

**Adolescence, School, and Mental Health: welcoming Practices
from the Perspective of Students at a Public School**

*Adolescências, escola e saúde mental: o acolhimento na
perspectiva de estudantes de uma escola pública*

*Adolescencias, escuela y salud mental: la acogida desde la
perspectiva de estudiantes de una escuela pública*

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to identify adolescents' perspectives on welcoming (acolhimento), as well as to plan and implement welcoming strategies within the school context alongside adolescents. A participatory research approach was conducted with 22 adolescents enrolled in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades of the second stage of elementary education at a state school in the interior of São Paulo, Brazil. To produce and analyze participatory data, creative methods were adopted, such as the production of photos and videos, collages, and group dynamics. The results indicated that welcoming is related to the possibility of experiencing positive relationships, feeling respected, and engaging in enjoyable activities in appropriate spaces within the school. The study highlights elements that may contribute to more effective mental health promotion actions in schools.

Keywords: Mental Health, Adolescence, Welcoming, Creative Methodologies..

Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa foi identificar a perspectiva de adolescentes sobre acolhimento, bem como planejar e implementar estratégias de acolhimento no contexto escolar junto a adolescentes. Realizou-se uma pesquisa de abordagem participativa com 22 adolescentes, matriculados no sexto, sétimo e oitavo anos do segundo ciclo do ensino fundamental de uma escola estadual do interior do estado de São Paulo. Para a produção e análise de dados participativos, foram adotados métodos criativos tais como: produção de fotos e vídeos, colagens e dinâmicas grupais. Os resultados indicaram que o acolhimento se relaciona à possibilidade de vivenciar relações positivas, a sentir-se respeitado e realizar atividades prazerosas em ambientes apropriados na escola. O estudo revela elementos que podem contribuir com ações mais efetivas de promoção à saúde mental na escola.

Palavras-chave: Saúde Mental, Adolescência, Acolhimento, Metodologias criativas.

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación fue identificar la perspectiva de los adolescentes sobre el acogimiento, así como planificar e implementar estrategias de acogida en el contexto escolar junto a los propios adolescentes. Se llevó a cabo una investigación con enfoque participativo con 22 adolescentes matriculados en sexto, séptimo y octavo grados del segundo ciclo de la educación básica en una escuela estatal del interior del estado de São Paulo, Brasil. Para la producción y el análisis de datos participativos se adoptaron métodos creativos, tales como: producción de fotos y videos, collages y dinámicas grupales. Los resultados indicaron que el acogimiento se relaciona con la posibilidad de vivir relaciones positivas, sentirse respetado y realizar actividades placenteras en espacios adecuados dentro de la escuela. El estudio revela elementos que pueden contribuir a acciones más eficaces para la promoción de la salud mental en el entorno escolar.

Palabras clave: Salud mental, Adolescencia, Acogimiento, Metodologías creativas.

Introduction

The process of growing into adolescence is understood through a complex network of interactions between the physical and psychological transformations of adolescents and the social expectations placed upon them within a given context and historical period. Thus, it constitutes a scenario that makes it impossible to consider adolescence as a singular experience, since there are many possible ways of living through this stage of life (Ozella & Aguiar, 2008; Moreira et al., 2011; Masson, 2020; Gasparini, 2022).

Furthermore, this study departs from the idea that the adolescence is not merely a transitional phase into adulthood. Such a view limits the possibilities of existing in the present and, consequently, denies adolescents their right to citizenship and their potential as agents of transformation, as individuals with rights and subjectivity (Gasparini, 2022; Rossi et al., 2019; Speranza, 2021; Surjus, 2019).

Studies that focus on adolescent mental health have identified numerous challenges. A recent report from the World Health Organization (2022, pp. 14 and 44) highlights suicide as one of the leading causes of death among adolescents and estimates that 14% of adolescents worldwide, aged 10 to 19, experience some form of mental disorder.

In the Brazilian context, the 2019 National Survey of School Health (PeNSE – Pesquisa Nacional de Saúde Escolar), which analyzed 125,123 students aged 13 to 17 from public and private schools across the major regions of the country, indicates that 17.7% of adolescents gave a negative self-assessment of their mental health. This evaluation was based on aspects such as worry, sadness, irritability, nervousness, feeling that no one cares, and believing that life is not worth living (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2021). Recent findings show that COVID-19 has also had a negative impact on young people's mental health, increasing cases of depression and anxiety (Nearchou et al., 2020).

In this scenario, promoting mental health becomes a fundamental strategy — although it is necessary to approach studies on the subject with caution, since much of the scientific literature in this field stems from perspectives focused solely on psychiatric diagnoses, overlooking the complexity that constitutes the plurality of adolescences (Gasparini, 2022; Rossi et al., 2019).

