

## ‘Rede Pode Falar’: Attentive listening and meaning-making in adolescents’ relationships with school

*‘Rede Pode Falar’: escuta acolhedora e produção de sentidos de adolescentes na relação com a escola*

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**ABSTRACT** This qualitative study, grounded in Social Constructionism, analyzed the discursive practices of adolescents and young people to understand psychosocial factors associated with psychological distress in school contexts. The analysis drew on support encounters conducted through the Weni Chats platform—the human support module of the Canal Pode Falar digital platform—between October and December 2024, using the descriptors ‘Bullying or Cyberbullying’, ‘Concerns about the future’, and ‘Academic Procrastination’. A total of 79 users were identified, of whom six were selected for in-depth analysis based on Thematic Analysis, in accordance with ethical guidelines. Three categories emerged: ‘Violence, meritocracy, and stigma’. ‘Precarization of social bonds’, and ‘Disruption of the meaning-making processes’. The results suggest that social ties are central to psychosocial and subjective development and to coping with psychological distress. In school contexts marked by symbolic violence and a lack of attentive listening, distress tends to be intensified and silenced. Nevertheless, experiences of care and support suggest that the school has potential as a space for care and mental health promotion. The study reinforces the urgency of intersectoral policies that recognize distress as a social phenomenon and promote institutional practices that listen to adolescents as rights holders, including in the construction of their narratives, using their own language, and fostering mental health, recognition, and well-being. The experience of one of the projects linked to the Rede Pode Falar highlights both the limitations and the strengths of schools in this process.

**KEYWORD** Schools. Mental health. Adolescents. Personal narratives.

**RESUMO** A pesquisa, de abordagem qualitativa e fundamentada no Construcionismo Social, analisou práticas discursivas dos adolescentes e jovens para compreender fatores psicossociais relacionados com o sofrimento psíquico em contextos escolares. Examinaram-se os atendimentos realizados via plataforma Weni Chats, módulo de atendimento humano do Canal Pode Falar, entre outubro e dezembro de 2024, a partir dos descritores ‘Bullying ou Cyberbullying’, ‘Preocupações com o futuro’ e ‘Procrastinação nos estudos’. Selecionaram-se 79 usuários, dos quais 6 foram submetidos ao estudo com base na Análise Temática, respeitando as diretrizes éticas. Emergiram três categorias: ‘Violência, meritocracismo e estigma’, ‘Precarização do laço social’ e ‘Fragilização no circuito de significação’. Os resultados apontam que os vínculos sociais são centrais na constituição subjetiva e no manejo do sofrimento. Nesses contextos marcados pela violência simbólica e ausência de escuta, o sofrimento tende a ser intensificado e silenciado. A pesquisa reforça a urgência de políticas intersetoriais que reconheçam o sofrimento como fenômeno social e proponham práticas institucionais que escutem adolescentes como sujeitos de direito, inclusive na construção de suas narrativas, com sua linguagem, promovendo saúde mental, reconhecimento e bem-viver. A experiência em um dos projetos vinculados à Rede Pode Falar evidenciou tanto os limites quanto as potencialidades da escola nesse processo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Escolas. Saúde mental. Adolescente. Narrativas pessoais.

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## Introduction

This article reports on findings from an analysis of how adolescents and young adults aged 13 to 24 articulated their experiences when seeking psychosocial support through the Canal Póde Falar (the Speak Up digital support platform) between October and December 2024.

The Canal Póde Falar is a nationwide mental health support channel available through a virtual platform designed for adolescents and young people aged 13 to 24. Launched in 2021, the Canal Póde Falar is an initiative of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF Brazil), developed in partnership with the Apolônio Sales Foundation for Educational Development (FADURPE), which is affiliated with the Federal Rural University of Pernambuco (UFRPE). The initiative emerged in response to growing demands in the field of youth mental health, which were intensified by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initiative offers a welcoming space for attentive listening grounded in ethical principles and respect for the individuality of participants. It also provides support materials on topics such as anxiety, stress, self-esteem, and other issues related to psychological distress. The support is delivered by university students affiliated with the partner institutions, who undergo ongoing training and supervision processes, ensuring both the technical quality and the ethical integrity of the interventions.

Unlike traditional psychotherapeutic approaches, Póde Falar is based on the model of Brazil's national suicide prevention hotline, the Centro de Valorização da Vida (CVV), with an emphasis on active, empathetic listening as a means of alleviating emotional distress. The service is guided by strict ethical standards, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity in interactions, and it is delivered by trained teams under the supervision of specialists in adolescent and youth mental health. Welcoming support goes beyond merely listening to what the other person has to say; it involves understanding their suffering respectfully and

sensitively, creating space for sincere communication free from judgment or imposition, and characterized by a transdisciplinary, dialogical, and caring approach<sup>1</sup>.

