Mental Health Of Education Professionals: Challenges, Repercussions, And Support Strategies In The Post-Pandemic Context

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Abstract:
This article examines the mental health of education professionals, highlighting the challenges and impacts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and proposing strategies for effective support. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of psychological well-being crucial for individuals' performance and social contribution. Teaching, inherently connected to intense social interactions and multiple responsibilities, is among the professions most susceptible to mental health issues, exacerbated by adverse conditions such as stress and work overload. The COVID-19 pandemic brought profound changes to the educational landscape, forcing teachers to rapidly adapt to remote teaching and face new psychological challenges, including stress, anxiety, and depression. Social distancing and the need to learn new digital tools intensified the workload and pressure on educators, resulting in a significant increase in mental health issues. The article also discusses the importance of interventions aimed at teacher well-being, including the need for specialized psychological support and the creation of support networks, such as discussion groups and group therapies. Public policies that consider the mental health of educators are essential to ensure a healthy and sustainable work environment. Promoting self-care and implementing support strategies are fundamental to addressing the consequences of the pandemic and improving the quality of life of education professionals.
Keyword: *Mental Health; Education Professionals; Occupational Stress; Education and Teaching; COVID-19 Pandemic.*

I.   Introduction

Mental health is an essential component of overall well-being and functional performance. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014), mental health is not merely the absence of disorders but involves a state of psychological well-being that enables individuals to cope with daily stress, develop their abilities, learn, and effectively contribute to their communities. This comprehensive concept is fundamental to personal, community, and socioeconomic development, as evidenced by how people interact, make decisions, and shape their environment.

The importance of mental health is even more evident when considering the workplace, particularly for education professionals. Teaching, central to the formation of future generations, has been widely recognized as a highly stressful profession, prone to mental health issues. Marx (1988) and Tostes et al. (2018) emphasize that human work is an extension of biological foundations and social experience, essential for personal and collective development. However, the teaching profession has faced significant challenges that directly impact teachers' mental health.

Studies show that teachers deal with a wide range of stressors, including workload, interpersonal conflicts, and lack of recognition, which contribute to conditions such as burnout syndrome and other mental disorders (Diehl & Marin, 2016; Reis et al., 2006). The impact of these conditions is exacerbated by educational

reforms and policy changes that often increase the workload without proper adjustment of working conditions (Oliveira, 1997; Souza, 2007).

The COVID-19 pandemic has added new dimensions to these challenges. Forced remote teaching and the rapid adaptation to new digital tools radically transformed the school environment and increased stress among educators (Cardoso, Soares & Gonçalves, 2022; Paz, 2021). The need to adapt to this "new normal" resulted in a significant increase in psychological distress among teachers, with elevated reports of stress, anxiety, and depression (Grossi et al., 2022; Souza et al., 2021).

In this context, promoting mental health and implementing effective interventions are crucial to supporting teachers in the post-pandemic recovery. It is essential that public policies and educational practices include strategies that address teachers' mental health, providing adequate psychological support and promoting a healthier work environment (Feitosa & Silva, 2022; Coelho et al., 2021). This narrative review seeks to explore the importance of mental health among education professionals, assess the pandemic's impact on their mental well-being, and discuss necessary strategies and policies to support and promote the well-being of these essential professionals in society.

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

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2014), mental health is a state of psychological well-being that allows individuals to handle daily stress, develop their skills, learn and work effectively, and contribute to their community. It is an essential part of health and well-being, supporting our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, establish relationships, and shape the world around us. Mental health is a fundamental right and plays a crucial role in personal, community, and socioeconomic development. It goes beyond the mere absence of mental disorders, existing on a complex continuum that varies from person to person, with different levels of difficulty and suffering, as well as various social and clinical outcomes.

According to the World Health Organization (2001), the scenario is not one of the absence of problems, but rather the ability to manage the implications and complications of interpersonal and social relationships, both in the short and medium to long term.

