

## Mental Health Education: Challenges And Future Perspectives

Renata Trivelato Felício Cenedesi<sup>1</sup>, Daiane Prates Mendonça<sup>2</sup>,  
Joana Darc Ferreira Da Silva<sup>2</sup>, Neliane Platon De Souza<sup>2</sup>,  
Maria Terezinha Gomes Pontes<sup>2</sup>, Maria Cristina De Moura-Ferreira<sup>3</sup>,  
Patrícia Rossi Carraro<sup>3</sup>, Mônica Rodrigues Da Silva<sup>3</sup>,  
Dirce Rodrigues Vitória Pacheco<sup>2</sup>, Maria Aparecida De Almeida Araújo<sup>2</sup>,  
Rodrigo Motta, Mario Angelo Cenedesi Júnior<sup>2</sup>  
*Universidade Aberta, Portugal*  
*Universidad De Ciencias Empresariales Y Sociales, Argentina*  
*Universidade Federal De Uberlândia, Brazil*

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### **Abstract:**

Basic education is a fundamental right and essential for the development of nations, as evidenced by the need for quality educational training. The relationship between socio-emotional behavior and learning is crucial, as cognitive and emotional characteristics directly affect learning. Mental health, often misunderstood and reduced to a restrictive treatment approach, is a determining factor in children's development, influencing emotional issues and how they develop throughout life. The school environment, where children spend most of their time, becomes central to promoting mental health and early intervention. Schools not only provide literacy but should also act as a space for socialization and prevention, integrating practices that address emotional and behavioral issues. The National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) emphasizes the importance of emotional and social competencies, such as empathy and conflict resolution, which are essential for the holistic development of students. Teacher training programs are vital, as they enable teachers to identify signs of emotional problems and intervene appropriately. Educator training should include knowledge about mental disorders and strategies to promote mental health, which can improve academic performance and student well-being. The approach should be holistic and student-centered, considering both individual needs and the social context. Ultimately, the school plays a transformative role in society, needing to adapt its curricula and practices to include topics of mental health and well-being, following Paulo Freire's critical and emancipatory perspective. By integrating health actions into the daily school routine, schools contribute to the development of conscious citizens prepared to face life's challenges.

**Keyword:** Public Health; Mental Health; Health Challenges

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### **I. Introduction**

Basic education is a fundamental right for all citizens and a social necessity, given that the development of nations depends, in part, on the quality of educational training provided to their populations (IPEA, 2009). One of the challenges in realizing this right lies in the relationship between socio-emotional behavior and learning. It is evident that cognitive characteristics, abilities, interests, social behaviors, emotional responses, and social attachment styles are expressions of mental health and directly impact learning (MACEDO, 2014).

Mental health is a vast and multifaceted area, not limited to a single field of study or practice, such as psychiatry. However, in common understanding, it is often reduced to the idea of caring for individuals deemed "crazy," who are supposedly meant to live under intense medication and freedom restrictions, as they are considered incapable of societal integration (AMARANTE, 2007).

Emotional issues can arise from birth or develop during childhood, potentially worsening in the school environment. The lack of identification and proper guidance can significantly contribute to the perpetuation of emotionally unhealthy behaviors throughout life, resulting in mental health issues at both individual and societal levels.

Given the significant time individuals spend in the school environment, it becomes the primary space for their social interactions from childhood. Therefore, schools are a suitable place for analyzing these issues. Additionally, recognizing the school as a major agent of social transformation, with the goal of shaping children into future citizens, includes the responsibility to address and act on these issues.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2001) emphasizes that defining mental health comprehensively is almost impossible, as it encompasses much more than the mere absence of mental and behavioral disturbances. WHO also underscores the importance of policies for the prevention of childhood mental disabilities, highlighting the need for adequate nutrition and early detection to promote necessary care and human development, especially through the school environment.

According to Oliveira and Ferreira (2022), the school is more than a mere space for literacy; it is also a place for socialization. The cognitive and behavioral characteristics of individuals reflect their mental health and significantly influence learning. Thus, the school environment is one of the most relevant spaces for promoting and preventing health, especially concerning mental health.

Galvão (2014, p.113) states that in his pedagogical ideas, Wallon proposes that the school reflect on its socio-political dimensions and embrace its role in societal transformations. He advocates for an engaged school, integrated into society and culture, while simultaneously committed to the development of individuals through practices that integrate social and individual dimensions.

