EMPOWERING MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AMONG VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING-TEACHING STUDENTS IN GERMANY

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Abstract

Over the past few years, a constant deterioration in the mental health of students in Germany can be observed. Among other things, this can be traced back to increasing pressure and exhaustion caused by reform processes in the higher education system itself, as well as an increase in external stressors, such as social and political crises. In addition, potential discrimination based on socio-structural characteristics (e.g., gender, sexuality) within the university can have an individual impact on (mental) health equity. This is particularly important for students on vocational teacher training courses, as they are a very heterogeneous academic group that differs significantly from average cohorts in such aspects as age, care responsibilities, occupational experience and academic background. Also, with regard to their future field of employment, prospective teachers have a distinct requirement for high mental health literacy (MHL). As teachers, they are exposed to an environment in which the stress and burnout rate of employees is significantly higher than average (especially considering the drastic increase in the teacher shortage in Germany). Yet the potential can also be emphasized, as teachers can serve as multipliers for the transfer of MHL through their dual role as both learners and teachers. In order to promote the individual MHL of this specific target group, it is crucial to create a study environment that takes their mental health into account and also supports the explicit development of competence. Continuous consideration of the students' perspective is essential for both. Therefore, in context of a research project, students are actively involved in a participatory research design in the curricular and structural design of health-promoting framework conditions and formats within the university. The first approach is based on the curricular integration of MHL-promoting content or the participatory development of advice, information and support formats. Moreover, a setting approach is used to interlink the behavioral and relational levels, so that the awareness of lecturers can also be raised and course-specific individualization or flexibilization achieved. In the long term, the needs and results are to be consolidated and represented in student health management within the university structures and to anchor the curricular offerings on the topic of MHL in the form of a micro degree in the university curriculum.

Keywords: Health promotion, mental health literacy, participation, teacher training, vocational education and training.

1. Introduction: The invisible problem

The shortage of teachers is a growing problem in Germany. As the Stifterverband's "Lehrkräftetrichter" (2021) illustrates, out of 50,000 first-year students, including cross- and side entry students, just 35,000 make their way into the classroom. This leads to an expected deficit of approximately 49,000 qualified teachers by 2035, with a large amount of these falling to vocational schools. At the same time, the development of (mental) health among teachers is also alarming. One in three teachers feels overworked. Significant proportions of employees in the education sector are subjectively suffering from chronic stress and mental health problems, and a comparison of occupational groups also demonstrates that employees in the education sector experience particularly high levels of stress (Blossfeld et al., 2014). This negative trend can already be observed during their academic career, as the overall mental health of students has steadily deteriorated in recent years. In addition to all this, it can be observed that around 9 out of 10 people (86.1 %) show low MHL (Kolpatzik, Fretian, Bollweg, & Okan, 2024). Despite the high and increasing prevalence of chronic diseases (especially among young people) and the existing data on general health literacy, this approach tends to remain neglected (ibid). As such, MHL focuses on knowledge and attitudes towards mental health, help-seeking behavior and experiences with mental illness and its treatment (Jorm, 2012). Given this, it can be concluded that the promotion of mental health among teachers must

begin as early as the academic phase in order to accompany students through the vulnerable period of their studies and reduce the likelihood of dropping out. By addressing MHL in the setting of the university, it is also possible to strive for a combination of behavioral and situational change.

2. The rise in student mental health challenges

The increase in mental health issues among students in Germany has become a growing concern for educators, policymakers, and healthcare providers (TK, 2008). In recent years, the number of students reporting symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders has increased significantly, reflecting a broader trend observed across many[*] countries worldwide. Several factors contribute to this rise, including social, global and economic challenges (p.e. COVID-19, the global climate crisis or the Middle East conflict), and the impact of digital technology and social media (Banek, Gillen, Michele, & Steuber, 2025). Beyond this, however, in particular the academic pressure remains one of the most significant sources of stress for students. This is particularly evident in a comparison with non-students of the same age, as the risk of developing mental health problems among university members almost doubled between 2013 and 2021, whereas it only increased by 2 percent among the overall population (TK, 2023). This can be caused by various reasons, such as exam stress, additional burdens due to care work and part-time jobs, financial worries or excessive workloads. In addition to the increasing stress and risk of illness, the likelihood of poor subjective well-being, sleep disorders, nutritional deficiencies, lack of exercise or substance abuse also increases (Dadaczynski, Helmchen, Sendatzki, & Rathmann, 2023). Besides this, other correlations exist between the stress that students experience during their academic careers and other factors such as their social background, low social support, a chronic illness, gender, migration background or financial worries (Sendaatzki & Rathmann, 2022; TK, 2023) It is therefore crucial to provide students with the knowledge and skills to manage their mental health and take care of it independently. Likewise, the university must provide structures that enable this. One promising approach is to empower MHL which is defined as knowledge and beliefs regarding mental disorders that promote their recognition, management or prevention. This includes knowledge of prevention of mental disorders, ability to recognise when a disorder is developing, an understanding of help-seeking options and available treatments, effective self-help strategies for milder problems and first aid skills to support others who are developing a mental disorder or experiencing a mental health crisis. (Cairns, Rosetto 2019; Jorm, 2012) Higher MHL is associated with better scores in the areas of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes towards mental health, as well as a lower tendency towards stigmatizing attitudes towards people with mental illness. Furthermore, people with higher MHL have a better state of well-being and are also more willing to seek professional help in the case of personal mental health problems (Kolpatzik, Fretian, Bollweg, & Okan, 2024). Looking at the group of students studying to become vocational teachers, it becomes clear at this point how these discrimination factors are also reflected in academic structures. In the following, the extent to which vocational education teaching (VET) students, as a vulnerable group, suffer from mental stress in particular and can benefit from the promotion of their own mental health skills will be emphasized. Secondly, the relevance of the topic for the target group will be examined from a prospective angle, focusing on their function as teachers. Here, not only the relevance of internal mental health is central, but also the potential to strengthen the mental health literacy of students at an early stage.