People's interactions with their social environments and peers can positively or negatively influence mental health, varying in degree and intensity from individual to individual. Therefore, for Santos (2023), it is useful to consider mental health not as an exact science but as a factor that depends on how each person responds to various environmental stimuli.

Work is the means by which humanity transforms nature, develops, and evolves. Marx (1988) emphasizes that human beings are defined by the combination of their biological base with the social products resulting from work. Tostes et al. (2018) corroborate that it is through conscious, planned work directed toward specific goals that humans build themselves, alter nature, awaken their own potential, and create new possibilities for humanity. Unlike other animals, humans are not born ready; they must appropriate the products of human activity, socially developed, to form what characterizes the human species in each historical period.

According to Saviani (2003), it is not enough for humanity to discover new ways of interacting with nature, create new knowledge, and explore new possibilities. It is essential that all this knowledge is passed on to future generations, promoting the development of humanity in each individual. The historical transmission of accumulated knowledge, from generation to generation, is fundamental for human progress and has occurred in various ways throughout history, until it became established in schools, as the responsibility of teachers. The author highlights that educational work is the act of producing, directly and intentionally, in each individual, and that humanity is built historically and collectively by society.

According to Souza (2007), teachers constantly live in the tension of being responsible for both the reproduction of a dominant culture, often individualistic, and representing the hopes of social mobility for various popular layers. In theory, schools have the function of forming individuals to become autonomous, critical human beings capable of acting in society to make it better, which in turn would also contribute to improving their quality of life. However, transformations in the social and economic context have significantly

altered the role of teachers, as well as personal and social expectations regarding the effectiveness of their performance.

Teaching work is realized, essentially, in human and social relationships, resulting in the production of subjectivities and affectivities as fundamental aspects of the profession. Teachers constantly face problems such as interpersonal conflicts in the workplace, which can lead to intrapersonal conflicts.

Various studies indicate that the teaching profession is among the most prone to illness. An example is the article "Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Learning," published in the Journal of Public Education, which highlights that the teaching profession is one of the most overloaded with tasks beyond classroom activities (GOMES, 2018). In a study titled "Mental Illness in Brazilian Teachers: Systematic Literature Review," Diehl and Marin (2016) state that teachers' health is a topic of increasing scientific importance, given the high stress load associated with the profession. Contributing factors to teachers' illness include professional impoverishment, stress, mental disorders, musculoskeletal diseases, depressive syndromes, sleep disorders, and burnout syndrome, among others.

The end of the 20th century in Brazil was characterized by various studies on teaching work, which underpinned political, social, and cultural changes during the transition to democracy. These studies highlighted the efforts of education professionals to build a school that reflected an innovative model, with public policies that respected the teaching profession and addressed its real needs, including the promotion of teachers' well-being (BARROS; GRADELA, 2017).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) considers teaching to be one of the most stressful professions (Reis et al., 2006). Teaching has become a strenuous activity, with evident impacts on teachers' physical health, mental health, and professional performance (REIS et al., 2006). Teachers have faced musculoskeletal strains and mental disorders such as apathy, stress, hopelessness, and discouragement (BARROS et al., 2007). The negative effects on teachers' health can be caused by various factors, such as intense emotional involvement with students' problems, social devaluation of the profession, lack of motivation, the demand for qualified performance, unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships, large classes, lack of time for rest and leisure, and extended working hours (NEVES; SILVA, 2006). These factors are sources of stress related to work organization, task content, and the work environment (CARLOTTO, 2012; GIL-MONTE, 2005).

According to Oliveira et al. (2002), the educational reforms of the 1980s and 1990s brought new demands to the teaching profession without the necessary adjustment of working conditions, significantly impacting the profession. Therefore, teaching work is a relevant field of study, considering the broad changes in schools and education, which are influenced by social transformations and the world of work (HYPOLITO; GRISHCKE, 2013).

