



PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF ADOLESCENT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To describe teachers' perceptions of adolescent students' mental health and actions undertaken at school. **Methods:** Descriptive-exploratory study, with a qualitative approach and theoretical-methodological framework of Sociopoetics. Nine high school teachers from a public school in the city of Niterói-RJ participated. Data were collected through questionnaire and research group and analyzed according to thematic analysis. **Results:** Three categories of analysis were found: a) mental health problems in adolescent students perceived by teachers; b) measures to protect the student's mental health engendered by the school and c) perception of the teacher's role in promoting the adolescent student's mental health. **Conclusions:** The data indicate that teachers identify the main problems related to the mental health of the adolescent student, but are not always willing or feel prepared to help them, showing the need for training and implementation of strategies to promote mental health at school.

Keywords: Mental Health. Adolescent. School Health Promotion.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a particular time of human development that occurs when individuals enter the process of social independence, a process far from childhood when they are still protected by their parents. This transition is often facilitated by major psychosocial, hormonal and neuronal changes that allow adolescents to acquire the experiences and skills necessary to navigate the adult world^(1,2).

In this respect, broader socio-environmental influences, such as the community, may have a greater impact on adolescents than on children, due to the increase in exploratory behavior⁽³⁾. In this, the economic and demographic benefits of adolescent health promotion practices are evident, increasing school productivity, reducing health costs and ensuring a healthier future for young people⁽⁴⁾.

Health promotion programs focused on school environments have the potential to deliver a wide

range of actions (mental health, sexual health, substance use counseling, among others)⁽⁵⁾. In this context, school health actions have the possibility of facilitating adolescents' access to health guidelines in their daily lives, with nurses being important providers of health services for children and adolescents⁽⁶⁾.

In this sense, schools constitute an environment in which mental health can be promoted to improve well-being and provide mental health services⁽⁷⁾. Studies have shown^(8,9) that approximately 20% of young people aged 10-24 suffer from mental health problems, and 86% of all mental health problems requiring diagnosis are often not detected at school.

Mental health interventions for adolescents can therefore be developed in a school environment, where adolescents tend to spend most of their time⁽¹⁰⁾. In this context, the teacher has a fundamental role in the identification, reception and immediate emotional support to the student,

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servicing as a reference for the first listening to their needs, referring him, when necessary, to primary care services - given that the demands of adolescents, in large part, do not spontaneously reach health services⁽¹¹⁾.

Health promotion activities in school environments are part of the spectrum of primary health care, in which the promotion of mental health of adolescents in schools has acquired a relevant role, it is increasingly necessary to use strategies to promote mental health available in school environments, highlighting the participation of teachers in this process⁽¹²⁾.

In this sense, this study aimed to describe teachers' perceptions of adolescent students' mental health and actions taken at school. It is expected, therefore, to contribute to the design of sustainable educational practices and to point out ways for the development of public policies for the mental health of adolescents. In addition to contributing to the increase of the bibliographic collection on the subject, in view of the scarcity of literature on the use of strategies to promote the mental health of adolescents in school environment.

This research was based on the following guiding questions: What are the perceptions of teachers about mental health of adolescent students? What are the experiences of mental health promotion implemented at school?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory research, based on the theoretical-methodological framework of Sociopoetics – research method developed in the 90s by the French pedagogue and philosopher Jacques Gauthier. Sociopoetics has as its fundamental principle that all knowledge is equal in law and that it is possible to make research an event of creation⁽¹³⁾. In this study, we performed the main device of the sociopoetic method - *the research group* - which is inspired by the Freirean dialogic theory. Respecting the principles of the method and aiming to better understand the demands of reality, we consider the members of the research group subjects co-responsible for the knowledge produced, seeking the human and political sense of the forms and contents of knowledge.

The survey was conducted in the city of Niterói in Rio de Janeiro-Brazil, whose population was

estimated at 516,981 thousand inhabitants in 2021, and in 2020, there were 19,631 students matriculated in high school in 95 schools (IBGE, 2021). It should also be noted that the total coverage of primary health care units that could provide support with health promotion activities for schoolchildren in December 2020 was about 80 establishments⁽¹⁴⁾.

