Chapter 14
Functions of Teacher Training Towards the Support of Students With Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to identify planned and attained educational functions and measures taken to address mental health issues in Poland. These will be studied from two perspectives: macro, policy of education in Poland (analysis of educational reports, law on education), and micro, the experiences of young people who have experienced a mental health crisis while in education. By using an interpretative paradigm, first, the authors identified planned functions by analysing the international and national education policy towards mental health issues. Then, they identified to what extent these functions have been successfully attained by analysing 12 autobiographical narrative interviews with people aged between 19 and 25, who experienced mental health problems during their education. The research results will be presented in the form of the school tasks presented in official documents that best illustrate the steps being taken towards prevention in the field of mental health as well as providing support for students with mental health issues.

INTRODUCTION

According to a UNICEF report, worldwide, 1 in 7 children aged 10 to 19 live with a diagnosable mental disorder (UNICEF, 2021). In recent years, the deterioration of young people's mental health has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions (social isolation, school closures, etc.). A number of studies to date indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted mental health conditions among young people (e.g., Liang et al., 2020; Cowie & Myers, 2020; Newlove et al., 2021).

In Poland, according to official data, 843 young people tried to take their own lives in 2020. Experts estimate that there were 80 to 100 times more unreported suicide attempts. The COVID-19 pandemic has been repeatedly described as a 'perfect storm' for mental health, and this is certainly an appropriate description of the mental health of youth (Danese & Smith, 2020). On the one hand, as Danese and Smith (2020) noted, the pandemic and related restrictions to daily activities have exposed young people to known risk factors for psychopathology, such as:

a.   health factors (e.g., infection and its dramatic consequences, malnutrition for the most disadvantaged, reduced levels of physical activities),
b.   social factors (e.g., social isolation, school closures),
c.   family factors (e.g., family stress, child abuse/neglect, parental mental illness), and
d.   economic factors (e.g., uncertainty about the future, unstable financial situation, etc.).

In addition, young people have been left without important external infrastructures that are normally in place to ensure their safety and provide support (Danese et al., 2020). As indicated by UNICEF experts, the consequences of the pandemic on young people's mental health and well-being will be experienced in coming years.

Based on the referenced report (UNICEF, 2021), there are significant gaps between mental health needs and funding worldwide support programmes. In Poland, in 2014-2016, almost half of the public schools in Poland did not employ either a pedagogue or a psychologist, and the number of psychiatrists is half of the standard recommended by the World Health Organization (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli[1] [NIK] report, 2016). Therefore, this chapter will present an analysis of the school situation of students experiencing mental health problems in Poland. We will examine this issue from the macro and the micro perspective. The macro-perspective will be analysed from the policy of education point of view concerning teachers' training in Poland. In this context, our attention will be focused on the analysis of the assumed functions or activities of schools to prevent mental disorders among children and adolescents and support schoolchildren who are experiencing such problems. A micro-perspective will be explored by reconstructing the school experiences of young people with mental health issues who graduated recently. The juxtaposition of these two perspectives will allow us to capture the similarities as well as the divergences between them, which may be of particular importance in the further design of support for schoolchildren experiencing mental health problems, as well as in the construction of teacher training.

In our study we merge two theories. The first of these, which relates to study functions in education towards mental health issues, is combined with Mertons' theory of functions of education (1968) that distinguish manifest and latent functions of education. Function in a common sense, means action for which a thing is specially fitted or used or for which it exists, and derives its relational nature (Webster dictionary). Educational functions that form education policies can be considered from the perspective of plans, meaning written expectations. Attained functions are those that are intended, planned, recognized, assumed by people, and which they expect educational institutions to fulfill. In other words, attained functions are unrecognized, unintended lessons that young people with mental health issues gathered during their school days. In contrast, to reconstruct the school experiences of young people diagnosed with mental health problems, we chose to adopt the interpretative approach (Wilson, 1973) placed in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969).

For this reconstruction, we use a bottom-up approach (the intersubjective perspective) which was captured through young people's spontaneous stories about their lives in the form of autobiographical

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