

# 1 Mainstreaming Mental Health in Teacher Education: Policy 2 Perspectives and Pedagogical Innovations

3

## 4 **Abstract**

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

24 **Keywords:** Teacher Education, Mental Health Integration, Educational Policy,  
25 Pedagogical Innovation, Holistic Education, Teacher Preparedness

## 26 **Introduction**

27 The global education landscape has witnessed significant transformations in recent  
28 years, with digital growth, socio-political shifts, and unprecedented disruptions such  
29 as the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside this, growing literature points towards a  
30 significant increase in student anxiety, depression, academic burnout, and emotional  
31 problems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Today, schools are not just  
32 academic centres but centres that promote holistic development, including socio-  
33 emotional development.

34 The teachers' role is at the centre of this ecosystem. However, research has  
35 consistently demonstrated that teachers feel poorly equipped to deal with student  
36 mental health concerns (Reinke et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2022). While  
37 mentalhealth has been increasingly emphasized in recent years, mental health  
38 competencies in teacher training remain fragmented.

39 Teacher training is one area that holds immense potential as a point of intervention.  
40 Training teachers with basic mental health literacy, trauma-informed pedagogy, and  
41 socio-emotional pedagogy has been found to significantly impact student outcomes  
42 (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

43 The purpose of this review-based paper is to explore how mental health can be  
44 effectively mainstreamed within teacher training through contemporary research and  
45 policy-based literature. The paper is based on three questions:

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

## 52 **Literature Review**

### 53 **Conceptualizing Mental Health in Education**

54 Mental health in educational settings goes beyond the lack of mental disorders. It  
55 includes emotional regulation, strength, social connectedness, and psychological  
56 safety (Keyes, 2014). Current models of mental health in schools follow a dual-factor  
57 approach. This approach includes both minimizing psychological problems and  
58 enhancing positive well-being (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008).

59 New research has shown that there is a shift from deficit-based models of mental  
60 health to strength-based models of mental health (Taylor et al., 2017). Social and  
61 emotional learning, trauma-informed practice, and school-wide well-being  
62 approaches have gained traction worldwide (CASEL, 2020). However, while schools  
63 have begun to embrace these models, teacher education has not caught up.

### 64 **Teacher Preparedness and Mental Health Literacy**

65 Mental health literacy has been described as "the knowledge and beliefs about  
66 mental disorders that help individuals recognize, manage, and prevent them" (Jorm,  
67 2012). Literature suggests that teachers experience low confidence in dealing with  
68 student mental health problems (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010; Kidger et al.,  
69 2016).

70 In addition, Reinke et al. (2018) proposed that teachers experience anxiety in dealing  
71 with behavioral and emotional problems in the classroom because they are not  
72 adequately trained in pre-service education. On the other hand, a review by Graham  
73 et al. (2022) revealed that teachers' confidence was enhanced after receiving mental  
74 health training.

75 However, the integration of mental health in teacher education remains fragmented,  
 76 with many programs only offering it as a standalone session in the broader context of  
 77 educational psychology.

78 **Table 1**

79 **Summary of Key Literature (2015–2025) on Mental Health Integration in**  
 80 **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 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

81  
 82 The literature indicates that, although there is an increasing recognition of mental  
 83 health in educational systems, teacher preparation is the missing link. Closing this  
 84 gap will require a concerted effort in terms of policy mandates, curriculum, and  
 85 teacher education.

86  
 87 The integration of mental health competencies will result in:

- 88 • Improvement in classroom climates
- 89 • Engagement of students
- 90 • Reduction of teacher burnout
- 91 • Strengthening inclusive practices
- 92 • Improvement in long-term learner resilience

93  
 94 It should be noted that mainstreaming should not be viewed as an extension of  
 95 teacher roles and responsibilities into mental health issues, but as providing teachers  
 96 with the fundamental literacy and referral competencies.

97  
 98 **Policy Trends Supporting Mental Health Integration**

99

100 Globally, bodies such as UNESCO (2021) and WHO (2022) have highlighted the  
101 significance of integrating mental health into the education system. This has been  
102 reflected in policy developments that prioritize holistic education, an inclusive  
103 classroom, and social-emotional skills.

104 However, there are various gaps in the implementation of these policies, and it is  
105 crucial to address these gaps in terms of bridging policy and curriculum development  
106 in teacher education.

