

Positive mental health among students in multicultural contexts: towards a new educational approach

Salud mental positiva en estudiantes en contextos multiculturales: hacia un nuevo enfoque educativo

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Dear Editor:

The world's population is currently experiencing a significant impact on mental health, which is understood as the sense of well-being that allows individuals to acknowledge their strengths consciously and helps them cope with everyday challenges, work productively, and contribute to their communities.¹

World Mental Health Day was celebrated on October 10, 2018, with the slogan "Inclusive Education, Positive Mental Health" and on April 7, 2019, under the slogan "Universal Health: for everyone, everywhere." Based on these assumptions, a discussion arose about what we mean by inclusion in education, and how it contributes to the development of mental health, especially in children and adolescents who are in an educational environment on a daily basis. This concept is related to the promotion of positive mental health by including each and every student with their own distinct characteristics, but also admitting that those characteristics differ from those of others. At this point, the notion of "difference" acquires relevance since, as is well known, the differences of individuals are related not only to biological features, but also to social, cultural and historical ones.

In the 1970s, it was proposed that the state of health and well-being should be based on a biopsychosocial model; however, the educational system has traditionally been a scenario in which cultural differences, particularly those of minority groups, are synonymous with rejection and exclusion, resulting in a decline in both individual and community mental health.²

This mostly cultural rejection of minority groups has been occurring in Chile for some time, firstly towards native people, who make up 9% of the population, and secondly towards migrants from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, who are increasingly arriving at the country and account for to 2.7% of the population.³ Minorities have been subjected to social, structural, and cultural violence as a result of this phenomenon, in which the dominant culture undermines and marginalizes them by imposing its own cultural values and elements on them;⁴ this in turn creates inequalities and asymmetries in access to services.

Consequently, immigrants must face difficulties in their destination country — mainly related to stigmatization, stress, discrimination, and other factors— that may have a direct impact on their mental health, with children being the most vulnerable because they are often involuntary migrants. This problem takes on special relevance in a country like Chile, which ranks fifth in the world in terms of suicide rates,⁵ being the population between 15 and 20 years of age the most affected by this phenomenon.³

Given the scenario, the role of teachers is especially important as they must act as mediators between local students and those coming from other cultures. In this sense, teachers must help their students to have a diversified perspective of reality in which they consider their peers' social, cultural, and historical backgrounds in order to recognize, understand, and accept them as similar yet different.

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Based on this position, we assume that teachers should develop skills, capacities and values that allow them to express their sensitivity to cultural differences and promote effective intercultural communication. Because the goal is to be able to put oneself in the shoes of the other, comprehend them, and understand their worldview, this necessitates access to the other, which must be done with sensitivity and through intercultural dialogue.⁶ As Tubino points out,⁷ dialogue seeks to understand the other by putting oneself in their shoes to discover new ways of feeling and perceiving the world.

On the other hand, interculturality entails the development of sensitivities and knowledge that enable us to transcend our own, enjoy what is different, recognize what is our own in the other, be critical of what hinders the exaltation of life or inhibits or denies human dignity, and appreciate and respect the keys to the happiness of others.⁸ However, there is little research on the psychological characteristics of teachers and their involvement in the development of intercultural interactions in educational contexts.⁹

Given the foregoing, the authors of this letter believe that having instruments validated in the local context to assess aspects such as intercultural sensitivity at the start of teacher training would be extremely beneficial, as the results of this evaluation would help to develop more appropriate curricula for pedagogical training. In addition, this would contribute to the development of inclusive, equitable and culturally relevant education that promotes the development of positive mental health for students.

Conflicts of interest

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