



Teaching and mental health, an essential partnership in educational practice

Docencia y salud mental, dupla necesaria en la práctica docente

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: education has been a fundamental pillar in the history and culture of civilizations, from ancient societies to the present day. In Mexico, education has evolved significantly from pre-Hispanic civilizations to the colonial era and modernity, facing challenges such as socioeconomic inequality and fluctuating quality of teaching.

Methodology: the main objective of the study is to argue for the need for a work plan focused on prevention and promoting the detection of mental health problems among teachers. The research is based on a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, to capture teachers' subjective experiences of work-related stress and their coping strategies.

Results: the study addresses how poor mental health affects teacher performance, existing contractual support for mental health care, and the potential impact of a specialized mental health center on improving educational indicators. The incidence of burnout syndrome and other mental disorders exacerbated by the pandemic was diagnosed, highlighting the need for effective interventions and support strategies. The findings underscore the critical mental health situation of teachers and the urgent need for effective interventions. In addition, the results point to specific factors that contribute to the deterioration of mental health and provide a basis for the implementation of comprehensive support policies.

Conclusions: it is concluded that the implementation of mental health prevention and detection programs for education workers can contribute to improving their well-being and, consequently, the quality of education.

Keywords: educational psychology, mental health, teacher education, teacher qualifications.

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RESUMEN

Introducción: la educación ha sido un pilar fundamental en la historia y cultura de las civilizaciones, desde las antiguas sociedades hasta la actualidad. En México, la educación ha evolucionado significativamente desde las civilizaciones prehispánicas hasta la era colonial y la modernidad, enfrentando desafíos como la desigualdad socioeconómica y la calidad fluctuante de la enseñanza.

Metodología: el objetivo principal del estudio es argumentar la necesidad de un plan de trabajo enfocado en la prevención y promover la detección de problemas de salud mental entre los docentes. La investigación se fundamenta en una metodología cualitativa, incluyendo entrevistas semiestructuradas, grupos focales y observación participante, para captar la experiencia subjetiva de los docentes en relación con el estrés laboral y sus estrategias de afrontamiento.

Resultados: el estudio aborda cómo la carencia de salud mental afecta el rendimiento del docente, los apoyos contractuales existentes para la atención de salud mental y el impacto potencial de un centro especializado en salud mental para mejorar los indicadores educativos. Se diagnosticó la incidencia del síndrome de burnout y otros trastornos mentales exacerbados por la pandemia, subrayando la necesidad de intervenciones efectivas y estrategias de apoyo. Los hallazgos subrayan la situación crítica de la salud mental de los docentes y la necesidad urgente de intervenciones efectivas. Además, los resultados apuntan hacia factores específicos que contribuyen al deterioro de la salud mental y proporcionan una base para la implementación de políticas de apoyo integral.

Conclusiones: se concluye que la implementación de programas de prevención y detección de problemas de salud mental en los trabajadores de la educación puede contribuir a mejorar su bienestar y, consecuentemente, la calidad educativa.

Palabras clave: competencias del docente, formación de docentes, psicología de la educación, salud mental.

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INTRODUCTION

When addressing issues related to history and culture, the phenomenon of education is always present. In the era of indigenous civilizations, there were no teachers or formal schools; the teaching-learning process occurred socially and continuously, that is, according to the traditions and worldviews of each people.

In contemporary times, educating involves deliberate planning; educating is fostering critical thinking (Freire, 2021). Therefore, education is a complex system that motivates excellence in behavior and promotes empathy with those around us, not only in the school environment, but also in the family, social, and work environments.

Egypt, India, China, Persia, Greece, and Rome represent the most influential ancestral educational paradigms (Mosin, 2023). In these societies, the main topics revolved around the transmission of religious values, cultural traditions, and training for civic or military life.

Education in Mexico involves exploring a complex and significant legacy that has evolved over the centuries. From pre-Hispanic civilizations, such as the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec, which already had formal and informal systems of knowledge transmission, to the arrival of the Spanish colonizers in the 16th century, whose Catholic and European influence marked a turning point in indigenous education.