In 2023, a consortium comprising 20 universities, three civil society organizations, and one municipal government joined forces with the original group responsible for the help channel and proposed transforming Póde Falar into a network committed to implementing five core components: (1) an online help channel; (2) advocacy for multisectoral public mental health policies for adolescents and young people; (3) studies, research, and knowledge production; (4) the promotion of network-based participation among adolescents and young people; and (5) professional training in mental health. Currently, the Network comprises 15 institutions, most of them public universities with representation across all five regions of the country. This collaborative arrangement builds on the initial efforts of UNICEF and its partners by consolidating the Network as a strategy to address psychological distress among adolescents and young people, while also affirming a listening-based approach that challenges models centered exclusively on adult perspectives.

Based on analyses of personal narratives shared by users of the Canal Póde Falar, studies by Santos and Ferreira<sup>2</sup> and Ferreira and Melo<sup>1</sup> identified key intersections between mental health and learning that inform everyday school life. The authors highlight the link between emotional well-being and academic performance, noting that when students do not feel supported, their concentration and motivation to learn are negatively affected. The school environment emerges as an ambiguous terrain, where both capacities for care and material and symbolic barriers to the creation of a genuinely supportive space coexist. Reducing violence in the school environment depends on institutional commitment to welcoming practices and attentive listening to students<sup>3</sup>. It entails a form of sensitive listening, free from imposition or rigidity, that

recognizes the school as a space of protection and care. Such listening requires a willingness to engage in dialogue—even in the face of disagreement—remaining open to exchange and to understanding others, regardless of differences in thought or feeling.

Against this backdrop, the consolidation of the Rede Pode Falar—a Brazilian initiative dedicated to attentive listening and adolescent mental health—has enabled expanded dialogue with schools through outreach, promotion, and mental health prevention initiatives targeting students and teachers.

From this perspective, the project 'Mental Health at School: Building Pedagogical Possibilities', developed by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), has fostered a meaningful exchange with the school community by addressing the topic in an open, constructive, and critical manner. The initiative reaffirms the importance of providing adolescents with spaces for qualified listening, whether through the Canal Pode Falar or through in-person activities carried out in public schools. The analysis points to the importance of mental health promotion strategies that treat adolescents and young people as subjects of rights and as protagonists of their own narratives, affirming their feelings and lived experiences across multiple contexts and recognizing the sociopolitical conditions underlying psychological suffering.

Students' accounts on the Canal Pode Falar reveal feelings of sadness, distress, fear, and anxiety, pointing to the need for more effective school engagement with mental health issues. Moreover, some statements suggest that the school environment itself may function as a risk factor for students' psychological distress, particularly in relation to demands, bullying, violence, pressure, and exhaustion—elements that recur throughout students' narratives<sup>4</sup>.

The initiatives carried out in schools, beyond promoting the Canal Pode Falar as a space for supportive listening, aim to bring discussions of psychological distress among adolescents and young people into everyday

school life. In doing so, they underscore the urgency of pedagogical strategies that prioritize active listening and the promotion of well-being. The interventions are structured around adolescents' own narratives rather than traditional lecture-based formats, seeking to strengthen a sense of belonging and shared responsibility while fostering a more inclusive, sensitive, and collaborative educational environment.

The support encounters were analyzed and categorized under the themes 'Bullying or Cyberbullying', 'Concerns about the Future', and 'Academic Procrastination', resulting in the selection of six cases for in-depth examination. This analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis and adhered to strict ethical guidelines regarding anonymity and data protection.

The three analytical categories that emerged were: 'Violence, Meritocracy, and Stigma'; 'Precariousness of Social Ties'; and 'Fragmentation of the Meaning-Making Circuit'. The results revealed the central role of social relationships in both the production of and responses to psychological distress, highlighting the school's potential—and its limitations—as a space of care.

The Pode Falar Project is presented as an institutional experience aimed at creating spaces for listening, care, and the construction of more compassionate narratives, breaking with medicalizing and productivist logics. The initiative highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary and intersectoral practices that bring together education, health, and social assistance, intending to promote mental health as a right inseparable from the right to education.

Finally, the text reinforces the urgency of institutional mechanisms that recognize adolescents as rights-bearing subjects, with their own voices and transformative potential. It advocates for the development of ethical and political practices of listening capable of opening institutional spaces for more inventive and less normative modes of subjectivation and care.

The mental health of adolescents and young people has been recognized as a global and national public health priority. At a particularly sensitive stage of development, they continue to experience the consequences of the psychological distress intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required social isolation and led to the suspension of school activities and other spaces for in-person socialization. These disruptions resulted in widespread experiences of grief over the loss of loved ones as well as heightened economic insecurity and anxiety about the future. In Brazil, the post-pandemic impacts on the mental health of adolescents and young people have been documented by multiple official sources.