Data production occurred from December 2019 to January 2020. Nine high school teachers participated in the research, and two also integrated the school management team.

The inclusion criteria for the study were: to be a professor and to teach high school subjects. In turn, we did not include licensed teachers and those who did not exercise class regency in the last two years.

To obtain the data, two techniques were applied: questionnaire and research group. All teachers who met the criteria for inclusion of the research were invited to participate, and nine answered the questionnaire and were available to participate in the research group.

The semi-structured questionnaire was made available for voluntary completion to high school teachers for a period of 30 days. It consisted of questions about: sociodemographic data, identification of problems related to the mental health of the student and description of actions to promote the mental health of the adolescent at school.

The research group lasted approximately two and a half hours, covering the following stages of the sociopoetic method⁽¹³⁾: a) presentation of the research facilitators and participants; b) presentation of the research objectives in group; c) coexistence contract; signature of the ICF; d) relaxation activity; e) presentation of the theme-generator of the research - How does the teacher perceive the mental health problems of the adolescent school? What are the strategies of mental health promotion developed in school? ; f) group discussion of the proposed theme; g) presentation of a final synthesis; h) evaluation and scheduling of the counter-analysis.

Data analysis was performed by thematic categorical analysis technique⁽¹⁵⁾. Subsequently, the results previously analyzed by the official researcher were presented to the participants of the research group for counter-analysis, according to the sociopoetic method⁽¹³⁾, being validated and complemented by the same. Five members of the

initial group participated in the validation group.

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the signatory institution (Opinion n. 42569921.5.0000.5243). All participants signed the Informed Consent Form.

RESULTS

Nine high school teachers participated in the study, and two also integrated the school management team. The teachers participating in the research group were between 35 and 56 years old, six of them female. Three of them are graduates, one specialist and four masters; the average time working as a teacher in the school is six years and teach the following disciplines: English, mathematics, physics, Portuguese, chemistry and philosophy. Three participants reported having teenage children.

The results were organized into three empirical categories: mental health problems in adolescent students perceived by teachers; measures to protect the student's mental health; and perception of the role of the teacher in the promotion of the adolescent student's mental health.

Mental health problems in adolescent students perceived by teachers

Here, we present the main problems related to the mental health of adolescent students identified by teachers - based on the data obtained through a questionnaire and a research group.

In daily living with adolescent students, teachers identify various problems related to mental health. Among the most recurrent, anxiety was reported by nine teachers, family problems by six and stress by six. As for the behaviors observed, excessive social disinhibition was reported by six teachers, persistent isolation/retraction by four and destructiveness also by four.

In the research group, the teachers commented that some students are aggressive, have antisocial behavior, agitation, relationship difficulty and use of alcohol and other drugs.

At the beginning of the advent of the cell phone, the problem with teenagers was the sending of 'nudes' and fights because of the boys. Now, anxiety and self-injury are recurring problems.

We were shocked to see the students self-mutilating,

making several cuts on their bodies.

I already had to accompany a young woman, who was seriously injured, to the health center here, close to the school.

There are several cases of teenagers cutting themselves. I don't know if it's a serious and personal suffering or if it's because they are influenced by colleagues.

These cases that appear are adolescents who don't have a structured family. They are raised by other people, by stepmothers, by aunts, by grandparents.

We witnessed major anxiety crises experienced by adolescents.

A student had a panic attack so severe that it was only controlled with the help of doctors from the mobile emergency service.

Teachers highlighted the concern with the growth of mental health problems in schoolchildren, emphasizing that these have been more severe and recurrent in recent years. They emphasized that anxiety and self-harm are frequent problems at school and do not know what to do.

Measures to protect the student's mental health

As the main protective measures to the mental health of adolescent students, the embracement was cited by six teachers and the stimulus to emotional expressions by four. All teachers indicate that the school should have trained agents and especially available to meet the demands of mental health of adolescent students.

Based on the previous questionnaire applied to the participants, three reported that they talk to the students about suicide prevention and themes related to mental health during classes.