During the colonial period, education was monopolized by ecclesiastical institutions, which prioritized literacy in Spanish through the catechization of the indigenous population. In the 19th century, with the formation of the nation-state, Mexico began to build its own educational system, which was predominantly influenced by liberal pedagogical ideas from Europe and the United States (Acosta, 2021).

Like other Latin American countries, Mexico is constantly struggling to consolidate accessible, quality, and equitable education. Since ancient times, education has been adapting to economic contexts, technological trends, and the demands of society (Alfaro-Ponce et al., 2023). For this reason, educational and legislative reforms are being implemented in the quest to achieve educational quality, facing multifactorial challenges such as socioeconomic inequality and the historical backwardness of the rural population (Calleros et al., 2023; Mora-Rivera et al., 2024). In this scenario, the main figure is the teacher, the actor who operationalizes each axis of the action plan. The formation of upright citizens cannot be conceived without linking it inextricably to the work of teachers, since there is a solid link between education and teaching.

This study provides the basis for understanding the challenges faced by teachers in Mexico and the pressing need for greater attention to their overall health.

The main objective of this article is to argue for and promote the implementation of a work plan aimed at preventing and detecting mental health issues among teachers. This proposal is based on the premise that the psychosocial well-being of educators is a fundamental pillar of quality education systems. To this end, it seeks explicitly to argue the urgent need for educational institutions to incorporate a detailed analysis of their teaching population into their strategic planning in order to identify the therapeutic support needs that exist in each academic unit. It also highlights the importance of integrating mental health professionals into the school environment, which would allow for effective management of the emotional and psychological challenges that characterize the profession.

This approach raises a series of critical questions: how does mental health impact teacher performance in the classroom, what support do collective bargaining agreements provide in this regard, how does the Institutional Development Plan reflect the importance of teacher human development, and how would the creation of a specialized mental health center impact learning indicators? The qualitative hypothesis guiding this research posits that the existence of a systematic plan for prevention and early detection would significantly improve teachers' job performance, emotional stability, and, ultimately, educational outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching practice is considered a professional activity in which dedication, vocation, and commitment are essential (Türk & Korkmaz, 2022). These principles are embodied in the design and implementation of teaching methodologies tailored to the specific needs of students, the institutional resources available, and the personal teaching style of the educator.

However, their work goes beyond the mere application of instructional techniques to cover content; it incorporates the crucial dimension of modeling attitudes, instilling values, and fostering skills and abilities in the classroom. The nature and quality of these elements transferred will depend directly on the cultural background, personal growth, and continuous professional development of each teacher (Zhang et al., 2021).

In this sense, teaching involves an intrinsic process of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and the setting of personal boundaries. This self-control is essential for authentically understanding coworkers and students with whom one interacts.

Being a teacher, therefore, implies continuous preparation and evolution, not only to optimize job performance but also for the sake of ethical consistency and exemplarity, given that it is not possible to demand from others what one is not willing to practice oneself (Harms & Yarden, 2023).

The profession faces a multitude of daily challenges (Aksakalli, 2025; Sewagegn & Diale, 2021; Vidergor, 2022); among the most critical are:

- The organizational climate.
- Bureaucratic administrative demands.
- The growing social devaluation of the teaching profession.
- Overcrowded classrooms.
- Management of the learning environment.
- The constant search for and adaptation of relevant strategies and content.
- Tight academic deadlines.
- Frequent shortages of material and institutional resources.

This demand is exacerbated when considering the ideal multifaceted profile of the contemporary teacher: mediator of knowledge, axiological guide in line with the current educational model, individual and collegial planner of their teaching and assessment activities, active member of academic collaboration networks, tutor, advisor, expert in their discipline, knowledgeable about the psychology of their students, model of assertive and professional attitude in constant updating (Swaran Singh et al., 2021; Semenova & Khanolainen, 2025). Added to this is the paradoxical social expectation of preparing new generations to face the challenges of a future society that is still uncertain and in constant transformation.