3. Mental health as a blind spot in vocational teacher training

Considering the ongoing precarious situation of teachers, which is linked to the shortage of teaching staff and a general decline in health (reflected, for example, in the prevalence of burnout and increasing mental conditions such as depression, the urgency of strengthening the MHL of student teachers is increasing (Banek, Gillen, Michele, & Steuber, 2025). VET students and early career teachers in Germany report high levels of psychological stress that stem from excessive workload, inadequate support, and challenges in maintaining work-life balance (Kärner, Bottling, Friederichs, & Sembill, 2021). This can among other things be traced back to the fact that VET students are an extremely heterogeneous group, whose needs and requirements must be considered differently from those of 'the average student'. A more differentiated look at this group reveals that many students are 'newcomers to education' who have not yet had any contact with university structures as part of their family background. Furthermore, around 40 % of VET students already have occupational experience at the beginning of their studies (Gillen, Michele, Schäfers, Steuber, & Wende, 2021). On the one hand, this leads to an above-average starting age of 22 and the possibility of being able to return to their occupational qualifications at any time, which increases the

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[*] In this context, it is important to mention that around 500 individual diagnoses are summarized under the term 'mental disorders', of which anxiety disorders, depression, psychosomatic disorders and addictions are the most prevalent (Blossfeld et al., 2014).

likelihood of dropping out (fallback option) (ibid.). They are therefore a group whose educational biographies are subject to the consequences of various health-related dimensions of inequality. The need for a high level of MHL is also increasingly apparent from the perspective of their later job requirements. In everyday school life, for example, teachers spend long periods of time interacting with students who are in a vulnerable phase of their lives in terms of mental health, as mental illness is likely to manifest at this age (Kirchhoff, Fretian, & Bruland, 2023). At the same time, almost eight out of ten trainees in Germany have only a low level of mental health literacy (Kolpatzik, Fretian, Bollweg, & Okan, 2024). Addressing and strengthening mental health and corresponding resources among young people not only fosters individual well-being but also opens up opportunities for teachers to actively engage in the planning and implementation of preventive and supportive measures within the school context. These approaches can be embedded within the framework of school health promotion and prevention, highlighting the role of teachers as key agents in fostering a health-promoting school environment. In this context, health literacy is increasingly recognized – by the WHO and the National Action Plan on Health Literacy and Schools as an essential educational objective, encompassing not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the development of competencies and attitudes that enable individuals to promote, maintain and improve health within everyday educational settings (Kirchhoff, Fretian, & Bruland, 2023).

4. Projekt "Mindful Campus (MinCa) – Strengthening Mental Health Literacy Among Students"

Based on this clearly outlined and emerging issue, universities are faced with a clear obligation: to take the mental health of students and its promotion seriously and to take responsibility as an institution of health promotion. This requires approaches that anchor target group-specific needs at all levels of the higher education system in a structured and coordinated manner.

How this can be operationalized through a participatory research approach is discussed in the following section by the Mindful Campus (MinCa) research project. The principal aim of the project is to develop a participatory concept and strategy to establish a Student Health Management (SHM) to promote health literacy among students across curricular and structural university settings. The initial focus of the project is on VET-Students due to the multiple stresses that have already been highlighted. The project is based on a salutogenetic understanding of health, whereby health is understood as a continuum that is detached from the normative concept of 'being healthy' and includes physical, psychological and social factors as conditions of origin and development factors for the individual state of health (Antonovsky 1991). In this context, the promotion of health literacy has a particular significance, as it allows people to develop constructive coping mechanisms to manage stress and regulate their own health. The promotion of health literacy includes an individual's cognitive, social and motivational abilities and skills that help him or her to gain access to health-related information and to understand and use it in such a way that it contributes to disease management, disease prevention and/or health promotion (Sørensen et al., 2012).