Schools are increasingly regarded as a fundamental environment for promoting health, well-being, and adolescent development (Organização Pan-Americana da Saúde [OPAS – Pan American Health Organization], 2022). Cid and Gasparini (2016), in a review study on child and adolescent mental health promotion initiatives in school settings, show that the actions described in the reviewed articles fail to consider the subjects' contexts and demands in their planning, and are disconnected from other health care mechanisms.

In order to reduce socioeconomic vulnerability and prevent school dropout, Brazilian educational policies have sought alternatives that extend students' time in regular schools and strengthen the right to quality public education. In the state of São Paulo, this movement led to the implementation of the Programa de Ensino Integral (Full-Time Education Program), established by Complementary Laws No. 1,164 and No.1,191, both from 2012. Initially covering a limited number of schools, the program has been progressively expanded (Avelino, 2019; Governo do Estado de São Paulo [GESP – Government of the State of São Paulo], 2022).

The *Programa de Ensino Integral* (Full-Time Education Program), regulated by Decree No. 66.799 of 2022, aims to foster the development of autonomous, supportive, and competent individuals, promoting skills for personal fulfillment and preparation for the exercise of citizenship (GESP, 2022). One of its core principles is Youth Protagonism (*Protagonismo Juvenil*), which seeks to encourage students to take an active role in shaping their educational trajectories by connecting school experiences with the development of a Life Project (*Projeto de Vida*). To this end, the program includes elective courses designed to broaden students' cultural repertoire and allow them to explore various areas of interest (GESP, 2013)

One of the program's main tools for promoting Youth Protagonism is the practice of *acolhimento*¹ (welcoming). According to the document Guidelines of the Full-Time Education Program (*Diretrizes do Programa de Ensino Integral*), issued by the São Paulo State Department of Education (2013), *acolhimento* refers to a set of activities led by veteran students to receive and integrate new students, fostering a sense of belonging to the school community and encouraging more democratic practices of coexistence in daily school life. This process aims to create a

¹ The term *acolhimento* is kept in Portuguese in its first occurrence due to its broad and culturally specific meaning. Depending on the context, it may convey welcoming, support, care, inclusion, or relational/emotional acceptance. The most appropriate English equivalent will be used in subsequent occurrences based on context.

welcoming environment in which students recognize themselves as active members of the school (GESP, 2013).

But what is adolescents' perspective on *acolhimento*, or on the experience of feeling *acolhido* (welcomed)? In reviewing the literature for this study, it became clear that research specifically focused on listening to adolescents and considering their views and ideas on *acolhimento* is virtually nonexistent — especially in the school context. In the field of health, a study conducted by Marques and Queiroz (2012) analyzed adolescent care in primary health services through focus groups with students from a public school in Fortaleza, Ceará. The adolescents revealed that *acolhimento* does not occur in those services, reporting feelings of neglect and dissatisfaction due to the perceived carelessness and lack of preparation of professionals when dealing with this population (Marques & Queiroz, 2012).

It becomes clear, then, that there is a need to expand the concept of *acolhimento* (welcoming) in relation to adolescences, as well as to develop strategies in collaboration with the adolescents themselves — especially within the school context, which is one of the primary spaces where this population circulates and builds lived experience. The present research aims to contribute in this regard, as it seeks to explore adolescents' perspectives on *acolhimento*, involving their active participation in the production of knowledge about a subject that directly concerns them. It is believed that this process may generate insights that broaden the discussion and support the planning and implementation of mental health promotion strategies for adolescents in the school environment.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to identify adolescents' perspectives on *acolhimento*, as well as to plan and implement *acolhimento* strategies within the school context, in collaboration with adolescents themselves.

Methodological Approach

This was a qualitative study with a participatory approach, developed through the collaborative construction of knowledge *with* the participants, not *about* them, prioritizing dialogical, contextualized processes aimed at social transformation (Brandão, 2006). Unlike traditional approaches, this type of research is not structured along a closed trajectory, but rather

shaped through interaction with the individuals involved, being guided by their reflections, interests, and experiences. The goal is thus to expand academic research as a practice committed to processes of social transformation, connecting academic knowledge with the lived realities of the participants. The subjects do not merely share information — they also influence the course of the investigation, actively participating in the construction of meaning and methodological direction (Parrilla-Lattas et al., 2016; Brandão, 2006).

Throughout the study, creative methods were adopted as a strategy to enhance adolescents' participation. Based on literature that highlights the need to expand the expressive possibilities available to adolescents, it is understood that the use of visual and creative tools — such as photographs, short films, drawings, group dynamics, posters, among others — can facilitate the communication of participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Gasparini, 2022; Liebenberg, 2009; Mannay, 2017; Parrilla-Lattas et al., 2016).

The study was conducted within the framework of broader university research² and extension³ projects focused on the promotion of adolescents' mental health, carried out in a public school offering lower and upper secondary education (*segundo ciclo do ensino fundamental* and *ensino médio*), located in a peripheral neighborhood of a medium-sized city in the interior of the state of São Paulo. The choice of site was made for reasons of convenience, given the activities already being conducted there and the researchers' involvement in the context — with the institution being open and interested in contributing to the development of the study.

In the process of coordinating these actions, the school's administrative team identified the group of *acolhedores* (welcoming) students (those who were part of the school's *acolhimento* activities). The university researchers then approached this group of students and invited them to participate in the study. The students who agreed — along with their legal guardians — signed the Assent Form and the Free and Informed Consent Form (*Termo de Assentimento* and *Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido*, respectively). In this way, the working group for the participatory research was formed, composed of three researchers and 22 *acolhedores* adolescents, aged 11 to

² “Saúde mental e sentimento de pertença: compondo conceitos e ações com adolescentes (na pandemia)” [Mental Health and Sense of Belonging: Shaping Concepts and Actions with Adolescents (during the pandemic)],” funded by the *Fundação de Apoio e Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo* (São Paulo Research Foundation), and “Producing Knowledge on Mental Health with Adolescents: A Participatory Research,” a doctoral research project by the study's second author.

³ A university extension project, coordinated by the last author of this manuscript, which aims to develop mental health promotion initiatives in a participatory manner with adolescents in the school context.

13, including 15 girls and 7 boys. Among the participants, 14 were enrolled in the sixth grade, seven in the seventh grade, and only one in the eighth grade.

It is worth noting that the following inclusion criteria were adopted for participation in the study: being an adolescent according to the criteria of the World Health Organization — that is, being between 10 and 19 years old; being regularly enrolled in the school where the project was taking place; being an *aluno/aluna acolhedor(a)* (welcoming student) according to the pedagogical function of the *Acolhimento* activity as established by the *Programa de Ensino Integral*; and having signed the Assent Form, with their legal guardians having signed the Free and Informed Consent Form. As exclusion criteria, the study considered those adolescents who, although assigned the role of *aluno acolhedor* (welcoming student) and indicated by the school staff, did not wish to participate in the investigation process.

To document the information and collective constructions, the research team used a field diary (Medrado, Spink, & Mélo, 2014), in addition to photographic, video, and audio recordings to support the description of the process.

Procedures

It is important to note that the study was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Studies Involving Human Beings at a public university, under CAAE: 63436222.7.0000.5504, Approval No.: 5.923.639. The meetings with the group of students for this research took place between March and December 2023, in spaces made available by the school, such as the cafeteria, the courtyard, and the sports court. The average duration of the meetings ranged from 40 to 60 minutes, held on a biweekly basis.

It is worth noting that mental health promotion activities had already been taking place prior to the development of this study (since 2021), through the aforementioned university extension project, which aims to develop, in a participatory manner, mental health promotion initiatives with adolescents in the school context. From the process of these earlier activities, the theme of *acolhimento* (welcoming) emerged as a demand to be addressed. In the present participatory research, this theme was explored through verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, using activities that were familiar, relevant, and even proposed by the adolescents

themselves. These included artistic expression and/or graphic representations, such as: the use of photographs, video production, music, posters, collages, group dynamics, among others — depending on the collective decisions made by the group of *acolhedores*, who identified the most appropriate ways for these tools to be used. The process was documented through photographs and recordings, made possible by the researchers' mobile phones and a digital camera funded by the affiliated university extension project.

Given the participatory nature of the study — that is, constructed through a process of action, reflection, action, and reassessment, in a manner that is not necessarily linear and with the participation of all those involved (Parrilla et al., 2016) — data production and analysis took place across four stages, which are briefly described in Table 1, with the joint participation of three university researchers and the 22 *acolhedores* (welcoming) adolescents.

It is also important to emphasize that, due to its participatory nature, the present study reflects “... the subjectivities arising from the relationships and bonds between researchers and students, which ended up shaping and framing the entire path taken for data production” (Martins, 2020, p. 50). In this process, data analysis occurred in a procedural and collective manner, as part of the process built throughout the meetings. The participants' reflections and interpretations were continuously incorporated, enabling a progressive understanding of the data. This dialogical movement allowed meanings to emerge from interaction, joint reflection, and the very activities carried out collectively (Martins et al., 2022).

Table 1

Stages of data production and analysis procedures with the adolescents

Stage	Objective	Activities	Number of Meetings
1) Survey of perspectives and planning	To explore the theme of <i>acolhimento</i> (welcoming) through the personal experiences of the participants and their role as “welcoming students”, aiming to identify their opinions and concepts related to <i>acolhimento</i> in the school context. Based on the findings and discussions from the previous stage, to plan <i>acolhimento</i> actions. To define common goals and develop strategies to achieve them within the group itself.	Creation of posters. Selection of songs that represent what it means to welcome and to be welcomed. Interviews with school community members about their views on <i>acolhimento</i> . Development of a playlist with songs that reflect the theme of <i>acolhimento</i> . Creation of a box filled with welcoming messages. Creation of a <i>clothesline</i> with ideas on how to make the school a more welcoming place.	3 meetings
2) Analysis	To revisit the process experienced in the previous stages and analyze the group’s production up to that point (surveys, discussions, and activities). To design and carry out activities considered welcoming by the group, with the aim of collectively proposing actions to promote <i>acolhimento</i> (welcoming) and, consequently, mental health throughout the entire school community.	Creation of a timeline of the process experienced up to that point. Poster with ideas and proposals related to <i>acolhimento</i> (welcoming) strategies to be carried out at school — both with the entire community and with the group of welcoming students. Group games and play activities focused on expressing and experiencing welcoming. Analysis of photographic records from this stage and definition of the strategy to be proposed to the entire school community regarding <i>acolhimento</i> : a day of play at school.	5 meetings
3) Implementation of the work	Definition of methods and strategies to share the collective construction with the school community. Implementation of lived experiences and discussions focused on specific aspects identified by the group, with the aim of carrying out the proposed actions.	Based on the proposed action, to plan and prepare the day of play, which would include the following activities, as defined by the group: Photo exhibition of the group’s process; Poster exhibition presenting the concept of <i>acolhimento</i> (welcoming); Interactive <i>clothesline</i> ; Game/team challenge.	3 meetings
4) Dissemination of the work	Execution of the action planned collectively with the entire school, giving visibility to the issues addressed regarding <i>acolhimento</i> (welcoming). Development of practical actions to disseminate the work built by the group over time.	Day of play, with the participation of the entire school in the four proposed activities.	1 meeting

Fonte: Elaborado pelas autoras

Results

The results of the participatory research with the adolescents in this study emerged from the lived process shared with them — shaped through the meetings and joint activities carried out by the entire participant group — in a continuous dynamic of dialogue, exchange, critical inquiry, action, reflection, and evaluation. This process was grounded in a respectful, democratic, and horizontal relationship between the university-affiliated researchers and the adolescent students from a public school, with the primary aim of recognizing, making visible, and validating the adolescents' own production on the theme of *acolhimento* (welcoming) (Brandão, 2006; Parrilla-Lattas et al., 2016).

Organizing this process according to the framework of traditional qualitative research — which underpins hegemonic academic production — is a challenge, as it follows a different logic and requires openness to the new, which is constructed *with* those most directly involved and invested in the reality being explored. This reality, in turn, is situated within a singular institutional and geopolitical context (Brandão, 2006).

Accordingly, the results produced will be presented based on the collective process as it was lived, organizing the jointly constructed material into categories — without, however, framing it in a way that would limit or obscure its complexity and richness. To illustrate the process and the resulting findings, excerpts from phrases written on posters and spoken comments made during the activities will be presented. These will not be attributed to specific individuals, since the dynamic was entirely collective and interactive, and the records generated (audio and video transcripts) did not allow for the identification of individual speakers.

As previously mentioned, twelve meetings were held with the *acolhedores* adolescents, covering the stages described in Table 1.

The first stage — *Survey of Perspectives and Planning* — consisted of three meetings in which data were gathered regarding the participants' understandings of welcoming, and the paths the group wished to follow from that point on were planned. As part of this process, the group engaged in activities such as creating a poster about “feeling welcomed.” There, through the identification of songs, relationships, and daily practices from the participants' lives, the group expressed the elements that, for them, represented welcoming or the experience of feeling

welcomed. This enabled the group to collectively organize their ideas about how they understood and experienced this concept.

It was observed that *welcoming* was associated with feeling important and validated by others — being able to open up, to be heard and respected, and, in doing so, to feel loved and that one belongs. The following phrases from the poster illustrate this understanding: “Feeling welcomed is being heard and loved”; “To me, being welcomed is when I’m not being excluded, but rather when I’m remembered”; “Being welcomed is when someone listens to you, knows how to talk, helps the person, knows how to put themselves in the other’s shoes, and doesn’t judge”.

The students also discussed their relationships with friends: some made lists naming their closest friends, while others used these relationships to express what *acolhimento* (welcoming) meant to them — “*I feel welcomed with my friends*”; “*It’s so good to have friends who care about you*”; Others reflected on family relationships: “*When I’m with my family*”; “*When I’m with my brother, my family*”.

The *welcoming students* also used music to express the feeling of being welcomed. Some shared excerpts from meaningful song lyrics, while others said they felt welcomed when they could listen to music they liked. In this same vein, they also spoke about sports — especially soccer and volleyball — to express the feeling of being welcomed: “*I feel welcomed when I’m playing — it’s my peace, even when I play badly*”; “*I feel welcomed when they’re forming a team and they choose me for it.*” “*When Corinthians wins*”.

Beyond what the group of *acolhedores* (welcoming students) understood about *acolhimento* (welcoming) and the feeling of being *acolhidos* (welcomed), they wanted to hear from other people at the school — that is, to understand how others perceived the concept. To do so, the research group came up with the strategy of collectively producing three posters, which were placed in the school courtyard, cafeteria, and sports court during the school’s break period. The *acolhedores* invited other students and school staff to contribute to the posters.