According to a global report by the Global Mind Project<sup>5</sup>, Brazil ranks third worst in mental health among 64 countries, surpassed only by the United Kingdom and South Africa. Data from the Mortality Information System (SIM) identify suicide as the second leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15 to 19, and the fourth among young people aged 20 to 29<sup>6</sup>. An increase in suicide risk is observed throughout adolescence, followed by stabilization in adulthood. Marked gender differences are evident: among males, suicide rates rise progressively with age, whereas among females the risk is higher during adolescence, followed by stabilization and a decline as age advances. Gender differences are also reflected in cases of self-inflicted violence: in 2021, of the 114,159 cases recorded by the Notifiable Diseases Information System, 70.3% occurred among females. Gender differences in the dynamics of suicidal behaviors have been widely documented in the global literature. Across countries, women show a higher prevalence of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts, as well as mood and anxiety disorders, whereas men face a two- to fourfold higher risk of death by suicide.

According to data from the Psychosocial Care Network (RAPS), between 2013 and 2023, anxiety-related care among children and adolescents surpassed that among adults

for the first time in history<sup>7</sup>. Data from the Mental Health in Data (Saúde Mental em Dados) bulletin<sup>8</sup> show that, between 2014 and 2024, anxiety-related care increased by 1,575% among children and adolescents aged 10 to 14, and by 4,423% among those aged 15 to 19. The Pan American Health Organization<sup>9</sup> reports that mental disorders account for 16% of the global burden of disease among individuals aged 10 to 19. Before the pandemic, data from the 2019 National School Health Survey (PeNSE) showed that 27% of girls reported frequent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, compared with 8% of boys<sup>10</sup>. Data from the 2024 PeNSE survey, which has not yet been released, may reveal more severe impacts of the pandemic.

The Brazilian School Health Program (Programa Saúde na Escola – PSE) maintained strong engagement in the post-pandemic period: 24.9 million students were reached in 2023/2024, compared with 23.4 million in 2021/2022; 5,506 municipalities participated in the program during the 2023/2024 cycle, representing 99% of Brazilian cities; more than 460,000 activities related to mental health promotion and a culture of peace in schools were carried out in 2024; and BRL 90.3 million were invested in 2023/2024, contingent upon the implementation of cycle-related actions, including those focused on mental health<sup>11</sup>. The 2025/2026 cycle sets targets such as achieving 100% coverage of participating schools with records in the Primary Health Care Information System and designates mental health as a priority thematic area<sup>12</sup>.

Schools have increasingly been consolidated as strategic spaces for the promotion of mental health. By integrating health services—such as psychologists, social workers, and collective actions—Brazil's School Health Program (Programa Saúde na Escola – PSE) has expanded the psychosocial support network<sup>13</sup>. However, the data indicate a significant increase in demand for mental health services within the Psychosocial Care Network (Rede de Atenção Psicossocial – RAPS). The

implementation of the PSE faces challenges related to coordination and continuity of actions, as observed in regional assessments. Despite the investments made, persistent challenges remain, including shortages of human resources, high staff turnover, and inconsistent institutional support.

The post-pandemic period has laid bare a crisis in youth mental health in Brazil. While the expansion of the RAPS and the strengthening of the PSE represent important steps forward, they remain insufficient. It is necessary to broaden the reach of school-based actions, consolidate intersectoral coordination, and ensure adequate resources and continuous training for professionals, thereby securing sustainability and equity. A recent example of professional development aimed at practitioners working with adolescents—and designed to strengthen mental health promotion skills—is the Advanced Training Course in Mental Health and Psychosocial Care for Adolescents and Young People, offered through the UNA-SUS Network<sup>14</sup>, which has certified 41,000 professionals over a two-year period.

## Material and methods

This study draws on Social Constructionism, which conceptualizes knowledge as emerging from social interactions and the discourses that shape them. By examining the discursive practices of adolescents and young people, the research explores the psychosocial factors contributing to psychological distress and their potential links to the school environment.

From this epistemological perspective, meanings can be understood as a kind of patchwork, woven by many hands within the dynamics of social relations and situated in a specific historical and geographical moment. Through this intersubjective process, discursive statements emerge, positioning subjects within the web of everyday life and producing ways of understanding oneself, others, and the world.

The discursive practices were analyzed based on a full reading of the support interactions made available through the Weni Chats platform, which provides technological support for the Rede Póde Falar. It is important to note that, in accordance with the data confidentiality policy adopted by the Network in partnership with the platform, access to any information that could identify the adolescents and young people who used the service is not permitted. The available data are limited exclusively to demographic markers—such as ethnicity, age group, gender identity, and region of residence—collected anonymously.

For the analytical dataset, support interactions conducted between October and December 2024 were selected if they included the descriptors 'Bullying or Cyberbullying', 'Concerns about the Future', and 'Academic Procrastination', as these themes are directly related to the school context. The descriptors are assigned to each interaction through tags suggested by the attendants during their exchanges with users, as a way of recording the main issues presented. Based on this initial thematic criterion, 79 users of the Póde Falar channel were identified. In the first screening stage, the inclusion criterion was the presence of one or more of the aforementioned descriptors, resulting in the selection of 13 users. The second stage involved a full reading of the interactions and the exclusion of duplicate records, yielding a final sample of six users whose interactions were included in the analysis.

