



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Capturing authentic academic ability: The role of mental health in youths' academic lives

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Abstract

This article examines the critical relationship between mental health and academic performance among youth in the United States of America. By exploring the author's concept of *Authentic Academic Ability* (AAA), the article highlights how students' true academic potential can be masked by mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and attention-related disorders. These mental health challenges often manifest themselves in truancy issues or poor academic reporting. Recent statistics show the growing mental health crisis among youth, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the urgent need for response. The article calls for a reformation in assessment methods, advocating for personalized evaluations that consider mental health as a fundamental factor and personal learning styles. Suggestions include alternative forms of assessment, mental health interventions, and the integration of more contemporary, flexible learning methods such as project-based learning. The author advocates that students should be accurately evaluated based on their true intellectual capacity, devoid of the influence of external emotional or mental health challenges.

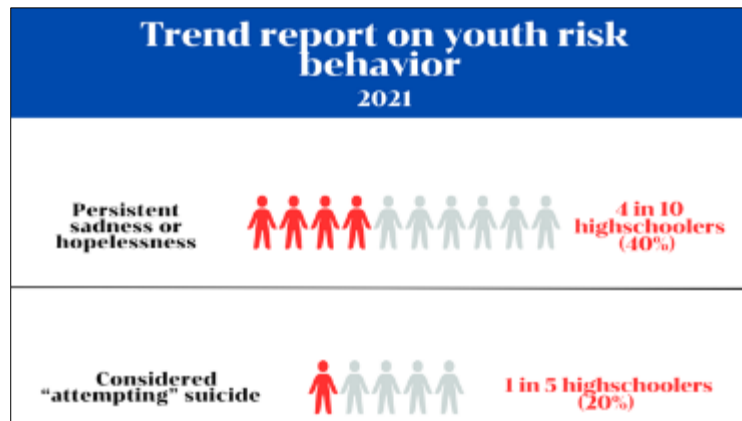
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1. Introduction

As defined by the American Psychological Association (APA), mental health[1] is “a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioral adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life”. Having good mental health is important among the youth to allow them to live their life to the fullest especially during their development years. In particular, good mental health means that the youth can face the challenges of academic life head on, form quality social relationships, and bounce back from adversities they may experience through resilience. However, recent evidence has demonstrated a growing mental health crisis among youth in the U.S.; most especially for those who were more substantially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic[2]. Significant social isolation, academic disruption, and losing a caregiver were among the issues experienced by the youth having far reaching consequences even up to this day.

Supporting this, a trend report on youth risk behavior among nationally representative US high school students made by the Center for Disease Control back in 2021 found that more than 4 in 10 students felt “persistently sad” or “hopeless” with a third of students reportedly “experiencing poor mental health”[3]. In the same report, additional data from respondents showed that 1 in 5 students considered attempting suicide with 1 in 10 having attempted suicide in the past.

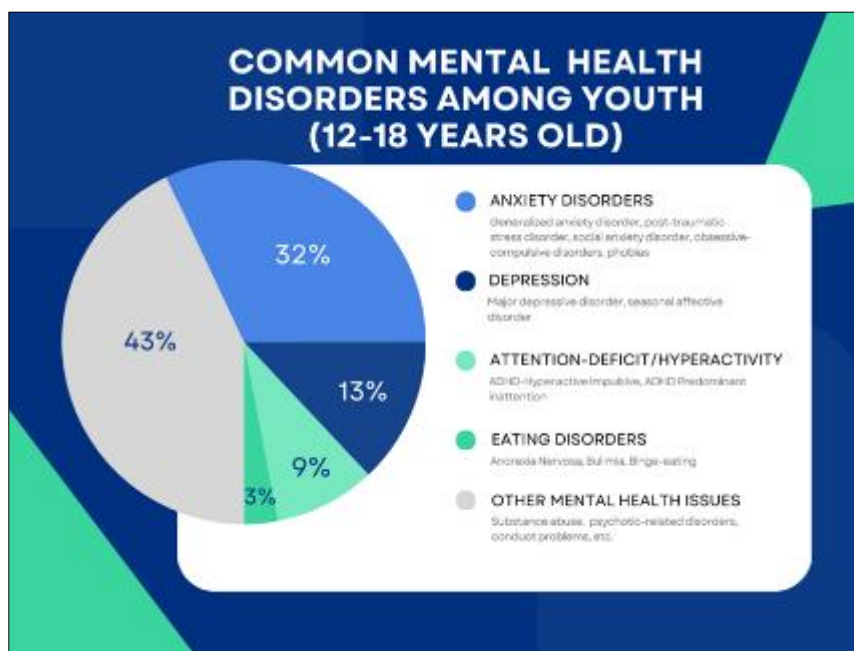
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Source: Center for Disease Control (2021)

Figure 1 Trends in depression and suicidal ideation in youth

Aside from depression, other common mental health disorders observed among the U.S. youth include anxiety disorders, substance abuse disorders, self-harming behaviors, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders, and eating disorders[4]. These mental health issues can make it very challenging for students to perform their best in school and makes it hard for educators to properly assess their students’ academic capabilities due to these contributing factors.



