OUR MINDS IN OUR BODIES: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL

Giorgia Del Bianco
Università Pegaso, Italy
giorgiadelbianco@icloud.com

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ABSTRACT
Eating disorders are the leading cause of death in young people. The mind-body connection is a fundamental aspect of individual well-being, particularly among young people. Eating disorders (ED) and bullying toward overweight students are issues that deeply impact the psychological and emotional health of students. Schools, as formative environments, play a crucial role in raising awareness about these topics, promoting a culture of respect, inclusivity, and body awareness. It is essential for educational institutions to implement programs that address both ED and bullying, providing psychological support, nutrition education, and promoting a healthy self-image. An integrated approach that considers the interaction between mind and body can help reduce stigma related to physical appearance and improve students' self-esteem. In this way, schools are not just places of learning but foundational pillars for a more inclusive and respectful future.

KEYWORDS
Eating disorders; well-being; school; inclusion.

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Introduction

Eating disorders (EDs) are among the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in adolescents and young adults. They are complex mental and physical health conditions that disrupt eating behaviors, body image, and overall functioning. The most common EDs include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder (BED), as defined by the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Anorexia nervosa is marked by extreme food restriction, an intense fear of weight gain, and a distorted body image. Bulimia nervosa involves cycles of binge eating followed by compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, fasting, or misuse of laxatives. BED is characterized by recurrent episodes of uncontrolled eating without compensatory actions. These disorders often coexist with anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive traits, contributing to significant psychological and physiological impairments (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

The Physical and Psychological Impact of Eating Disorders

EDs are multifactorial illnesses with roots in biological, psychological, and socio-cultural domains (Treasure, Claudino, & Zucker, 2010). Physically, EDs can cause cardiac arrhythmias, osteoporosis, gastrointestinal damage, electrolyte imbalances, and reproductive dysfunction. For example, bulimia often leads to dental erosion and esophageal tears, while BED increases the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and metabolic syndrome (Fairburn, 2008). Psychologically, EDs affect emotional regulation, identity, and interpersonal relationships. Individuals often internalize societal standards of beauty, equating thinness with worth and control (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). This internalization can result in low self-esteem, perfectionism, and social withdrawal, which further exacerbate symptoms and delay help-seeking (Vitousek & Manke, 1994). Despite advances in psychotherapy, nutritional counseling, and pharmacological support, relapse rates remain high, underscoring the importance of early intervention and systemic prevention strategies (NEDA, 2020).

Schools as Critical Contexts for Prevention and Early Intervention

Schools play a central role in adolescent development, influencing identity formation, body image, and peer relationships. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, schools are part of the microsystem directly

shaping students' day-to-day experiences. As such, they can act as both protective and risk factors in the development of EDs (Derenne & Beresin, 2006). Peer dynamics, academic pressure, and institutional culture significantly impact body dissatisfaction and self-esteem. Research by Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, and Story (2012) indicates that weight-based teasing in school is strongly associated with disordered eating behaviors. Thus, schools should be equipped not only to identify early warning signs of EDs but also to actively promote positive body image and inclusive environments.

Integrating Mental Health and Life Skills Education

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1946) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Building on this holistic view, the WHO's life skills education framework (1997) emphasizes the development of emotional regulation, critical thinking, decision-making, and interpersonal skills as essential to adolescent mental health. Integrating life skills into school curricula has shown positive effects on self-esteem, body satisfaction, and resilience to media pressures (Stice, Shaw, & Marti, 2013). Programs that incorporate media literacy, body functionality education, and emotional expression—delivered through interactive methods—are particularly effective. For instance, the "Body Project" has been widely validated for reducing thin-ideal internalization and improving body image among adolescent girls (Stice et al., 2013).

Educator Training and Institutional Support

One of the most overlooked elements in school-based prevention is the role of educators. Teachers are often the first adults to notice changes in students' behavior, appetite, or appearance. However, a lack of training on mental health issues, including EDs, limits their capacity to intervene appropriately (O'Dea & Abraham, 2000). Educator training programs that include psychological first aid, trauma-informed practices, and referral mechanisms can enhance schools' responses to EDs. Moreover, school counselors and psychologists should be integrated into multidisciplinary teams, working collaboratively with families and healthcare providers to ensure comprehensive care (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2011).

Social Media and the Digital Landscape

In recent years, the rise of social media has intensified body image pressures among adolescents. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok often promote curated, idealized images that contribute to body dissatisfaction, particularly among girls and gender-diverse youth (Perloff, 2014). Algorithms that favor certain body types can reinforce narrow beauty standards, leading to increased vulnerability to EDs (Levine & Piran, 2019). Schools must address these influences through digital literacy programs that teach students to critically engage with media, recognize manipulation, and develop a healthy online presence. Encouraging student-led campaigns and peer support groups can empower adolescents to redefine beauty norms and support each other in resisting harmful messaging.

Promoting Inclusivity and Body Diversity

Beauty ideals are culturally constructed and often exclude marginalized groups, including students of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and those with disabilities. Inclusive education must therefore challenge Eurocentric, cisnormative, and ableist standards by promoting diverse representations of beauty and health. Classroom discussions, creative arts, and culturally responsive curricula can help students explore identity in empowering ways (Yager & O'Dea, 2008). Such approaches not only reduce the risk of EDs but also foster a sense of belonging and validation. Policies that address dress codes, weight-based discrimination, and bathroom access also contribute to an affirming school climate.

Cultivating Emotional Resilience and Self-Care

Emotional resilience—the ability to adapt to stress and adversity—is a key protective factor against EDs. Schools can cultivate resilience through mindfulness practices, journaling, peer dialogue, and the establishment of safe spaces for emotional expression. Programs that normalize conversations about mental health reduce stigma and facilitate early intervention (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2011). For example, integrating brief mindfulness exercises into daily classroom routines has been associated with reductions in anxiety and improved emotion regulation (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). Teaching students to recognize hunger and satiety cues, practice self-compassion, and challenge negative self-talk further enhances self-care capacities.

Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

To effectively address EDs in school settings, coordinated policies at local, national, and international levels are essential. These should include mandatory mental health education, funding for school counselors, collaboration with public health agencies, and longitudinal evaluation of school-based interventions. Evidence-based models such as Health Promoting Schools (HPS) offer a comprehensive framework for embedding health into all aspects of school life, including curriculum, environment, and community partnerships (Langford et al., 2015). Future research should explore the long-term impact of early interventions on ED incidence, especially in underrepresented populations.

Conclusion

Eating disorders are multifaceted conditions requiring interdisciplinary, preventive, and inclusive approaches. Schools hold transformative potential in reducing ED risk by fostering self-awareness, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. Through integrated education, supportive environments, and policy innovation, schools can empower students to resist harmful beauty standards and build lifelong well-being. Collaboration among educators, families, healthcare providers, and policymakers is crucial to creating a future where all young people feel valued, supported, and healthy in their bodies.

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