in every other course. While this student was not planning on exploring a future art career or majoring in art, it caused him to panic about this one grade. Grades are a significant factor in one's schooling, so it may be impossible to eradicate grades from the school. On the other hand, the school should reassure students that grades are just as significant as the knowledge they learn from the classes

they take. Students place so much pressure on themselves to succeed that they view anything less than an “A” as failing. Students need to change this mindset.

Theme 4: Need for Collaboration and Transparency

One of this school's strengths is establishing a care management team (CMT). This team includes the student's counselor, therapist, learning specialist (if the student has an IEP or other learning differences), assistant principal for student life, associate principal for academics, dean of students, school nurse, and campus minister. These individuals are responsible for understanding how the student is shaped and addressing any mental or physical health issues he may face.

One strength of this treatment model is the communication among various stakeholders. Each person brings a unique perspective on how the student is being treated, fostering a shared understanding of the student's challenges. It is important to note that information shared in these meetings remains confidential and is disclosed to the student's parents only with the student's explicit permission or if there is a threat to the student's physical well-being. Participant 3 discusses how the CMT operates and meets each Monday to focus on a student's needs. They state, “So a counselor will say, I have a CMT need for a student, and they also come to that meeting. But we're talking about five to eight or nine kids each week. So, we could have a rotation of all those counselors coming in and out throughout that hour we're meeting to discuss it.” Solutions can involve schedule changes for the student, meeting with the student regularly, seeking outside resources for the student, or taking a leave of absence. Participant 3 adds, “But it goes through CMT just to make sure it's not one person making those decisions, and it's a collaboration of different professionals adding input.” This type of collaboration is a

positive reminder of the importance of clear and transparent communication to ensure that students receive comprehensive support as needed.

Another strength of this model is the interaction between individuals and the student. For instance, the student's primary counselor focuses on the college admissions process and any mental or social challenges the student may face. The student is referred to the school therapist if significant psychological or physical issues arise. This collaboration leads to a shared treatment plan for the student. Because no single adult is solely responsible for the student's treatment, this approach fosters collaboration among various stakeholders, ensuring everyone is accountable for addressing the student's needs.

This type of communication addresses the need for holistic education in schools. Holistic education is a teaching method that emphasizes the development of the whole person, encompassing students' social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual needs. Several participants in this study are members of the Care Management Team. Each week, they meet to discuss the various challenges faced by students. On average, they talk about 4 to 5 students per week who struggle the most with mental health issues and other disorders. In these meetings, the discussions focus on the primary problems of the students and the best ways to address these issues at school. In some cases, parents are involved, while in others, they are not, as the challenges of mental health can sometimes stem from the pressures parents place on their children.

Theme 4 Conclusion

This school has provided a crucial service to its students by establishing a care management team (CMT) to support student health and well-being. A student's mental health should not only be addressed by the student's counselor; the involvement of other stakeholders can enhance healing and foster transparency in the school. This team can

also greatly assist parents by ensuring the school effectively communicates how to support their child best.

A recommendation is to involve the students' teachers by informing them how to address their needs and best support their interests. While students' mental health is a sensitive issue, the CMT can guide teachers on better assisting these students and determining whether their mental health challenges arise from what is happening in the classroom. There may be instances when a student's mental health crisis worsens due to a teacher's words and actions at school. Participant 7 mentioned that the counseling department is planning future professional development for the school community to help address mental health issues among students.

Clear and transparent communication among adult members of the school community is essential, particularly with those who work with students facing mental health challenges. The teachers of these students must receive professional development focused on effectively addressing specific mental health cases. While progress has been made in recent years regarding communication issues with teachers, providing them with additional resources can further support their efforts in assisting struggling students.

Theme 5: Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) Classes

This Catholic school takes pride in being a college preparatory institution. Many high schools, both private and public, offer courses designed to prepare students for higher education. Participant 9 noted that every class is considered a "college prep" course. While students are not required to take any honors or AP classes throughout their four years at the school, the vast majority enroll in honors or AP courses during their studies. These courses have restrictions, meaning that students must apply to gain acceptance. They need to demonstrate their ability to manage the coursework in these

classes. Acceptance requirements include the grade received in their current class, a teacher recommendation, and approval from the department chair.

The reasons students enroll in these courses vary from one student to another. However, the consensus among participants in this study is that students pursue these courses to make their college resumes stand out. Gaining acceptance into elite colleges and universities is becoming increasingly more challenging. As noted in an earlier theme, competition among students is rising, and they believe that taking more honors and AP courses will enhance their chances of getting admitted to their preferred college.

Participant 9 emphasized that the school is responsible for applying moderate stress to students. Participant 9 stated, “I believe there is a healthy level of stress that teenagers should experience, as it helps them learn to perform under pressure and prepares them for college.” He noted one of the challenges is finding the right balance of stress and teaching students to manage it. While schools address mental health issues, it’s also crucial to prepare students for the realities of the “real world.” If students are not equipped to handle stress and life pressures, the school ultimately does them a disservice.

Participant 7 noted that there needs to be a reevaluation of the honors and AP classes. However, most mentioned that the school should keep those courses available for students. One of the interviewees suggested limiting the number of AP courses a student can take in a year, which could solve the issue of students enrolling in more AP courses than they should. This theme connects to another concern: students' competition among peers. When students see their peers taking more AP courses, they feel pressured to keep up with them to compete for admission to specific colleges. While a healthy level of competition can benefit students, excessive competition can lead to anxiety and burnout.