Source: Office of Population Affairs (2017)

Figure 2 Distribution of common mental health disorders among youth

In the education sector, it is quite common to encounter students who struggle with various mental health issues. Mental health issues can cause students to perform poorly in their academic endeavors, increase their truancy, and heighten the risk of dropping out from school. Mental health related factors do impede academic achievement leading to an inaccurate reflection of the youth’s academic ability in their report card. With these underlying mental health issues affecting the young person’s performance, a student’s *Authentic Academic Ability (AAA)* may be difficult to assess.

Authentic Academic Ability (AAA) is defined as a student’s “true” ability that is measurable through learner-appropriate evaluations and is accessible only when a student’s success is not impeded by external factors such as mental health issues. It represents a more accurate academic portrait of the student’s capacity when there are minimal or no mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, etc. It is often the case that educators judge students as poor academic performers for reasons unrelated to their intelligence and actual academic performance. This is because mental health struggles often confound the assessment of a students’ academic ability such as when students with

mental health issues incur absences on days where major exams are conducted. Thus, the standard way of assessing performance in the classroom such as test scores, memorization and regurgitation, written individual and group work assessments may be grossly inaccurate when used with youth who are struggling with mental health issues. It is imperative that educators and others who work with the youth are aware of this confounding effect so that changes in the evaluation of students' abilities are done allowing them to capture the Authentic Academic Abilities of students.

There are several ways to determine the authentic academic ability of a learner. The first may be to change the way academic ability is assessed by improving the tools educators use. This may look different for each child and allows them to show us their understanding through their own mediums and methodology. For example, if a child struggles with test anxiety but loves preparing an oral presentation, educators should be able to evaluate their grasp of learning outcomes and their understanding of concepts regardless of the chosen format. Several "alternative forms of assessment" can also be used to draw out authentic academic ability such as the use of poems, recorded videos, works of art, and book reviews among others[5]. This type of adaptation falls within current best teaching practices in pedagogy. The second would be to begin by addressing the underlying mental health issue prior to initiating assessment. Students with depression, for example, may struggle with truancy and therefore not have had the required instruction to be evaluated. By acknowledging the need for treatment as a first step towards academic success, the learner would later be better equipped to demonstrate their AAA. Moreover, some students may benefit from a more self-paced approach in learning to reduce pressure when it comes to performing well in class[6]. Further, more contemporary and innovative methods of learning may be used to help students take ownership for their academic success such as project-based learning where multiple learning outcomes across a variety of subject matters can be achieved. Integration of subject matters along with experiential learning and assessments may also be utilized to provide fun learning opportunities for students, in particular those with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity and related disorders who are unable to focus when given repetitive and traditional standardized tasks within the classroom. There are multiple ways to conduct alternate assessments and training our educators who work with youth on how to do so is key to successfully capturing authentic academic ability.

Addressing the underlying mental health issue is essential when trying to determine a learner's AAA. It is well known that there is an inverse relationship between mental health issues and academic performance; the more our youth struggle with mental health issues, the more likely they are to have poor academic success in school. By providing preventative programs to help our youth grow emotional resilience and eventually overcome mental health challenges, it is hoped that the youth will be able to demonstrate their authentic academic ability. Utilizing social support systems involving adults and older peers to help deal with problematic behaviors that affect academic performance is key to this[7]. Making mental health services both financially and geographically accessible to youth is also fundamental. Furthermore, raising awareness and reducing stigma is also a crucial step to take in this endeavor. With more school personnel being trained on how to support youth with mental health issues it's believed that the learning community will be better positioned to help young people discover their authentic academic ability.

2. Conclusion

Mental health challenges have a profound impact on the academic achievement of young people. Issues such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse often lead to truancy, increased dropout rates, and inaccurate reporting that is not reflective of a student's true capabilities. By prioritizing mental health needs of young learners, we enable them to better demonstrate their authentic academic ability. As adults entrusted with the training and development of the next generation, it is our responsibility to engage learners in their academic progress through relevant and engaging teaching practices. Helping students become more emotionally resilient through intentional teaching strategies will, in turn, ensure reporting better reflects each student's authentic academic ability.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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