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Approaches to integrating mental health into Moroccan schools and universities: an analysis of public policies and international experiences

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ABSTRACT

Public policies in Morocco have shown increasing interest in mental health issues; however, the integration of mental health into the education system remains fragmented and falls short of the institutional coherence promoted by contemporary international approaches. This article examines the limited and insufficiently effective integration of mental health policies within Moroccan schools and universities, despite the multiplicity of initiatives and programmes implemented. It analyses the place of mental health in educational policy through a critical review of legal and regulatory frameworks

and national programmes, and compares them with selected international models.

The study adopts a qualitative public-policy analysis approach based on official and institutional documents, alongside a comparative analysis of Finland, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, considered examples of the institutional integration of mental health into education. The findings show that Moroccan policies tend to be sectoral and reactive, with weak institutional coordination and no integrated preventive framework, limiting their effectiveness in educational institutions. By contrast, the international experiences reviewed demonstrate approaches that structurally embed mental health in educational policy through comprehensive, preventive strategies, intersectoral coordination and the active involvement of education stakeholders.

The article concludes that improving the integration of mental health into Moroccan education requires a shift from fragmented programmes to an integrated public-policy framework, and from a predominantly curative approach to a preventive one. Mental health should become a structural component of educational policy rather than an ancillary service.

Keywords: public policy; mental health; educational institutions in Morocco; policy integration; international approaches.

Introduction

In the context of the social and economic transformations taking place in Morocco, public policies have become key determinants in shaping education and health, given their direct influence on the quality and effectiveness of services delivered (Al-Jabri, 2020). Despite this importance, integrating mental health into the education system continues to face multiple challenges at the level of existing public policies.

This study forms part of analytical research on public policy from a socio-educational perspective. It examines and analyses the place of mental health in Moroccan educational policy. The central problem is the limited and insufficiently effective integration of mental health into Moroccan public education policies. Some studies on the impact of educational policies on students' mental health in Morocco point to a gap between declared policies and their implementation in educational institutions (Analysis of Educational Policies in Morocco and Their Impact on Students' Mental Health, 2019). This gap contributes to an inadequate response to learners' growing psychological needs.

The study therefore asks the following main question: How do current public policies address the integration of mental health into schools and universities in Morocco, and what approaches could improve this integration in light of international experience? Related questions concern the limitations of the current legal and regulatory framework, the effectiveness of existing programmes and policies, and the possibility of drawing on alternative approaches from international experiences.

The study aims to analyse public policies relating to mental health in Moroccan schools and universities, assess their effectiveness in promoting learners' psychological well-being, compare them with selected international models, and propose an approach to strengthening the integration of mental health into the education system. It uses a descriptive-analytical method to examine official documents and adopted policies, drawing on relevant academic literature to develop a critical analysis.

I. Literature review

The literature indicates that mental health is no longer understood merely as the absence of a disorder; it also encompasses psychological well-being, social adjustment and the ability to cope with stress (Ben Sghir, 2018). This broader understanding supports a shift towards preventive and institution-based approaches in education. International approaches highlight the value of embedding mental health in policies and curricula, providing ongoing professional development for educational staff, and strengthening coordination among stakeholders. The experiences of Finland, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia illustrate these priorities and have reported positive outcomes in improving psychological support in educational institutions.

Despite their explanatory value, these studies have limitations when transferred to other countries. Some focus on ideal models without sufficiently analysing the institutional and political conditions required for implementation.

At the Arab regional level, studies identify structural challenges, including limited access to mental-health services and high levels of social stigma associated with mental health (Zakaria, 2020), some of which are also relevant to Morocco. In Morocco, studies and official reports describe scattered efforts and sector-specific initiatives intended to support mental health in education. These efforts, however, suffer from weak institutional coordination and the absence of an integrated public-policy vision. Information from the Ministry of National Education points to the limited systematic integration of mental health into educational programmes

(The Moroccan Education System and Public Mental Health Policies, 2021).

The research gap has three main dimensions: first, a lack of applied field studies measuring policy impact; second, a lack of studies that systematically apply a public-policy analysis approach; and third, insufficient attention to the institutional and governance dimensions of integrating mental health into education. This article contributes a critical and comparative analysis linking international literature to the Moroccan model. Rather than merely describing policies, it examines their underlying mechanisms to develop a deeper understanding of the conditions required to integrate mental health into the education system.

II. Research methodology

This study adopts a public-policy analysis approach to understand changes in social and educational policies in the Moroccan context (Al-Alawi, 2021), particularly in light of national literature describing mental-health policies in educational institutions as fragmented and insufficiently integrated (Public Mental Health Policies in Moroccan Schools, 2021).

