Original articles

Something to teach and to learn: the psychic suffering and mental health of educators in Alto Oeste Potiguar, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil[1]

Algo a ensinar e a aprender: o sofrimento psíquico e a saúde mental de educadores no Alto Oeste Potiguar

Francisco Gilmar da Silva Chaves[a]
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2883-4368
Email: gilmarfrancisco478@gmail.com

Bertulino José Souza[b]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9866-9305
Email: bertulinosouza@uern.br

Lucas Vialli Batista Miranda[b]
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3556-9013
Email: lucasvialli20@gmail.com

[a]Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte. Department of Physical Education. Rio Grande do Norte, RN, Brazil.

[b]Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte. Graduate Program in Planning and Territorial Dynamics in the Semi-arid Region. Department of Physical Education. Rio Grande do Norte, RN, Brazil.

Abstract

This article, originated from the research project *Born in the shadows: perception of the academic community of Pau dos Ferros on psychic suffering and mental health*, analyzed the health condition of educators in the municipality of Pau dos Ferros, Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, aiming to identify damages and impact factors on these professionals' health. This qualitative research was carried out between February 21, 2019, and March 21, 2019, at the Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte (UERN), in the Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), and at the Universidade Federal Rural do Semi-Árido (UFERSA). Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire with 34 teachers by proportional stratified sampling. Content analysis was used to decode the statements and results showed an estimated 60% of the target audience, that is, 20 out of 34 respondents indicated psychic suffering, excessive workloads, inadequate working conditions, constant stress, strong social pressure, lack of leisure time, among others. The causes for this high rate represent serious danger for the health of these professionals, requiring health policies to address them.
Keywords: Psychic Suffering; Mental Health; Educators; Alto Oeste Potiguar.

Correspondence
Francisco Chaves
Rua José Paulino do Rêgo, 45, 2nd floor. Pau dos Ferros, RN, Brazil.
Zip Code 59900-000.

Resumo

Este artigo, originado do projeto de pesquisa *Nascido nas sombras: percepção da comunidade acadêmica de Pau dos Ferros sobre sofrimento psíquico e saúde mental*, analisou a condição da saúde de docentes em instituições de ensino do município de Pau dos Ferros, Rio Grande do Norte, tendo como objetivo identificar a existência de danos e fatores de impacto na saúde dos profissionais. Metodologicamente, a pesquisa, de natureza qualitativa e realizada entre 21 de fevereiro de 2019 e 21 de março de 2019 na Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte (UERN), no Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN) e na Universidade Federal Rural do Semi-Árido (UFERSA), indagou, a partir de um questionário semiestruturado, 34 docentes por amostragem estratificada proporcional. A análise de conteúdo foi a estratégia utilizada para decodificar as falas e os resultados apontaram para uma estimativa de cerca de 60% do público-alvo, ou seja, 20 dos 34 respondentes deram indicativos de sofrimento psíquico, cargas excessivas e condições inadequadas de trabalho, estresse constante, forte pressão social, ausência de momentos de lazer, dentre outros. Considera-se que o conjunto de fatores que determinaram um índice tão elevado representam um sério alerta para a saúde desses profissionais e a necessidade de políticas de saúde que atendam a esse segmento.

Palavras-chave: Sofrimento Psíquico; Saúde Mental; Educadores; Alto Oeste Potiguar.

Introduction

Psychic suffering comes from the inability of human beings to deal with adversities and instabilities in their lives, resulting in impotence and subjective malaise (Amarante et al., 2011). This condition of fragility makes individuals believe that, for society, they synthesize disability, unproductivity, and even danger, besides bringing shame to family members and close ones.

Such way of thinking comes from prejudiced social representations and stigmatizes individuals, considering them a deviation from the social norm and qualifying them negatively (Figueirêdo; Delevati; Tavares, 2014).

This suffering condition differs from the concept of full enjoyment of mental health, known as "a personal and social state considered satisfactory because of the set of requirements achieved: work, leisure, and personal, professional, and social validation" (Souza, 2013, p. 87).