The National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), a document that defines the essential learnings to be developed in basic education, outlines ten general competencies, three of which directly involve the emotional aspect. According to the BNCC (2018, p.12), these competencies include: knowing oneself, appreciating oneself, and taking care of one's physical and emotional health, understanding oneself within human diversity, recognizing one's emotions and those of others, with self-criticism and the ability to manage them; practicing empathy, dialogue, conflict resolution, and cooperation, respecting oneself and others, promoting human rights, and valuing the diversity of individuals and social groups, their knowledge, identities, cultures, and potentialities, without any form of prejudice; and acting both personally and collectively with autonomy, responsibility, flexibility, resilience, and determination, making decisions based on ethical, democratic, inclusive, sustainable, and supportive principles.

Early childhood, the first stage of human development, is a crucial phase where children have a greater capacity to adapt to different environments and acquire various skills, such as learning other languages, developing psychomotor skills, cognitive abilities, and socio-emotional skills. Child Development (DI) is a fundamental part of human development (SOUZA; VERÍSSIMO, 2015). Therefore, neglecting mental health care at this stage can compromise this development, leading to repercussions that may extend into adulthood.

International guides that address the inclusion of "health" in the school curriculum aim to develop students' knowledge and skills that promote their development and well-being. These guides seek to encourage students to take responsibility and an active role in learning a healthy lifestyle. Some of the frequently mentioned topics in these guides, especially concerning mental health, include communication with others; identification and resolution of problems and interpersonal conflicts; stress management; diversity and equality (Genuino, et al., 2009).

A careful and responsible approach to mental health issues in schools can prevent negative impacts on individuals' lives, such as poor academic performance, low school attendance, and dropout (ESTANISLAU; BRESSAN, 2014). The lack of reliable information on how mental health issues affect learning leads to distortions in teachers' perspectives, resulting in inappropriate referrals to health services, without prior reflection on the relationship between the school context and the mental health of referred students (SCORTEGAGNA; LEVANDOWSKI, 2004).

The school institution is where children and adolescents spend most of their time. Therefore, *"the school has become one of the most important places for health promotion and preventive interventions among children and youth"* (WHO, 2004, p. 31). In this sense, a strategy for promoting mental health in these learning spaces can be implemented through the training and development of professionals in aspects related to mental health and well-being.

## **II. Methods**

This academic essay aims to explore the proposed topic in depth and comprehensively, addressing its fundamental aspects, implications, and challenges. The analysis is based on a critical review of existing literature and the evaluation of relevant data and evidence, providing a detailed and well-founded perspective on the subject. The goal is not only to describe and contextualize the topic but also to identify and discuss its main dimensions, present coherent arguments, and offer insights that contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field. By integrating different perspectives and addressing complex issues, the essay seeks to offer a more complete and informed understanding, promoting enriching academic debate and contributing to the development of more effective solutions and strategies.

### **III. Results And Discussion**

#### *The Importance of Teacher Training in Mental Health and Well-being Education Processes*

Training education professionals is a viable and promising strategy for preventing and promoting health among students, school staff, and families. Teachers act as agents of mental health promotion and disorder prevention, as "they can identify signs that require referral for mental health evaluation, contributing to early intervention" (VIEIRA et al., 2014, p. 17). This role is crucial for promoting positive outcomes such as improved academic performance, development of problem-solving skills and social competence, as well as reducing internalizing and externalizing issues like depression, anxiety, bullying, substance abuse, and aggressive behavior (WHO, 2004).

It is essential that mental health care is given appropriate attention, as those suffering from a disorder are human beings with the capacity to love and need to be loved. More importantly, they must be respected and receive appropriate care from childhood, aiming to provide healthy development. This is fundamental to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to grow in an environment that supports their emotional and psychological well-being.

According to Marinho et al. (2015), it is crucial for teachers to have knowledge about mental health concepts, including disorders, difficulties, and learning problems. However, it is equally important to move beyond the biomedical model of health and adopt a broader perspective on the health-disease process. This means that educational practices should be based on comprehensiveness, problematization, popular participation, and the appreciation of community knowledge. This approach allows for a more holistic and inclusive understanding of mental health, promoting more effective and respectful interventions that align with the realities and experiences of students and their communities.

Basic knowledge of health and mental disorders is essential for education professionals dealing with these issues. Teachers should integrate mental health promotion into their school practices (Brown, 2017). For this, it is vital that they have access to high-quality professional development opportunities.

Knowledge about mental disorders and neurodevelopmental issues can help education professionals implement strategies to promote mental health in schools. For example, in the case of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), the main characteristic is excessive and persistent worry, often accompanied by physical symptoms. Unlike adults, children with GAD often manifest symptoms through somatic complaints, such as headaches, stomachaches, nausea, and palpitations.