Participant 3 discussed how the school can assess the AP class process and its impact on students' mental health. Additionally, Participant 3 highlighted how the school can evaluate the effectiveness of the homework assigned each night and whether it can be reduced to promote overall student health and well-being. Each teacher assigns no set minimum amount of homework to their students. A more explicit guideline regarding the amount of homework given each night could benefit students' health. Furthermore, guidance on the purpose of homework could help teachers better understand its role for students. Students enroll in 6 to 7 classes each year, leading to a rigorous course load that varies based on the classes they choose and the amount of homework each teacher assigns. Moreover, students may participate in various activities, limiting the time they can devote to homework. This may reduce their sleep each night, mainly because this school is a commuter school.

Theme 5 Conclusion

Honors and AP courses allow students to excel in specific subject areas. The school should emphasize that every course is a college preparatory class designed to prepare students for higher education. Just because a student is accepted into one of these courses does not mean they are obligated to take it. One strength of this school in recent years is how effectively it has communicated to students the reasons for taking specific classes and the requirements for acceptance. Students should not feel pressured to enroll in advanced courses if they are uncomfortable with the associated workload. Parents should also be informed about these expectations to prevent them from pressuring their children to take classes that demand significant time and effort.

Participant 9 discussed the ongoing conversations about limiting the number of honors and AP classes each student can take each year. These discussions have continued

for some time without a clear resolution. There is no limit on the number of AP classes a student may enroll in. Furthermore, this school does not offer all available AP classes. Occasionally, a student enrolls in an AP class outside of school, either at a local community college or through another organization. While the school cannot control where a student enrolls externally, it can oversee the classes a student takes within its institution.

Further research could involve contacting other schools that have reduced or eliminated AP classes from their curricula. This issue may not be resolved within a year; instead, it might take several years to implement. Understanding the pros and cons of this change can help students by preventing an excessively demanding course load. This shift may free up their time and enable them to pursue interests beyond academics. Unfortunately, some students might enroll in these courses simply because they were accepted. Additionally, limiting the number of AP courses that each student can take may create opportunities for others to enroll in these classes, as it could open up more slots. Such a change could promote more significant equity for the entire student body.

Discussion

While this research was conducted at a Catholic all-male school, the insights gained can benefit various educational institutions, including other all-male and co-educational schools. Adults working in high schools with male students can gain a valuable understanding of how these students operate and what they can do to support young men facing mental health challenges. Efforts were made to cover as many themes as possible. Still, limiting the number of themes was also crucial to ensure potential solutions to these issues can be addressed effectively and measurably.

These themes were discussed to alleviate the pressures students face in school today. Interviewing these individuals has broadened my perspective on how many students struggle with mental health issues. While the actual number of students who struggle appears to be low, there may be more students within the population who are facing difficulties that educators are unaware of. It is essential to recognize that there may be students in the population who are not officially diagnosed with mental health issues but are still experiencing challenges.

A problem discussed in several interviews emphasized how schools should take a proactive rather than reactive approach to this issue. While this school has excelled in supporting students, more can be done to tackle this concern. This includes engaging with parents and students about the measures they can adopt to help alleviate pressures. There is a consensus that anxiety and depression stem from both biological and environmental factors. Although addressing the biological aspects of anxiety and depression is challenging, there are steps the school can take to address the environmental factors impacting mental health.

The participants in this study were not full-time classroom teachers, meaning none currently teach a whole load of classes; however, several had previously been involved in the classroom. I asked them how teachers can address mental health with their students and what they can do to help. The following excerpts illustrate their responses to that question:

- “To create a safe and loving environment... just providing a safe space for students to express themselves,” especially if they are having a stressful week (Participant 9).

- “I always say that one of the first things we need to do is model it. How can [teachers] present themselves as good, whole, and healthy individuals with proper boundaries around our work?” (Participant 8).
- “[Teachers] are very open-minded about the professional development we have. If they could maintain that enthusiasm, we also need to provide more PD to help train them and assist them in understanding what it means to be a student with learning differences” (Participant 4).
- “As teachers, can we collaborate across departments to discuss, ‘When is your test happening?’ and the amount of homework, or even consider creating a master schedule of tests?” (Participant 5).
- “Certainly, our students respond positively to respectful interactions... If something is happening that you need me to be aware of to improve our teacher-student relationship” (Participant 1).

Integrating the mentioned themes into the classroom requires teachers to adjust their management styles and interactions with students. While this may pressure teachers and demand more time for implementation, such changes can positively impact students' mental health. Recognizing that teachers often lack sufficient time and resources, more significant effort may be needed to achieve these changes. Nevertheless, the outcomes could significantly benefit students' mental well-being in the short and long term. Building stronger relationships can substantially improve student-teacher interactions. This is where professional development can positively shape how teachers perceive student mental health.