Regardless of mental disorders, mental health allows individuals to accept the demands of life. The condition is therefore a principle or project that impairs the singularity of individuals to deal with good and bad emotions in a world of anguish and constant change.

Moreover, the conceptualization of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) will be used to understand the definition of mental health. It defines mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his own abilities, coping with the normal tensions of life, accepting moments of ecstasy and sadness, being productive, and contributing to their community (PAHO, 2016).

Considering the importance of health balance and the damage caused by psychic suffering from mental health instability, professors in the academic community of the municipality of Pau dos Ferros (RN) were investigated, identifying the damages to their mental health. They were chosen for three reasons: (1) because of preliminary reports regarding the high stress load in teaching; (2) because of the varied audience, offering diverse perspectives; and (3) because studies on this theme are incipient. This research therefore aimed to discover how the

respective teachers understand their mental health and to identify psychic suffering.

At the same time, the research was conducted in a social and political context in which the speed of changes between man and nature allow/create situations of vulnerability and strong psychosocial impacts on the population which could harm or compromise teaching. According to Costa Neto and Dimenstein (2017), the fragility of interpersonal bonds in contemporary times causes malaise, including stigma and marginalization, affects self-esteem and self-confidence, reduces motivation, and interferes in life projects.

Isolation and daily exposure to violence and abuse can thus cause psychosomatic symptoms, encourage the use of psychoactive substances, and result in severe mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, burnout syndrome, common mental disorders derived from emotional suffering, and, in most severe cases, suicide (Menezes et al., 2019).

Materials and methods

This study's approach is qualitative, with relevant quantitative data. Prodanov and Freitas (2013) state that in this type of approach, which uses quantity and quality, one of the forms of research will overcome the other. This study focused on the teachers' perception of knowledge about mental health and their interpretation of psychic suffering. The qualitative aspect was predominant, especially because of responses that reflected their reality and the need to deeply analyze the problem. Based on Marconi and Lakatos (2003), this study became exploratory and descriptive.

Quantitative relevance is given by the number of participants (464) of the research project *Born in the shadows: perception of the academic community of Pau dos Ferros about psychic suffering and mental health*, within the Institutional Scientific Initiation Scholarship Program (PIBIC). Numbers specifically indicated 34 respondents in the teachers category, 398 in the student category, and 24 in the technics category.

As aforementioned, this article analyzes the teaching category, given the urgency of the facts.

This study was conducted in Pau dos Ferros (Pau dos Ferros City Hall, 2022), a municipality in the countryside of the state of Rio Grande do Norte, in the mesoregion of Oeste Potiguar, Northeast Brazil. Considered the main city of the Alto Oeste Potiguar region, it is 392 km west of the state capital city, Natal, and its territorial area is around 259,959 km². According to the demographic census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the municipality had 27,745 inhabitants in 2010 (IBGE, 2010) and currently has an estimated 30,802 inhabitants (IBGE, 2021), thus being the 18th most populous municipality in Rio Grande do Norte.

The city is an important commercial and educational center because of its geographical position, bordering the states of Paraíba and Ceará. The communications office of the Pau dos Ferros City Hall (2017) has stated that thousands of people circulate through the municipality daily.

A semi-structured questionnaire was applied and divided into two blocks of questions for data collection. The first block, composed of nine questions, sought to learn the profile of the respondents. The second, composed of four subjective questions, sought to address the problem. Regarding subjectivity, the first question asked the deponents on their understanding of happiness and its dimensions and implications. This type of questions allowed discovering the teachers' expectations and projects. The second question asked how representations affect the life and practices of teachers in a society dedicated to the virtual world.

Then, the third question investigated the extent to which teachers care about their mental health when their life goal is at stake whereas the fourth question asked how they deal with pain and suffering.

