

Mental Health and Education as a Structural and Growing Problem

Susana Costa Ramalho · Institute for Family Studies, Faculty of Human Sciences, Universidade Católica Portuguesa

SUA EMINÊNCIA REVERENDÍSSIMA, SENHOR CARDEAL JOSÉ TOLENTINO DE MENDONÇA, PREFEITO DO DICASTÉRIO PARA A CULTURA E A EDUCAÇÃO,

EXCELENTÍSSIMA SENHORA PROFESSORA DOUTORA EMILCE CUDÁ, SECRETÁRIA DA PONTIFÍCIA COMISSÃO PARA A AMÉRICA LATINA,

EXCELENTÍSSIMO SENHOR DOUTOR MARIANO JABONERO, SECRETÁRIO-GERAL DA ORGANIZAÇÃO DE ESTADOS IBERO-AMERICANOS,

EXCELENTÍSSIMOS SENHORES MINISTROS E EXCELENTÍSSIMAS SENHORAS MINISTRAS DA EDUCAÇÃO,

CAROS COLEGAS, MINHAS SENHORAS E MEUS SENHORES,

The mental health of children and young people is, nowadays, one of the most widely documented yet also one of the most underestimated issues in education policy. We know this is not a new phenomenon, but it has been worsening at an accelerating rate and can no longer be treated as a responsibility falling exclusively within the remit of the health sector.

Pope Leo XIV's Apostolic Letter - Charting New Paths of Hope - calls for the creation of a 'global educational constellation' that inextricably links technical, emotional, social and ethical skills. It is from this vision that this meeting arises: the conviction that responding to the mental health crisis among children and young people is not a sectoral task – it is a civilizational responsibility that demands convergence between science, politics and ethics. We share the diagnosis but, more importantly, the willingness to share the journey.

Scientific data reveals consistent figures: at least one in seven adolescents lives with a diagnosable mental disorder. More importantly, 50% of these disorders are established before the age of 14, and 75% before the age of 24. The peak in prevalence coincides precisely with the period of compulsory schooling. It is therefore impossible to dissociate mental health from education, as the two phenomena share the same developmental timeline.

The post-pandemic period has exacerbated this situation, but the trend predates it and is global in nature. Over the last few decades, the incidence of mental health issues among children and young people has risen by around 30% in our region, with a similarly alarming increase in Latin America and Europe. Data from meta-analyses in Latin America and from the Eurobarometer now point to a prevalence of anxiety and depression of around 45% among the student population. This is not, therefore, a temporary spike but a structural trend that affects children and young people in our nations equally.

Added to these vulnerabilities is a dimension that the Apostolic Letter identifies with precision: the relationship between the digital world and human life. Digital technologies play an ambivalent role – they can expand opportunities for learning and connection, but they can also intensify isolation, dependency and cognitive overload, contributing to emerging forms of psychological distress. UNESCO, too, objectively recognises that violence in digital contexts clearly undermines the right to education and the emotional well-being of students and families. Digitalisation is not, of course, a neutral phenomenon: it is a risk factor or a protective factor depending on the choices we make – and those choices fall precisely within the remit of those of us here in this room today.

THE ANSWER TO THESE QUESTIONS IS NO LONGER JUST A HYPOTHESIS – IT IS A MODEL BACKED BY ACCUMULATED EVIDENCE, AND IT IS NOT SO FAR FROM US AFTER ALL. I SHALL SHARE THE KEY IDEAS WITH YOU.

The link between mental health and learning is not, as we have said, merely a pedagogical hunch. This interdependence is now a well-established finding, supported by replicated research, and has direct implications for education policy.

Children and adolescents experiencing psychological distress exhibit measurable deficits in attention, working memory and self-regulation (among other areas) – the basic cognitive functions upon which all learning is built. Overall, emotional distress is not a parallel obstacle – or one on the fringes – of the educational journey, but rather a direct impediment to the ability to learn, regardless of the quality of the teaching received.

In any Latin American classroom today, there is a significant proportion of students who, one might say, appear to be ‘technically’ unable to process learning, not because of a lack of intelligence or effort, but because of psychological distress that, as yet, no one has identified.

The neurosciences provide the most compelling argument for the political urgency of this action: childhood and adolescence represent a unique window of opportunity for development. The prefrontal circuits responsible for emotional regulation and decision-making are actively maturing – the young brain is simultaneously more malleable to positive influences and more vulnerable to chronic stress and adverse environments.

This neural plasticity is at its peak in the early years of life and remains high throughout childhood and adolescence. Early toxic stress leaves measurable marks on neurological development. What happens at school during these years cannot be made up for at the same cost at later stages. In other words, what happens in childhood does not stay in childhood.

The digital dimension adds a structural factor. The HBSC/WHO (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children) study, involving 280,000 young people across 44 countries, reports an increase in problematic social

media use between 2018 and 2022 – with girls at greater risk. This is not, of course, a simple cause-and-effect relationship, but the data is consistent: the digital dimension amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities, making investment in the protective factors that schools can build even more urgent.