One of this school's strengths is the environment fostered by the faculty and staff. Participants noted several times how the teachers at this school cultivate a sense of

belonging and encouragement among their students. Healthy and transparent relationships between teachers and students are essential for promoting mental health. Students should feel comfortable approaching their teachers with any issues or concerns. While it may be challenging for a teacher to connect with each student on a personal level, that teacher should make every effort to acknowledge their students and reassure them that discussing any problems they face is acceptable. Teachers should also be prepared to refer student issues to a counselor or another professional at the school.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the purpose of the study, the research questions that guided it, the method of inquiry, the data analysis procedures, and the results from the interviews. The study aimed to explore and understand how individuals working at a Catholic, all-male high school can support their students who are struggling with mental health issues and prevent these issues from becoming a more significant problem for the student body as a whole. This study utilized a phenomenological method of inquiry consisting of semi-structured interviews. The results from the interviews revealed five key themes that addressed this issue.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Everyone involved in schools should prioritize students' mental health and well-being. While schools provide valuable knowledge and insights through academics, they increasingly function as environments where students need holistic support. Many students participate in activities outside the classroom, including sports, clubs, and other extracurricular pursuits. Since students spend significant time at school, they often seek assistance from school personnel. Fortunately, students at this Catholic school receive essential support. This includes teachers, coaches, counselors, mental health and wellness coordinators, learning specialists, and administrators. Establishing a care management team ensures that struggling students receive the assistance they need while creating a forum to discuss those concerns with other community members. Students facing mental health challenges must access the support they require, as many mental health issues often go unnoticed.

Aim Statement

The DIP aimed to understand mental health from the perspective of staff, counselors, and administrators and see how it has become particularly acute within the classroom setting. This paper attempted to explain how narrative and phenomenological approaches to this study are the most appropriate methods for analyzing the research question.

This study aimed to understand what problems students have in the classroom when it comes to mental health. The significance of this study was to develop an understanding of the problems associated with teenage mental health so that adults at the school can come up with solutions to overcome the challenges students face with mental health issues. The results of this DIP study help adults working with teenage boys to

develop a set of recommendations to address the problems students have with mental health issues at school and in the classroom.

Proposed Solution(s)

Several proposed solutions emerged from the participants' interviews. These solutions include: 1) the need for ongoing professional development, 2) increased and more straightforward access to mental health resources for students, 3) a reevaluation of the honors/AP curriculum guidelines, 4) enhanced collaboration, particularly between the CMT and teachers, 5) more profound and more effective dialogue regarding parental expectations and pressures, and 6) awareness and understanding of the workload of each classroom teacher.

The data informed these solutions because each interview frequently mentioned these issues. Several participants highlighted the importance of teachers receiving training from professional healthcare workers specializing in mental health. They also expressed that students should have easier access to mental health resources and that teachers must know where to find them. Additionally, they suggested that the school reevaluate whether there should be a limit on the number of AP courses a student can take each year. Furthermore, they emphasized the ongoing need for transparency, collaboration, and communication among all stakeholders, particularly between the school and parents. The school needs to convey the expectations and realities to parents, urging them to take an active role in their children's health and development. Developing these young men should not rest solely with the school community.

Evidence that Supports the Solution

The most substantial evidence supporting the solution of professional development lies with the mental health and wellness coordinator. As someone

professionally trained to assist students experiencing mental health issues, this individual is qualified to guide teachers on how to work with these students effectively. While this training is not explicitly intended to instruct teachers in handling medical matters related to mental health, it will nonetheless significantly aid teachers in understanding the types of behaviors, words, and actions they can implement in the classroom to ensure students feel comfortable approaching them for help regarding mental health. Furthermore, professional development can help teachers more easily identify struggling students and find effective ways to support them in class.

Regarding the reevaluation of honors and AP courses, the school can investigate other institutions that have either eliminated these courses or have imposed limits on the number of such classes students can take. Examining these other schools can significantly assist in finding a solution to this issue and determining whether limiting the number of these courses truly affects student mental health and outcomes.

The CMT model demonstrates that communication is essential for mental health assessments and student outcomes. Building on this model, the school should consider expanding its scope to include other stakeholders who offer valuable insights, specifically the students' teachers and parents. These individuals provide essential perspectives on the nuances of the students and what can be done to assist them. Moreover, involving these stakeholders can empower and engage them in solutions to help students. Parents play a crucial role in the education and upbringing of teenagers. Establishing clear and transparent communication with parents is vital since they are also part of the school community. Involving parents highlights their importance and underscores the need to understand parental expectations, which is essential for student learning. Some parents

may wish to engage more actively in the school and their children's lives. This open and balanced communication type can benefit all stakeholders, especially the students.

These solutions are practical because they can be implemented promptly and clearly. They do require more work on the part of administrators; however, the school has built-in advantages for implementing these changes. The school already has multiple days of professional development on its calendar. Additionally, it doesn't take much effort to reach out to parents via email to communicate with them more effectively. Since the school operates a standard website, it can include a page devoted to mental health resources for its students. The CMT can send relevant information to teachers about students who are struggling with mental health issues, making that communication more accessible to parents as well. While they may seem insignificant, these solutions can provide lasting student health and wellness benefits.

Evidence that Challenges the Solution

Given the topic's sensitivity, one challenge is the extent of information that can be shared with teachers and parents. Some students may come from households facing significant mental health challenges, which may lead them to prefer that their information remain private from their parents. Furthermore, some teachers might not feel equipped to address such delicate issues with students, leading them to refer those students to counselors or other appropriate individuals for support. Since teachers already have numerous responsibilities in addition to managing a full schedule of classes, they often cannot provide adequate assistance to students grappling with specific mental health challenges. Regularly working with individual students becomes nearly impossible due to time and energy constraints.