The questionnaire was applied in an interval of 30 days to a stratified sample proportional to 20% of the professors of the Universidade do Estado do Rio Grande do Norte (UERN),

the Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (IFRN), and the Universidade Federal Rural do Semi-árido (UFERSA). In total, 34 professors participated. The inclusion criteria were being a teacher and working in one of the three public institutions of higher education of Pau dos Ferros. Exclusion criteria were teachers from private universities and other educational institutions of the state and municipal network of Pau dos Ferros or from surrounding cities.

Data were discussed from the theoretical contributions of Goffman (2008), Amarante et al. (2011), Santos (2019), Camalionte and Boccalandro (2017), Rocha and Santos (2018), Arruda (2018), Sarques (2018), Emerich and Onocko-Campos (2019), among others, using descriptive and interpretative content analysis.

Learning about the profile of teachers

Getting to know the teachers was essential to understand the representations in their answers, investigating aspects of their singularity. Graphs 1, 2, and 3 show the research findings.

Regarding age, Graph 1 shows that almost half of the teachers are in the age group of 32 to 37 years old, that is, teaching activities in daily life are mostly conducted by young teachers. A small percentage of teachers between 44 and 50 years old - or older - works in higher education, corroborating with the last census of higher education: "38 years is the most frequent age of teachers working in public and private institutions" (INEP, 2019, p. 10).

Graph 1 — Teachers — age

Between 20 and 25
Between 26 and 31
Between 32 and 37
Between 38 and 43
Between 44 and 50
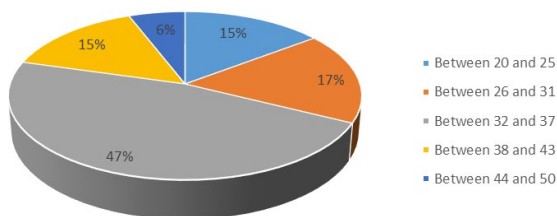
Source: Data from PIBIC 2018/2019

Sexual identity is one of the new facets of theoretical problematization in the last 10 years, according to Anjos (2000), Ferreira (2018), Colling (2018), and several other authors. This discursive category crosses different studies, including cultural studies of biological/naturalistic bias and those which interpret gender studies as historical and social constructs produced on biological, sociological, and anthropological characteristics, associating with practices involving the feminine, the masculine, and sexuality (FERREIRA, 2018).

The theoretical point of view shows an effort to debate and, overall, abandon the conservatism in arguments of the past, which, "[...] as a rule, works so that all people have a single gender identity, determined by sex, which should be pure and considered as normal and natural" (COLLING, 2018, p. 32). As an example, if a straight man has feminine traits, he will often suffer prejudice.

With this interpretative verve of the context of sexual identity, respondents were asked how they saw themselves represented (Graph 2). Analyses showed that 50% of the interviewees declared themselves cis women and 44% declared themselves cis men. Questions regarding the term "cis" were answered during the research. Regarding sexual orientation, only 3% of the respondents declared themselves bisexual and 3% could not inform or did not answer. None of the interviewees identified themselves as pansexual or transsexual even though the questionnaire included both alternatives.

Graph 2 — Teachers — gender identity

Cis men
Cis women
Bissexual
Could not inform
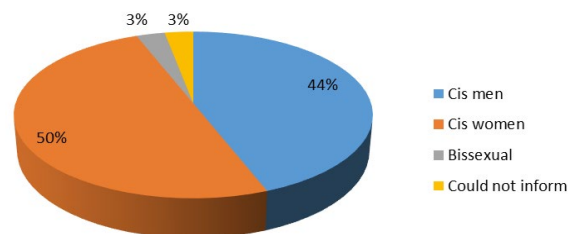
Source: Data from PIBIC 2018/2019

Data indicate the presence of sexual diversity, though binary traditionalism - man/woman - proved to be the majority in teaching. The little diversity in the contemporary audience of students, teachers, and the

entire school community threatens the educational institution itself. According to César (2009, p. 48):

> Students and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual teachers make up the contemporary diversity of the school institution; however, for this institution that was born disciplinary and regulatory, differences, or everything that is outside the norm, especially the sexual norm, are unbearable for infringing the limits of the known.

