Review Article

**THE IMPACTS OF CAREER DECISION MAKING DIFFICULTIES ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF ADOLESCENTS**

**ABSTRACT**

| **Introduction:** Career choice in adolescence, a key phase of identity formation, is complex and influenced by social pressures and low self-efficacy. These challenges can affect students' mental health, leading to anxiety and depression. This study explores how psychosocial factors relate to these difficulties to support more conscious decision-making. **Objective:** To analyze the relationship between professional choice and students’ mental health, identifying the main difficulties and proposing socio-educational strategies to support decision-making and emotional well-being. **Methodology:** This is a descriptive bibliographic study with a qualitative approach, based on a literature review conducted between 1999 and 2024. Descriptors such as “Mental Health,” “Adolescent,” and “Career Choice” were used in databases such as LILACS, SciELO, PubMed, and Web of Science. The analysis was based on nine thematic axes developed according to the specific objectives. **Results and Discussion:** Neurological immaturity, hormonal variations, and heightened social sensitivity render adolescents more susceptible to mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression. The pressure to make early career decisions, coupled with unequal access to information and excessive exposure to social media, exacerbates insecurity, indecision, and emotional distress. The absence of adequate support from family or school environments further aggravates this condition. **Conclusion:** The study highlights the need for public policies, educator training, and socio-educational initiatives to mitigate mental distress and enhance vocational guidance, beyond It emphasizes the importance of coordinated family-school support and targeted interventions. |
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*Keywords: Mental health; Career choice; Adolescence*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

According to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stressful moments of life, develop all their skills, be able to learn and work properly, and contribute to the improvement of their community (McCann *et al*., 2010). However, considering Erikson’s (1976) concept of adolescence — a phase of life that most strongly fosters identity development — adolescents may not yet be mature enough to make such important decisions as choosing a profession, a decision that, to some extent, will guide their entire life and may thus cause significant impacts on their mental health.

Furthermore, Papalia (2022) states that, due to advances in technology and the current volume of information exchange, adolescence has been extended, as young people tend to stay in school longer, get married, have children, and establish permanent careers later and with less certainty than in the past. In addition, Bandura et al. (2001) argue that self-efficacy beliefs are essential in helping to shape the occupational options students consider and the way they prepare for future careers. Still according to Bandura et al. (2001), self-efficacy is defined as the beliefs individuals have about their capacity to organize, develop, and carry out actions to achieve goals and accomplishments — a construct considered key in the career decision making process.

Thus, reinforcing Erikson's (1976) postulates, identity construction occurs in interaction with the environment and with others, making a supportive family environment crucial in the career choice process. As stated by Jodl et al. (2001), this is not the reality for most Brazilian adolescents.

Thus, this study addresses the following question: “How does the difficulty in choosing a profession impact the mental health of third-year high school students ” Additionally, to answer this question, the group aims to analyze the relationship between the process of career choice and the mental health levels of students, taking into account that the search for a career choice is a reality faced by many high school students, especially third-year students, who face family pressure, insecurities and emotional overload, which can lead to high levels of anxiety and depression.

Therefore, this article aims to understand the reasons why students find it difficult to make this decision, in order to provide facilitators for their choices because, according to the Ayrton Senna Institute in a study conducted in São Paulo, 70% of students report symptoms of depression and anxiety, which influence their daily routine. Thus, the study seeks to provide a basis for students to make assertive and conscious decisions regarding their future, promote the improvement of the quality of mental health and analyze the correlation between the psychosocial context in which students are inserted and their choices.

**2. METHODOLOGY**

This was a descriptive bibliographic study with a qualitative approach, and the data collected were used for the development of the scientific article. Data collection was carried out through a bibliographic review based on research of scientific productions on the proposed topic, covering the period from 1999 to 2024. A total of 410 articles were found, of which 72 were selected for reading after an initial review of the titles and exclusion of texts that appeared unrelated to the topic. The inclusion criteria for content selection were: full-text publications aligned with the theme *The impacts of the difficulty in career choice on the mental health of third-year high school students*, including documents, regulations, health authority norms, scientific articles, and institutional guidelines, published in Portuguese and English. The exclusion criteria included: articles without direct relation to the theme, duplicate materials, incomplete documents, reviews, abstracts, debates, and content unavailable in full.