For data analysis, Content Analysis was employed, with an emphasis on Thematic Analysis<sup>15</sup> to guide the identification of the core meanings within the narratives, whose presence or frequency was significant in relation to the objects of study. Through this process, three analytical categories emerged: 'Violence, Meritocracy, and Stigma', 'Precarization of Social Bonds', and 'Fragilization of the Meaning-Making Circuit'.

Accordingly, the selection of cases was drawn from a broad set of mental health support interactions involving adolescents within the public network, based on specific criteria that included explicit references to school and to experiences of psychological distress. Although the sample is numerically limited, the aim was not statistical representativeness but rather interpretive depth, in keeping with a qualitative and constructionist approach. The six cases were selected for their discursive potency, their condensation of recurring meanings within the broader set of interactions, and their ability to illustrate emblematic situations in which the production of psychological suffering is linked to school experiences and with care conditions in the protection network.

This methodological strategy is consistent with qualitative and interpretive studies, which enable a deeper understanding of complex and context-specific phenomena<sup>16</sup>. It is acknowledged, however, that the narratives examined do not capture the full diversity of experiences within the network and impose limitations on the statistical generalization of the findings. Nevertheless, the interpretations offered should be understood as illustrative of broader psychosocial processes, allowing for plausible theoretical and practical contributions to similar contexts. Future studies could expand the sample or combine qualitative and quantitative methods to generate population-level estimates. The discussion put forward aims to contribute to debates on practices and public policies in child and adolescent mental health, in dialogue with relevant documents such as UNICEF reports and guidelines on adolescence, schooling, and mental health.

## Results and discussion

In seeking to understand the psychosocial factors involved in the production of psychological distress in the experiences of adolescents and young people, the analysis

of narratives revealed forms of subjective suffering rooted in social relationships shaped by structural inequalities and normative discourses of success, merit, and productivity. The intersection of school, family, and the body emerges in the narratives as a space of control, suffering, and invisibility, creating a tense environment that directly affects mental health. This underscores the need for psychosocial support spaces, qualified listening, and opportunities for self-narratives.

Drawing on the perspective of language-in-use<sup>17</sup>, it is understood that discourses do not merely describe realities but also produce social, subjective, and institutional effects. Discourses are an interactive social production, shaped by the economic, political, and historical contexts in which they are articulated.

Thus, it is important to contextualize that, within the prevailing social and economic system, there are various mechanisms for positioning and marginalizing individuals. These mechanisms are based, for example, on ideas about what is valued in the labor market, who is seen as having productive potential, and which behaviors are expected to ensure social conformity and the maintenance of order.

In this context, it is important to note that adolescents' voices and the knowledge they construct about themselves are often devalued for not meeting the legitimacy criteria imposed by hegemonic discourses, particularly in settings marked by poverty<sup>18</sup>. Such practices generate feelings of incompetence and the expropriation of voice among marginalized groups, distancing them from the possibility of being recognized as rights-bearing subjects<sup>19</sup>.

Therefore, speaking is more than merely communicating. To speak is to participate in a network of meanings that shapes what can be said, who is allowed to speak, and the effects that speech can produce. Language is not neutral<sup>20</sup>, but it is shaped by relations of knowledge and power embedded in social dynamics. As such, discourses are more than words: they are social practices that produce

broader effects and consequences, even when these effects are not intentional or immediately perceptible.

Therefore, engaging with discourse—especially adolescent narratives—demands careful ethical awareness. This involves understanding where these voices originate, the conditions under which they are created, and the opportunities (or limitations) they carry. It also requires challenging hegemonic practices and discourses of social exclusion to question the modes of subjectivation being shaped<sup>18</sup>.

Even so, it is important to remember that discourses are not solid, fixed entities. They intersect, contradict one another, and are continually reconfigured. Moreover, while they express collective positions, they are also shaped by singular experiences. Ultimately, discourse is an attempt to make sense of the world, and these meanings are always contested, producing effects far beyond those intended or articulated by their speakers. For this reason, rather than seeking hidden meanings or unspoken intentions, the challenge lies in listening to what is actually said and in considering how these statements produce effects, draw boundaries, and open (or close) possible pathways<sup>20</sup>.

Seguindo esse fio condutor, serão discutidas, a seguir, as categorias identificadas nos enunciados de adolescentes e jovens.

### **Violence, meritocracy, and stigma**

Adolescents' accounts reveal feelings of frustration, exhaustion, institutional pressures, and psychological distress. Expressions such as 'I've fallen behind in my studies', 'I was never smart', 'my plan was to improve my grades', 'I still don't know the best way to study', 'I am too hard on myself because of my mistakes', 'I am afraid of failing', and 'we're required to give many presentations, but I can't speak in public' help to illuminate how these young people experience the school environment and the pressures that permeate it.

These narratives highlight the weight of an ideal of intelligence that privileges certain forms of knowledge aligned with technical rationality, sustained by a positivist, Eurocentric, and performance-oriented logic. This verticalized model defines who is considered 'capable' or 'intelligent' according to criteria that render invisible the multiplicity of other ways of knowing and learning. Within this context, adolescents' efforts to recognize how they learn and which strategies might work for them point to the production of legitimate knowledge, even though it is often devalued. These are the so-called subjugated knowledges<sup>21</sup>: forms of knowledge regarded as naïve or incomplete and positioned as inferior in relation to the hegemonic standard of required scientific knowledge<sup>22</sup>.

Within an educational system shaped by neoliberal ideals—where performance, productive efficiency, and pedagogical technique are aligned with the demands of the labor market—subjugated knowledges tend to be erased. This results in an increasing distance between adolescents' lived experiences and the expectations imposed by educational institutions. Such a configuration can significantly contribute to psychological distress among those who are unable to meet these expectations, affecting how they perceive themselves and the value they attribute to themselves<sup>21</sup>.

The narratives heard offer important clues to a culture centered on results, performance, and validation—whether personal, social, or familial—while simultaneously tending to erase contexts of deprivation and structural violence. Paradoxically, the intensification of demands and the growing bureaucratization of school routines are presented to students as supposed solutions, even when they fail to engage with their actual needs. This issue is made explicit in statements such as: 'I'm on academic probation and the coordinator gave me lots of assignments to do in a short period of time', 'my mother wants me to keep trying to get into medical school through the ENEM (Brazil's national secondary education

examination used for university admission)', 'they think I need more classes', 'I'm still in the same place', and 'I feel exhausted'.

The work<sup>20</sup> invites reflection on how discourses operate within complex systems of codes that produce and reproduce relations of knowledge and power. These systems bring together rules, institutions, practices, and forms of knowledge that intertwine and sustain what has been conventionally accepted as truth, shaping broader structures that define what can be said and the effects such statements may produce. Through this mechanism, subjects are positioned within different types of discourse, which in turn shapes the possibilities—and impossibilities—of appropriation for specific social categories.

Given this, one might ask whether any institution is better positioned than schools to serve as the primary regulator of discourse and to define which subjects are able to express themselves. After all, it is often within this space that decisions are made about which voices will be heard, which will be discredited, and which forms of knowledge and ways of doing are valued. Along these lines, those who do not fit within the logic of success and merit tend to be subjected to processes of disqualification and criticism, reduced to moralizing explanations such as laziness, lack of effort, or individual failure. This outlook is evident in statements such as 'my mother thinks I'm lazy', 'my mother seems disappointed in me', and 'they say I'll never amount to anything'. These discourses invalidate adolescents' experiences and contribute to feelings of inadequacy and psychological distress.

Although formal education presents itself as a space in which all individuals can access any form of discourse, it also functions—through both what it allows and what it restricts—as a site where social oppositions and struggles are produced and reproduced. In other words, the school, as a non-neutral field traversed by multiple relations of power, becomes a site for the production of distressed subjectivities, shaped by the demands that regulate the rituals of speech

and the processes through which individuals are qualified as authorized speakers. At the same time, it is also through the school that these norms can be contested, thereby allowing for the circulation of alternative discursive practices more closely aligned with well-being<sup>20</sup>.

Adolescents' statements reveal that discriminatory practices continue to be normalized in everyday school life. Comments, attitudes, and even looks reinforce stigmas related to social class, educational trajectories, and youth identities. Excerpts such as 'I changed schools because teachers and students singled me out', 'the teacher immediately started making nasty remarks about me', 'because I came from a 'bad' school, they treat me like an animal', 'the looks and the laughter when they look at me', and 'having to go there and endure everything over and over again' illustrate how these adolescents confront forms of symbolic exclusion and institutional violence.

Often, these forms of violence are disguised as discourses of 'disciplinary guidance' or 'adjustment periods', yet they sustain prejudices related to class, race, gender, and ableism. These processes of exclusion are neither isolated nor confined to the school environment. Structural violence<sup>23</sup> also manifests within schools through unjust policies, unequal distribution of resources, and the marginalization of certain groups of students.

As a psychosocial phenomenon, violence is historically and politically constructed within the social structure. This structure both shapes and is shaped by how schools are organized, given their formative role and their effects on the production of subjectivity. In this sense, broader social processes of violence are also manifested in everyday school life.

The sense of distress expressed in adolescents' statements points to the very way institutions are structured. The absence of policies focused on listening and care, combined with pedagogical practices that remain detached from adolescents' lived experiences, ultimately hinders their sense of belonging and produces a condition of invisibility.