The disproportionality indicated by César (2009) shows that conservatism stigmatizes sexuality and its complexity. Therefore, understanding that sexuality involves cultural, social, historical, and political aspects, with biological and psychological dimensions, is essential. Despite being in all institutional and social spheres, sexuality is targeted by prejudices and judgments, for everything that escapes the norms socially pre-established as standard still finds resistance.

Regarding their origin (Graph 3), 52% of the teachers who work in one of the three institutions included are from the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Among all research participants, only four teachers were born and live in the city where they work. Other participants seem to perform pendulum migration every day, from their city of origin to Pau dos Ferros. These data differ from the last demographic census of 2010 conducted by IBGE, which show that "In Brazil, 87.1% of workers worked in the same municipality where they lived. Those who worked in another municipality were 11.8% of the employed population" (IBGE, 2010).

Graph 3 — Teachers — birthplace
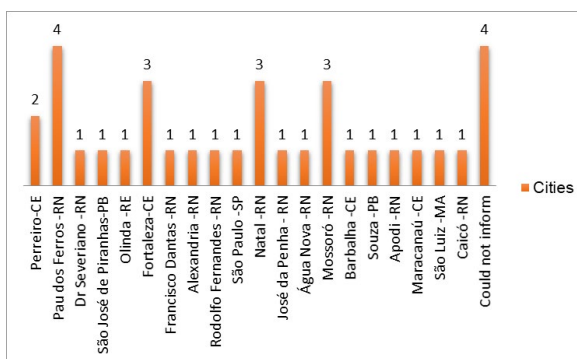
Source: Data from PIBIC 2018/2019

About 50% of the research public declared themselves married, 44% single, and the other 6% had other definitions, such as living together, which includes them in the group of married people for being common-law partners. Moreover, 62% of married individuals earn above five minimum wages, 9% earn three to five minimum wages, and 29% earn one to three minimum wages. Finally, the participants' length of teaching activity was not characterized or questioned.

Data were collected on age, sexual identity, place of birth, marital status, and income since this information affect current social practices. According to Souza and Gouveia (2011), understanding teachers' characteristics indicates that

> [...] they are not constituted by educational policy, but interfere in it, either by the interventions that the policy maker can or cannot do, considering who the teachers are, by the securing of rights by these professionals, or by a more direct relationship since teachers are the ones who, in the end, guarantee (or not) that any educational policy effectively reaches classrooms and other educational spaces. (SOUZA; GOUVEIA, 2011, p. 2)

The role of these individuals in society makes their teaching activity essential in the teaching-learning process. Teachers are those who effectively validate public education policies, requiring greater physical and mental effort, which is natural in the work environment but greatly increased in personal interactions and teacher relationships.

From this frequent and intense increase of efforts, teachers start developing behaviors that could result in disorders from the dynamics of work relationships, which cause and/or worsen psychosomatic disorders.

Teaching: a sea of calm waters?

Considering the profile of this study's participants, the main causes of these disorders in postmodern society must be analyzed on their nature, especially if related to ideals of happiness and well-being, materialized in the satisfaction of desires and pleasures.

This materialization often comes from socially propagated codes of demonstrations of success and restraints on individual freedoms, contained in social norms or in the attributions of the world of work. This process is synthesized by Sarques (2018, p. 33): "life in society restricts the individual's search for the satisfaction of his desires. This is the center of all problems involving malaise in civilization."

The main outcome is that happiness is a subjective and therefore individual feeling and that states of happiness are found in the momentary absence of displeasure and in daily actions, including talking with someone close, going on a trip, acquiring a material good, having a chance encounter, among others. In the end, even death could be a state of happiness if one seeks to escape from suffering – psychic or physical – and from the displeasure of life in society.