Oliveira (1997, apud ARAÚJO; PINHO; MASSON, 2019) observes that among the educational reforms of the 1990s in Brazil were administrative, financial, and pedagogical decentralization, and flexibility in the organization and functioning of schools. This provided greater autonomy to school management, benefiting teachers by allowing more freedom to organize their work, but also increased their responsibilities for educational success. Oliveira, Vieira, and Augusto (2014) add that these changes also transferred greater power to students and parents. The paradox of this regulatory model is that, while teachers' autonomy increases, so does the control over them.

The increase in internal control over activities deserves attention, especially regarding time and task management. This manifests through a rigid agenda with fixed deadlines and dates, imposing the execution of activities within increasingly shorter periods. Reflection on work is often replaced by the urgency of deadlines and the need to meet the agenda, promoting a shift from the logic of knowledge to the logic of competencies. As one demand is completed, another arises quickly, resulting in a feeling of lack of time for adjustment or reflection. The demands for high approval levels, regardless of concrete learning processes, pressure teachers, leading to a growing scarcity of time, greater standardization of practices, and focus on quantitative results monitored by approval indicators.

Esteves (1999) describes this set of work characteristics as "teacher malaise." This social phenomenon is characterized by the devaluation of the profession, associated with the continuous increase in professional demands, as well as violence and indiscipline. These factors create an identity crisis, causing teachers to question their career choice and the meaning of their career. The impacts of these conditions include burnout, fatigue, suffering, and disillusionment.

Health promotion and prevention policies are essential to avoid illness among education professionals, especially teachers. In this regard, Marques, Martins, and Cruz Sobrinho (2011) highlight effective strategies such as continued education programs, lectures, informational materials, periodic exams, risk reduction, and ergonomic corrections. These actions are significant for improving workers' health and increasing productivity within organizations.

Teachers' Mental Health Post-Pandemic

Despite all the technological innovations that have occurred since the 20th century, no one could predict that a pandemic would radically transform the global scenario in various areas and that in-person classrooms would become virtual. In the face of this new reality, educators were forced to learn and/or improve their knowledge of digital tools for online classes (Cardoso, Soares, Gonçalves, 2022).

Teachers had to use these virtual tools without, in many cases, prior contact with the platforms. Due to social distancing, they could not meet with others for training, being forced to learn to interact with students online, share slides, and manage various other complex functions on their own (Flores and Lima, 2021).

According to Junior and Sousa (2021), during the pandemic, teachers became concerned not only with conducting lessons but also with supporting students. Many were dealing with grief from losing family members and were shaken by the situation caused by the pandemic. This made it necessary to work on values such as solidarity, respect, humility, and tolerance.

Home-based teaching, as Paz (2021) notes, increased teachers' workload, particularly concerning student support. In in-person classes, this support was provided directly during the lesson, with the teacher assisting as questions arose. With social distancing, teachers began working longer hours, responding to students' questions after class and through messages on teaching platforms.

Souza et al. (2021) remind us that since the 1980s, teaching has already been considered a high-risk profession due to numerous psychological pressures and daily challenges. The pandemic added new stress factors beyond the existing ones, such as the fear of contracting the disease and changes in teaching methodology, resulting in increased psychological illness, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

The post-pandemic period has revealed, according to Grossi et al. (2022), a revolution in teachers' lives, causing physical, mental, and social disarray. Symptoms include excessive stress and exhaustion due to pressure and long working hours, as well as insecurity regarding new teaching methods, as not everyone was proficient in the digital

technology required for online classes. This constant pressure due to changes has had a significant impact on teachers' lives. Inevitably, according to the authors, the return to in-person classes manifested a significant psychological change in teachers' lives, leading to changes in their methodologies and complications in their psychosocial aspects. The pandemic marked a profound reform, where previous school methodologies were transformed, forcing a generation to adapt to distance learning and new forms of communication between teachers and students.