Another factor limiting the school is parents' pressure on their sons to succeed. With tuition continuously rising, parents hold high expectations for their sons. Parents may decide not to send their sons here if the school limits the number of AP courses. Given the increased competition for admission to elite universities, parents always seek an advantage; since their sons might be denied certain courses, they may oppose this limitation, especially considering the substantial tuition costs they incur to send them to this school. Finally, parents themselves may be constrained by time and energy to support their sons with mental health issues effectively. They also may not know how to handle these specific concerns, so they turn to school personnel for assistance. Consequently, there may be pushback from teachers and parents regarding several of the proposed solutions.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gather information on how various adults at a high school perceive and understand students facing mental health challenges. During this research, it was essential to identify the roots of mental health issues and explore strategies for schools to prevent these problems more effectively. While some students may experience difficulties related to mental health, most do not encounter significant issues. However, this does not imply that schools should focus solely on struggling students. Every student deserves access to the support they need. Furthermore, schools should not only address this challenge reactively, even though it often tends to be the norm. Instead, schools must proactively strive to create environments where students are less likely to face mental health issues.

This research primarily focused on solutions to students' challenges regarding mental health issues. Still, it began to evolve into strategies for schools to support all

students dealing with these concerns. One challenge is the notion that schools must be reactive toward struggling students. However, schools must take a proactive approach to addressing the specific issues students encounter. While many students experience difficulties, many others are on the verge of struggling. Additionally, there may be more students in the population who go unnoticed. Therefore, it is essential to reach out to all students and understand how schools can better promote mental health for everyone.

Implications for Action/Recommendation for Further Research

Practical Implications

While this dissertation does not comprehensively cover the issues that high school boys face, it offers a valuable starting point for how faculty and staff can better support their students. Although faculty and staff may not have professional training in addressing mental health concerns, they serve as resources for students seeking the required help. For instance, faculty and staff are mandated reporters when assisting students who are suspected of experiencing abuse. Teachers and counselors must remain vigilant regarding their students' mental health, as signs and symptoms can be challenging to recognize. Consequently, effective communication is essential in tackling this issue, and collaborating with fellow faculty and staff is important, considering that students often interact with multiple individuals within the school environment.

Implications for Future Research

Further studies can include the parents' perspective on this issue. While students spend much time in school, their homes are also significant. Parents play a vital role in their children's development. Clear and transparent communication is necessary regarding the needs of the student. School personnel and parents must collaborate in addressing the individual's needs. However, since parents can sometimes be a source of a

child's anxiety, it is essential to determine whether their involvement is beneficial.

Therefore, it is crucial to listen to students' concerns and understand the sources of their mental health issues.

This school has made significant progress in supporting students; however, additional assistance would be beneficial. Over the past seven years, it has hired a full-time health and wellness coordinator and added three staff members to its learning center. These individuals have been crucial in providing students with the support they need. The school might consider adding another full-time health and wellness counselor. Although school budgets can restrict hiring opportunities, specific roles are essential for the comprehensive care of students.

Schools must provide students with emotional and social support. Therefore, another recommendation is to conduct an annual assessment to evaluate the school's needs and determine how it can best address them moving forward. The school should continually explore various methods to enhance student learning and support. Students' mental health and well-being significantly impact their short- and long-term lives. If students receive early treatment for mental health issues, they can get the support they need right away. Thus, addressing these problems early will benefit teenagers as they transition into adulthood.

I want to discuss the reasons for focusing on males. While most schools are coeducational, many also provide education in single-sex environments. Several interviewees have worked with women in previous roles and noted differences in addressing the needs of both males and females. Males tend to be more reserved and less expressive when sharing their feelings. Although this does not apply to all males, this behavior is generally noticeable. One way to understand this issue is to increase

awareness of students' behaviors and responses. Another solution is to create spaces and opportunities for students to express themselves more freely. These can include retreats, small support groups, and activities such as journaling, where students can write down their thoughts if they feel too uncomfortable to share them aloud. Some teenage boys communicate more effectively through methods other than verbal expression.

Another recommendation for further research is to interview the students themselves. While researching minors poses significant challenges due to privacy laws, it still offers educators valuable insights to support students facing various issues. Although the themes discussed in this research could be explored more thoroughly, the questions below can provide valuable perspectives on this problem from the student's viewpoint:

- How have your parents influenced your overall mental health, both positively and negatively?
- In what specific ways has the school culture affected your mental health? This can involve academics, sports, and various extracurricular activities.
- How have school staff members impacted your mental health? You can include teachers, counselors, coaches, moderators, and other adults connected to the school.
- How has the use of technology influenced your perceptions of relationships and your overall mental health? This includes internet and social media usage. Do you think these have any effect on your mental health?
- Does your daily commute significantly impact your mental health, positively or negatively?

- Do you think that the pressure of getting into college impacts your mental health positively or negatively? Are you competing with your peers regarding college applications or acceptance?
- How have teachers impacted your overall mental health, either positively or negatively? (You can keep names confidential if you prefer not to share examples of specific teachers.)

While students might be hesitant to share their insights on these questions, guaranteeing confidentiality or anonymity is crucial for them to respond truthfully. These questions stem from themes discussed by the interviewees in this research.

Another avenue to explore in this research is interviewing former students from this school. Individuals reflect on their experiences as they age and articulate how their mental health has evolved throughout their school years. This provides valuable perspectives and insights into what works and what doesn't in their mental health journeys during high school. Their experiences can assist current and future students. Additionally, they can equip school personnel with the necessary tools to understand how the school can better support students, given that they have recently experienced high school themselves.