The literature search was conducted in the following databases: LILACS, SciELO, PubMed, BVS, ScienceDirect, PsycINFO, and Web of Science. It is worth noting that these databases were accessed through the Virtual Health Library (BVS). Searches were conducted using the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) from the Regional Library of Medicine (BIREME), as follows: [“Saúde Mental” / “Mental Health”; “Adolescente” / “Adolescent”; “Escolha da Profissão” / “Career Choice”], with the use of Boolean operators “AND” and “OR.”

The methodology employed in this study began with the careful selection of descriptors in DeCS, followed by the search in indexed databases. Using the main terms and their equivalents, tables were created containing the articles found in each database. Duplicate articles were removed, and a screening based on the relevance of the titles was then conducted.

Following this stage, abstracts were read, and subsequently, full readings were done for articles that met the established criteria. For the analytical process, nine thematic axes were established, derived from the study’s specific objectives: (1) to identify the underlying factors contributing to difficulties in career decision-making; (2) to assess the levels of anxiety and depression among students; and (3) to propose socio-educational strategies that support professional choice and promote mental health. These axes were formulated as guiding questions to ensure coherence between the objectives and the data interpretation. These questions guided the reading and critical analysis of the selected articles, forming the conceptual basis for the discussion and interpretation of the data. The answers obtained provided the theoretical foundation for the construction of the results and reflections proposed in this study.

**3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Adolescence is marked by profound biological, cognitive, and social transformations, including puberty, brain maturation, and increased sensitivity to social contexts (Blakemore & Mills, 2014, p. 188). These changes shape behavior and affect decision-making, making career choice a common challenge during this period. The development of abstract thinking broadens the ability to reflect but can also generate doubts and insecurities in the face of multiple career possibilities (Arain *et al.*, 2013, p. 450). Moreover, sex hormones modulate brain plasticity and emotional responses, intensifying mood swings and impacting judgment (Arain *et al.*, 2013, p. 451).

Structural and functional changes in the brain — particularly in the prefrontal cortex and limbic system — directly affect emotional regulation and adolescent impulsivity, making it harder to rationally assess professional paths (Blakemore & Mills, 2014, p. 190; Arain *et al.*, 2013, p. 452). This makes the decision-making process more vulnerable to external influences, such as family expectations, peer pressure, and academic demands. These factors lead to internal conflicts and contribute to difficulties in forming a life project that includes a conscious and realistic career choice (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 224).

The family and school environments also play a decisive role in emotional development and identity construction during adolescence (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 225; Benetti *et al*., 2007, p. 1276). Fragile relationships, emotional instability, or excessive demands interfere with emotional well-being and can hinder important decisions such as career choice (Blakemore & Mills, 2014, p. 192). The lack of dialogue and support in schools undermines the development of a clear vision of future possibilities, limiting access to information about different career paths (Soares *et al.*, 2014).

Cultural, economic, and social issues also influence career decision-making. Factors such as inequality of opportunities, social stigma, and financial difficulties shape access to information and the resources needed to plan a professional future (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 225; Benetti *et al.*, 2007, p. 1278; Gomes *et al*., 2020, p. 4391). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, worsened these disparities by disrupting emotional bonds and regular school routines, deepening isolation and insecurity among adolescents (Mattia *et al*., 2025; Gomes *et al*., 2020, p. 4389).

Excessive use of social media affects self-image, self-esteem, and emotional well-being, interfering with the self-confidence necessary for important choices like career decisions (Keles, Mccrae & Grealish, 2020, p. 84; Khalaf *et al.*, 2023, p. 118). Constant exposure to social comparison and the search for validation can lead to feelings of inadequacy, contributing to indecision and procrastination when defining the future (Khalaf *et al*., 2023, p. 117). Thus, identity and independence construction are compromised, directly affecting the autonomy and clarity needed for career choice (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 225; Reisner *et al.*, 2016, p. 205).