Another group of disorders that teachers should better understand to aid in mental health promotion includes mood disorders. When the brain has difficulty regulating emotions, mood can significantly deviate from the usual state, becoming excessively sad and not returning to normal. These mood fluctuations can affect performance in school, family, and social environments, indicating the presence of a mood disorder. Besides affecting emotions, mood disorders often alter biological rhythms as well as thinking and behavior patterns (Kutcher et al., 2014).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a disorder frequently discussed among educators. It can persist throughout life, typically starting in childhood, and is characterized by excessive physical and mental activity beyond what is expected for the age, along with difficulties in following instructions and limits set by parents and teachers (ARGOLLO, 2003). Academic difficulty is the most common complaint among parents and teachers of children with ADHD. Academic performance is influenced by various factors, such as the characteristics of the educational institution, the family, and the student themselves. It is well known that children with ADHD face greater challenges in learning, as well as difficulties in test performance and cognitive functioning compared to other children, particularly regarding organizational skills, expressive language, and fine or gross motor control. Regarding intellect, there is no difference compared to other children; apparently, ADHD does not affect general cognitive abilities but rather performance deficits (ARGOLLO, 2003).

Mauco (n.d.) discusses teacher-student interaction: "(...) the quality of human relationships is determined by the degree of affective maturity, and this maturity cannot be achieved while the individual remains trapped in archaic modes of behavior, characterized by capture and possession. (...) For this relationship to lead to maturity - and therefore be educational - it is necessary that educators themselves have achieved adult maturity, meaning they are capable of satisfactory genital relationships. Any educational action must affirm this superiority of the adult, who becomes a model to be followed and with whom strengthening exchanges are possible for the child. (...) The educator who reacts subjectively and, therefore, aggressively to the child, lowers themselves to the child's level. (...) To understand the child does not mean to alienate oneself in the child but to maintain the distance that facilitates objective understanding of the child and aids the educator in their own domain" (pp. 193-194).

In this context, aware of the challenges faced by educators, it seems entirely understandable that Freud expressed a desire for "psychoanalytically enlightened education" (Freud, 1913) and recommended psychoanalytic training and even personal analysis for educators. However, this did not prevent him from

warning that "the work of education is sui generis: it should not be confused with psychoanalytic influence and cannot be replaced by it" (Freud, 1925, p. 342).

Although schools cannot guarantee students' mental health, as there is no way to ensure education whose effects are predictable, they can, however, strive to recognize the student as a desiring subject, who is entitled to a voice and the right to express emotions, affections, and anxieties. The teacher, who becomes a target of identification and transference by the student, reacts to these manifestations according to their sensitivity, training, and, above all, their unconscious desire. They may project their own fantasies and Ideal Self onto the student, engaging in imaginary conflicts and rivalries that alienate and subordinate the child's desire to the teacher's unconscious desire. Conversely, they can articulate the child's manifestations at the level of symbolic language, allowing the child to express their desires, conflicts, and tensions through words.

Recognizing the anxiety, lack, and conflict inherent in being human can help educators reduce their educational expectations (megalomaniac) and better understand and accept the limits of their own actions (Aragão, 1994).

For schools and educators to fulfill a containment role, able to shelter and contain the multiple, surprising, and conflicting manifestations of children's desires, it is essential to recognize that the child's desire is to be loved. It is through the word and the desire of the Other that the child will recognize themselves and hope to be recognized.

Thus, the emotional preparation of teachers is crucial. They need to be trained to observe and identify situations related to the emotional state of children, in order to rethink, plan activities, and develop strategies that facilitate the resolution and minimization of conflicts. These conflicts shape children's behavior and also influence their academic performance.

#### *The Social Role of Schools as Promoters of Health and Well-being*

Contemporary society shows increasing concern for mental health. Although this concern is persistent, discussions on the topic are often absent, perpetuating a cycle of mental and emotional illness. This impacts the holistic development of children, who are forming during this period, which is directly linked to academic performance.

The social role of schools in today's society includes the responsibility to review their pedagogical practices, as well as the application and analysis of the effectiveness of these practices, according to the competencies that need to be developed, in line with national education guidelines. Thus, the school environment should be a space for observation, information, preparation, awareness, and transformation, considering that children are the future of the nation.

Discussions on health promotion and education in schools may include implementing programs aimed at improving quality of life. These programs should focus not only on physical aspects of health but also on strengthening students' individual and social capacities. This involves preparing them to face various health determinants, such as socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural issues that can impact their well-being.

Paulo Freire (1996), one of the great educators and education philosophers, always emphasized the importance of a critical and transformative educational practice. He believed that one of the fundamental tasks of this practice is to create conditions for individuals to recognize themselves as historical, social, thinking, creative, and active beings. This means that education should be an emancipatory process, where individuals can understand and transform their reality.