Interviewing teachers will help us better understand how schools can tackle the mental health crisis. Each teacher possesses unique traits and skills that can be valuable resources for future research. It's also essential to discuss teacher preparation and how schools can equip teachers to address any mental health challenges they may face in their careers. As this issue gains more attention and is openly discussed in schools today, it is crucial that teachers receive proper training to handle situations related to mental health.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

This study incorporates the theories discussed in the literature review and interviews to apply them at this specific school and others. Leaders at this school can adopt these recommendations and implement them because they pertain to the health and well-being of current and future students. One benefit of applying these theories is that it would help alleviate parental concerns by focusing on the well-being of their children. School is not merely a place to learn academic skills; it is also an environment where students can receive the emotional and social support essential for their lives. When issues arise, such as increased mental health concerns among students, it becomes necessary for school leaders to make changes to address these issues. School leaders can review these recommendations and implement them to determine what works best for the health and well-being of their students.

Implementation

Successfully implementing recommendations should consider the overall school culture and climate. Furthermore, prioritizing the health and well-being of students must be a key focus for school personnel. While the primary aim of education is to foster academic knowledge, this alone should not be the final objective of Catholic schools. “A Catholic education is a unique learning experience because it addresses more than just academics... nurturing the whole person in mind, body, and spirit is vital for a happy, healthy, and balanced life.” (Diocese of Sacramento, 2025).

Professional development remains a top priority for educators. Involving an experienced therapist to discuss mental health and strategies for supporting students facing mental health challenges can positively impact the school community. While most adults working in schools are not medically trained, it is vital to have trained experts

assist them, as teachers and counselors are on the front lines regarding their students' health. Therefore, several counselors agreed that professional development is crucial for the adult community at this school.

Another suggestion is to limit the number of honors and AP classes a student can take in a year. While this solution might be controversial for some stakeholders, efforts must be made to reduce the level of competition students face and to lessen their daily workload. Students are often overwhelmed by the amount of work required and the number of activities they participate in within their community. Counselors, teachers, and administrators believe that students frequently experience competition among their peers as well as competition for admission to elite universities. Due to this competition, students feel compelled to enroll in as many honors or AP classes as possible.

Several years ago, the school organized a "renewal day." This day aimed to give students a chance to come to campus; rather than attending classes, they participated in various workshops led by community adults and student leaders. Throughout the day, students listened to these individuals share their experiences with the challenges of school and the personal obstacles they have faced. The purpose of this day was also to unite students as a community, encourage sharing of their struggles, and engage in team-building activities. While this day was not intended to discuss or promote mental health awareness explicitly, it could serve as a blueprint for addressing this issue for future students.

Offering students a designated day each year or a class each semester focused on understanding and addressing mental health issues can significantly enhance student health and wellness. While the school does provide opportunities for retreats and service trips, these experiences are primarily tailored to the spiritual and intellectual needs of the

students. These options are voluntary, meaning not all students will participate in such activities. Implementing a dedicated day or semester for mental health awareness would ensure participation from all students. Although this initiative may require sacrificing some class time, the positive impact on their health and well-being would make it a worthwhile addition to the curriculum.

Participant 1 states, “I think the research tells us that it takes about four years for a culture to shift.” Change can be difficult at first, but because students spend four years at the same high school, changing the school's culture may take four years. Current students may be hesitant to change, but there will be long-term benefits for future students if the school adjusts the culture around mental health. Since May is Mental Health Awareness Month, implementing changes can be a positive step for the following school year. It will take time, but the benefits of these changes will last a lifetime for these students.

Mental health issues impact students both in the short and long term. How they are handled now will benefit them as they grow and mature. Mainly, as they are developing physically, mentally, and emotionally during this crucial period, it supports this development. School is essential and is evolving into a place to achieve academic goals, but it should also be a space where students receive care in other aspects of their lives. All school personnel are responsible for engaging in the student body's health and wellness. All stakeholders aim to nurture and strengthen students' hearts, minds, and bodies. Schools are responsible for future generations of citizens, so it takes a village to raise a child.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution

The stakeholders related to the implementation of the solution include administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students. The administration is primarily

responsible for implementing these changes since they are the individuals running the school and can quickly implement them. They must consider the overall health of the student and the health of the school. This includes budget, teacher retention, student recruitment, and teacher recruitment. They must also ensure parents are on board with the school's implementation.

An item that has been mentioned is hiring additional personnel to address the mental health needs of the students. While this can be a simple step, one difficulty is the budgetary concerns and how this will affect tuition for future families. Another factor that must be addressed is the willingness of teachers to embrace this notion of professional development. Teachers may hesitate to take on this extra responsibility, but students must be willing to be open to these changes. However, students may be receptive to these changes because they focus on their health.

The school currently has resources to address these needs. While these resources represent a positive step, there is always room for improvement. Establishing a central location for gathering information, such as a webpage, can significantly assist students. Additionally, providing opportunities for students to voice their concerns will be very beneficial. For instance, recognizing and celebrating *Mental Health Awareness Month* may allow students to focus on this vital aspect of their lives. The school has performed admirably, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, in addressing the needs of students. However, it is crucial to continue this work moving forward.

What sets this school apart is its Catholic mission and identity. The school emphasizes caring for the whole person, nurturing each student's body, mind, and heart. Parents seek a school for their son that is academically rigorous and fosters well-rounded development. This program can significantly help attract future students due to its focus

on holistic personal growth. Parents are eager to send their son to this school because he will be formed in healthy ways, and the school will care for him.