According to Pierre Lévy (2000), technological evolution has been an integral part of education, influencing the ways teachers and students interact. However, this technological innovation had a significant psychological impact on the teaching profession, many of whom had no prior skills or knowledge in this area. Suddenly, it became necessary for them to adapt to these new tools, which facilitated communication and access to remote classes. Moreover, these technologies offered various functions that allowed teachers to enhance their didactics and teaching methods.

Lyra (2022) discusses the need to listen to teachers, who, upon returning to work after the pandemic, faced significant overload due to psychosocial challenges and changes in teaching methodology. They experienced increased teaching hours, minimal financial return, and persistent lack of recognition, issues that were exacerbated. Due to inadequate psychological support and the need to be heard, many teachers voluntarily came together to support each other, sharing experiences and strategies to cope with the exhausting and stressful routine.

Melo, Mattana, Rios, and Nazar (2022) reveal that anxiety and depression levels among teachers during and after the pandemic were higher than those found in students infected with the COVID-19 virus. Besides the physical impacts of the disease, the psychological effects were profound. Teachers found themselves in a worrying psychological situation, being one of the classes most affected by the aftermath of COVID-19. The lack of psychological preparation to face such a devastating pandemic led teachers to adapt quickly to the "new normal," working online and adjusting their practices to continue providing educational support to students. This lack of preparation was evident both at the beginning of the pandemic and when returning to classrooms.

Cruz et al. (2020) highlight that symptoms of mood disorders among teachers are notable, resulting from the new and disappointing reality they faced during the pandemic. Education professionals had their psychological state compromised, presenting symptoms of anxiety, depression, panic episodes, acute and post-traumatic stress.

According to Souza, Novaes, and Zirpoli (n.d.), these significant impacts on teachers' lives resulted in exacerbating stress, as this class is prone to developing disorders and syndromes, with a focus on Burnout Syndrome. This condition is characterized by a chronic and gradual process of exhaustion, fatigue, irritability, reduced productivity, stress, among other symptoms. Teachers, due to their vulnerability, are more susceptible to developing this occupational syndrome.

One impact of returning to classes post-pandemic was the increase in diagnoses, especially among children in the literacy phase. This period affected the neuropsychic development of children, requiring teachers to adapt to the "new normal" (Mata, 2021). Montano (2022) discusses how the pandemic impacted children with ADHD, characterized by altered behaviors. It is observed that dealing with these children with altered behaviors due to disorders and diagnoses has become part of the "new normal" that teachers need to face. However, there was a lack of physical and psychological preparation to handle this new reality, making this class one of the most affected. The return of students was marked by a new expectation regarding the post-pandemic school environment, considering the changes before and after COVID-19. However, this return brought with it challenges such as a lack of mental sanity, which impaired the school environment, affecting teaching and didactics, psychologically impacting teachers, and increasing their vulnerability to mental health issues.

The Importance of Mental Health Support Interventions for Education Professionals Post-Pandemic

Following the impacts of the pandemic on teachers' pedagogical practices and the resulting psychological effects, it is essential to understand how educators are coping with the ongoing consequences of COVID-19 on their mental health. Psychologist Segantim (2022) warns teachers about the need to protect their mental health as a way to face new challenges. She emphasizes the importance of respecting one's limitations concerning excessive work and highlights the need for schools to provide a space for support and listening for teachers.

This perspective underscores that the abrupt changes caused by remote teaching and the return to in-person classes required teachers to quickly develop new skills and pedagogical approaches. The lack of preparation for these sudden events resulted in the need for a "new didactics" and new professional competencies to meet students' teaching and learning demands, which led to excessive demands on teachers.

Segantim (2022) also highlights the importance of setting boundaries so that teachers' personal lives are not further compromised. She suggests that it is crucial for teachers to have time for themselves, cultivate social relationships, and practice self-care. If teachers do not learn to deal with the consequences of the post-pandemic period, including respecting their limitations and developing cognitive flexibility to adapt their personal plans, their emotional stability may be further compromised, harming their mental health.