It is at this point that the humanistic dimension of this meeting proves indispensable to a proper understanding of the situation:

The Apostolic Letter suggests that the centrality of the inner life acts as a natural counterbalance to hyper-digitalization, the crisis in relationships and the inequalities that fragment our attention and harm the human mind. This is not (merely) a statement of faith, but rather an educational hypothesis with growing scientific support. Research makes it clear that a human being with self-awareness and access to their inner life – with the capacity for attention, silence, purpose and meaning – is more resilient, better able to exercise discernment, and less vulnerable to the spirals of anxiety that social media algorithms systematically induce. Cultivating this inner life is also a form of mental health policy. And school is the place where this policy can be put into practice every day.

This vision is now complemented by Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical **Magnifica Humanitas**, which presents humanity with a decisive choice: to erect a new Tower of Babel – where profit, uniformity and efficiency take precedence over the individual – or to rebuild, together, a city where the dignity of every person is safeguarded. In the field of children's and young people's mental health, this choice is concrete: either we allow algorithms to define our children's emotional environment, or we build – in schools, in families, in policies – the foundations of a humanity that does not lose its beauty.

Let us have no doubt whatsoever on this point – a system that fails to look after the people it educates is not fulfilling its mission.

The question before this room is, therefore, what we can do next.

IT IS TO FORGE THIS PATH TOGETHER THAT WE ARE HERE TODAY...

The scientific consensus sends us a clear warning: one-off mental health interventions in schools are a waste of resources and do not tend to produce sustainable results. Science therefore calls for a systemic approach, and this provides us with a relevant framework for any policy decisions.

On the one hand, the whole-school approach (WSA) as a methodological principle is a way of organising any school-based intervention so that it involves the entire educational community: the curriculum, institutional culture, teachers, families and support services. It is, in essence, the ‘how’ – the organising principle that ensures no intervention operates in isolation.

The central aim of the WSA is that everyone in the school – regardless of their abilities, language, cultural background, identity or role – should feel safe, welcome and able to learn. It is this principle that the Health Promoting Schools model – the institutional model promoted by the WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF since 1995 – puts into practice within a public policy framework, with standards, indicators and accountability mechanisms that enable each government to know exactly where it stands and what is needed to move forward.

The literature identifies five components of the WSA, each supported by its own evidence, which reinforce one another. These five points set out precisely the areas of action that the school community must address simultaneously for the intervention to be considered a ‘whole-school’ approach (curriculum, environment, teachers, health and families).

1. Social and emotional skills in the curriculum

(...)

2. Safe and supportive school environments

(...) School is not a neutral space: it either fosters a sense of belonging or creates vulnerability.

3. Teacher training and well-being

(...)

The mental health of education professionals is not, therefore, merely a secondary benefit; it is also a fundamental prerequisite for any effective policy.

4. Integrated school-health services and referral mechanisms

A whole-school approach does not replace mental health services, but works in conjunction with them.

(...) - the school stands out as the only point of access with the necessary scale to ensure a universal and integrated public health response.

5. Participação das famílias e articulação com a comunidade

(...)

The most vulnerable families are both those most in need of support and those with the least access to it, which makes the school's mediating role all the more crucial.

Now that we have reached this point, it becomes clear that the problem is not a lack of evidence on what to do. The biggest problem we face is, in fact, the gap between what the evidence suggests and what education systems actually implement on an ongoing and evaluated basis.

As we know, this meeting has specific objectives that go beyond mere reflection. It aims to align common concepts and priorities for the development of joint strategies and work plans; and to lay the foundations for the systematic collection of data, the sharing of best practices and benchmarking, through a partnership that enables us to turn distance into productive collaboration.

I would like to conclude with a framework that I believe is central to the agenda this meeting can help shape: the concept of 'mental capital'. As has been widely argued, protecting the emotional well-

being of children and young people is not a luxury, but rather the safeguarding of the ‘mental capital’ and human capital that is essential to the development of any society. We are not merely talking about a matter of individual well-being, but about mental health as the most strategic economic and social asset of the 21st century.

This meeting brings together countries with very different education systems, but with a common challenge – and that challenge is also an opportunity for cooperation that goes beyond mere protocol.

As Pope Leo XIV emphasised in his reflection on the ‘educational constellation’: each member has its own contribution to make, but it is joint action that charts the course. Let us, therefore, be that shared path.

If, as the Holy Father reminded us, our young people are ‘a desire, not an algorithm’, our schools must be the place where that desire finds a future, security and a sense of belonging. The gap that currently separates scientific evidence from the reality of the classroom is not an insurmountable obstacle; rather, it can be our roadmap and our collective historical responsibility.

As I said earlier, this is not about adding mental health to the curriculum. It is about understanding that, without mental health, no curriculum can function, no investment can bear fruit, and no school can fulfil its mission. Caring for the emotional well-being of our children and young people is, ultimately, the primary duty of a society that wishes to be humane.

May this partnership between the OEI and the Holy See be the beacon that lights the way.

Thank you very much.

Translated with DeepL

28.05.26