The content gathered closely resembled what had already been produced by the *welcoming* students — that is, relationships with friends and family were once again mentioned in relation to feeling welcomed, as well as feeling comfortable expressing oneself, feeling respected, and being able to engage in activities they enjoy, such as sports.

Figure 1

Poster activities carried out in Stage 1



Source: Authors' archive

Continuing the exploration of the theme and the gathering of perspectives on *acolhimento*, the research group wanted to carry out other activities that would allow for a broader reflection on the topic. One such activity involved creating a box filled with messages about *acolhimento* or encouraging phrases. Here are some examples of the phrases written by the participants: “Welcoming is showing affection to others”; “When you’re not feeling well, look for something that makes you feel good”; “Believe in your dreams — you can make them come true”; “You will never be alone”; “Never give up, even if life fills you with pain”; “Don’t place limits on your dreams — have faith”; “Being better than others doesn’t mean you’ll have more friends”; “Love yourself and don’t worry about what others say”; “Be yourself, not what others expect you to be”.

Another activity carried out by the group involved a “clothesline”, where group members wrote down what they thought could make the school a more welcoming place. The phrases written by the students centered primarily on the theme of respect, as seen in the following examples: “respect classmates and those who struggle”; “have more respect, empathy, and harmony”; “don’t

judge by hair or skin color"; *"fewer tasteless jokes and more respect and unity"*; *"much more respect for teachers."* Structural and school dynamic suggestions also appeared, such as: *"have more activities during recess"*; *"increase playtime"*; *"play music during recess"*.

Figure 2

Activities carried out in Stage 2: playlist, message box, and clothesline



Source: Authors' archive.

Based on the activities carried out by the group, it was possible to observe that, for the adolescents in this study, fostering respectful and prejudice-free relationships — both among peers and among everyone who attends the school — as well as making the school a more attractive place through enjoyable activities, is closely related to *acolhimento* (welcoming).

In the second stage — *Analysis* — the adolescents were invited to analyze what they had collectively produced during the previous meetings. To support this, a timeline was created. The university researchers provided photographic records, brief summaries, and the dates of the meetings so that the group could make connections and reflect on each activity. Through this process, the adolescents synthesized what they had produced, reaffirming their understandings of *acolhimento* (welcoming) and the experience of feeling *acolhidos*, while also expanding their reflections to express ideas on how to make the school a more welcoming environment for students.

The adolescents also discussed the need for more play and recreational activities within the school context — including during the meetings with the research team. They expressed a desire to have more experiences of *acolhimento* (welcoming), so that they could reflect on how to expand that experience to the entire school.

Along this path of experiencing *acolhimento* (welcoming), two additional meetings were held with open-ended practices focused on games and group play (chosen by the entire group), in order to continue fostering experiences and expressions related to *acolhimento*. The adolescents noted that *“playing is connected to welcoming because it’s a chance to share and teach someone else how to play”*. They also pointed out that *“it’s not easy to play at school, because the adults don’t allow us to run or do more ‘energetic’ activities, out of fear someone might get hurt”*. They emphasized that playing, having fun, and being together are beneficial for everyone involved in the process.

In another meeting, with the aim of fostering a new round of analysis with the adolescents, the university researchers organized and presented the audiovisual recordings made during the previous *acolhimento* (welcoming) experiences. The adolescents reaffirmed their understandings, which led to the development of proposals to offer a *day of acolhimento* (welcoming) for the entire school community. The ideas that emerged were: organizing a day of games at school; holding a film screening and discussion (inviting people to watch the videos recorded during the meetings and then discuss recreational spaces in the school); and organizing an exhibition of the photographs produced throughout the research group’s entire process.

The day of games at school was chosen as the group’s favorite strategy. The idea was discussed and further developed, with the university research team taking responsibility for coordinating the implementation of the event with the school’s administration.

The third stage — *Implementation* — aimed to plan and organize the day of games at school. Beyond providing a moment of fun, the group also intended to present and share what they had produced over time about *acolhimento* (welcoming). Three meetings were held to build and plan the proposal, with the goal of experiencing it and assessing its effectiveness.

The adolescents suggested presenting their creations during the *Dia da Culminância* (Culmination Day). According to the *Programa de Ensino Integral* (PEI – Full-Time Education Program), each Elective Activity must conclude the semester with a culmination, which consists of a product that can be shared with the school community. At the same time, there is also the

Culminância do Acolhimento (Culmination of *Acolhimento*), during which students invite the community to view the outcomes of the activities they developed (Governo do Estado de São Paulo, 2013). In coordination with the school administration, a day was made available for the working group to share with the entire school what they had developed during this already anticipated moment in the school's calendar.