Santos (2019) considers states of happiness as an instant interval, showing that "happiness is not a lasting state, but rather happens in the interstices between the realization of a desire and the formulation of another [...]" (Santos, 2019, p. 3).

Considering the balance of these relationships – individual ones, such as happiness and well-being, and collective ones, such as freedom and social relations –, the first two questions addressed happiness and freedom, seeking to discover the participants' understanding of these phenomena and how they scale their feelings from their perception of others rather than simply knowing if they were happy.

Respondents were therefore asked about the rich material available in digital and social media that portray moments in which an individual shows that he is well, with tranquility, peace, economic power, and a harmonic life, among other aspects.

All answers stated that the happiness shown by people on social networks differs from reality and that, in the digital world, people are invariably conditioned to show behaviors and results acceptable to the social web even if they do not necessarily reflect reality, as seen in statements 18 and 19:

No. Social networks suggest a constant environment of happiness and a reason in what humanity knows or wants to know/live as ideal (a world without problems and full of satisfactions, pleasure, and joy). This (virtual) space suggests a peaceful world that differs from reality, explained in the work Love, Poetry, Wisdom of the French Edgar Morin. This romantic world leads individuals (men and women) to an illusion that differs from the real world and from the ideals of happiness. The contemporary human being lives an illusion. (Respondent 18)

I cannot tell. I believe not. The way I see it, there is a desire to show an image of happiness. But we should consider that most people make clippings of happy moments to expose on social networks. This, however, does not mean that they are necessarily happy. After all, there is a construction on the states of happiness of this contemporary man that we are given to show daily. (Respondent 19)

The statements indicate that one needs a constructed/induced behavior to be socially accepted, therefore taking advantage of temporary records in which the illusion of a perfect experience is illustrated and shared.

Participants were also sure to state that social network profiles portray a happiness that may not really exist. These statements corroborate with Arruda (2018), who discusses social isolation mediated by social networks and their created forms of relationship:

This identity can be dressed in various clothes and be built using various strategies. It can be made with photos, text, aspects of the daily routine, loose thoughts, references to family or friends, activities in which you were involved, excerpts from books, music, or images from movies. And in this process of identity-building, political ideas can cross apolitical ideas, activist actions crossing non-activists. (ARRUDA, 2018, p. 136)

This identity personalization addressed by Arruda (2018) allows understanding that, in the virtual world, people create fictitious and moldable identities of realities and feelings that often do not correspond to their actual state but are only a simulacrum. Regarding such identities in the context of stigmatization, Goffman (2008) states that:

[...] there could be a discrepancy between an individual's virtual and real identity. When known or manifested, this discrepancy spoils your social identity; it has the effect of driving the individual away from society and from himself in such a way that he turns out to be a discredited person before a non-receptive world. (GOFFMAN, 2008, p. 28)

Goffman's (2008) approach of the duality of one's personality as a discrepancy of identity emphasizes the answers of interviewees 3 and 10, which reinforce this: *"No. We are not, but we do not want anyone to know, because showing that you are sad does not get you many likes. We have this need to be accepted"* (Respondent 3); *"No! There is a sick obligation to be happy"* (Respondent 10).

This leads us to believe that the virtual world requires being happy constantly, conditioning happiness to a virtual demonstration of a state of mind that is often not effectively felt, but only published.

Moreover, interviewees were also asked on their ideals of freedom and well-being, what their perceptions of happiness and freedom were, and if they observed them in daily life and in their mental health.

Many respondents considered themselves happy but relied on different parameters, including material goods, work, and themselves, and several stated not having the desired freedom to do what they really like: *"I observe that happiness is linked to material goods. I do not agree with it, but that is what I observe"* (Respondent 2); *"I do not seek happiness and freedom in other people, I try to find them in myself"* (Respondent 5); *"I feel very free in many aspects of my life, but I am very attached to social conceptions towards the body, as an example, which can sometimes interfere with my concept of happiness"* (Respondent 6); *"I am happy, but have been increasingly valuing work, social standards, etc., I think this fact can seriously compromise my mental health and my happiness"* (Respondent 14); *"When we understand that we are responsible for our life it is simpler to be happy"* (Respondent 25).

