UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH: BECOMING ONE OF THE FEW

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As educators, we have to be observant and equally empathetic towards our students. In the Philippines, struggling with depression is stereotypically equated to ‘pag-iinarte’ – or worse – being crazy. Whenever a child tells her parents that she is depressed and does not want to be in school, the usual response would be: “Tinatamad ka lang.” This is the sad truth about opening yourself regarding mental health: some people would not take it seriously – as if the misery and sadness would instantly diminish after having a good night sleep. A child could appear as happy and lively, but we are not sure of what is going around inside her head.

There is no universal standard of what a depressed student looks like. Regardless of social status, anyone could be a victim. In an article published in CNN Philippines, the author told a story about Lena who was clinically diagnosed with major depressive disorder when she was in graduate school. Looking at her profile, no one would even think that she is mentally ill: she was an achiever with lots of friends, and she had a balanced life between studying and extracurricular activities. However, there was a point where she simply disappeared in to her classes and spent her time in bed for two weeks, sleeping, barely eating and talking with anyone – no one else knew what she was going through, besides herself.

According to the Harvard Medical School, the symptoms of anxiety and depression often appear during college but this does not mean that they were not there in grade school and high school. Thus, it is important to provide a healthy environment for students during their formative years because these are the crucial stages of shaping
one’s mental health. While I was browsing online for data on mental health, I noticed that most records are only on adults and adolescents; I barely saw a few pertaining to children in primary school. The lack of awareness in mental health combined with stereotypes exhibited in Filipino culture continue to contribute in the struggle of children suffering from it. We should provide more spaces for them to talk about their emotions through being more open-minded. Mental health issues should be taken more seriously. Every school should have at least one mental health expert, and teachers should be more exposed to seminars that aim to educate and raise awareness.

Understanding mental health could guide teachers in identifying the reason behind a child’s behavior in school. Through kindly talking to them, we could determine the origin of their intermittent absences, or why they are not paying attention in class. Is it because they always see their parents fighting? They do not feel safe at home or at school? Are they are being bullied? This is a window of opportunity to help them more in school and cope up with their surroundings despite struggling mentally; through becoming one of the few people who can understand and empathize with them.

References:
