

# The challenges of health education in public schools

**RESUMO |** Objetivo: O objetivo do artigo é discutir os desafios enfrentados pela escola pública para a educação em saúde. Método: foi utilizado o procedimento metodológico da revisão integrativa de literatura, em busca por artigos publicados entre os anos de 2015 a 2022, com os seguintes descritores de pesquisa: saúde; escola pública; educação em saúde, direito à saúde; educação básica. As bases de dados consultadas foram: Biblioteca Virtual de Saúde, Scielo e Capes. Resultados: a educação em saúde na escola pública, comumente, é vista como a conscientização sobre o autocuidado para evitar doenças, porém, de modo mais amplo, pode ser trabalhada para estimular a reflexão crítica e garantir um direito social. Conclusão: os desafios do ensino de saúde em escola pública é efetivar abordagens que possam elucidar questões que contribuam com a formação cidadã, como o acesso a bens e serviços por meio das políticas públicas. Estima-se, assim, que é necessária maior parceria dos setores educacionais e de saúde para que possam contemplar programas que capacitem os profissionais da educação para a realização de uma abordagem total sobre a saúde como direito fundamental que perpassa a ausência de doenças para contemplar diversos aspectos que garantem a qualidade de vida.

**Descritores:** Direito Fundamental; qualidade de vida; educação básica.

**ABSTRACT |** Objective: Objective of health education by public school for public education. Method: the review used the methodological procedure of the integrative literature, in search of articles published between the years 2015 to 2022, with the following research descriptions: health; public school; health education, right to health; basic education. The databases consulted were: Virtual Health Library, Scielo and Capes. Results: health education in public schools is commonly seen as an awareness of the self to avoid diseases, however, in a broader way, it can be worked on to stimulate critical reflection and guarantee a social right. Conclusion: the challenges of public health education are approaches that can elucidate issues that contribute to the formation of the city, such as access to goods and services through public policies. It is estimated, therefore, that a greater partnership between studies and health is necessary so that it can contemplate programs that train education professionals to carry out a total approach to health as a fundamental right that permeates the diversity of absence of diseases, aspects that guarantee the quality of life.

**Keywords:** Fundamental Right; quality of life; basic education.

**RESUMEN |** Objetivo: Objetivo de la educación en salud por parte de la escuela pública para la educación pública. Método: la revisión utilizó el procedimiento metodológico de la literatura integradora, en busca de artículos publicados entre los años 2015 a 2022, con las siguientes descripciones de investigación: salud; escuela pública; educación para la salud, derecho a la salud; Educación básica. Las bases de datos consultadas fueron: Biblioteca Virtual en Salud, Scielo y Capes. Resultados: la educación en salud en las escuelas públicas es comúnmente vista como una conciencia de sí mismo para evitar enfermedades, sin embargo, de manera más amplia, puede ser trabajada para estimular la reflexión crítica y garantizar un derecho social. Conclusión: los desafíos de la educación en salud pública son enfoques que pueden dilucidar cuestiones que contribuyen a la formación de la ciudad, como el acceso a bienes y servicios a través de políticas públicas. Estima-se assim, que é necessária maior parceria dos estudos e de saúde para que possa contemplar os programas que capacitam profissionais da educação para a realização de uma abordagem total a saúde como direito fundamental que perpassa a diversidade de ausência de doenças aspectos que garantem a calidad de vida.

**Palabras claves:** Derecho Fundamental; calidad de vida; Educación básica.

## Leandro Pereira Lopes

Graduated in Nursing, Centro Universitário Estácio da Amazônia, Boa Vista-RR, Brazil.  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1023-3919

## Daiane Ruth Alves da Silva

Specialist in Institutional Psychopedagogy, Faculty of Education São Luís, Jaboticabal – SP, Brazil. Graduated in Psychology, Federal University of Roraima, Boa Vista-RR, Brazil  
ORCID: 0000-0001-9082-836X

## Giselle Alfena Schmidt

Specialist in Public Health and Environment Management from Universidade Candido Mendes, Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil. Graduated in Business Administration, Centro Universitário Estácio de Ribeirão Preto, Ribeirão Preto – SP, Brazil.  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7281-6963

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## INTRODUCTION

The school is a favorable space for the promotion of actions and dialogue on various aspects that are part of human formation and acting in society. There are several realities that are found in the school space, contributing to the expansion of debates, but also giving certain vulnerability and risks of diseases. Therefore, the actions of the Unified Health System should include the school public through in-

tersectoral collaboration, as a way of promoting access to fundamental health rights, as well as critical reflection and training for the full exercise of citizenship.<sup>[1]</sup>

The choice of theme is justified by the emerging need to insert educational actions that address health in all its dimensions, understanding that being healthy is different from not being sick. This conception presented to the students enables them to develop critical thinking and awareness about access to social rights, which contributes to the minimization of social inequalities, in the construction of a fairer society with equal opportunities.

Both education and health are part of the inherent approaches to human development.<sup>[2]</sup> In the meantime, it is up to the school to provide favorable development conditions for the child, keeping them healthy and without negative impacts due to the school experience, but better, in all aspects.<sup>[3]</sup> Health education in elementary schools must be in line with global guidelines, covering all aspects that are part of the development of children and/or young people, aligned with the perspective that health represents the complete well-being of the human being in the physical, psychological and social dimensions.<sup>[4]</sup> Given the above, the question is: what are the challenges faced for health education in public schools?

The concept of health and illness are polysemic, whose meanings are linked to various social, cultural and economic factors and vary historically according to the prevailing social situation. In this sense, the World Health Organization<sup>[4]</sup> defined the concept of health in 1946 as a state of well-being, physical, social and mental, and not merely the absence of disease. The concept of health defined by the WHO can be unattainable and utopian, because complete well-being is difficult to achieve.<sup>[1]</sup>

Historically, the school space de-

bates health issues, whether through the debate of hygiene practices, assistance or biologists, as well as the development of practices and activities



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that involve the prevention of various diseases. Through law 5,692/1971, the discussion on health in the school environment was formalized, by introdu-

cing the subject Health Program, but the theme has always been encouraged by the Ministry of Education, through its regulatory documents for education.<sup>[5]</sup>

The scope of discourses involving health in the school environment is the transmission of technical, biological and hegemonic knowledge in popular knowledge, with the support of various materials and pedagogical methods, that make the school environment a powerful tool for health education, creating a fertile space for research, questioning and dissemination of technical and hygienist knowledge.

The lack of teaching knowledge to approach the subject in the correct way, presenting the concept of health in a broad way, dependent on social issues, cultural and biological factors is one of the challenges of health education, as the theme is commonly approached considering the concept of health with an individual, fragmented and only biological logic.<sup>[1]</sup>

In addition, it is necessary for those responsible for the health and education sectors to articulate more effectively with society, to reflect and debate issues involving education and health, with an emphasis on the relationship between the two areas. This integration will be able to build an integrated and critical conception of health education, to guide collective actions that match the social reality.<sup>[6]</sup>

The general objective of the article is to discuss the challenges faced by public schools for health education. The specific objectives are: to present the concept of health and health education, understand the importance of health education in basic education and reflect on the challenges for the effectiveness of health education in public schools.

#### METHOD

The research was carried out from the Integrative Literature Review, in

consultation with scientific articles published between the years 2016 to 2022, in the digital repositories of Capes, Virtual Health Library - BVS and Scielo with the following research descriptors: health; public school; health education, right to health; basic education. The classification criteria for the articles were: complete articles, in Portuguese, English or Spanish that addressed the challenges for teaching health in public schools. Incomplete articles, outside the temporal delimitation and which did not correspond to the object of the study, were excluded. The data were interpreted qualitatively and the results presented in a descriptive way.

**RESULT**

Initially, 32 results were found that corresponded to the delimitations of the study, among the three researched repositories. After reading the abstracts and applying the classification criteria, 14 articles remained. After reading the full text, 6 were selected for analysis and discussion of the results. The other articles were used as a contribution to the theoretical framework of the research. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the selected articles:

In order to analyze the perception of nurse-educators about health education for public schools, Silva et al <sup>[7]</sup> interviewed 11 nursing students revealing that in the undergraduate students' perception, the biggest challenges for the promotion of health education in public schools were the discussion of concepts beyond disease prevention, considering the entire context of the community in which the school is inserted through the analysis of social, political, cultural, behavioral and economic factors.