Feitosa and Silva (2022) assert that taking time for oneself is crucial for teachers, helping to address the psychological illness resulting from the pandemic's aftermath. This balance between mind and body allows the mind to engage in other activities, helping to divert attention from the obstacles brought by these challenges.

Specialized care is crucial for teachers' recovery in the post-pandemic period, as many carry the marks of this challenging period and its consequences (Feitosa and Silva, 2022). Psychology and psychological care play an important role in supporting individuals during disasters and emergencies. Such care examines the relationship between the person and the situation, offering ways to cope with and reinterpret the events (Trindade and Serpa, 2013).

There is a significant need to support and listen to teachers, which can be considered an effective intervention method for dealing with the consequences of the post-pandemic period. According to Coelho et al. (2021), one way to achieve this is through conversation circles, where teachers can discuss the challenges faced in the classroom, creating a network of mutual support. Additionally, it is important to provide access to psychoeducational materials as support for mental health and the teaching context.

Group therapy is a modality where participants share experiences related to the problems they face. This sharing allows individuals to realize that they are not alone in their difficulties but that others are in the same situation (Costa, Silva, and Silveira, 2018). In this context, it can be inferred that such an intervention could help teachers overcome and reinterpret traumatic events resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is crucial to develop public policies that address emergency responses, such as pandemic and post-pandemic periods. These policies should address the various challenges faced in different areas, with a focus on mental health as discussed in this work. Feitosa and Silva (2022) emphasize the need for special attention to psychological health in the learning process and social transformation of individuals, especially those who have experienced weaknesses due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The work of Social Services plays a crucial role in supporting the mental health of education professionals, especially in the post-pandemic context. The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the educational system, exacerbating stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues among teachers. These professionals faced a significant increase in workload due to the rapid adaptation to remote teaching and the use of new digital tools. In this scenario, social workers are essential in providing emotional and psychological support, facilitating access to appropriate resources, and promoting healthier work environments.

Social workers help identify signs of stress and psychological distress, offering direct interventions and referrals to specialized treatment when necessary. Additionally, they can assist in creating support networks within educational institutions, promoting discussion groups and group therapy sessions that aim to reduce feelings of isolation and provide a safe space for expressing concerns. Implementing public policies that integrate support for educators' mental health is crucial, and Social Services can contribute to the formulation and execution of these policies, ensuring that the needs of education professionals are effectively addressed.

IV.   Conclusion

The mental health of education professionals is a crucial aspect of the effective functioning of educational institutions and the overall well-being of teachers. Teaching work, with its intense and complex demands, increasingly reveals itself as a profession with high emotional and stress loads, exacerbated by external conditions such as educational reforms and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The forced adaptation to remote teaching and the demands associated with this new format had a profound impact on teachers' mental health, evidenced by a notable increase in disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

In this scenario, it is imperative to recognize that teachers' mental health should not be treated as a secondary issue but as a central component of educational policies and school management. Evidence points to the urgent need to implement effective psychological support strategies and preventive interventions aimed not only at reducing stress and promoting well-being but also at creating a more balanced and respectful work environment.

Psychological support programs, stress management training, and the promotion of a collaborative and understanding school environment are essential to mitigate the negative effects on teachers' mental health. Additionally, valuing teaching work and creating suitable working conditions are crucial to ensure that professionals can perform their roles with quality and without compromising their health.

The pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of teachers and the need for more robust and structured support. The return to in-person classes and adaptation to new educational realities require a renewed approach, considering recent experiences and lessons learned. Teachers' mental health should be a priority in educational policy agendas and school management, with the implementation of measures that promote a healthy work environment and support teachers' psychological well-being.

Finally, investing in the mental health of education professionals not only benefits the teachers themselves but also contributes to a more positive and productive learning environment, directly reflecting on the quality of education provided to students. Therefore, it is vital for all stakeholders—from educational managers to public policy makers—to commit to creating strategies that promote teachers' well-being and, consequently, the educational and social success of future generations.

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