## 107 **Theoretical Foundations**

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

### 111 **1. Social-Emotional Learning Theory**

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

### 121 **2. Trauma-Informed Educational Theory**

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

### 131 **3. Ecological Systems Theory**

132 The ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, views child  
133 development as being affected by five interacting systems, namely, microsystem,  
134 mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner,  
135 1979). According to this theory, teachers play a crucial role as key individuals in  
136 the microsystem of the child, which directly influences the child's daily  
137 experiences of safety, belonging, and feeling effective. Teacher education

138 programs that are grounded in the ecological systems theory encourage teachers  
139 to become aware of the various factors that can affect child development, such  
140 as family, community, policy, and cultural factors. This enables teachers to work  
141 in collaboration with parents, mental health experts, and the community in  
142 promoting the holistic development of the child

#### 143 **4. Reflective Practice Theory**

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

### 152 **Policy Perspectives on Mainstreaming Mental Health in Teacher** 153 **Education**

#### 154 **1. Global Policy Developments (2015–2025)**

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

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

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

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

#### 169 **2. National Reform Movements and Holistic Education**

170 In many countries, educational policy is increasingly supporting holistic, inclusive,  
171 and multidisciplinary approaches. These approaches are focused on:

- 172 • Learner well-being
- 173 • Competency-based education
- 174 • Teacher professional development
- 175 • Digital and blended learning innovation

176

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

## 182 **Pedagogical Innovations in Integrating Mental Health**

### 183 **1. Curriculum Embedding Instead of Add-On Modules**

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

188 For example:

- 189 • Classroom management courses can be designed to incorporate emotional  
190 regulation skills.
- 191 • Assessment courses can be designed with stress-sensitive evaluation  
192 approaches in mind.
- 193 • Modules on inclusive education can be designed with trauma-informed  
194 approaches.

### 195 **2. Experiential and Reflective Training**

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

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

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

### 205 **3. Trauma-Informed and SEL-Based Pedagogy**

206 Trauma-informed education approaches centre around creating a safe and  
207 predictable environment and building trust (Brunzell et al., 2016). Teacher education  
208 programs may include:

- 209 • Knowledge of adverse childhood experiences
- 210 • De-escalation techniques
- 211 • Exercises for building classroom community
- 212 • Compassion-based communication

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

#### 215 **4. Digital Innovation and Blended Mental Health Literacy**

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

219 Teacher education programs may include:

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

#### 224 **Challenges in Mainstreaming Mental Health**

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

##### 228 **1. Curriculum Overload**

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

##### 237 **2. Faculty Capacity Gaps**

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

##### 246 **3. Stigma and Cultural Barriers**

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

254 institutions and impede the normalization of discussions around mental well-being in  
255 teacher education institutions.

#### 256 **4. Resource Constraints**

257 The limitations in teacher education institutions also offer challenges in the process  
258 of mainstreaming mental health in teacher preparation. Some teacher education  
259 institutions may lack well-equipped counselling facilities, mental health partnerships  
260 in schools, and practice opportunities for teacher students in mental health practice.  
261 In addition, budgetary constraints in teacher education institutions may result in  
262 prioritizing infrastructure and technology upgrades rather than investing in mental  
263 well-being services. In disadvantaged contexts, large student-faculty ratios and lack  
264 of access to counsellors may impede opportunities for teacher students to engage in  
265 practice and mentoring in mental health practice.

#### 266 **5. Lack of Assessment Mechanisms**

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

### 274 **Implications for Teacher Education, Policy, and Practice**

#### 275 **1. Implications for Teacher Education Institutions**

276 There is a need to go beyond the theoretical commitment to mental health issues  
277 and develop a systemic approach to teacher education. The curriculum should:

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

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

#### 286 **2. Implications for Educational Policy**

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

- 288 • Accreditation standards
- 289 • Teacher competency standards
- 290 • Institutional accountability mechanisms

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

### 294 **3. Implications for Research**

295 There is a need for further research on:

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

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

### 303 **Conclusion**

304 With the rising levels of psychological distress among learners, mental health has  
305 moved from the periphery to the centre of the education reform agenda. Teachers  
306 are placed at the forefront of interaction with learners but feel ill-prepared to deal with  
307 the emotional and behavioral issues that arise in the classroom. The review has  
308 clearly shown that although global and national policies have highlighted the need for  
309 holistic and inclusive education, the integration of mental health into teacher  
310 preparation is still in disarray.

311 For mental health to be mainstreamed into teacher preparation, it is imperative that it  
312 is embedded into the curriculum, training experiences, institutional systems, and  
313 research-based assessment. A multi-tiered framework can provide a concrete  
314 framework for its eventual and sustained integration. Teacher preparation needs to  
315 transcend its traditional content-based focus to become more reflective and well-  
316 being-based approaches that recognize the role of emotional intelligence as the  
317 foundation of good pedagogy.

318 Teacher preparation can become the driver of transformative change in the creation  
319 of mentally healthy educators and learning environments. The integration of mental  
320 health into teacher preparation is no longer optional; it is imperative.

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