A significant factor of change, with consequences that are still felt today, was the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a profound impact on teachers and students, radically transforming the landscape of global education systems, and Mexico was no exception (Khalil et al., 2021). The abrupt and forced transition from face-to-face teaching to digital or hybrid modalities, triggered by lockdown, highlighted and exacerbated the deep structural inequalities that already existed in the Mexican education system (Chans et al., 2023). This situation not only severely affected teaching and learning processes but also acted as a significant trigger for a mental health crisis (Kumar & Nayar, 2021).

According to Hammoudi Halat et al. (2023), mental health is understood as a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with everyday stress, develop their abilities, learn and work productively, and contribute to their community. This state directly influences cognition, emotions, and behavior, as it determines the ability to make decisions, establish healthy relationships, and achieve personal and professional goals.

The pandemic context, characterized by prolonged confinement, restricted social interactions, and an atmosphere of permanent uncertainty, exacerbated anxiety, depression, and stress in the general population (Turna et al., 2021). Teachers, in particular, were forced to adapt to an environment of unprecedented technological and pedagogical challenges, often without the necessary training and resources (Oliveira et al., 2021). This overload, coupled with the loss of face-to-face contact with students and colleagues, catalyzed feelings of isolation, demotivation, and profound exhaustion among teachers.

Recent research confirms that disrupted routines, forced social distancing, and concerns about health and family finances contributed to a global mental health crisis (Both et al., 2021; Lange, 2021).

The confluence of these factors, coupled with the tensions of a complex sociopolitical context, has led to an alarming increase in cases of chronic work-related stress, resulting in dire physical, social, and psychological consequences (Wang et al., 2023). This not only jeopardizes the mental well-being of educators but also seriously compromises the quality and effectiveness of the educational process as a whole.

The specialized literature documents how these elements have increased psychosocial risks in various population groups, underscoring the urgency of implementing effective interventions and support strategies that address both the immediate effects and the long-term consequences of the pandemic on collective mental health (Armijos et al., 2023).

There are a multitude of work-related stressors that negatively impact teachers' behavior and well-being, leading to dissatisfaction, institutional disengagement, physical fatigue, decreased self-esteem, depersonalization, sleep problems, and high intentions to leave the profession (Arbia et al., 2023). These difficulties create an increasing emotional and pedagogical distance between teachers and their students.

Within this spectrum of attrition, burnout syndrome emerges as a severe condition (Estrada-Araoz et al., 2023). It differs from everyday work-related stress in that it constitutes a state of extreme physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to poorly managed chronic work-related stress (Agyapong et al., 2022). Its defining characteristic is that it is not resolved by rest, but instead requires psychological interventions and profound organizational changes (Agyapong et al., 2023).

In addition to stress and burnout, the pandemic exacerbated a range of mental health conditions globally, affecting both the general population and high-risk groups such as teachers. These include a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), major depression, sleep disturbances, obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD), increased substance use, eating disorders (EDs), and cases of domestic violence (Brabete et al., 2021; Linde et al., 2022; Mullins et al., 2022).

This wide range of conditions reflects the multifaceted impact of the pandemic. Therefore, it is critically important that educational institutions recognize and systematically address the importance of psychological factors in the health, illness, well-being, and quality of life of their teaching staff. It is imperative to understand that health transcends the mere absence of disease, encompassing a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being, influenced by living conditions, socioeconomic and environmental factors, and the individual's ability to adapt.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodological approach was chosen for this research, as it was considered the most suitable for addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon under study: teacher mental health. This approach allows for the in-depth capture and analysis of teachers' opinions, attitudes, motivations, behaviors, and expectations, facilitating a holistic and contextualized understanding of the underlying causes of this psychosocial problem (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2020). Such analytical depth, focused on subjective perception and stress management in the workplace, would be unattainable through a quantitative approach, given the inherent rigidity of the latter in exploring the experiential dimension.

