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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## MAINSTREAMING MENTAL HEALTH IN TEACHER EDUCATION: POLICY PERSPECTIVES AND PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS

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#### Abstract

The rising incidence of anxiety, depression, academic stress, and socio-emotional problems among students has led to an increased focus on mental health as an essential area of concern for education today. Teacher education institutions form an essential foundation for providing pre-service teachers with essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable them to support students' mental health and well-being alongside their academic performance. This review article critically explores existing research literature (2015-2025), international and national policy initiatives, and pedagogical innovations related to integrating mental health education into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. The review draws on interdisciplinary research literature from education, psychology, and public policy and critically synthesizes some of the emerging themes and concerns related to teachers' preparedness, curriculum reform, mental health literacy, and systemic challenges. The review also proposes a multi-tiered conceptual framework for mainstreaming mental health education into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs through curriculum embedding, experiential learning, institutional support systems, and research-informed evaluation. The review concludes that integrating mental health education into pre-service and in-service teacher education programs is not an add-on or an ancillary area of concern for education today. Rather, it is an essential foundation for achieving holistic, inclusive, and equitable education.

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#### Introduction:-

The global education landscape has witnessed significant transformations in recent years, with digital growth, socio-political shifts, and unprecedented disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside this, growing literature points towards a significant increase in student anxiety, depression, academic burnout, and emotional problems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Today, schools are not just academic centres but centres that promote holistic development, including socio-emotional development. The teachers' role is at the centre of this ecosystem. However, research has consistently demonstrated that teachers feel poorly equipped to deal with student mental health concerns (Reinke et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2022). While mental health has been increasingly emphasized in

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recent years, mental health competencies in teacher training remain fragmented. Teacher training is one area that holds immense potential as a point of intervention. Training teachers with basic mental health literacy, trauma-informed pedagogy, and socio-emotional pedagogy has been found to significantly impact student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). The purpose of this review-based paper is to explore how mental health can be effectively mainstreamed within teacher training through contemporary research and policy-based literature.

**The paper is based on three questions:**

1. What does current research reveal about the relationship between teacher education and student mental health outcomes?
2. How do policy frameworks conceptualize mental health integration in teacher preparation?
3. What pedagogical innovations can effectively embed mental health competencies within teacher education programs?

**Literature Review:-**

**Conceptualizing Mental Health in Education:-**

Mental health in educational settings goes beyond the lack of mental disorders. It includes emotional regulation, strength, social connectedness, and psychological safety (Keyes, 2014). Current models of mental health in schools follow a dual-factor approach. This approach includes both minimizing psychological problems and enhancing positive well-being (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). New research has shown that there is a shift from deficit-based models of mental health to strength-based models of mental health (Taylor et al., 2017). Social and emotional learning, trauma-informed practice, and school-wide well-being approaches have gained traction worldwide (CASEL, 2020). However, while schools have begun to embrace these models, teacher education has not caught up.

**Teacher Preparedness and Mental Health Literacy:-**

Mental health literacy has been described as "the knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that help individuals recognize, manage, and prevent them" (Jorm, 2012). Literature suggests that teachers experience low confidence in dealing with student mental health problems (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010; Kidger et al., 2016). In addition, Reinke et al. (2018) proposed that teachers experience anxiety in dealing with behavioral and emotional problems in the classroom because they are not adequately trained in pre-service education. On the other hand, a review by Graham et al. (2022) revealed that teachers' confidence was enhanced after receiving mental health training. However, the integration of mental health in teacher education remains fragmented, with many programs only offering it as a standalone session in the broader context of educational psychology.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Key Literature (2015–2025) on Mental Health Integration in Education**

| Author(s)            | Focus Area                      | Key Findings   | Implications for Teacher Education       |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Reinke et al. (2018) | Teacher preparedness            | Teachers report low confidence in managing student mental health | Need structured pre-service training     |
| Taylor et al. (2017) | SEL meta-analysis               | SEL improves academic & behavioural outcomes                     | Embed SEL modules in curriculum          |
| Loades et al. (2020) | Remote learning & mental health | Increased anxiety during school closures                         | Digital mental health literacy essential |
| Graham et al. (2022) | Teacher mental health training  | Training improves recognition & referral                         | Mandatory mental health literacy courses |
| WHO (2022)           | Global adolescent mental health | Rising prevalence of distress                                    | Policy-level integration needed          |

The literature indicates that, although there is an increasing recognition of mental health in educational systems, teacher preparation is the missing link. Closing this gap will require a concerted effort in terms of policy mandates, curriculum, and teacher education.

**The integration of mental health competencies will result in:**

- Improvement in classroom climates
- Engagement of students
- Reduction of teacher burnout
- Strengthening inclusive practices
- Improvement in long-term learner resilience

It should be noted that mainstreaming should not be viewed as an extension of teacher roles and responsibilities into mental health issues, but as providing teachers with the fundamental literacy and referral competencies.