[...] happiness, I understand it as a transitory state in which it is only possible to know and feel if,

and only if, immersed in daily life [...]. About freedom I think it is an existential state to be conquered daily. It has to do with choices, jobs, persistence, political and ethical attitude, above all. (Respondent 18)

A consumerist premise affected the understanding of happiness, materialized in the accumulation of goods, corroborating with Santos (2019, p. 6): "The explosion of consumer goods, and together of the forms and experiences of consumption, put happiness on the shelf by dressing it as a consumable object." Participants had the same stance regarding freedom since, although they consider themselves free, they contradict each other by placing social standards as impositions and limiters of certain behaviors.

Many of these standard behaviors are imposed by rulers, representatives of the political power given to them by citizens, with normative acts that condition human freedom, dictating what is allowed, prohibited, or mandatory. This is a clear threat to freedom, according to the American economist Milton Friedman (1984, p. 5):

Freedom is a rare and delicate plant. Our minds tell us, and history confirms, that the great threat to freedom is the concentration of power. Government is necessary to preserve our freedom, it is an instrument through which we can exercise our freedom; yet by concentrating power in political hands, it is also a threat to freedom.

Politically established social standards of being, acting, dressing, behaving, talking, among others, thus become what society has defined as acceptable and to be replicated. Internal desires are unfulfilled and restrained by institutionalized norms of power, often resulting in social malaise, as seen in Sarques's (2018) and Bauman's (2011) statements about security and freedom from the Frontiers of Thought program.

Finally, answers to this question corroborate with Camalionte and Boccalandro's view of the common sense about happiness (2017, p. 212): "[...] there is no 'formula for happiness', showing us that what common sense proposes as the cause of happiness

(purchasing power, age, gender, external events) may not be enough in most people's lives."

Answers necessarily approach scientific knowledge not just because of the interviewees' academic formation but because they had difficulty in recognizing the true essence of the term, thus sharing the understanding of the common world.

In answers to the second question, another extremely relevant point was the clear psychological overload – mental stress – of some teachers: "*I consider myself free and happy, however, with a daily life very agitated by tasks and commitments that affect health*" (Respondent 26); "*I am in constant war with my mental health*" (Respondent 31).

These answers indicate mental damage considering the discontent and discouragement with self-desires, which differ from the ideals of happiness spread out regardless of place and time:

> However, the happiness desired by human beings is that which is realized from almost perfect characteristics, perpetuated by ideals of happiness, regardless of the place and time in which the subject is. Everything that escapes from this ideal (including melancholy, sadness, or when the individual feels crested and introspective) is seen from a pathological and negative perspective. (ROCHA; SANTOS, 2018, p. 469-470)

Moreover, psychological disorders are perceived from the limitations imposed on freedom, conditioning individual choices and overlapping one's existential state to what others consider as good, correct, attractive, and beautiful. As a result, those who run away from this pattern are considered as abnormal, which can affect their happiness and freedom (GOFFMAN, 2008).

The third question addressed the meaning of existence and what the interviewees can do or are currently doing to meet their needs and achieve their life goals. Respondents 14, 18, 20, and 27 indicated working and self-effort as means to realize their dreams: "*To contribute, with my work, to the individual and collective development of my students, and to offer living conditions to my family*" (Respondent 14); "*Planning, work, persistence,*

desire, decision-making, confrontations, not fearing error, and constant correction of the verified errors" (Respondent 18); "*Work*" (Respondent 20); "[...] *I try to strive without going beyond the limits of how much psychological pressure I can be exposed to, or handle*" (Respondent 27). Excess seems to be a characteristic point of modern society, which prescribes that the dream and hopes of a good life are achieved by those who work, even if under exhaustive conditions, with low salaries, excessive working hours, and the inevitable boredom (SOCHACZEWSKI, 2012).