The study sample consists of official documents, including laws governing education and mental health, relevant national and regulatory decrees, national strategies, reports issued by government sectors and national and international institutions, and academic studies related to the topic. Documents were selected on the basis of their direct relevance to integrating mental health into school and university settings and their temporal relevance to the current phase of public policy.

The study also uses thematic analysis, organising the material around key themes: the legal and regulatory framework; institutional structures; psychological-support services in educational institutions; prevention and intervention mechanisms; and the training of education stakeholders.

For the comparative component, four international experiences — Finland, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia — were selected as leading examples of mental-health integration in educational policy. The selection criteria included the clarity of integrated policies, the presence of interventions at multiple levels (institutional, educational and preventive), and the availability of documented evaluations of effectiveness.

The study relies exclusively on published documentary sources and does not include field interviews or quantitative data analysis. This limits statistical generalisability but allows for a more in-depth analytical understanding of existing public policies and comparison with international models.

III. Analysis of public policies

Any analysis of public policies relating to mental health in Moroccan schools and universities must consider the various frameworks that have shaped them, whether through legal and regulatory provisions or through programmes and initiatives intended to provide direct support to university students and school pupils. The existence of multiple reference frameworks does not necessarily indicate a coherent vision or effective implementation. These policies are often sectoral and poorly integrated.

Recent studies suggest that the integration of mental health into Moroccan educational policy is still taking shape and that the transition from planning to implementation in educational institutions remains weak (Integrating Mental Health into Moroccan Educational Policies, 2022). Field studies in Moroccan educational institutions likewise indicate that institution-based psychological-support services are implemented to a limited extent (Case Studies on Mental Health in Moroccan Schools, 2020). These programmes face structural and institutional challenges, making it necessary to develop a robust psychological approach that takes into account the different dimensions of mental health.

This raises the question of how to move from isolated interventions to integrated public policy. The effectiveness of current policies within educational institutions must also be assessed in order to develop an approach that improves service quality. International literature argues that policy effectiveness depends on integration into the education system rather than on the number of isolated initiatives (Springer, 2019). Previous studies, however, have often been limited by a descriptive focus rather than critical analysis of mechanisms and outcomes. Improving these policies therefore requires a restructuring of the overall conception of mental health in educational policy, rather than treating it as a secondary concern.

1. Legal and regulatory framework

Examining the legal and regulatory framework governing the integration of mental health into schools and universities requires reviewing the principal laws and decrees adopted in this area. An analysis of legislation governing higher education and school education helps identify provisions relating to mental health, whether through institutional structures or programmes offering psychological support to students and pupils (Law No. 13-83 on Mental Health,

undated). Such provisions are generally implicit and do not establish mental health explicitly as a right or as an independent public service within the education system.

This is consistent with Benjelloun's analysis, which argues that the integration of mental health into Moroccan education remains limited because public policies are partial and intersectoral coordination is weak (Benjelloun, 2020). This analysis is important for understanding the extent to which the current legal system responds to mental-health needs in education and may provide a starting point for proposing more comprehensive and effective amendments or policies. A gap remains between legal recognition and institutional implementation.

Moroccan higher-education legislation contains indirect references to mental health through provisions intended to improve learning conditions and university integration and to strengthen social and educational support for students. However, it does not set out detailed, explicit mechanisms for integrating mental health as a core university service. Mental health is therefore still addressed implicitly within general social support rather than through a dedicated, structured policy.

Some universities have nevertheless taken initiatives to establish listening and psychological-guidance centres. One example is the Reception, Information, Guidance and Follow-up Centre (CAIOS) at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, which seeks to fill this legal gap and respond to students' needs. A clearer and more comprehensive legal framework is needed to strengthen mental health in university settings and ensure the sustainability of such initiatives. Their fragmented nature limits their ability to achieve a nationwide impact.

In lower- and upper-secondary education, social-work professionals have been introduced into Moroccan educational institutions to strengthen learners' psychological, social and health-related support, help manage school-life activities, communicate with families and supervise educational and extracurricular activities. This measure falls under Decree No. 2.23.819 concerning the special statute for employees of the Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports (Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports, 2023, p. 5), which defines the duties assigned to this professional group within the education system.

2. Coordination of government programmes

The Moroccan Ministry of Health has launched a national mental-health strategy aimed at improving mental-health services and access to them (National Mental Health Strategy in Morocco, undated). However, implementation within educational institutions remains limited in terms of coordination with educational policies. This aligns with academic literature emphasising the need for integration between health and education policies and programmes to ensure effective mental-health provision in the education system (Mental Health and Education: Integrating Policies and Programmes, 2021).