Speaking and being heard is not simply a matter of taking the floor, but of moving through a process of discursive qualification that entails recognition, authorization, and belonging. This process determines who can occupy particular speaking positions and who is authorized to formulate certain statements, operating through mechanisms that regulate the production, circulation, and consumption of discourse. This involves a set of procedures—such as the ritualization of speech, the delimitation of legitimate institutional spaces, the attribution of authority to certain subjects, and the validation of particular forms of knowledge—that signal the presumed or imposed efficacy of words, depending on who utters them.

These mechanisms determine the effects of discourse on those to whom it is addressed, as well as its cohesive value within a discursive regime. Thus, discourse is neither free nor equally accessible to all; it is controlled, selected, and redistributed through relations of power that shape who can say what, when, where, and with what effects<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, adolescents and young adults may be considered to occupy a disadvantaged position within this discursive regime, particularly in the context of the school institution. The excerpts indicate that, even when they speak, their voices are often not recognized as legitimate, thereby reducing their chances of being heard. The school, as a space regulated by discursive norms and asymmetric power relations, tends to marginalize subjugated forms of knowledge, which are often disqualified or ignored, even when they clearly express the impact of school experiences on mental health, as revealed in the speech fragments presented.

## **Precarization of social bonds**

The narratives reveal experiences marked by feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and a lack of support. Adolescents appear as subjects

adrift, affected by multiple vulnerabilities, without consistent sources of support in institutions or in the psychosocial service network. Statements such as 'I have no friends', 'I feel isolated', 'no one understands me', 'my grandmother doesn't support me and insults me a lot', 'there's teasing not only at home but also at school', 'my family fights a lot', 'no one listens to me', and 'I isolate myself' reveal a fragility in relationships that should serve as sources of care, protection, and belonging. This scenario highlights not only the psychological distress of young people but also an affective and symbolic deficit, produced by the absence of meaningful bonds and spaces where they can be heard and recognized.

Historically, mental health care for Brazilian children and adolescents has been shaped by neglect, exclusion, and institutionalization<sup>24</sup>. However, after the enactment of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent<sup>25</sup> and subsequent health-related social policies linked to the Ministry of Health<sup>26</sup>, there has been increased emphasis on protecting human rights and providing comprehensive care for children and adolescents. In this context, schools are seen as spaces that promote citizenship, foster a culture of peace, and support health education beyond purely cognitive or curricular<sup>27</sup> aspects.

Against this backdrop of fragmented, targeted, and frequently discontinuous public policies, psychological distress cannot be understood in isolation from the structural and historical fragility of the social protection network—particularly concerning coordination among education, health care, and social assistance sectors. In the absence of an effective intersectoral logic, schools continue to operate within pedagogical and administrative normative functions that confine them to spaces of control, containment, and assessment, thereby disengaging them from the social dimension of suffering.

The narratives make clear the mismatch between what adolescents seek and what the educational system provides. Operating in isolation, without meaningful ties to the

local context or to services that could share responsibility for care and support, schools reinforce practices and discourses of blame, in which young people's distress is framed as personal failure. This dynamic opens space for processes of medicalization affecting both students and teachers, as well as for the increasingly early pathologization of behaviors. It thus reveals a logic that tends to normalize suffering rather than recognize it as a signal of a reality that must be acknowledged and transformed.

Although adolescence is understood as a social construct shaped by diverse experiences of growing up across different cultural contexts, there is little discussion of the fact that, within a single culture, the framing concept of 'adolescence' excludes a large segment of young people whose lived experiences are deprived both materially and symbolically. The normative perspective on adolescence obscures not only vulnerabilities in affective bonds, but also inequalities in access to public goods and services, as well as social markers of race, gender, and sexual orientation<sup>1</sup>.

Reflecting<sup>24</sup> on issues related to the school context and mental health care for adolescents entails the construction of intersectoral practices, in which different professionals can provide targeted services and act in a coordinated manner to ensure a situated listening to young people, grounded in an understanding of the specificities of their lived realities and involving the entire school community.

A normative understanding of adolescence thus ends up obscuring significant inequalities. It conceals both the fragility of affective bonds and disparities in access to rights, public policies, and opportunities. Moreover, it marginalizes social markers of gender, race, and sexuality, which play a decisive role in shaping the ways of being and experiencing youth<sup>23</sup>. Such forms of coordination are increasingly important in the context of a growing condition of alienation, disintegration, and individualism associated with the globalization of culture. Strengthening social bonds is essential

both as a means of confronting violence and as a resource for revitalizing respect for and recognition of others as human beings, thereby reinforcing circuits of meaning and enhancing the capacity for social participation among political subjects.

### **Fragilization of meaning-making processes**

Understanding adolescence requires shifting the analytical lens away from biologizing or purely intrapsychic explanations toward a more complex, relational, and socially situated reading, since it is through discursive practices<sup>28</sup> that subjects construct meanings about themselves, the world, and their experiences. Thus, adolescence should be understood as a socially and culturally constructed category, rather than as a natural and universal stage of life. It is a unique experience, marked by social markers, power relations, forms of belonging, and struggles over meaning that emerge within social interactions.