As for the mental health actions developed by teachers at school, four reported that, most of the time, they do nothing, because they feel unprepared and six declared that they do not consider this to be their role. In the meantime, they point to some measures that have already been tried, six of which mentioned that they talked to the teacher to know what to do; four, who talked to the student outside the classroom to try to help him in whatever way possible; and four, who talked to other teachers.

We did an activity at school based on the importance of hugging. One student reported that, after the hug, she changed, became 'looser', that she was never

accepted at any school.

When we propose group activities, they manage to do the 'catharsis', they talk, and they have been talking. There was even a girl who spoke and moved us, complaining about non-acceptance. Because she is "chubby", people discriminate against her. She is still "chubby", but now she has learned to deal with this situation.

The cool thing about this is that we sit down with them, teachers, management, coordination and it's been really cool. Then we end up dancing, everyone dancing together.

Based on the teachers' statements, it is found that some mental health strategies are carried out at school. Although there is no Mental Health Program implemented, some actions happen sporadically in the face of a negative emotional experience with some adolescent student.

Perception of the role of the teacher in the promotion of the adolescent student's mental health

Teachers showed divergence about their role in the promotion of mental health of the student, the need for training was not unanimous among them.

Some teachers say: 'What do I have to do with this? He has already repeated the year'. 'The certificate does not endorse the facts'.

Many teachers use the 'neutrality' discourse as armor to protect themselves from possible involvement with the student's problem.

I did didactics 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, educational psychology, things like that to teach, to teach; not to emotionally educate students.

So, these children arrive without education, without any limits and lack of family structure. A demand that goes far beyond our competences as well.

There is a great need for training of all school agents to deal with the emotional problems of adolescents.

The teacher has to listen and have a different look. He has the power to build or destroy.

We experience countless emotional and anxiety crises in adolescent students, we need to be guided for this.

Given these reports, it is noteworthy that part of the teachers does not consider as part of their assignment to deal with the demands of mental health presented by adolescent students in the

school environment. However, some teachers consider the training necessary, pointing out that it should be extended to other school agents.

DISCUSSION

The school environment has represented, through its functioning mechanisms, a device of social participation and development of citizenship processes. It is understood as a health promoting space due to its potential to elicit healthier and more creative forms of existence in the world and sociability. Because they are more accessible and natural than health services, schools provide adolescents with interventions that are less stigmatizing⁽¹⁶⁾.

Sociodemographic and environmental components of teachers' lives, especially those of high school - such as age, gender and average time of performance - aspects of everyday life in the school environment and can serve as subsidies to support the mental health of children and adolescents. They also end up being prerequisites that conform the school context, facilitating the interaction with adolescents in their daily lives⁽¹⁷⁾.

Four of the nine participants hold the title of master and one is an expert, which speaks in favor of a human resource structure, prepared to face the contemporary challenges of teaching and able to develop new educational actions in school according to specific training - such as the promotion of mental health of adolescents, pointed out as necessary by teachers.

The fact that most teachers participating in the study are women and some have adolescent children allows greater empathy with the problems experienced in the school environment. On the other hand, the more mature age group of teachers, corresponding on average to the age of parents, can accentuate generational conflicts. In the school space, generational conflicts place in relation to the different values and expectations of adults and young people. Markedly hierarchical, the relationship between teachers and students translates into a relationship of power. It is necessary to consider that school has historically been configured as an autocratic space with regard to knowledge, body practices, languages and learning, further intensifying the mental suffering of adolescents^(18,19).

Participants identified problems related to

mental health in the classroom and most did not know how to deal with it, justifying that they had not received training for it. Some participants consider that promoting mental health is not part of the teacher's professional role, indicating the need for greater awareness and training for this issue.

Research shows that teachers expressed concerns and interest in knowing the needs and problems experienced by adolescents, highlighting their concern with the occurrence of instability generated by the transition, emotional imbalance, the world of adults and extreme aggressiveness, also highlighting the depression very present in adolescents⁽²⁰⁾.

The main problems identified by the study participants were self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, anxiety, excessive charging, disinterest, lack of identity and family abandonment. The teachers gave much emphasis in their testimonies in the group to the occurrences of self-mutilation in adolescents.