One proposal is to establish a national coordination committee comprising representatives of the Ministry of Health, the school and higher-education sectors, and mental-health experts. The absence of a permanent, institutionalised coordination structure reflects weak intersectoral governance in this area. Such a committee could coordinate existing programmes and resources and ensure that stakeholders' efforts complement one another. Turning this proposal into an operational policy remains a major organisational challenge.

In Moroccan university residences, one model involves assigning a medical clinic to each residence. This initiative could be extended to other university institutions, with additional services devoted to students' mental and psychological health. However, the model remains limited in scope and is not governed by a clear national university mental-health policy. Part of each clinic could be allocated to a team of psychologists to support students' psychological needs, but the shortage of specialised personnel constrains the possibility of implementing this model comprehensively.

3. Current challenges

These challenges are consistent with recent literature on mental health in educational institutions, which identifies shortages of specialists and weak institutional infrastructure as major obstacles to effective integration (Mental Health in Educational Institutions: Challenges and Opportunities, 2021). International literature also indicates that the issue is not solely one of physical infrastructure, but also of weak mechanisms for integrating mental-health services into educational institutions, particularly where coordination between educational and health stakeholders is limited (Ministry of Health, 2022).

There is a need to provide integrated training for professionals through theoretical and practical university education in Morocco, combined with placements in hospitals, social-care

institutions and schools. Yet the integration of theory and practice remains limited and is not systematically structured.

The shortage of psychologists is also linked to the absence of a legal framework regulating the profession in Morocco. This reflects a structural institutional gap that directly affects the development of the field. Another challenge concerns public awareness: the role of psychologists in institutions is not fully understood and is sometimes reduced to treating illness, overlooking their other responsibilities.

Moroccan universities also need to strengthen their psychology laboratories, which require a range of resources and tools to operate effectively. Limited investment in research infrastructure more broadly constrains the development of psychometrics and scientific research in this field.

IV. Possible approaches

Integrating mental health into educational institutions is a major challenge that deserves increasing attention in public policy because of its direct impact on learning quality, academic achievement, and learners' psychological and social well-being. Several approaches can be used to pursue this goal in an effective and sustainable manner.

1. Participatory approach

This approach is based on cooperation among stakeholders in education and health, including the relevant ministries, schools and universities, families, civil-society associations, legislative bodies (both chambers of Parliament) and executive bodies across the sectors concerned. Its aim is to promote the psychological well-being and balance of students, pupils and teaching staff through coordinated action.

Measures could include integrating psychologists into the education and training system; providing teachers and administrators with training on the fundamentals of mental health in educational institutions; adopting supportive policies and legislation; allocating adequate human and financial resources; involving families in raising mental-health awareness at home; and establishing mechanisms to monitor the implementation of programmes and interventions intended to improve the psychological environment of educational institutions.

2. Preventive approach

Establishing listening and support units in universities and strengthening the role of social-support staff across primary and secondary education—including lower- and upper-secondary levels — could reinforce proactive measures to reduce the emergence of psychological disorders in educational institutions. This requires a supportive and stimulating environment for students and pupils, educational curricula that develop emotional intelligence and stress-management skills, and listening and psychological-support centres in these important settings.

Awareness campaigns could also highlight the importance of mental health and its effects on learners' educational pathways and personal development.

3. Therapeutic approach and psychological intervention

This approach is central to the article because it is closely related to the field under study. It seeks to establish an integrated framework combining different forms of intervention to support pupils and students experiencing psychological disorders or emotional difficulties that affect their educational progress.

It involves providing psychological support and treatment within educational institutions or through partnerships with specialist centres, such as psychiatric clinics and psychological counselling and support centres. Cooperation agreements with hospitals and mental-health centres can help ensure comprehensive care for cases requiring specialist follow-up. The approach also recommends establishing dedicated psychological-support units in schools and universities, staffed by qualified professionals able to provide counselling services to students and thereby strengthen mental health throughout the education system.

4. Rights-based, educational and political approach

International conventions and legal instruments designed to protect children's rights emphasise the right to education in a safe environment that supports psychological well-being and learners' cognitive and emotional balance at school and at home. In this context, the National Human Rights Council has noted that mental health in educational institutions is an essential part of the right to quality and equitable education, and that the absence of protection and psychological-support mechanisms raises concerns about the fulfilment of this right (Report on Mental Health in Moroccan Schools, 2021).

Mental health should therefore be established as a priority in education policies and legislation, as a core component of educational quality rather than an ancillary service. Educational and political decision-makers should improve learning environments through effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that assess whether institutions

comply with mental-health standards and promote learners' psychological, social and cognitive development.