Concerned only with the classroom and scientific production, teachers stop growing good friendships, spending more time with their families, and taking care of their physical and mental health. However, with these questions, some teachers showed desire to detach themselves from the goals, work, and rules by meditating and doing physical and leisure activities.

In the last question, we sought to better understand the circumstances that most cause teachers pain or psychic suffering, and which places offer support to solve such problems. Answers were diverse and associated with loss of relatives, anxiety, overwork, traumatic memories, bullying, and excessive self-demands. Some teachers claimed to be in good mental health, whereas others had suffered psychological damage in the past but were now recovered.

To overcome traumas, teachers sought support from relatives, friends, and/or religion, but never from specialized support. These data are worrisome since the lack of specialized treatment can aggravate psychic damage, evolving to depression, anxiety, excessive stress, anguish, or even to other syndromes and mental disorders, increasingly compromising teachers' mental health. "*The issue of me overcharging myself in many ways. I never sought help*" (Respondent 6). "[...] *what causes me most suffering is the feeling of not taking care of my responsibilities. I seek support in the people I love, but it is not enough and I need more support, especially professional*" (Respondent 8). "*Lack of humanity. Lack of freedom, lack of time to do what gives me pleasure. I seek support in family and in sports*" (Respondent 14). "[...] *I believe*

that what causes me the most psychic suffering is overworking and little time for rest. Currently, I have not felt the need to seek help" (Respondent 19). "*The anxiety of having to complete tasks and deadlines at all times, but, I have not sought much help, I only sometimes resort to the spiritual field*" (Respondent 26).

The fear of seeking specialized help seems to be cultural since, according to Alabora, DeMarco and Silva (2017, p. 4): "Everyone, unfortunately, has experienced moments of sadness, anguish, conflicts, despair, anxiety, among other internal conflicts, and many consider that seeking help from a psychologist or psychiatrist is a sign of weakness."

The teachers' anxieties indicate external denominators, including excessive demands at work and malaise, which create feelings of mistrust and self-disability that, when aggravated, make it more difficult to conduct life projects.

Psychological suffering is clearly perceived in interviewees who are unhappy with his or her working conditions, salary, income, family, and people in their surroundings, who are stuck with several social standards that restrict their freedom, who are under stressful conditions of coexistence, and who feel unable to deal with their emotions. This requires specialized and appropriate treatment.

This could only be concluded from the concept of mental health advocated by PAHO (2016), which considers mental health as a state of physical and mental well-being in which individuals develop their own abilities, can deal with the normal tensions of life, and live perfectly with good and unpleasant emotions.

The research results show that the absence of this state of well-being is, in fact, the existence of a picture of psychic suffering.

Final considerations

According to the teachers' answers, the research found that, in the educational institutions analyzed, among so many happy faces willing to study, work, teach, have leisure moments, and participate effectively in religions, some are searching for mental health.

This study sought to identify the existence of damages and impact factors on the health of teaching professionals. Results suggest that about 60% of the target audience, that is, 20 of the 34 respondents, show signs of psychic suffering. This results from excessive and inadequate workloads, constant stress, strong social pressure, lack of leisure moments, among other cases found in the answers.

The research showed that paying attention and listening to someone else, showing closeness and respect, is essential and a fundamental desire of teachers: to be heard and perceived. This type of research is significant for often serving as an opportunity for respondents to express their anxieties, pains, and projects.

Many of the interviewees avoided specialized follow-up simply because they were afraid of social judgment and instead sought self-treatment, which is both contraindicated and dangerous since it could aggravate health and disturb routines.

This study thus works as a warning to the other follow-ups of the academic community and to its leaders, who must better understand about the reality of teachers and adopt interventional measures for greater care of their mental health.

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