It is therefore essential to assess students’ levels of anxiety and depression, considering that adolescence is characterized by pronounced emotional instability due to brain immaturity, hormonal influence, and heightened sensitivity to social stimuli — all of which contribute to emotional reactivity (Arain *et al.*, 2013, p. 453; Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 224; Blakemore & Mills, 2014, p. 191). This vulnerability is intensified by factors such as delayed sleep phase, chronic stress, mood changes, and the search for social validation, making adolescents more prone to anxiety, depression, and impulsivity (Crowley, Acebo & Carskadon, 2007, p. 605; Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 227).

Signs of emotional vulnerability include withdrawal, irritability, persistent bad mood, low self-esteem, reluctance to seek help, and social isolation — all commonly associated with psychological distress (Orben, Tomova & Blakemore, 2020, p. 638; Meadows, Brown & Elder, 2006, p. 94; Radez *et al.,* 2021, p. 186; Khalaf *et al.*, 2023, p. 120). These manifestations highlight the importance of continuous attention from parents and educators, especially in cases with histories of marginalization, social pressure, or stigma — factors that increase the risk of worsening mental health disorders (Reisner *et al.*, 2016, p. 204; Benetti *et al.*, 2007, p. 1279).

Experiences of bullying — including cyberbullying — significantly intensify emotional suffering, increasing anxiety, depression, and low life satisfaction, particularly among adolescents from marginalized groups (Keles, Mccrae & Grealish, 2020, p. 86; Lázaro-visa *et al.*, 2019, p. 97; Reisner et al., 2016, p. 205; Benetti *et al.,* 2007, p. 1280). The absence of peer or family support worsens this condition by reinforcing feelings of loneliness and emotional helplessness (Orben, Tomova & Blakemore, 2020, p. 636). Symbolic violence in unwelcoming school environments also contributes to the deterioration of mental health (Benetti *et al.*, 2007, p. 1280).

The pursuit of social acceptance and online validation influences adolescents’ behavior and well-being, leading them to act to please others — a pattern that can compromise emotional autonomy and lead to frustration (Blakemore & Mills, 2014, p. 193; Khalaf *et al.*, 2023, p. 118; Orben, Tomova & Blakemore, 2020, p. 637). Constant comparisons on social media and cyberbullying intensify feelings of inferiority and increase emotional instability (Keles, Mccrae & Grealish, 2020, pp. 85–84; Khalaf *et al.*, 2023, p. 121). Social disconnection, especially during the pandemic, also worsened adolescents’ well-being (Gomes *et al.*, 2020, p. 4389).

The implementation of school-based mental health education programs — such as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) — promotes resilience, reduces symptoms of distress, improves emotion recognition, and encourages help-seeking behaviors (Durlak *et al.,* 2011, pp. 412–415; Radez *et al.,* 2021, p. 187; Sawyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 227). By addressing topics such as bullying, anxiety, self-esteem, and self-awareness, these programs help students develop coping skills and reduce emotional vulnerability. When combined with career guidance, they also allow young people to make healthier and more authentic decisions about their future.

Therefore, the influence of the family in career choice cannot be overlooked, even though young people do not base their decisions solely on family members. The family functions as a symbolic and emotional reference, which can either support or create doubts and conflicts in the adolescent’s professional project. Family discourse has a direct impact on the young person's emotional security: when there is support, the adolescent feels empowered to choose with autonomy, but in the face of negative or imposing messages, feelings of insecurity and dependence arise. Thus, the family environment can either promote or hinder the development of a life project (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018; Reisner *et al.*, 2016).