The fieldwork was carried out in the specific context of the Ciudad Universitaria de Los Mochis High School, Academic Unit (U.A.) of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS). This educational center has an enrollment of 2163 students and a teaching staff of 84 teachers working in both school and semi-school settings. For this study, a sample of 76 teachers assigned to the school-based modality was taken.

The main objective of this qualitative research was to analyze teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding their mental health, identifying the main stressors, the coping strategies used, and the possible needs for therapeutic support within the institutional setting. Based on the premise that emotional, psychological, and social well-being is a fundamental pillar of resilience in adverse situations, it is considered crucial to prioritize the analysis of educators' mental health. The study of these complex aspects of human experience transcends the merely quantifiable, which is why the phenomenological design was considered the most appropriate, as it allows for an understanding of job performance through the interpretation of teachers' personal and professional experiences.

Three complementary techniques were used to collect data. First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to obtain detailed first-person accounts. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore dimensions such as sources of stress, emotional and physical impacts, and coping mechanisms. Each session, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants for subsequent transcription and analysis.

In an initial phase, five focus groups were formed with seven teachers each, representing 41,66% of the teaching population sampled. The dynamic consisted of collective discussion and exploration of common themes, which

encouraged participants to share experiences, feelings, and perceptions about stressful situations in various settings. These sessions, with an estimated duration of 1 to 2 hours, were recorded (with proper authorization) and supplemented with field notes to facilitate analysis. It is important to note that the discussion in these groups was structured around thematic areas that emerged from previous dialogues, which allowed for preliminary triangulation and comparison of findings.

Subsequently, in a second stage, the participant observation technique was implemented. This phase consisted of direct observation of seven teachers in their natural work environment (the classroom) in order to capture in situ the interactive dynamics and contextual elements that may influence their mental health. The observation was carried out through multiple visits to the institution, with sessions lasting between 1 and 1,5 hours each. An observation guide was used to systematically record behaviors, interactions, environmental conditions, and any other relevant aspects of everyday teaching practices, recording all information in field journals.

To analyze the information collected, a rigorous and systematic process was implemented that combined two main qualitative analysis techniques. First, a thematic coding system was applied, which required a thorough and repeated reading of the textual transcripts derived from the interviews and focus group sessions. This process was carried out in three consecutive and progressive stages: open coding, aimed at identifying and labeling initial concepts, ideas, and categories present in the raw data; followed by axial coding, focused on reorganizing and refining these categories, exploring the relationships, connections, and subcategories that emerge between them; and culminating in selective coding, whose purpose was to integrate and refine the findings to identify and define the central themes or significant nuclei that articulate the entire experience studied.

Secondly, and in a complementary manner, an interpretive analysis of the themes and patterns identified was carried out. The main objective of this phase was to understand the deeper meaning and nature of the subjective experiences reported by the teaching staff, going beyond mere description to delve into the contextualized interpretation of the findings.

To ensure the robustness, validity, and depth of the study, methodological triangulation of the data was carried out. This strategy consisted of systematically comparing and cross-checking the information obtained from the three primary sources: individual interviews, focus groups, and field notes from observations. This convergence of evidence not only enriched our understanding of the phenomenon from multiple angles but also consolidated the consistency and reliability of the final results (Pérez Gamboa et al., 2024).

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RESULTS

The qualitative methodology implemented in this research proved to be an ideal tool for revealing and gaining an in-depth understanding of the complexity of the experiences lived and the latent needs of teachers. The triangulation of techniques—interviews, focus groups, and participant observation—made it possible to capture a multiplicity of perspectives, generating a robust and contextualized body of data. This empirical evidence lays the necessary foundations for the future design of institutional intervention programs aimed at promoting teacher mental health, which would constitute a significant step toward strengthening their psychosocial well-being and enhancing their professional resilience.

A crucial aspect of the process was the facilitation of the five focus group sessions by a psychology professional. Their expert intervention, aided by the application of standardized mental health assessment tools, was fundamental in moving from a question-and-answer dynamic to a genuine and reflective conversation. In this space, personal narratives emerged that covered a wide range of critical situations, from divorce, bereavement, and low self-esteem to generalized anxiety, economic problems, experiences of domestic violence, and the aftermath of parental absence.