Self-mutilation is a very recurring problem among adolescents nowadays, being related to suicide. It is the act or habit of an individual to cause injury and/or harm to himself, commonly including self-inflicted cuts or intentional poisoning, and may or may not be associated with suicidal intent and ideation. This practice may be associated with some personality disorders or abrasions, and may be associated with anxiety and substance abuse⁽²¹⁾.

According to the teachers' testimony, the school gives signs of self-mutilation through changes in behaviors related to their affectivity, mood and physical appearance, which include clothing in order to mask or camouflage the lesions. This perception indicates the attention of teachers to the risk behavior of the student, although, most of the time, they do not know how to act, feeling insecure by the lack of knowledge about the subject. This result is similar to what was found in the study conducted previously in a public school in São Paulo, which indicates the need to develop informative strategies as a way to consolidate teachers' knowledge on the subject of mental health⁽²¹⁾.

It is important to highlight that many adolescents who have experienced suicidal ideation, or who have attempted suicide, do not have contact with mental health professionals⁽²²⁾, school as a space for identification and promotion

of mental health of adolescents.

Thus, it is vitally important to identify adolescents with emotional problems, especially those with suicidal ideation who are not accessing treatment. The teacher, when trained in mental health, is a fundamental agent in this process.

The school plays an important role in the protection of adolescents who resort to self-mutilation, providing the first attempts at assistance, by identifying and subsequently notifying cases to the family and competent bodies, in order to direct possible interventions⁽²³⁾.

The approach adopted by school agents regarding the identification of problems and needs for mental health assessment is fundamental for the beginning of the reception, establishment of a help relationship, referral and treatment of adolescents⁽²¹⁾.

However, in addition to ensuring a supposed diagnosis and treatment of adolescents with mental disorders, the school should dialogue with the adolescents themselves, health services and other sectors on the main actions that can contribute to the promotion of school health. Thus, it contributes to the prevention of the practice of self-mutilation and other mental health problems that affect this population.

Participants recognized that there are mental health actions that can be developed at school, either by the teacher him/herself or by different school agents. In the school under study, there were some successful experiences of emotional support to the student. Although occasional and insufficient, these protective measures, engendered by the school, are intended to create a space for reception and emotional expression of adolescent students, not being part of an effective program of mental health at school.

Making room for mental health at school is the first step in tackling the emotional problems that hit adolescents so badly today. But, above all, the recognition by the teacher that student learning evolves in the same proportion that the teacher recognizes their skills, invests in differences, guarantees freedom and diversity of opinions, confronting meanings and experiences⁽²¹⁾.

In general, schools are not prepared to deal with the emotional demands of adolescents⁽²⁰⁾. However, when they propose to carry out health promotion actions with schoolchildren, they are positively surprised. Such activities are

informative, aggregating, emancipatory, constructive, and can be enhanced with the support of health professionals⁽²⁴⁾.

The interviewees emphasized the need to listen to adolescents, who need them to transform the school space, not worth coming with a ready proposal. This shows a broader and integrative view of the teacher about the protagonism of students in planning and decision making about their life and health, which is strongly recommended by studies on mental health of adolescents^(24, 25).

It is important to highlight that, for the Implementation of a Mental Health Program in School, in accordance with the *Byelaw of Children and Adolescents* (ECA – *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente*), it is necessary to consider the position of this population as subjects of law, valuing its protagonism, ensuring their interests and prerogatives in setting priorities⁽¹⁹⁾.

In addition, one of the factors considered most important for the protection of mental health is the appreciation of people's powers, the stimulus to their development and strengthening of resilience through coexistence activities⁽²²⁾.

Teachers recognize as protective factors to the mental/emotional health of adolescents at school - reception, positive reinforcement for achievements, strong connection with families, strong connection with the community, positive cultural experiences, promotion of sport/ leisure, interaction and stimulation of artistic expressions.

As we verified in the testimony of the teachers, there is a growing suffering observed in the students and the measures to deal with them in the school are insufficient, although there is interest and sensitivity on the part of the teachers and leaders.

On the other hand, it is noticed that there are still points to progress regarding the awareness of teachers, regarding the reception and appropriate treatment of the young person in mental suffering, as well as the identification of positive characteristics of their students.

