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The Impact of COVID-19 and Trauma on Student Behavior and Considerations for Strategies for Educator to Support Students

Wpływ COVID-19 i traumy na zachowanie uczniów oraz rozważania dotyczące strategii wspierania uczniów przez pedagoga

Abstract: COVID-19 has been difficult on children, and there has been an increase in anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems in schools. This article summarizes the recent literature on the effects of the pandemic on the mental and behavioral health of children and provides an overview of the root causes of the behaviors that may be exhibited by students. The impact of trauma and health on learning are well documented and supported by brain science. Schools are in a position to buffer and support students so that the negative effects of trauma can be mitigated. Recommendations on strategies that schools can take to support students are also included.

Keywords: COVID-19; student mental health; social and emotional learning; trauma

Abstrakt: Okres pandemii COVID-19 był bardzo trudny dla dzieci – w szkołach nastąpił wzrost lęków, depresji i problemów behawioralnych. W artykule podsumowano najnowszą literaturę na temat skutków pandemii i jej wpływu na zdrowie psychiczne i behawioralne dzieci oraz przedstawiono przegląd podstawowych przyczyn zachowań, które mogą przejawiać uczniowie. Szkoły są w stanie buforować i pomagać uczniom tak, aby można było złagodzić negatywne skutki traumy. Uwzględniono również zalecenia dotyczące strategii, jakie szkoły mogą przyjąć, aby wspierać swoich wychowanków.

Słowa kluczowe: COVID-19; zdrowie psychiczne uczniów; uczenie się społeczne i emocjonalne; trauma

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a better appreciation for the non-academic supports that schools provide students and staff. When schools initially closed at the start of the pandemic, school staff desperately searched for ways to

provide such essential services as breakfasts and lunches, medical care, and behavioral health supports to students and families who depended on receiving them through school. The lack of other school-based experiences, such as physical activity, interpersonal connections, and social, emotional, and behavioral learning, did not cause the same immediate distress, but the potential ramifications of their absence are beginning to appear as anxiety and other mental and behavioral health challenges have increased among students (Hafstad, Augusti, 2021; Naff et al., 2022; Viner et al., 2022). COVID-19 has led to stress and feelings of grief and loss in youth and families who worry about the health of loved ones, job security and the economy, and who miss their established routines and friends. For neighborhoods hit the hardest by the pandemic, the uncertainties and fears have been even greater. Unfortunately, recent world events will probably add to the accumulated anxiety in both students and adults.

With students spending most of their day in schools and interacting with teachers and school staff, schools are at the forefront of the social, emotional, and behavioral consequences of the last two years on our children and youth. There are reports that behavior challenges have increased, social cues are not as understood, and the ability to share and interact with peers has decreased (Blad, 2022; Naff et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022). There are also reports of increases in fighting, emotionally hurtful interactions, and absenteeism (Belsha, 2021). In a recent review of the emerging literature on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of pre-kindergarten – grade 12 students, Naff et al. (2022) identified broad repercussions to mental health, including increases in anxiety, depression, loneliness, and violent behavior such as hitting, throwing objects, and acting out. They also found that COVID-19 was very unsettling for everyday activities and routines, including diet, exercise, sleep, and technology use. School personnel need to be prepared to address these issues to support students and staff more than they have in the past. As will be discussed, they should ensure that structures and supports are in place to provide students and staff with emotional, behavioral, and social help, create positive school environments, and provide training in social and behavioral health to all students and staff.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a growing understanding that healthy students learn better (Basch, 2011; Kolbe, 2019; Michael et al., 2015). In a seminal literature review on the prevalence of seven health issues in urban minority youth in the United States and their impact on certain academic indicators, Basch (2011) concluded that children who have these underlying health conditions are at risk for poor academic success. The seven health issues he reviewed were poor vision, asthma, teen pregnancy, aggression and violence, physical activity, breakfast, and inattention and hyperactivity. He selected them because they were prevalent, had successful school-based programs to address them, and

there was evidence of causal effects on academic achievement, such as sensory perceptions, cognition, school connectedness and engagement, absenteeism, and dropout rates. He further argues that health promoting activities and programs should be a fundamental part of education. These findings are corroborated by the World Health Organization (2011), which considers health and education "mutually reinforcing interests" (p. 2), and recommends that schools promote health as well as learning.

There is also growing evidence that child development and learning are influenced by environmental factors. Recently, a team of authors reviewed meta-analyses, peer-reviewed literature, and handbooks on the last 20 years of science on learning and brain development to understand the influences on learning and development (Cantor et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2020). In a series of two articles, they provide a synthesis of their findings and outline the attributes that are conducive to learning. One article provides a review of the recent discoveries in brain development (Cantor et al., 2019), while the other focuses on relationships and contexts, and provides an overview of the micro- and macro-systems that impact development in both positive and negative ways (Osher et al., 2020). Together, they offer a view of development that demonstrate the power of nurturing and nature. The authors conclude that human growth and development is fluid and influenced by both the environment and genetics, and that affective elements can impact learning and development. Furthermore, they suggest that relationships are a key driver of healthy child development. They state that external factors not only have a positive or negative influence on a child's development, but that new environments and relationships can either counteract or fortify the effects of previous environments. These findings suggest that schools have the capacity to either buffer or reinforce both positive and negative influences from outside the school environment by developing a nurturing, caring environment for students and supporting the growth of their social and emotional well-being.