According to Gomes and Horta (2010), an educational environment that promotes care and attention to health, grounded in respect for individuals and valuing their qualities, favors the assimilation of knowledge and the ability to make conscious decisions. This aligns with Freire's perspective, which values the autonomy of learners and their active participation in the educational process.

In this context, the school is seen as a promising space for implementing health actions. According to Faial (2016), the school not only provides an environment for academic knowledge transmission but also for understanding reality, interpersonal relationships, and the environment itself. By integrating health actions into everyday school life, the school can contribute to the formation of conscious citizens, capable of understanding and acting on the social determinants of health and their own lives.

Strategies for mental health education in schools are essential for creating an educational environment that also cares for students' well-being. According to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2018), these strategies should include curriculum flexibility and the creation of institutional spaces for integrated planning of education and health, with a comprehensive and participatory approach. This means that schools should be prepared to adapt their curricula to include health and well-being topics, as well as create opportunities for students to actively participate in planning and executing health actions.

### *Challenges in Social Work as a Mobilizer of Health Education*

As observed, mental health education is crucial for promoting psychological well-being and preventing mental health issues, playing a key role in Social Work. This field faces several challenges, including stigma and prejudice associated with mental illnesses. Many people still hold negative or prejudiced views about mental health, which can discourage individuals from seeking help or participating in educational programs. Therefore, Social Work must work to promote a broader and more empathetic understanding of mental health issues and combat these entrenched prejudices.

Another significant challenge is the limitation of resources. Often, there is a lack of adequate funding for educational programs, appropriate materials, and trained professionals. Given these constraints, Social Work needs to find creative and effective ways to offer education and support with the available resources. Continuous training for social workers is also crucial for implementing mental health education programs. However, the ongoing need to update and expand professionals' knowledge about best practices and new approaches can be a barrier if there are not adequate training opportunities.

Additionally, Social Work faces the challenge of diversity and inclusion. Mental health needs can vary significantly among different demographic groups, such as age, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Developing and implementing educational programs that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the specific needs of each group is essential. Integrating mental health with other areas of health and social well-being is also important, but there are often barriers to collaboration between mental health services and other areas, such as primary care and social services.

In the future, the use of technology offers new opportunities for mental health education. Online platforms, mobile apps, and digital resources can facilitate access to information and promote education more widely and efficiently. Social Work should explore these tools to expand the reach and effectiveness of educational programs. Focusing on prevention is also an important perspective. Educational programs aimed at mental health from childhood and adolescence can help reduce the incidence of serious problems in the future, and Social Work should work to implement these preventive strategies in schools, communities, and other settings.

Strengthening partnerships and collaborations with organizations, health institutions, and communities is crucial to enhance the impact of mental health education. These collaborations can lead to the development of more comprehensive and effective programs, as well as promote the sharing of resources and knowledge. Advocacy and public policy development also play a significant role. Social Work can influence the formulation of policies that support mental health education, ensuring adequate funding and favorable regulations.

Finally, investing in the continuous training of Social Work professionals is essential to ensure they are updated on best practices and approaches in mental health education. Training and professional development programs should be a priority to improve the effectiveness of interventions and educational programs. By addressing these challenges and exploring future perspectives, Social Work can contribute significantly to a more effective and inclusive approach to promoting mental health, ensuring that all individuals receive the necessary support for their psychological well-being.

## **IV. Conclusion**

The importance of teacher training and the social role of schools in promoting mental health and students' well-being is extremely fundamental. The school, in turn, should take an active role in promoting health and well-being, not only by transmitting academic knowledge but also by preparing students to face social and emotional challenges. The pedagogical approach should be adaptive, flexible, and participatory, integrating mental health topics and promoting students' autonomy. This aligns with Paulo Freire's vision of a critical and emancipatory education that seeks to transform students' realities and empower them to become conscious and active citizens.

Teacher training goes beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge about mental disorders; it should develop skills to identify and intervene early in situations that may affect students' emotional well-being. This not only helps in preventing and treating mental health issues but also contributes to a more inclusive and supportive school environment that fosters students' holistic development.

When teachers are trained to identify and address mental health issues, they not only improve the quality of early intervention but also create an environment of support and understanding. Simultaneously, the school, as a space for learning and growth, should incorporate practices and programs that address mental health in a comprehensive and participatory manner. This approach not only promotes a more inclusive and empathetic educational environment but also strengthens students' ability to face personal and social challenges, preparing them for a more balanced and healthy life. Integrating mental health into educational practice and school culture is fundamental to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to develop fully and reach their maximum potential.

Therefore, combining proper training for teachers with the implementation of educational practices that value mental health creates a school environment where students can thrive academically and emotionally. The school should not only react to mental health issues but also anticipate and integrate them into its pedagogical practice, contributing to the holistic development of students and strengthening the school community as a whole.

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