Academic stress significantly affects the physical and emotional health of college students. The burden of demands throughout the semester leads to physiological changes, such as increased blood pressure, which may evolve into more serious conditions such as gastritis, dermatitis, and hypertension (Benetti *et al.,* 2007). On an emotional level, the effects include anxiety, depression, and exhaustion — symptoms that affect around 20% of college students. Exhaustion undermines the body’s protective mechanisms, increasing the risk of illness and negatively impacting quality of life, especially in fields such as the humanities and exact sciences (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018).

Psychological evaluation is a valuable resource in supporting career choice when applied critically and with sensitivity to individual particularities. Although traditional intelligence and interest tests are useful, their isolated and decontextualized use may limit understanding of young people’s real needs (Arain *et al*., 2013). The study highlights that qualitative approaches — such as interviews, reflective groups, and narrative interventions — promote self-awareness and help young people recognize their values, interests, and conflicts. In this way, assessment shifts from a normative role to a mediating process for reflection and context-aware guidance.

The integration of education and mental health in schools is an effective strategy to reduce emotional vulnerability and improve career decision-making. Interventions such as self-awareness workshops, discussion circles on anxiety and vocation, and SEL programs foster resilience, reduce aggression, bullying, and anxiety, and encourage help-seeking behavior (Durlak *et al*., 2011, p. 412–415). Schools that combine emotional care with vocational guidance help students make more authentic choices, free from idealizations or external pressures, fostering the development of sustainable life projects.

Lastly, public policies aimed at educational inclusion are essential to promote equity in access to higher education and to ensure the mental health of young people. Lack of access increases feelings of frustration and insecurity among students from underprivileged backgrounds, affecting their future expectations. Expanding programs such as Income-Contingent Loan Schemes (ICLs), placing psychologists in schools, and valuing multiple professional pathways (including technical courses) are viable ways to ensure that students can dream and plan without fear of failure, promoting emotional well-being and social justice.

This study reinforces the importance of combating social inequalities and expanding access to higher education and other forms of professional qualification, offering young people real opportunities for choice and social advancement. Thus, the integration of health, education and inclusion policies is essential to form more emotionally balanced adults, aware of their choices and prepared to contribute to society in a healthier, more productive and autonomous way. Finally, ensuring emotional support during adolescence is not just an individual issue, but a collective social responsibility that directly influences the formation of more resilient, critical citizens capable of building sustainable life projects.

**4. CONCLUSION**

The bibliographic analysis of this study demonstrates that the difficulty in career decision-making among adolescents is intrinsically linked to neurological, emotional, and social factors, as highlighted in the findings. Immaturity, family and academic pressures, unequal access to information, and excessive use of social media were identified as key elements that exacerbate mental distress, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, and demotivation. These findings directly address the study’s objective of analyzing the impact of such difficulties on students’ mental health. A critical aspect identified was the coordinated role of family and school in building a supportive environment. While the family serves as an emotional and symbolic reference, the school should provide contextualized vocational guidance and implement programs such as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

This review underscores the importance of policies that reinforce this partnership, including teacher training to identify signs of vulnerability and the creation of spaces for dialogue with families—essential measures to reduce uncertainty and foster informed decision-making.

Finally, the implementation of socio-educational initiatives is recommended, such as self-awareness workshops and discussion groups on mental health and vocational interests, alongside public policies that ensure equitable access to career information and the presence of psychologists in schools. These proposals, based on the identified gaps, aim to mitigate the negative impacts on mental health and to empower adolescents to make autonomous and resilient decisions, integrating the evidence discussed throughout the study.

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1.Name and version of AI: ChatGPT (GPT-4), developed by OpenAI.

2.Source: Accessed via the ChatGPT platform (https://chat.openai.com).

3.Purpose of use: The AI was used to organize paraphrased scientific content, improve coherence and clarity, and assist in the translation and refinement of the manuscript from Portuguese to English.

4.Input prompts: Prompts included requests such as “organize this paraphrased scientific text into academic format,” “translate and refine this paragraph into fluent academic English,” and “suggest improvements for structure and clarity.”

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