4.1. Principle 1: Setting approach

In addition to strengthening students' individual mental health, it is also necessary for universities as educational institutions to become aware of their responsibility for developing a health-promoting environment, to recognize the above-mentioned effects of crises and disadvantages within their organizational structures and to take them into account by designing their university culture in a responsive manner (TK, 2020). The setting approach focuses on promoting health literacy in people's actual living environment and therefore addresses both the framework conditions and personal behavior. Given this background, the university is understood as a socio-spatial system in which health-promoting measures and processes can be implemented in both working and learning contexts. Also, the amendment of the Prevention Act in 2015 adopts this approach and emphasizes the relevance of specific measures and structural development in the university context. The setting approach is considered one of the core strategies of health promotion and networking can be its most important development tool' at universities (TK, 2020). MinCa adapts this concept by operating on two different levels. The structural level is addressed by establishing a SHM to contribute to the long-term improvement of health-promoting university structures. This includes the formation of a steering group for the coordination, consolidation and further development of (mental) health literacy within the university. One of the main priorities is cross-institutional interlinking and the prevention of duplicate structures and programs. In addition, MinCa also addresses the specific promotion of individual MHL at the behavioral level. This is achieved by first distinguishing between the need for prevention and intervention programmes and the theoretical qualification, focusing initially on the target group of VET students. The knowledge transfer and aims to promote both the students' own MHL and the transferability to the VET- school context. This involves the participatory development of seminar content, learning opportunities and exchange formats on topics related to MHL.

4.2. Principle 2: Partizipation

Participation is understood as the individual or collective involvement of individuals in health-related decisions for their lives in the narrower sense (Wihofszky, Hartung, & Narimani, 2020). As part of project planning, a participatory approach enables an increase in effectiveness and acceptance and requires more flexibility in all project phases. To achieve this, MinCa follows Wrigth's (2020) stages of participation in health promotion over the entire duration. The aim is to involve target groups as much as possible in the stages of 'participation' and to formalize their involvement in decision-making as co-researchers (Wright, 2020). In the case of MinCa, this is evident right from the planning (e.g. through exploratory workshops to identify topics and coordinate the project framework) and the permanent institutionalization of a steering group with student participation. During the data collection and evaluation phase, students research assistants are also involved, for example by collaboratively revising the recruitment and advertising materials developing and testing semi-structured interview guidelines. Using this method, a permanent accompanying evaluation is taking place, in which ten interviews have been conducted with students so far. An expansion to include PhD students and study program coordinators is currently being planned. In direct linkage with the curricular level, students are also being included as co-researchers in a pilot course on participatory knowledge transfer with a focus on mental health in higher education structures since the summer semester of 2025. In addition, professional trainings on Mental Health First Aid are organized which target all hierarchical levels of the university involving students as well as lecturers, professors and administrative staff in order to sensitize for the subject.

5. Conclusion

The persistent shortage of qualified teachers in Germany constitutes not only a structural challenge for the education system but also a significant concern from a public health and social development perspective (Blossfeld et al., 2014). Addressing this multifaceted issue requires more than policy interventions aimed solely at increasing recruitment figures; it necessitates a comprehensive strategy that targets the underlying determinants of teacher attrition – among which mental health plays a pivotal role. Emerging evidence indicates that student teachers, particularly those in VET programs, are exposed to substantial psychological stressors during their academic training. These stressors, if unaddressed, contribute to elevated dropout rates and early career exits, thereby exacerbating the existing personnel crisis in education. Consequently, the promotion of MHL must be recognized as a critical component in the development of sustainable teacher education pathways (Kirchhoff, Fretian, & Bruland, 2023). By equipping prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies necessary to manage their own mental health and support others, MHL not only promotes individual resilience, but also helps teachers to address additional key challenges in dealing with their students and to ensure a healthy school. Through its dual emphasis on a setting-based approach and participatory research design, MinCa situates the promotion of MHL within both structural and curricular dimensions of the university environment. This integrated approach ensures that health-promoting measures are co-developed with students, thus enhancing their relevance, responsiveness, and sustainability. By institutionalizing MHL as part of student health management and embedding it within the academic curriculum, MinCa contributes to the creation of a university culture that actively supports the well-being of future educators. Ultimately, promoting MHL in VET students is not just a secondary aspect of teacher education, but a central cross-sectional task with the potential to mitigate systemic challenges such as teacher shortages. It underscores the notion that the psychological well-being of student teachers is a prerequisite for their professional effectiveness, long-term engagement, and the overall quality of education. Therefore, MinCa provides a model for how higher education institutions can take a proactive and collaborative role in promoting health equity and occupational well-being in the higher education sector through participatory research approaches.

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