V. International experiences

International experiences provide valuable inspiration for developing national policies to integrate mental health into schools and universities. Several countries have adopted different models and approaches that have helped promote learners' psychological well-being. These experiences can be grouped according to the following main strategies.

1. Finland: inclusive education and psychological well-being

Finland (Shehata, 2022, p. 384) adopts a holistic approach aimed at creating a learning environment that supports mental health. This includes flexible educational programmes that help reduce academic pressure and the integration of psychologists and social workers into schools to provide students with ongoing support. The approach also emphasises cooperative learning rather than competition, which may contribute to lower levels of anxiety and depression among learners.

2. Canada: mental health as a priority in educational policy

In Canada, mental health is treated as an important component of educational policy, with national and regional programmes designed to raise awareness. One programme cited in the literature is "MindMatters" (Farooq, 2023, p. 203), which provides educational resources to help teachers support students' mental health in the classroom. The programme also seeks to incorporate life-skills and emotional-intelligence lessons into curricula and highlights the importance of psychological-support centres in universities to provide counselling and treatment when needed.

3. The United Kingdom: the "whole school approach"

The United Kingdom uses a whole-school approach, drawing on Catherine Weare's report, What Works in Promoting Social and Emotional Well-being and Responding to Mental Health Problems in Schools? (Weare, 2015). The report seeks to promote mental health by embedding it in school policies and making it the responsibility of all stakeholders, rather than psychologists alone. It also recommends regular assessments of students' mental health to enable early intervention and stronger links between schools and mental-health service providers so that cases requiring specialised follow-up receive effective care.

4. Australia: the "kids matter" programme

Australia introduced the "KidsMatter" programme (Slee & Shute, 2017) to promote mental health among children and adolescents. It includes teacher training on ways to support learners' mental health and involves parents in creating a supportive psychological environment both inside and outside school. The programme also focused on establishing mental-health clubs in schools, offering students safe spaces in which to express their feelings.

5. Analysis of international policies and experiences

The international experiences reviewed show that each model offers a distinct policy mechanism for integrating mental health into education. In Finland, success is associated with reducing academic pressure and permanently integrating psychologists into institutions, highlighting the importance of continuous prevention. The Canadian model emphasises incorporating mental health into curricula and training programmes, making it part of learning rather than an ancillary service.

In the United Kingdom, the Whole School Approach distributes responsibility for mental health across educational stakeholders and strengthens early-detection mechanisms and coordination with support services, illustrating the value of an integrated institutional approach. Australia's experience highlights the importance of involving teachers and parents and creating dedicated school spaces for psychological support, demonstrating the role of community participation in building a supportive educational environment.

The comparison suggests that effective mental-health policies depend on three main factors: institutional integration into educational policy, appropriate training for educational stakeholders, and broader support involving families and communities. Compared with these models, Morocco's main difficulty is not a complete absence of initiatives but their weak integration into a coordinated policy framework, as also reflected in national reports describing mental-health interventions in education as fragmented (National Mental Health Strategy: A Model for the Moroccan Education System, 2022).

VI. Discussion of findings

The findings align with World Health Organization reports (WHO, 2020) and earlier studies emphasising that mental health is more effectively integrated into educational policy when it is institutionally embedded in the education system rather than delivered through isolated sectoral interventions.

In Morocco, the findings are consistent with national literature describing scattered efforts to provide psychological support in educational institutions. This study places greater emphasis on weak institutional arrangements and governance as structural barriers, rather than merely technical obstacles. Official reports likewise point to persistent shortages of human resources and support infrastructure for mental health in educational institutions (Annual Report on Mental Health in Educational Institutions, 2022).

In international comparison, Morocco partly resembles other countries in adopting initiatives, but differs substantially from models such as those of Finland, the United Kingdom and Australia, where mental health is addressed through a comprehensive and organised approach. This difference may be explained by contextual factors related to social and economic change, which directly affects learners' mental health (The Impact of Social Change on Students' Mental Health in Morocco, 2022), as well as cultural factors concerning society's perceptions of mental health.

An alternative interpretation is also possible regarding the multiplicity of stakeholders: rather than viewing it only as a source of fragmentation, it could be considered an opportunity to expand interventions if supported by effective coordination. Policy effectiveness therefore depends not simply on the presence of stakeholders, but on their ability to work within an integrated governance framework that ensures complementarity rather than dispersion.

VII. Recommendations and proposals

The recommendations that follow can be grouped into several main areas, with a focus on strengthening interventions and promoting mental health in educational settings.