Timeline for the Implementation of the Solution

Participant 1 mentioned that it takes a school about four years to implement changes that can become permanent within the community. These changes can reasonably take four years, so students currently in the school can adjust slowly. Regarding professional development, the school can implement these changes within a year since it allows for multiple days of professional development on its calendar. When it comes to altering the AP courses, the school can gather input from parents to see if they desire that change and can begin implementing those changes within two to three years since schools typically schedule a year in advance.

When it comes to communication among various stakeholders, that solution can be achieved within a short time frame since connecting with those individuals is straightforward. These changes can be implemented concurrently since they all address the needs of the students. Enacting these changes within one to three years will help the school understand what works best for student outcomes while allowing time to assess the success of these changes or determine if further action is required. As a result, a four-year period is a reasonable timeframe to implement these recommendations and evaluate their effectiveness, with feedback from teachers and parents necessary to see how they respond to these recommendations.

Evaluating the Outcomes of Implementing the Solutions

When implementing these changes, it can be challenging to determine immediately whether they are successful. One method of evaluating these changes is to conduct interviews with recent graduates, teachers, and parents to assess whether they

have significantly impacted students' mental health. One evaluation tool that may be valuable is performing senior exit interviews, which the school already conducts. The feedback students provide during these interviews can significantly assist in understanding whether the school successfully implemented these changes or if adjustments are necessary in this area. Additionally, parents can offer constructive feedback to ascertain the success of these changes.

It is essential to understand that these changes remain dynamic. Change, while challenging at times, becomes necessary. If the recommendations are implemented, the school should continually reevaluate their effectiveness. If further changes are needed, the school should also implement those adjustments. The school must address the needs of its students, as schools must stay current with the signs of the times. Therefore, implementing these changes over four years would be ideal. Reevaluating those changes at the end of this period may help the school understand its success. Consequently, the school should consistently assess whether it meets its students' needs and what changes are necessary to fulfill those requirements.

Summary of the Findings

Speaking with everyone helped me better grasp the major themes that emerged for each person. While mental health remains a vital aspect of a person's overall well-being, it becomes imperative to engage with teenagers as they are rapidly developing during these formative years of their lives. School personnel are increasingly involved in addressing their students' mental health issues, as some students enter school with existing problems. In contrast, others find their difficulties worsened by the pressures of school culture. Additionally, teenagers often struggle to confide in their parents about their mental health concerns due to the sensitive nature of these issues. Sometimes,

pressures from parents can contribute to their mental health challenges. Consequently, teenagers struggle to seek help at home, often turning to school personnel for support.

Each interviewee provided several reasons for the increase in mental health issues and suggested ways teachers can help students overcome their struggles. One solution is to limit the number of honors and advanced placement courses each student can take. This may alleviate the pressures of managing too many courses and reduce students' time on homework. Another challenging factor is that this school primarily serves commuter students, meaning many students travel long distances to attend. While most high school students live close to their schools, commuter schools necessitate that many students drive or take longer trips. Considering early or afternoon sports practices and various activities after school, students can often feel exhausted when they get home.

Several interviewees discussed the importance of professional development for faculty and staff. Professional development entails acquiring new knowledge or insights in a specific area. Gaining valuable insights or new techniques to address mental health issues can enhance the faculty and staff's ability to assist high school students effectively. While most teachers are not mental health professionals, they can still serve as valuable resources for helping students find the support they need. Moreover, professional development can improve classroom experiences by equipping teachers with skills and tools to create a less stressful, more engaging, positive student environment.

Summary of the Dissertation in Practice

This phenomenological research explored how high school adults can better support students facing mental health challenges. As the study progressed, it became clear that addressing the needs of these students is essential, alongside understanding how schools can prevent such issues from arising in the future. While most students do not

experience many, if any, mental health problems, it is crucial to take steps to avert these issues. Being proactive rather than reactive is more critical in this matter.

This study found that all high school adults should collaborate when working with struggling students. The care management team model fosters effective communication among administrators, counselors, teachers, and the mental health coordinator to address students' challenges. Communication and transparency remain vital because students regularly interact with these various individuals. One area of concern is to keep additional individuals informed as well. These include moderators of different clubs and coaches, as they also play a significant role in the students' lives.

Although this research topic is neither new nor widely discussed, it offers a roadmap for how schools can effectively support their students on the path to success. Teachers are increasingly aware of their students' struggles, making professional development and training essential. While most teachers are not healthcare providers or mental health experts, they are nonetheless on the front lines regarding their students' social, emotional, and mental support. Shortly before this research was completed, Jonathan Haidt released a book titled **The Anxious Generation**. In his work, Haidt highlights the rise of mental illness among the youngest generations in today's world. While he details the issues surrounding this epidemic, he also presents several solutions to help mitigate the increase in mental illness. Although his solutions are more focused on what can be done at home, the solutions proposed in this research are tailored to the school environment and what educators can do to address mental illness among their students, given that teenagers spend a significant amount of time in school.

I have been teaching high school students for over ten years. Hearing their stories and listening to their personal experiences has provided me invaluable insights into their

lives, teaching me many lessons in my professional journey. I have also gained a better understanding of how to address their concerns and how I can support them. While I am not a mental health professional, I have learned how to respond to specific issues and how to find the necessary help for students when needed. Teaching high school students is a demanding career, but it brings many rewards.

In conclusion, although teenagers may experience growing pains during this stage, they need nurturing and caring adults to help them navigate these years. Guiding and teaching them holistically is essential. Schools must have various individuals available to assist students, including teachers, counselors, administrators, and therapists. An old proverb states, “It takes a village to raise a child.” While the original author remains unknown, these words convey a profound truth. Addressing and understanding the challenges our teenagers face as they navigate their path to adulthood is essential.