Thus, through the meetings, four activities were planned: (1) an exhibition of the photos taken throughout all the meetings held by the group; (2) a poster/carpet presenting the concepts of *acolhimento* (welcoming) developed during the process; (3) a *clothesline* where people could write down what could make the school a more welcoming place; and (4) a game/riddle — created by the group — designed to invite participants to uncover a secret phrase. They would be divided into three teams, each responsible for solving a riddle to reveal one word of the phrase: “*o acolhimento transforma a escola*” (“welcoming transforms the school”).

In the fourth stage — *Work Dissemination* — the *Dia da Culminância* (Culmination Day) was carried out as planned. The school was divided into two groups, one with lower secondary students and the other with upper secondary students. As outlined in the previous planning stages, the event structure was organized into four stations: photographic exhibition; poster/carpet; interactive *clothesline*; and the secret phrase challenge. The research group divided itself among the stations and took on the role of documentation, capturing photos, videos, and interviews with the students who participated in the activities.

It is worth noting that the interactive *clothesline* emerged as a conclusion to the theme of *acolhimento* (welcoming), resulting from dialogue among the participants. In this process, they reflected on the discussions held during the meetings and compared them with the perceptions brought by the school community. Two questions were used as prompts: “What does it mean to feel welcomed?” and “How can we make the school a more welcoming space?” The *acolhedores* invited other students to write their answers on slips of paper and hang them on the *clothesline*. These responses reinforced what had been developed throughout the entire process, as the phrases described *acolhimento* as the possibility of feeling loved, cared for, acknowledged, and heard; of feeling at ease with where and with whom you are; and of having the opportunity to talk, open up, hug, and be happy.

In order for the school to become a more welcoming space, the phrases written by the students indicated that its structure needs to be more inviting, the environment more

comfortable, with spaces for listening and validation that promote inclusion, respect, and safety — along with meaningful, enjoyable, and fun activities that allow students to feel a sense of belonging and comfort.

Figure 3

Activities carried out in Stage 5 — dissemination of the work on “Culmination Day”



Source: Authors' archive

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, it was possible to develop concepts and strategies related to *acolhimento* (welcoming) together with the adolescents in the school context. According to the collective construction of the working group, *acolhimento* is, first and foremost, rooted in the relationship with the other — in feeling important, included, and validated by them. Through empathy and respect, a dialogue is fostered that involves the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and subjectivities in a safe and comfortable environment, enabling both listening and the externalization of feelings. In this way, the person feels loved, cared for, a sense of belonging — and, ultimately, welcomed. In the collective construction with the adolescents, they identified this “other” as friends, classmates, and family members.

Interpersonal relationships, therefore, play an essential role in promoting and facilitating *acolhimento* (welcoming). The adolescents emphasized the importance of friendships and family support as forms of assistance in times of distress — particularly for those who identified meaningful support in their friendships and family connections. These findings are consistent

with existing literature that highlights the role of social support networks. According to Hayakawa et al. (2010), a social support network is the sum of all relationships that an individual considers meaningful, distinguishing it from the anonymous mass of society. The support that arises from this network can also become a space for dialogue, for the exchange of important information, and for sharing knowledge gained through lived experience. The sharing of such experiences is a tool for facing situations of psychological distress through mutual support, strengthening bonds of affection and friendship — which is crucial for navigating challenging periods (Molina et al., 2014).

The need to have interpersonal relationships that are positive and meaningful can be understood within the concept of sense of belonging. A scoping review study mapped and analyzed the relationship between the concepts of mental health and adolescents' sense of belonging. The findings indicated that this phenomenon is built through relationships capable of generating social and emotional support, acceptance, and appreciation — thereby creating a sense of connection, *acolhimento* (welcoming), and inclusion among adolescents. Moreover, the study found that feelings of belonging to family, peer groups, and school are protective factors for adolescent mental health, as well as for preventing school violence and problematic use of alcohol and other drugs. Specifically, a sense of belonging within the school environment can be fostered through more democratic relationships and a climate of respect and tolerance, which promote trust-based relationships between students and school staff. These elements serve as protective barriers against situations of violence, such as bullying and cyberbullying, for example (Speranza et al., 2023).

The authors of the study also point out that, among the 30 studies analyzed, half explored the sense of belonging within the school setting — highlighting the importance of this context in adolescents' experience of belonging. Therefore, it is essential to build, within this space, environments that foster the production of life, participation, and *acolhimento* (welcoming) (Speranza et al., 2023; Brasil, 2014).