1. Strengthening infrastructure and psychological services

Psychologists should be made available in all schools and universities to ensure timely psychological support for students and learners at every educational level, from primary to lower- and upper-secondary education. Specialised training programmes for these professionals should be developed in schools and universities to ensure that they can respond competently and effectively to learners' psychological needs.

Dedicated psychological-support centres should also be established in every educational institution and equipped with the necessary resources, including counselling rooms, group mental-health support programmes, office equipment for recording cases, and secure spaces for storing confidential information relating to those receiving care.

2. Mental-health awareness and education

Mental-health awareness campaigns should be launched in educational institutions with the involvement of relevant government bodies, particularly through cooperation between the ministries responsible for national education and higher education and the Ministry of Health. Campaigns could target students, pupils and educational staff, explaining the importance of mental health and its impact on academic and social performance while promoting a culture of psychological support and reducing stigma associated with mental disorders.

Mental-health topics should also be included in school and university curricula. This could increase learners' psychological awareness, strengthen coping skills, change negative attitudes towards mental health and challenge the social stigma that may prevent people from seeking help when they need it.

3. Integrating mental health into public policy

Comprehensive national strategies for mental health in educational institutions should be developed with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the health sector, national education, higher education, parents' associations and non-governmental organisations. International guidance stresses the need to give particular attention to young people in public mental-health policy by improving access to psychological-support services in educational institutions and reducing barriers associated with stigma and inadequate service coverage, in line with World Health Organization recommendations (The Mental Health of Young People in Morocco: Challenges and Prospects, 2020; Mental Health in Schools: Global Challenges and Solutions, 2020).

These strategies should be multidimensional and include prevention, early intervention, psychological support and continuing professional development for educational staff. Effective integration would help create an educational environment that supports mental health and contributes to improved academic performance and psychological well-being.

4. Cooperation between government institutions and non-governmental organisations

Relevant government sectors should strengthen cooperation with non-governmental organisations through joint programmes and increased resources. Local networks could bring together educational and health institutions and community organisations to provide sustained, diverse

psychological support for students, pupils and educational staff. Such cooperation would help create a more integrated learning environment that responds to the needs of all stakeholders.

5. Continuous evaluation and research

Effective mechanisms should be established to evaluate the success of mental-health policies and programmes in educational institutions. This should include regular data collection on the mental health of students and pupils to analyse the effects of psychological-support programmes on academic performance and well-being.

Universities and their research laboratories should also be involved in in-depth scientific studies assessing the impact of current policies on learners' psychological well-being. This would help identify strengths and gaps and enable policies to be improved in light of scientific findings and field data.

6. Integration and a participatory approach

Coordination across sectors is essential to developing comprehensive policies that address mental health from multiple perspectives, including education, healthcare and social support. An integrated approach can ensure that stakeholders' efforts complement one another and provide more effective responses to learners' psychological needs.

Families should also be involved in promoting their children's mental health through awareness and training programmes that help them provide support at home. This involvement can sustain and reinforce the impact of programmes delivered in educational settings and create a supportive environment extending from school to family, thereby improving learners' psychological and social adjustment.

7. Strengthening programmes for people with disabilities

Specific programmes should be designed for students and learners with disabilities, including psychological-support services that meet the needs of those with sensory, physical or multiple disabilities. Psychological methods and interventions should be adapted to their particular needs, with educational and support strategies that promote well-being. Psychologists and teaching staff should also be trained in advanced techniques to ensure that support is effective, appropriate to learners' abilities and conducive to their academic and social inclusion.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the challenge of integrating mental health into Moroccan schools and universities is not primarily a lack of initiatives or programmes, but rather the limited development of an integrated policy framework capable of transforming those initiatives into a coherent and sustainable public policy. The analysis shows that the prevailing approach remains largely sectoral and reactive, whereas international models adopt preventive and institution-based frameworks that make mental health a structural component of the education system.

The international comparison further indicates that effective policy depends on three interrelated conditions: a clear legal framework establishing the basis for integration; multisectoral governance based on genuine coordination; and the incorporation of mental health into everyday educational practice rather than its provision solely as an ancillary service. In Morocco, these conditions are still developing, limiting the impact of current policies.

The main challenge is therefore not simply to expand the availability of psychological-support services, but to rethink the place of mental health in educational policy and move it from the margins of social intervention to the core of educational practice. This requires a transition from separate programmes to integrated public policy and from treatment-focused interventions to comprehensive prevention.

The study also opens avenues for future research, particularly evaluative field studies that measure the impact of existing policies and analyse how they are implemented in educational institutions. Such research could support the development of intervention models better suited to the Moroccan context and more responsive to current social and educational changes.

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