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*Appendix A***Interview Protocol**

Project Title: MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: A CASE STUDY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS AT AN ALL-MALE CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES.

Date:

Time of Interview:

Total years working in education:

Total years working at current high school:

Permission to record this interview (please circle one): Yes / No

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research study investigating your experience working with our students on their perceived mental health struggles in our school classroom. The purpose of this research is to understand our students on a deeper level and assist them in their struggles when it comes to their mental health. Any information collected for this study, such as your comments and observations, will be kept confidential and in a secure location. Please do so if you need to stop, take a break, or clarify anything. Please note that participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw anytime. Also, note that this interview may last approximately one hour to one and a half hours in length.

For this interview, I will be using the term mental health. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2024), “Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.” This is the definition I will use to discuss mental health. I will ask you questions regarding mental health, including if

you agree with this definition and if you would add or subtract anything from that definition.

Questions to ask the interviewee:

1. How would you describe the term *mental health*? Would you agree with the CDC's definition?
2. What would you say is the current state of our students' mental health?
3. Is HS doing enough to support our students in terms of mental health?
4. How are other teachers involved when it comes to the mental health of students?
5. How are administrators involved when it comes to the mental health of students?
6. How are parents involved when it comes to the mental health of students?
7. Are there specific subjects or teachers that students usually go to, to help them through their mental health struggles?
8. Why do you believe mental health is the way it is today? Has it changed since you started in education? Has it changed since you began working at HS?
9. What would you do differently when it comes to the mental health of our students?
10. Are there any questions, comments, or concerns you want to mention that we still need to discuss?

Thank you very much for your participation. Your responses will be recorded, and I will use them to collect data for my dissertation. Once the dissertation is completed, I will send you a copy that includes insights and recommendations for future study.

Thank you again for your time and for all you do to help our students during this critical time of their lives.

*Appendix B***Email to Participants and Principal:**

Dear _____,

This semester, I am writing my dissertation on the mental health of high school students from the perspective of counselors and other adults in the Loyola community. I plan on interviewing approximately 10 individuals from the community.

I have attached the research information sheet and consent form for your reference. Any names and all references to the school will remain confidential. I hope that the information gained will help any schools in the future learn more about how we, as adults, can assist our students with their mental health struggles.

Dr. Paul Jordan is my co-chair on my dissertation committee, so he is assisting me with this endeavor. The interview will take place via Zoom and be recorded. It will be stored in a secure, password-protected file.

If you agree to this, I will print out the consent form for you to sign. I am free in periods 1, 5, and 6 this week. I can also do the interview next week or when we return. I believe you will provide invaluable information for this research. The interview will be between 45-60 minutes.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns and are willing to participate,

Thank you,

John Ahearn

Appendix C



Completion Date 22-Jun-2024
Expiration Date 22-Jun-2028
Record ID 63503380

This is to certify that:

John Ahearn

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Responsible Conduct of Research
(Curriculum Group)
CITI Responsible Conduct of Research Course
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Creighton University



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 24-Oct-2024. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w06eff1b5-de9e-456b-8a4a-03c982f7305c-63503380

*Appendix D***Creighton University Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178

Phone: 402-280-2126

Email: irb@creighton.edu*Social-Behavioral Research Informed Consent Template*

Research Informed Consent and/or Parental Permission

Creighton University Research Informed Consent

Protocol Title:

IRB Project Number:

Principal Investigator's Name: John David Ahearn

Principal Investigator's Phone Number: (818) 489-6597

Research Investigator's Name and Department: Dr. Diane Fleming

Research Coordinator's Name and Department: Dr. Paul Jordan

Study Introduction: This study focuses on the mental health of high school boys at an all-male Catholic high school in the western United States. Research includes interviewing adults working in high schools to understand their students' mental health issues. The rationale for this study is the ever-increasing awareness of mental health among teenage males and what school personnel can do to mitigate poor mental health in their students.

Background: Mental health is an important topic to understand, especially for teenagers. This age group experiences much growth during this period, including physical, mental, and emotional development. While schools are places for students to gain knowledge, they are becoming places where they spend much of their time and seek support. While

faculty and staff offer students academic support, schools are increasingly becoming places where teenagers need emotional and social support.

There have been recent studies and reports describing the increased rates of teenage mental health crises taking place. These crises include increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, suicide attempts, and drug use. The justification for performing this type of research is to understand how faculty and staff in high schools can work with students who are struggling with these various issues and what teachers in the classroom can do to facilitate better and help their students. Since many teenagers spend much of their time in school, it makes sense for the adults working in these schools to be better trained to alleviate the problems teenagers face when it comes to their mental health.

While most adults working in high schools are not medical professionals, it is becoming more common for teenagers to seek help from these people. Teenagers who are afraid of the stigma of poor mental health may not speak with family members about it. Still, they may reach out to other adults they are more comfortable approaching, including their teachers or counselors. While research on this topic is not meant to provide specific training on what to do with mental health problems, it is intended to understand the situation from the perspective of adults and incorporate possible changes within the school environment to help students' overall mental health.

Objectives: The objective is to evaluate mental health from the perspective of teachers, counselors, and administrators and see how it has become particularly acute within the classroom setting. This paper will explain how narrative and phenomenological approaches to this study are the most appropriate methods for analyzing the research question. Identifying key issues of student mental health is paramount from the perspective of adults working in schools because these adults spend much time with these

students. By looking at this study, schools can implement changes in how they work with students who are struggling with mental health issues and potentially alleviate future issues with students by being proactive in their solutions to these problems they may face.