To broaden the reflection on the expansion of *acolhimento* (welcoming) spaces, the literature shows how this concept has been discussed and developed in the field of health. One example is the study by Romanini et al. (2017), which, through participatory research conducted within the context of the Psychosocial Care Network (*Rede de Atenção Psicossocial – RAPS*) in Porto Alegre, RS, aimed to analyze and question the meanings of *acolhimento* practices from the

perspectives of service users and professionals. Based on its findings, the study categorizes *acolhimento* in two distinct ways. The first is understood as an action or activity that occurs during reception and triage, or as a technical-specialized intervention. The second form of *acolhimento* is understood as a product that expands population access to services, reorganizes work processes, represents a posture or technology of care, and fosters the encounter of different forms of knowledge. Even while characterizing *acolhimento* as a tool within healthcare work, the authors emphasize that it occurs in the encounter between users and professionals. Once again, we can observe the implication of the “other” in the *acolhimento* process — a point that aligns with the findings produced with the adolescents in this study (Romanini et al., 2017).

Along these lines, the work group’s contributions in the present study help advance the discussion and development of the concept of *acolhimento* (welcoming) within the school context, extending and expanding debates that have traditionally taken place in the field of health. *Acolhimento* has been identified as a pedagogical activity and as a recommended practice in the guidelines of the *Programa de Ensino Integral* (Full-Time Education Program) of the Government of the State of São Paulo, which presents it as a set of welcoming activities for students and as the first pedagogical action of the academic year — with the main objective of fostering students’ sense of belonging to the school (GESp, 2013).

However, “to welcome [acolher] is more than an act — it is an attitude” (Yasui, 2010, p. 139). Both the users of the health services and the adolescents in this study revealed that *acolhimento* (welcoming) is not limited to a single action or gesture — it involves a continuous and consistent disposition of empathy, affection, and spaces for dialogue. For this to happen, both groups (students and users) indicated that in order to offer *acolhimento*, one must also be — and feel — *acolhido*. This care is essential, as *acolhimento* is a space of exchange through which individuals affect and are affected by one another (Romanini et al., 2017). In other words, in the case of this study, the adolescents pointed out that a welcoming student (*aluno acolhedor*) cannot demonstrate *acolhimento* toward new students if they themselves do not feel *acolhido* in their school.

The adolescents also developed the concept of *acolhimento* (welcoming) based on the implications of the school context, reflecting on ways to make it a more welcoming environment. To that end, they highlighted the importance of a more inviting structure, a more comfortable school environment, and the reduction of prejudice. They also emphasized the

need for more meaningful activities — such as listening to music during recess, having more opportunities for play, and engaging in sports. These characteristics foster greater student participation and a stronger sense of belonging, contributing to socialization and overall quality of life.

Regarding the question of environment, one may consider the concept of *Ambiência* (a term from Brazil's *Política Nacional de Humanização* that refers to both the physical setting and the social and relational dimensions of a space), as defined by the *Política Nacional de Humanização* (PNH – National Humanization Policy). According to the PNH, *Ambiência* goes beyond the physical and structural space to include the social context and interpersonal relationships. The goal of the PNH is to develop a space that is welcoming — one that fosters freedom, autonomy, and participation, promoting the production of subjectivity (Willrich et al., 2013). As for how to make the context more welcoming, the adolescents in the present study emphasized the importance of meaningful and enjoyable activities within the school community as an opportunity to share and be with others.

Engaging in activities can be understood as having a purpose that goes beyond merely generating products. It involves the formation of a relationship with the very process of producing them. The relationships and interactions that are established and built throughout the execution of these activities are what make them meaningful (Benetton & Marcolino, 2013). Human activities can foster dialogue and the exchange of knowledge between individuals, everyday life, and cultural production — being understood as territories of existence and life production, intrinsic and unique to each person. They are a fundamental element of how individuals or groups become integrated into their everyday spaces (Cardinalli & Silva, 2021). Leisure activities, play, and sports generate well-being, pleasure, socialization, and self-esteem, and they enable adolescents to develop strategies for coping with challenging situations. These activities may also be considered protective factors that promote well-being and health (Martins et al., 2022).

The study by Fabi et al. (2025), which aimed to understand and analyze elements related to the theme of mental health in adolescence together with students from a public school, using the strategy of film screening and discussion (*cine-debate*), found that the participating adolescents reported difficulty in feeling *acolhidos* (welcomed) and heard within the school context. They called for the development of practices that would ensure more welcoming physical spaces and

structures, through lived experiences of *acolhimento*, allowing adolescents to express their perceptions through meaningful activities.

In the study reported here, the need to experience *acolhimento* (welcoming) became evident during the meetings of the working group, in which the adolescents had the freedom to choose games and group play activities. The students associated play with a space for sharing experiences and, therefore, with a space of *acolhimento*. However, they pointed out the difficulty of engaging in play due to restrictions imposed by adults, motivated by the fear that students might get hurt.

A study conducted at a public school in the region of Galicia, Spain, implemented a social transformation project involving the school community — families, teachers, and students (ages 3 to 12). Through a participatory methodology and the use of the Photovoice technique, the researchers were able to identify both barriers and facilitators to students' participation in school activities — findings that align with those of the present study. The research revealed several obstacles to student play, such as short recess periods, poor flooring conditions, and a prison-like atmosphere caused by excessive restrictions and the presence of violence, all of which limited opportunities for play. On the other hand, the study also identified actions that supported students' right to play, such as the implementation of a structured game and the creation of murals in the playground (Rivas-Quarneti et al., 2024).