Knowing that health promotion is not just the absence of disease, it is necessary to verify socioeconomic and also subjective aspects that are related to the subject's quality of life. <sup>[7,8]</sup> With a transversal function to establish a clo-

**Table 1 – Characteristics of the articles selected for analysis**

Author/Year	Objective	Method	Result
Castanha et al (2017)	Identify the concepts of health and health education of elementary school teachers and their insertion in the subjects taught.	Case study	Health appears to be strongly related to physical activity, food and well-being. Teachers rarely relate health to their subjects, and when they do, it is informal and unplanned.
Silva et al (2018)	To analyze how students of a Licentiate in Nursing understand the concept of health promotion, their perception of the nurse's work in basic education and of health promotion practices for training as a nurse-educator.	Qualitative/descriptive/exploratory	The concepts of promoting critical reflection for health stood out; dialogic education and the interdisciplinarity of actions.
Jacob et al (2019)	Identify and describe the scientific evidence on educational actions carried out by the Health at School Program.	Systematic review	Health education is identified as an important strategy to achieve positive indicators, with regard to health promotion and disease prevention among schoolchildren.
Côrrea et al (2020)	To report a Health Education experience carried out with teachers and other professionals from a public school for early childhood education in the city of Coari, in the interior of the state of Amazonas, in the northern region of Brazil.	Experience Report	There was a low level of knowledge among teachers and other professionals regarding the prevention of parasitosis, providing an educational experience in which there was space to learn, teach, listen, communicate and interact.
Pereira et al (2021)	Understand the scope of the actions resulting from the Health at School Program in municipal public schools in Belém-PA, from the perspective of teachers.	Case study	There is a need for teacher self-recognition as a health educator, in order to make them intrinsic health promoters in their pedagogical practices.
Richter et al (2022)	Understand the factors that affect the implementation of school-based mental health	Systematic review	The lack of communication and engagement of health and education professionals were listed as challenges for the implementation of the program.

Source: Castanha et al (2017), Silva et al (2018), Jacob et al (2019), Côrrea et al (2020), Pereira et al (2021) and Richter et al (2022).

ser relationship between health professionals and users, health education can help to prevent diseases that directly impact the population's quality of life. <sup>[8]</sup>

This is what the research by Côrrea et al <sup>[8]</sup> reveals, when reflecting on a health education program carried out in a public school, interviewing 32 teachers,

2 pedagogues, 2 cooks and 6 general service assistants. The action carried out aimed at disseminating information regarding the prevention of intestinal parasites, through the contextualization of the prior knowledge brought by the children and the daily habits, as well as the characteristics of the community in which the school is inserted. <sup>[8]</sup> In view

of this, the result showed great motivation on the part of school professionals and students, who, when acquiring information, modified their routine, with the insertion of healthier habits that directly impacted on the quality of life.<sup>[8]</sup>

The biggest challenge found by the authors was the lack of training of education professionals, thus, training is necessary so that they can work broadly and critically on the concept and actions in health.<sup>[8]</sup> The actions developed at school impact on the subject's health, as education and health are two important aspects of human development.<sup>[7,9]</sup> Health and education professionals must promote actions that address the particular aspects of the region in which they work so that health education is meaningful and can meet the specific demands of the affected population, however, necessary knowledge about the main needs of the region or of the people who will be covered by the action is not always available.<sup>[8,9,10]</sup>

An example is the implementation of programs that contribute to the promotion of mental health of public school students, helping to prevent mental illness, as well as better quality of life and better school performance.<sup>[9]</sup> However, there is a need to engage the professionals involved, both in health and education, so that they can clarify preventive measures for mental illness and how to identify related risk factors.<sup>[9]</sup>