From this perspective, it becomes necessary to recognize that the boundaries between adolescence and adulthood are not neutral. Discourses on adolescence are permeated by an adult-centric<sup>1</sup> bias, rooted in asymmetries within intergenerational relations, which define what is considered legitimate, acceptable, or pathological. In this context, adolescents are often silenced or spoken for by others—by schools, health services, and families—without their voices being recognized as legitimate

In prevailing discourses on adolescent mental health, the narratives available for naming and making sense of suffering are predominantly pathologizing, reinforcing a reductionist understanding of distress. Statements such as 'I can't organize myself within thirty minutes of speaking,' 'the topic slips away,' 'I feel blocked,' and 'I don't understand when my classmates explain,' alongside expressions like 'the pain only eases through self-harm' and 'I think about suicide almost every day,' make

explicit the absence of symbolic address for these experiences. This produces a rupture in the circuits of meaning between what adolescents live through and what they are able to communicate. As a result, suffering cannot be translated into a symbolic space that would enable meaning-making and agency; instead, it is repeated through acts or silences

Within this context, psychological suffering is frequently framed as individual failure, even though it is deeply entangled with the precariousness of living conditions, the lack of social recognition, and the performance pressures imposed by neoliberal logic. As Foucault's analyses of the interplay between knowledge, power, and the economy suggest, these dynamics produce what may be understood as competence capital: a repertoire of knowledge, skills, and forms of conduct that acquire economic value and come to organize prevailing expectations of success. Schools, like health and social welfare institutions, are not external to this process; on the contrary, they become key sites for investment in the production of human capital. The subject thus configured—as an entrepreneur of the self—is expected to manage, expand, and make themselves yield returns, thereby justifying the value invested<sup>28</sup> in them. This imperative of self-management generates a persistent sense of inadequacy, as well as a continual threat or affirmation of individual failure.

Spink<sup>29</sup> invites us to consider how discourses produce realities. In addition, two forms of discursivity emerge in analyses<sup>30</sup> of self-injurious practices among adolescents and young people: one frames these practices as the affirmation of an existential and social depth that communicates a request for help and care—as a technique of survival; the other approaches the phenomenon as a risk factor, in accordance with the criteria established by the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics<sup>31</sup>. By labeling self-harm as either 'risk' or 'a survival strategy,' one is not merely describing a phenomenon, but actively shaping how it will be understood, addressed, and experienced. Thus, beyond

diagnosis, it is essential to create spaces in which adolescents can narrate their experiences in their own words, grounded in their contexts, meanings, and urgencies.

Symbolic invisibility, compounded by the absence of qualified listening and the fragmentation of care networks, leads to a context in which suffering becomes unspeakable. As a result, recurring feelings of discouragement, hopelessness, and self-devaluation emerge, expressed in statements such as 'I'm not good enough', 'everything I do goes wrong', or 'after all this, I lose the motivation to go to school'. More than merely an individual experience of demotivation, this reveals a profound loss of faith in one's own possibilities and a deep sense of disillusionment in the absence of meaningful support. Without spaces for the collective elaboration of suffering, adolescents tend to experience social malaise and structural violence as personal failure, creating conditions for silent and collective forms of distress.

The educational system has contributed to the pathologization of illnesses that are, in fact, linked to far broader and more complex demands. Rather than embracing the diversity of ways of existing, it tends to reinforce standards of success grounded in merit-based logic. This process<sup>32</sup> contributes to an increase in indicators of Common Mental Disorders (CMDs) among students. According to the study's findings, symptoms associated with CMDs represent the most prevalent expression of psychological distress, alongside frequent reports of psychosomatic complaints, psychological stress, and insecurity regarding academic performance.

Approaching adolescent mental health through the lens of discursive practices entails recognizing that psychological distress does not reside solely within the individual, but emerges in the relationship between subject and context. Within this framework, hopelessness appears as a psychic response by adolescents to a context that offers little recognition of their histories, rhythms, and struggles, thereby intensifying experiences of withdrawal, silencing, and

impulsive acts. This reveals a process of subjective exclusion far more complex than what indicators of school dropout or academic failure alone are able to capture.

Processing suffering requires time, space, and recognition—three elements that are scarce in the everyday experiences of most adolescents. Support is needed to enable young people to narrate their own stories and translate suffering into language, as they learn to articulate personal distress with social experience, thereby constructing a worldview more firmly grounded in critical consciousness<sup>33</sup>.

Narratives of suffering, such as self-harm and suicidal ideation, are analyzed as forms of communication of an unspeakable pain, underscoring the need for approaches that value the experiences and meanings produced by adolescents themselves. The study highlights the importance of discursive practices that enable the legitimate expression of young people's lived experiences, recognizing suffering as a collective and socially situated phenomenon that requires time, space, and recognition in order to be elaborated.