**Policy Trends Supporting Mental Health Integration:-**

Globally, bodies such as UNESCO (2021) and WHO (2022) have highlighted the significance of integrating mental health into the education system. This has been reflected in policy developments that prioritize holistic education, an inclusive classroom, and social-emotional skills. However, there are various gaps in the implementation of these policies, and it is crucial to address these gaps in terms of bridging policy and curriculum development in teacher education.

**Theoretical Foundations:-**

The integration of mental health in teacher education is supported by various theories, which are all related in such a way that they justify the integration of mental health into teacher education.

**Social-Emotional Learning Theory:-**

The theory of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) supports the development of basic competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). In teacher education, SEL goes beyond the development of these competencies in students, as it also includes teachers' social-emotional development. Teachers in teacher education programs are encouraged to work on their own emotional development, as it has been observed that teachers' social-emotional development has a significant impact on classroom outcomes, as it influences teachers' resilience, which in turn influences student outcomes.

**Trauma-Informed Educational Theory:-**

Trauma-informed education models acknowledge that adverse childhood experiences, stress, and socio-economic insecurity can significantly impact children's cognitive, emotional, and learning behaviors (Brunzell et al., 2016). Teacher education programs that are trauma-informed help teachers understand that students' behavioral problems should be viewed with compassion rather than punishment. Such theories encourage teachers to provide a safe, predictable, and nurturing classroom environment that is characterized by trust, cooperation, empowerment, and sensitivity towards diversity. By doing this, trauma-informed theory enhances the mental health responsiveness of the education system.

**Ecological Systems Theory:-**

The ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, views child development as being affected by five interacting systems, namely, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to this theory, teachers play a crucial role as key individuals in the microsystem of the child, which directly influences the child's daily experiences of safety, belonging, and feeling effective. Teacher education programs that are grounded in the ecological systems theory encourage teachers to become aware of the various factors that can affect child development, such as family, community, policy, and cultural factors. This enables teachers to work in collaboration with parents, mental health experts, and the community in promoting the holistic development of the child.

**Reflective Practice Theory:-**

The concept of the reflective practitioner, as proposed by Donald Schön, emphasizes the importance of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in the development of professionals (Schön, 1983). Reflective practice is particularly crucial in the development of mental health-responsive pedagogy, as teachers need to constantly reflect on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses. The inclusion of various forms of reflective practice, such as journaling, case studies, and group work, in teacher education programs enables teachers to become emotionally intelligent and aware of their adaptive expertise.

**Policy Perspectives on Mainstreaming Mental Health in Teacher Education:-  
Global Policy Developments (2015–2025):-**

In the last ten years, there has been a rise in the global conversation around the role of mental health in ensuring the quality and equity of education. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), one in every seven adolescents worldwide suffers from a mental health disorder, thus underscoring the need for preventive education interventions.

**Global frameworks on the role of mental health in ensuring quality and equity in education:**

- Whole-school approaches to mental health
- School-based early intervention approaches for mental health
- Teacher capacity-building in terms of mental health literacy
- Incorporating socio-emotional learning in the curriculum

However, it has been observed that policy frameworks are focused on reforming schools rather than teacher education reform. Teacher education institutions are not being sufficiently addressed in national policy frameworks (OECD, 2019).

**National Reform Movements and Holistic Education:-**

In many countries, educational policy is increasingly supporting holistic, inclusive, and multidisciplinary approaches.

**These approaches are focused on:**

- Learner well-being
- Competency-based education
- Teacher professional development
- Digital and blended learning innovation

However, there is a lack of consistency in the implementation of such policy directives in the form of structured mental health modules in teacher training programs. Research has indicated that policy coherence is critical in ensuring policy sustainability. This refers to the alignment of accreditation requirements, curriculum, and teacher competencies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

**Pedagogical Innovations in Integrating Mental Health:-  
Curriculum Embedding Instead of Add-On Modules:-**

The main challenge in the implementation of mental health in teacher training is that it is often relegated to add-on modules in psychology courses. However, research has indicated that there is a need to embed mental health in pedagogical training (Jennings et al., 2017).

**For example:**

- Classroom management courses can be designed to incorporate emotional regulation skills.
- Assessment courses can be designed with stress-sensitive evaluation approaches in mind.
- Modules on inclusive education can be designed with trauma-informed approaches.

**Experiential and Reflective Training:-**

**Experiential learning significantly enhances teacher preparedness (Kolb, 2015). Recommended strategies include:**

- Case-based discussions of real classroom mental health scenarios
- Role-play simulations of parent–teacher conversations
- Reflective journaling on emotional labor in teaching
- Field visits to school counselling units

Reflective practice fosters emotional awareness and reduces teacher burnout (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

**Trauma-Informed and SEL-Based Pedagogy:-**

Trauma-informed education approaches centre around creating a safe and predictable environment and building trust (Brunzell et al., 2016).

**Teacher education programs may include:**

- Knowledge of adverse childhood experiences
- De-escalation techniques
- Exercises for building classroom community
- Compassion-based communication

In addition, SEL programs have been shown to improve both teachers' and students' well-being (Taylor et al., 2017).

**Digital Innovation and Blended Mental Health Literacy:-**

The shift to digital education also calls for addressing online well-being. The online learning environment has been linked with increased academic stress and social isolation (Loades et al., 2020).