Due to the responsibility of meeting academic goals, the prioritization of safety (avoiding physical harm), and adherence to the rules set by the educational council, the expansion of recess time and greater freedom in play were dismissed by the adults in the school community. This led to tensions and conflicts between adults and students regarding play — illustrating how barriers and facilitators are rooted in the interaction of coexisting physical, social, political, and institutional contexts, which together shape the opportunities for meaningful play. The authors conclude that changes to the physical environment must be implemented alongside changes to the social, institutional, and cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of recognizing children and adolescents as rights-holders, and of play as a right (Rivas-Quarneti et al., 2024).

In line with the findings of the study reported above and those of the present research, another Brazilian investigation aimed to explore children's perceptions regarding the factors that promote and those that hinder their mental health in an after-school program. The results

also pointed to play, sports, educational activities, and contact with nature as elements that promote mental health. In contrast, bullying and other forms of violence were perceived as harmful (Martins et al., 2022).

Continuing with the findings of the present investigation, it is essential to discuss welcoming spaces and to address issues of race, gender, and sexuality that shape the lives of adolescents — influencing their social position, identity, experiences, and life opportunities. Discussions developed by the working group, based on input from the adolescent participants — such as *“being respected in my gender”*, *“not judging by hair or skin color,”* and *“fewer tasteless jokes and more respect and unity”* — reinforce the need to incorporate these topics into school practices.

Social and economic issues influence individuals’ living conditions and health, with those generating social stratification standing out most prominently. In other words, there are structural factors in society that affect how power and wealth are distributed — including the division of social classes and the presence of prejudice based on characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality, or disability. Political systems contribute to the deepening of inequalities related to economic power (Carvalho, 2013). Among the mechanisms that generate and sustain this stratification is the education system, which can corroborate and reinforce the increase in violence within the school context by producing and maintaining social inequalities (Ristum, 2023; Carvalho, 2013). Therefore, exposing the forms of violence that arise from this system of oppression is essential for understanding the racist, sexist, and LGBTQIAPN+phobic⁴ practices that occur in the school environment — as well as in other settings. These mechanisms of discrimination and exclusion negatively impact quality of life, mental health, autonomy, and everyday social interactions (Cecchetto et al., 2023).

Just as the school reproduces and reinforces the inequalities and prejudices rooted in society, it can also foster the process of denaturalizing forms of discrimination and domination. Thus, it is necessary to develop not only public policies, but also concrete actions within the school context to address diversity collectively — using educational resources that contribute to promoting social inclusion and, consequently, creating a more welcoming and safe school

⁴ It refers to any and all forms of intolerance and discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Non-Binary people, and other gender identities and sexual orientations that do not conform to heterosexual and cisgender norms.

environment. Preventing violence involves raising awareness, encouraging reflection, and broadening the discussion (Cecchetto et al., 2023).

Final Considerations

To reiterate, the aim of the present investigation was to identify adolescents' perspectives on *acolhimento* (welcoming), as well as to plan and implement *acolhimento* strategies within the school context in collaboration with adolescents. It is believed that conducting the research in a participatory manner and adopting creative methodologies were strategies that contributed to the collective construction of data production, also serving as facilitators of dialogue more closely aligned with the students' lived experiences.

The working group understood *acolhimento* as something rooted in relationships with others — in the process of feeling a sense of belonging, of being respected, heard, and loved. They also explored the contextual implications, proposing ways to make the school a more welcoming place through a more inviting and comfortable structure, free from prejudice, and filled with meaningful activities for adolescents that allow for greater participation and protagonism.

This study has the limitation of presenting a process constructed within a specific reality — a public state school — which may have significantly influenced the results produced. However, it is believed that investigations such as this may serve as a pathway for discussing aspects and challenges of the school context in a contextualized manner, in order to engage with the actual experiences of the school community. For this reason, future investigations in this direction are encouraged, aiming to identify viable strategies for promoting students' mental health, expanding actions at an intersectoral level, and enhancing the role of the school as a possible space for this purpose.

Finally, it is believed that this work contributed to the production of knowledge *with* adolescents, and not *about* them — creating spaces for emancipation and social participation, and broadening the issue of *acolhimento* into an ethical dimension of everyday school life.

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Notes

Submission data:

Submitted to evaluation on August 08, 2024; revised on March 28, 2025; accepted for publication on May 10, 2025.

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Support and Funding:

Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, (Grant / Award Number: '2023/15310-7')

Research data availability:

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Research ethics:

The research was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Plataforma Brasil, according to Process no.5.923.639.

Copy Editing services:

Portuguese version - Copy editing and standardization of citations and bibliographical references (7th. Edition APA): Francisco López Toledo Corrêa
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