Given the risks associated with mental health, programs that address this aspect in schools can result in an opportunity for a reflective approach that can contribute to improving mental health in general.<sup>[9]</sup> The challenges for the implementation of programs that promote education for mental health in the school environment was to adapt the interventions to the specific reality of the school and the students, involving education and health professionals so that they can carry out effective actions with full training and knowledge,

guaranteeing the benefits of the program.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is noted that one of the great challenges mentioned in the literature on health education in public schools is related to the engagement and preparation of professionals, as also related to the research by Castanha et al.<sup>[10]</sup>, who conducted interviews with 13 elementary school teachers to verify how topics related to health education were addressed. The professors do not relate the themes of health education to their disciplines, carrying out decontextualized approaches that emphasize only physical care, disease prevention and healthy eating.<sup>[10,11]</sup>

The research by Castanha et al.<sup>[10]</sup> revealed that 38.4% of the surveyed teachers did not carry out any health education actions and those who did maintained their focus on healthy eating, physical exercise, personal hygiene and disease prevention. Teachers who did not carry out activities that included health education stated that the topic could not be addressed in their class, as it was not part of the subject's contents.<sup>[10]</sup>

However, the National Curricular Common Base<sup>[12]</sup> emphasizes the transversality in educational processes, in the themes: health, science and technology, environment, economy, multiculturalism, citizenship and civics, so that all disciplines should approach such themes in a transversal way. Educators and health professionals should emphasize health promotion over disease prevention, as prevention is temporary, health promotion "is the continuous set of measures aimed at eliminating the disease, as it seeks to reach the different causes that lead to illness and not only to prevent it from occurring".<sup>[10]</sup>

Due to the precariousness of health education in public schools, limited to subjects related to natural sciences, limited to disease prevention, it is necessary to understand that one of the main challenges is teacher training to under-

take transversal actions contemplating totalitarian aspects of health education in collaborative action with health professionals inserted in the school environment.<sup>[10]</sup>

Investigating the Health at School Program and the effectiveness of health education actions in basic education, Jacob et al.<sup>[11]</sup> carried out a systematic survey of the literature emphasizing the importance of the Saúde na Escola Program for the promotion of health education. They revealed that health professionals, in the context of their academic training, must have experience at school to facilitate students' learning and act in actions that promote health in a critical perspective, in the role of social rights.<sup>[11]</sup>

The Health at School Program, despite being created in 2007, is still not fully implemented, as it faces challenges in encouraging intersectoral actions between health professionals and education professionals. The actions carried out by health professionals at school are still limited to identifying the health condition of students, reducing educational practices to food and hygiene care, which negatively impacts the conception of health, limiting it to specific actions.<sup>[11]</sup>

Health promotion at school, if carried out in order to explore the full potential and scope of the concept, is an instrument for accessing rights,

awareness of health strategies and promoter of quality of life and greater autonomy in students and in the community in which the school is inserted. However, it is still necessary that intersectoral practices for the effectiveness of health education in public schools be carried out, through professional training that guarantees the effectiveness of the activities carried out.<sup>[11]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The article reviewed the concept of health, understanding that health cor-



responds to a full state of well-being that encompasses all aspects of the human being, that is, physical, mental and social. Health education is characterized by the promotion of actions at school that allow access to the student's fundamental right to health and the promotion of a better quality of life through the awareness of students and the entire school community.

Programs that promote health education at school, contemplating the regional, social, economic and cultural aspects of the region, can act as an important resource for raising awareness and disseminating information to the population, helping to prevent diseases and promote health, with continuous care and well-being actions that generate a better quality of life.

With the research, it can be un-

derstood that the main challenges for health education in public schools are presented in professional training and renewal of practices that can make health education a daily part of the school environment, appearing transversally to the subjects studied, contextualized to everyday school life. Therefore, it is necessary to work in an intersectoral way between health and education professionals, so that the actions carried out in the school environment contemplate the entire broad and complex dimension of the concept of health.

It was noted that despite the recommendations of the Programa Saúde na Escola and the documents that guide education, such as the National Common Curricular Base, some education professionals are still reluctant to address the issue of health in their classes,

as they claim that the contents do not correspond to the subject they teach, however, health issues must be inserted transversally in all basic education subjects.

As for health professionals who are in a school environment, the challenge is also in the innovation of practices, as it was found that most of the actions of these professionals are in the detection of the health condition of students and in the prevention of diseases, and not in health promotion.

Therefore, there should be further clarification on the concept of health and the importance of stimulating the critical development of students to understand their social rights and acquire habits that give them a better quality of life. 🐦

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