In the conclusion, the text examines the lived experiences of adolescents from a discursive and social perspective, highlighting the central role of family, school, and community ties in psychological and subjective development. In contexts marked by structural and everyday violence, these ties can either promote social expression and participation or generate psychological distress. Within this scenario, the school assumes an ambivalent role: it can function as a space of care and belonging, or as one of exclusion, humiliation, and invisibility.

## Final considerations

The lived experiences of adolescents are not formed in generalized or decontextualized ways. Rather, it is the social ties they experience across different life contexts that shape their possibilities for social inscription, their

production of meaning and direction, and their modes of expression within culture. Bonds—whether familial, school-based, territorial, or community-oriented—are central to psychological and subjective development, functioning as symbolic supports for narrative construction and social participation. However, in contexts marked by violent relations—whether explicit or subtle, structural, or enacted in everyday interactions—these dynamics give rise to stress and psychological suffering.

A discursive-practices perspective makes it possible to understand adolescence not as a biologically determined or universal transitional stage, but as a human production shaped by struggles over meaning. It also allows us to recognize that psychological suffering is not a pathologized given, but a social construction. Discursive regimes across relationships, public spaces, and institutions such as schools shape not only interpretations of suffering, but also the conditions under which subjects may name it, articulate it, and be heard.

Structural violence, embedded in social dynamics and institutions, directly shapes adolescents' ways of living and experiencing suffering. It manifests in inequalities of access, forms of symbolic exclusion, school relationships marked by devaluation, and the absence of spaces in which young people are truly listened to. Within this context, the school may assume a dual role: sometimes as a welcoming space for the construction of meaningful bonds, and at others as a site of diverse forms of exclusion, demands, and invisibility.

The accounts point to practices of humiliation, discrimination, and isolation enacted by peers, parents, and institutional figures. Such experiences reinforce the perception of school as a potentially hostile environment, weakening adolescents' bonds with learning processes and with the development of a secure sense of identity.

At the same time, the statements also refer to teachers, staff members, peers, or family members who listen and provide support, suggesting that the presence of strengthening

bonds can function as an escape from oppressive dynamics. These accounts highlight the school as a stage—far from neutral—where all these dynamics unfold. They also point to the school's potential as a space for promoting well-being, provided that mechanisms of care and recognition are in place.

This multiplicity of meanings attributed to the school underscores the urgency of intersectoral institutional policies that bring together health, education, and social assistance, while recognizing the complexity of the school as an institution.

Breaking the cycle of violence requires institutional and discursive mechanisms that recognize suffering as a social and communicable phenomenon. This entails understanding adolescents not as 'carriers of symptoms,' but as rights-bearing subjects who articulate their subjectivities in their own language—as persons of desire, undergoing transformations in a life stage marked by movement, ambivalence, and potential. From this perspective, it is necessary to create spaces that restore to adolescents the dignity of being heard and respected in their protagonism—their capacity to narrate their pain, produce meaning from it, and intervene in the world in their own way. In this process, listening is not merely a therapeutic or educational practice, but also an ethical and political act.

Through the implementation of the Póde Falar project, focused on listening to school-aged participants in basic and higher education, it became possible to identify the intersections between mental health and learning that permeate everyday school life—that is, learning is also an affective process in multiple ways. In this context, the school environment emerges as an ambivalent territory, where both the potential for care and the material and symbolic obstacles to creating a genuinely welcoming space coexist.

These elements point to ways forward for a school that, although constrained by mechanisms of control, standards of productivity, efficiency, and performance, can also serve as

a space for creativity and care. The account of this experience highlights the importance of interdisciplinary institutional actions committed to promoting mental health as an inseparable dimension of the right to education.

The receptiveness of certain teachers, coordinators, or peers who engaged with the project highlights the possibility of cracks in institutional rigidity. Within these openings, it became possible to sustain moments of reflection, attentive listening, and the strengthening of bonds between adolescents and young people experiencing psychological distress.

The project linked to the Rede Póde Falar—grounded in listening, the promotion of more compassionate self-narratives, and the connection between students and multiple intermediaries—sought to establish welcoming practices that challenge the logic of productivity and performance as measures of subjective value. By prioritizing encounter and expression, it signals a shift away from traditionally medicalizing, normalizing, and reifying practices, while serving as a guiding beacon for educational practice.

There is a need to reintroduce social practices that foster listening and creativity. In doing so, suffering can find symbolic mediation, and the subject, rather than being reduced to silence or a symptom, can be reinscribed in their affects, expressions, and participation. The ways in which adolescence is spoken about, adolescents are listened to, and institutional spaces of care are organized point toward the possibility of inventive, ethical modes of subjectivation that escape normative forms of subjection and enable practices of freedom and care for oneself and others.

## Authorship contributions

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