Throughout the interactions, a space of trust and ethical support was gradually established. The teachers not only showed a remarkable willingness to share their experiences, but also explicitly expressed a pressing need for emotional relief. It was in this context of openness that the evidence of a common and alarming reality underlying their work and personal experiences became apparent and was shared.

Unanimously, the participating teaching staff pointed out that the measures implemented by the authorities, consisting mainly of granting days off, proved insufficient to mitigate the pain and constellation of negative feelings that overwhelmed them at the time and persist to this day. They strongly emphasized the urgent need to establish

an effective emotional support system within the educational institution that includes, as an essential component, clear protocols for referral to comprehensive and specialized psychological care when needed.

Each of the testimonies collected agreed that, during their most vulnerable moments, they would have greatly valued having concrete institutional support. However, due to various circumstances—including administrative pressures and economic needs—they were forced to return to their work in front of groups in a state of emotional fragility, with the consequent repercussions for their performance and well-being.

The analysis of the results concerning this issue confirms the initial hypotheses. However, it does so by highlighting an indisputable reality: the mental health of educators is in a state of critical vulnerability that requires urgent and systemic attention. This reality is not only indicative of deep dissatisfaction and growing unrest among teachers, but also constitutes a risk factor that has a direct and negative impact on the quality of educational services and the school climate as a whole.

At the same time, the research identified and categorized specific stressors—both organizational and psychosocial—that contribute decisively to the deterioration of mental health. Recognizing these problems as real, serious phenomena that deserve priority attention provides the solid argumentative basis needed to advocate for the implementation of effective interventions and holistic support programs. This project, therefore, not only diagnoses a problem, but also aims to catalyze the formal creation of a mental health center for university workers in each academic unit.

DISCUSSION

According to the World Health Organization, mental health problems include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities, as well as other mental states associated with significant distress (World Health Organization, 2022). On its official website, the WHO states that in 2019, 970 million people worldwide lived with two of the most common disorders—anxiety and depression—which are proven to negatively affect functioning in various settings, whether family, social, or work (World Health Organization, 2022).

Today, the need to determine the mental health status of teachers is more evident than ever. Through the exchange of teachers' own experiences, a detailed picture of individual and collective experiences is constructed, highlighting the pressing need to implement support and improvement strategies in the educational environment.

Educational institutions could rely on strategic and preventive plans for the mental health care of teachers (Beames et al., 2023). Currently, university workers receive medical services from the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), which in 2024 implemented the "EMPIEZA POR TI" (Start with Yourself) campaign, which provides information on key aspects of self-care for mental health (Mexican Social Security Institute, 2024). However, it is a recognized fact that public medical services lack the capacity to meet the demand of the entire eligible population. Therefore, it should be a priority for each institution to provide direct support to its workers. In this regard, it is suggested to start with a critical and assertive look at the mental health diagnosis of its workforce.

A teacher with good mental health not only reaps personal benefits, but also has a positive impact on students and the educational community in general. Even the official IMSS website (2024) lists benefits such as better physical health and faster recovery from illness; the establishment of quality interpersonal relationships; the ability to maintain a constant state of well-being and develop plans for the future; and, ultimately, a general improvement in the quality of life of individuals. Although this article focuses on well-being rather than teacher productivity, it is undeniable that improvements in mental health can translate into reduced absenteeism due to illness, which in turn leads to greater dedication, commitment, and motivation in interactions with students.

As a result, a positive school climate is created, assertive communication is facilitated, and interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are strengthened (Márquez-Cabellos & Ramos-Ramírez, 2024). Likewise, good stress and emotion management allows educators to resolve conflicts effectively, maintaining a safe and productive learning environment (Khassawneh et al., 2022).

A fulfilled teacher who enjoys good mental health can even become a role model for their students, promoting the importance of mental well-being by example and responding more effectively to students' emotional and psychological needs. In turn, this stability opens up the possibility of greater creativity in the classroom, the application of new teaching methodologies, and a more open attitude toward continuing education and professional development.