The lack of preparation to deal with the situations pointed out is a problem for teachers. Training programs for both students and teachers in schools can influence and promote mental health, reducing risk factors and emotional and

behavioral problems through socio-emotional learning⁽²³⁾.

The training of teachers to perform the function of multiplier of health information in the classroom is fundamental and a protective factor for mental health problems in adolescents. The figure of the teacher represents a model and an example of habits and behaviors, hence the importance of the role he plays in valuing and stimulating health practices.

There is a need to build concrete opportunities for participation of adolescent students in school, enabling them to assume the role of protagonist in the struggle for the construction and guarantee of rights, being the teacher a fundamental agent of change - taking into account their training.

CONCLUSION

Teachers perceive as mental health problems present in adolescent students - anxiety, stress, social disinhibition, persistent isolation/retraction and self-mutilation. They showed great concern with the recurrent episodes of self-mutilation among adolescents, emphasized the need for mental health agents in the school, and but did not mention the need for a mental health program at school and did not consider this aspect as part of their professional role.

Although they highlight the mental health problems of schoolchildren and seek to help them, in general, teachers do not know how to deal with such situations, and the measures of emotional support to the student are insufficient in school.

We consider that the promotion of school mental health - being related to a set of values such as democracy, participation, partnership, development, social justice and citizenship - is a perspective that evokes intersectoral action, being the schools space promoter of health privileged for being more accessible to adolescents than health services and for providing sustainable interventions.

Contributions of the study: This study showed the need for mental health care for school adolescents and the need for support for teachers so that they can provide actions to promote the mental health of adolescents in the school.

PERCEÇÃO DE PROFESSORES DE UMA ESCOLA PÚBLICA SOBRE A SAÚDE MENTAL DOS ESCOLARES ADOLESCENTES

RESUMO

Objetivo: Descrever percepções de professores sobre saúde mental dos escolares adolescentes e ações empreendidas na escola. **Métodos:** Estudo descritivo-exploratório, com abordagem qualitativa e referencial teórico-metodológico da Sociopoética. Participaram nove professores do ensino médio de uma escola pública do município de Niterói-RJ. Os dados foram coletados através de questionário e grupo-pesquisador e analisados conforme a análise temática. **Resultados:** Foram encontradas três categorias de análise: a) problemas de saúde mental nos escolares adolescentes percebidos pelos professores; b) medidas de proteção da saúde mental do escolar engendradas pela escola e c) percepção do papel do professor na promoção da saúde mental do escolar adolescente. **Conclusões:** Os dados indicam que os professores identificam os principais problemas relacionados à saúde mental do escolar adolescente, mas nem sempre estão dispostos ou se sentem preparados para ajudá-los, mostrando ser necessário capacitação e implementação de estratégias de promoção de saúde mental na escola.

Palavras-chave: Saúde Mental. Adolescente. Promoção da Saúde Escolar.

PERCEPCIÓN DE PROFESORES DE UNA ESCUELA PÚBLICA SOBRE LA SALUD MENTAL DE LOS ALUMNOS ADOLESCENTES

RESUMEN

Objetivo: describir las percepciones de profesores sobre la salud mental de los alumnos adolescentes y las acciones emprendidas en la escuela. **Métodos:** estudio descriptivo-exploratorio, con abordaje cualitativo y enfoque teórico-metodológico de la Sociopoética. Participaron nueve profesores de secundaria de una escuela pública del municipio de Niterói-RJ/Brasil. Los datos fueron recogidos a través de cuestionario y grupo investigador y analizados conforme el análisis temático. **Resultados:** se encontraron tres categorías de análisis: a) problemas de salud mental en los estudiantes adolescentes percibidos por los profesores; b) medidas de protección de la salud mental del estudiante creadas por la escuela y c) percepción del papel del profesor en la promoción de la salud mental del alumno adolescente. **Conclusiones:** los datos indican que los profesores identifican los principales problemas relacionados a la salud mental del alumno adolescente, pero no siempre están dispuestos o se sienten preparados para ayudarlos, demostrando la necesidad de capacitación e implementación de estrategias de promoción de salud mental en la escuela.

Palabras clave: Salud Mental. Adolescente. Promoción de la Salud Escolar.

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