Study Population: The population will include adults working at a Catholic, all-male high school in the western United States. Participants will be a mix of men and women, counselors, mental health coordinators, learning specialists, and administrators. The ages of participants will vary, but they will be required to have worked in the school for at least the previous three years or longer. There will be approximately 8-12 participants included in this study. Participants come from various demographic backgrounds and areas of the city.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria: Participants will be required to engage in an interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. They must have worked at an all-male school for at least the previous two years or longer. Participants who have worked less than that time will be excluded from the study. Participants will include members of the counseling department, the learning specialist, and administrators.

Subject Recruitment: Subjects will be recruited based on their job titles and tenure in the school. They will include teachers of various subjects, administrators, counselors, learning specialists, and the health and wellness coordinator.

Methods: This study will employ a qualitative design using narrative and phenomenological research methods.

Risks: This study carries minimal risks. Due to its sensitive nature, any information shared will remain confidential.

Benefits: The benefits to the participants of this study include their willingness to assist teenagers in the future with their mental health.

Assessment of Potential Risks and Benefits: This study has risks and benefits, yet the benefits outweigh the risks since it is meant to assist young people with mental health. This study will help schools deal with this issue with their students.

Study Duration: The study will take approximately 3-5 months to complete, including revisions, interviews, and data collection and processing.

Participant Duration: Participants will be notified that the interview will last at least one hour and, at most, two hours. The study will be recorded via Zoom.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participants in this study.

Confidentiality and Privacy: Participants will be notified that their identities will remain confidential using a number-coding sequence, and the school's name will remain confidential.

Informed Consent Process: Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent agreement, knowing that participation in this study is voluntary.

HIPAA: No HIPAA records will be required for this study.

Data Analysis Plan: The participants' interviews will be analyzed using qualitative methods, including narrative and phenomenological research design methods.

*Appendix E***Creighton University Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178 • Phone: 402-280-2126

Email: irb@creighton.edu

Research Information Sheet

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: A CASE STUDY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS AT AN ALL-MALE, CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

Introduction

You have been invited to take part in a research study. This Research Information Sheet is designed to help determine whether you want to participate. The decision to join is entirely yours. If you truly wish to do so, you should only engage in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate after reading this letter, you can change your mind and withdraw anytime. If you opt not to participate in this research or decide to withdraw before the study's conclusion, there will be no penalties, and you will not forfeit any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

This sheet may include words that you do not understand. Please ask the researcher to explain any words or procedures with which you are unfamiliar.

Study Summary

This study aims to investigate the experiences of faculty and staff regarding the struggles that mental health students face within school and classroom environments, as well as the effects these struggles have on their overall lives. You are invited to participate in this research because you are a vital community member and can contribute

to understanding your students' mental health issues. This study is conducted for research purposes only. Your option is to choose not to participate in this study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you must conduct a Zoom interview with only the researcher present. We anticipate that your involvement will take 45 to 60 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of Participation

This study involves minimal risk research, meaning that the risks associated with participating in this study are no greater than those you usually encounter in your daily life or during routine physical or psychological assessments or tests. As with any research participation, there may be risks to your confidentiality and privacy due to your involvement in this study. The following measures are in place to help protect against these risks: names will be kept anonymous and confidential. Interviews will be stored in a secure file accessible only by the researcher.

There may or may not be a direct benefit to you because you participate in this study. This study may help researchers learn more about the mental health struggles of teenagers and learn how to help those teenagers.

Compensation

You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

Contact Information

If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact *[insert study team member and contact information]*. If you have questions about research participants' rights, contact the Creighton University Institutional Review Board (CU IRB) at 402-280-2126.

By choosing to participate in this study, I acknowledge or am aware that:

- The researcher(s) discussed the study with me and answered all my questions.
- If I have any questions or concerns about the study, I can use the contact information provided above to contact the study team or the CU IRB.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. I need to have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study and to make that decision without any pressure from the people conducting the research.
2. You must refuse to be in the study at all or stop participating at any time after you begin the study.

3. I want to be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating.
7. I want to know who will have access to the information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, research-related injury, and your rights as a research participant.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
 - a. You should be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
 - b. If you have a research-related injury, you should be told where treatment is available and who will pay for it.

*Appendix F***Approval from IRB**

DATE: 14 January 2025

TO: John Ahearn

FROM: Social Behavioral IRB

PROTOCOL TITLE: **MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS: A CASE STUDY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS AT AN ALL-MALE CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES**

SUBMISSION #: 2005244-01

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application

REVIEW METHOD: Exempt

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exempt 2iii

DETERMINATION: Exempt

Thank you for your submission. This memorandum is a notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes at 45CFR46.104(d) and deemed exempt from ongoing IRB review. You are therefore authorized to begin the research.

As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. Although your study is exempt from ongoing review, you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should, therefore, employ all protections for your participants and their data appropriate to your research.

The following conditions apply to all IRB submissions:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB-exempt determination date.
2. Only the Consent/Information Sheet/Assent/Parental Permission forms and recruitment materials submitted with this review (as applicable) may be used to enroll subjects.
3. All protocol modifications must be IRB-reviewed and approved prior to implementation. This includes any change of investigator or site address.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to being used.

Should any changes need to be made to the study, please submit a Request for Modification within InfoEd. Any changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review.