Based on the above, it can be deduced that to ensure a healthy and effective education system, it is essential to implement mental health and well-being support programs for teachers (Rahmi, 2024). Some concrete proposals include the creation of a department within the institution that functions as a center of attention for university workers, providing psychological support, counseling services, and therapy to address personal, family, and work-related problems. It would also be useful to create peer support groups where teachers can share experiences and coping strategies, implement mentoring programs where more experienced teachers support newcomers, thus fostering networks of collaboration and camaraderie, and conduct periodic evaluations through surveys to assess the mental well-being of teachers, using the results to continuously adjust and improve support programs. Finally, it would be very valuable to design specialized workshops on stress management, relaxation techniques, and training in conflict resolution and assertive communication skills.

Implementing and maintaining these programs requires a strong institutional commitment, in which authorities play a crucial role. This commitment must translate into concrete actions and sustainable policies that address the mental and emotional well-being of teachers, ensuring their accessibility and continuous application. Therefore, in 2024, the authors of this article submitted a proposal to the Program for the Promotion of Educational Research in High School (PROFIEB) of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS), which proposes the creation of a Center for University Workers (C.A.T.U.) to provide therapeutic support to workers—initially teachers—who experience emotional difficulties with a significant impact on their professional performance and on students' academic indicators. After a review process and some observations, the project was approved and its first phase will be implemented throughout 2025, consisting of an experiential workshop and the subsequent application of standardized psychometric batteries to a sample of teachers.

It is also recommended to establish systems for recognizing the achievements and efforts of teachers, as this fosters an institutional culture of value and appreciation. At the university under study, there is currently a program called the Teaching Staff Performance Incentive Program, as well as its equivalent for administrative staff (Administrative Staff Performance Incentive Program), which addresses motivation linked to productivity to a certain extent, but does not specifically address mental health issues.

To implement these strategies and programs effectively, authorities must adopt attitudes that foster an environment of support, respect, and care. This implementation includes actively listening to faculty members, showing understanding and sensitivity to their needs, and working collaboratively, involving them in decision-making and in the design of wellness programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this research, it has been unequivocally established that teachers' mental health is a fundamental pillar not only for their individual well-being, but also for the vitality and effectiveness of the education system as a whole. The findings obtained through a qualitative methodology reveal a critical and widespread reality: teachers operate in a state of psychosocial vulnerability exacerbated by a complex interaction of work-related, administrative, and personal stressors. The identification of problems such as anxiety, burnout, and the aftermath of adverse life events, which are not addressed in a timely and specialized manner, paint a picture that calls for immediate and structured institutional intervention.

The discussion that emerged from the focus groups and interviews goes beyond a mere description of individual grievances to form a collective diagnosis. The unanimous perception of the inadequacy of palliative measures, such as simple days off, and the crying need for an internal emotional and psychological support system, highlights a critical gap between current administrative policies and the real human needs of educators. This disconnect not only impacts their quality of life but, as demonstrated, directly affects the classroom climate, the quality of teaching, and ultimately student learning outcomes.

Consequently, this study concludes that mental health cannot continue to be treated as a secondary issue or the sole responsibility of the individual. On the contrary, it stands as an indicator of institutional quality and an ethical obligation of educational organizations. The concrete proposal to create a University Workers' Care Center (C.A.T.U.) is presented not as an optional suggestion, but as a necessary and viable strategy to operationalize this commitment. Its implementation would represent a transformative step toward a management model that prioritizes human capital, integrating therapeutic support, prevention through stress management workshops, and the promotion of peer support networks.

Finally, this research sets a precedent by providing local empirical evidence that corroborates a global problem.

The conclusions presented here seek to transcend the academic sphere to urge decisive action by decision-makers. Teacher mental well-being is, in essence, the foundation upon which a more resilient, empathetic, and academically robust educational ecosystem can be built. The future of education does not depend solely on curriculum reforms or technological resources, but on investing in the health of those who sustain it day in and day out in the classroom.

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