**Teacher education programs may include:**

- Digital mental health resources
- Artificial intelligence-based early warning systems
- Online well-being check-ins
- Hybrid workshops for digital burnout prevention

**Challenges in Mainstreaming Mental Health:-**

However, despite the policy acknowledgement of the significance of mental health in education, there remain many structural, cultural, and institutional impediments to the full integration of mental health into teacher education programs.

**Curriculum Overload:-**

Teacher education programs have complex curricula that focus on subject matter knowledge, pedagogical theory, practice requirements, and regulatory compliance. The need to comply with accreditation standards and to ensure that students pass certification assessments limits the scope to add new courses on mental health. Mental health is thus considered an optional add-on to the main professional competencies. Without addressing this issue of curriculum overload and complexity, attempts to integrate mental health into teacher education programs may remain superficial.

**Faculty Capacity Gaps:-**

One of the key impediments to the full integration of mental health into teacher education programs is the lack of preparedness of teacher educators. Teacher educators in many teacher preparation programs were trained within traditional pedagogical paradigms that did not emphasize psychological well-being and trauma-informed approaches. Teacher educators may thus lack formal qualifications and training in this area. Without addressing this issue of faculty capacity gaps through professional development in this area, attempts to integrate mental health into teacher education programs may remain superficial.

**Stigma and Cultural Barriers:-**

The stigma associated with mental health issues remains a critical sociocultural challenge, especially in situations where mental well-being is poorly understood, downplayed, and equated with weakness. The deeply rooted cultural narratives may also influence educator and student reluctance to engage in discussions about mental vulnerability. In certain societies, mental health issues are viewed and understood in exclusively moral, spiritual, and punitive contexts rather than psychological ones. This may result in resistance to change in teacher education institutions and impede the normalization of discussions around mental well-being in teacher education institutions.

**Resource Constraints:-**

The limitations in teacher education institutions also offer challenges in the process of mainstreaming mental health in teacher preparation. Some teacher education institutions may lack well-equipped counselling facilities, mental health partnerships in schools, and practice opportunities for teacher students in mental health practice. In addition, budgetary constraints in teacher education institutions may result in prioritizing infrastructure and technology upgrades rather than investing in mental well-being services. In disadvantaged contexts, large student-faculty ratios

and lack of access to counsellors may impede opportunities for teacher students to engage in practice and mentoring in mental health practice.

**Lack of Assessment Mechanisms:-**

Although cognitive abilities are stringently tested through tests and teaching demonstrations, socio-emotional competencies are rarely included in the formal testing and assessment criteria for teacher certification. What is not tested is often not considered important. Unless socio-emotional competencies are included in the standards and criteria for teacher certification and professional standards, the importance of mental health education may be considered peripheral rather than core in teacher identity.

**Implications for Teacher Education, Policy, and Practice:-**

**Implications for Teacher Education Institutions:-**

There is a need to go beyond the theoretical commitment to mental health issues and develop a systemic approach to teacher education.

**The curriculum should:**

- Mandate mental health literacy as a fundamental teacher competency
- Emphasize the integration of SEL and TIP in all subjects
- Ensure supervised practicum exposure in relation to student mental health issues
- Emphasize the importance of reflective practice

Institutions should also develop faculty development programs to ensure teacher educators' knowledge and understanding of mental health-responsive pedagogical practices.

**Implications for Educational Policy:-**

**At a policy level, there is a need to ensure that there is alignment between:**

- Accreditation standards
- Teacher competency standards
- Institutional accountability mechanisms

Mental health integration should be incorporated into qualification standards and quality assurance mechanisms for teachers. In addition, without such policy coherence, such reforms may be considered rhetorical in nature (OECD, 2019).

**Implications for Research:-**

**There is a need for further research on:**

- The long-term effects of mental health integration into teacher education
- Comparative studies on mental health integration into teacher education
- Pre-service teachers' perceptions of preparedness in terms of mental health integration
- The relationship between digital pedagogy and mental health

There is a need to conduct impact evaluation studies on the effectiveness of mental health integration into teacher education.

**Conclusion:-**

With the rising levels of psychological distress among learners, mental health has moved from the periphery to the centre of the education reform agenda. Teachers are placed at the forefront of interaction with learners but feel ill-prepared to deal with the emotional and behavioral issues that arise in the classroom. The review has clearly shown that although global and national policies have highlighted the need for holistic and inclusive education, the integration of mental health into teacher preparation is still in disarray. For mental health to be mainstreamed into teacher preparation, it is imperative that it is embedded into the curriculum, training experiences, institutional systems, and research-based assessment.

A multi-tiered framework can provide a concrete framework for its eventual and sustained integration. Teacher preparation needs to transcend its traditional content-based focus to become more reflective and well-being-based approaches that recognize the role of emotional intelligence as the foundation of good pedagogy. Teacher preparation can become the driver of transformative change in the creation of mentally healthy educators and learning environments. The integration of mental health into teacher preparation is no longer optional; it is imperative.

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