A review of the factors that influence motivation, assessment, and instruction provide similar conclusions about the importance of affective school factors, such as trust, caring, relationships, and respect. For example, one study found that higher levels of positive feedback led to higher performance (Hirn et al., 2018). In their overview of 1,400 metanalyses on the factors that work best for student achievement, Hattie and Zierer (2019) identified nine domains and 250 effects that impact positive achievement. The domains include student, home, school, classroom, curricula, teacher, teaching strategies, implementation methods, and learning strategies, and highlight the impact of relationship building on academic success. In addition, studies have suggested that school climate effects achievement and that a positive climate can mitigate the detrimental effects of stress and external factors. In a synthesis of 78 studies on school climate, Berkowitz et al. (2017) found that

a positive school and classroom climate has a positive effect on student achievement. School climate focuses on the students' experience and how they perceive such areas as school discipline, a supportive academic, emotional, and physical environment, and trusting, respectful, and caring relationships (National School Climate Center, n.d.).

Furthermore, there is growing evidence of the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on a child's social, physical, and cognitive development. ACEs are traumatic events such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; divorce; food insecurity; parent or guardian death, incarceration, mental or physical illness, or substance abuse; neighborhood violence; neglect and deprivation; social discrimination; and homelessness (Bethell et al., 2014; Plumb et al., 2016; Sacks et al., 2014). To illustrate the prevalence of childhood trauma, in the United States, 48% of children have experienced at least one ACE in their lifetime, while 10% have experienced three or more (Bethell et al., 2014; Sacks et al., 2014). This number will undoubtedly increase after the events of the last few years, as children have experienced stress and loss during the pandemic. While many children are affected by at least one of these experiences, studies indicate that children who experience three or more are at greater risk for poor academic performance and poor health as adults. Extensive trauma, such as that experienced with multiple ACEs, can have a detrimental effect on the developing brain, causing behavior and learning difficulties so that children cannot reach their full potential if unaddressed (Plumb et al., 2016). For example, one quantitative study using a national data set in the United States demonstrated that students with two or more ACEs were more likely to miss more than two weeks of school, repeat a grade, and be less engaged in school (Bethell et al., 2014).

In a review of the available literature, Plumb et al. (2016) summarize the effect of trauma on a child, as well as efforts that can be taken to mitigate the experiences and reverse the negative impact. For example, extensive trauma can affect a child's stress response, leading them to have difficulty understanding social cues, sleeping, self-regulating, decision-making, language acquisition, and healthy self-concept development (Plumb et al., 2016). These effects may show up as angry outbursts, difficulty making and keeping friends, aggression, and difficulty concentrating. It can also affect motor-control, coordination, and spatial awareness. If a child experiences extreme trauma, they may be in constant fight, flight, or freeze mode, making it nearly impossible to focus on learning. In addition, a child who does not feel physically or emotional safe will have difficulty learning (Allensworth, Hart, 2018; Basch, 2011; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2019).

To counteract these difficulties, there are a number of strategies that schools can take. As we now know from the brain science and the malleability of the developing brain, it is possible to buffer the effects of trauma through caring, sup-

portive relationships, a safe and consistent learning environment, developing and teaching social, emotional competencies, and implementing restorative discipline policies and therapy for those most affected (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Minkos, Gelbar, 2021). Plumb et al. (2016) recommend a focus on building attachments, enhancing student and staff self-regulatory capacity, and increasing social and emotional competencies. It is also recommended that a trauma-sensitive culture be created by providing teachers and staff with training on the impact, prevalence, and signs of trauma, encouraging healing, caring relationships, and facilitating student social and emotional competencies (Bethell et al., 2014; Plumb et al., 2016). Knowing and understanding the impact that difficult environments and experiences can have on children will help educators empathize with their students so that they react and support students in ways that support their positive growth. The goal is to create environments and situations that actively seek to avoid retraumatization and allows students and staff to develop positive and healing relationships (Minkos, Gelbar, 2021).

In addition to these larger, whole school efforts, there are less intensive and time-consuming activities that can have a positive impact. For example, providing opportunities for exercise offers a protective factor against behavioral and mental health challenges. Other recommendations include creating and consistently following daily routines, providing creative outlets, such as art, music, free play, and writing, and providing support to caregivers so that they can support their children (Naff et al., 2022). It is also important to provide a space and time for interpersonal interaction so that students can hear from each other and discuss events that are important to them (Belsha, 2021). In one school in the United States, 15 minutes each morning are now set aside to talk about world events, personal stress, or mindfulness activities (Belsha, 2021). Other simple activities such as greeting students warmly at the door of the school or classroom every time they enter, communicating and consistently following daily schedules, teaching and reinforcing behavioral routines, and using positive discipline can have a positive effect on student well-being (Minkos, Gelbar, 2021).

In conclusion, physical and social emotional well-being make a difference in student academic outcomes. Schools have the opportunity to improve academic outcomes by providing health services, such as dental, mental, and physical health, as well as an emotionally and physically safe school environment. In addition, they have the power to mitigate the impact of external stressors, as well as contribute to any positive or negative reactions by reinforcing positive behavior. Schools can provide a buffer against trauma or trigger and prolong it through their school climate and culture and the relationships that they foster. As Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) conclude in their report on creating schools that focus on the whole child:

Research indicates that schools and child-caring services must be organized around strong, developmentally supportive relationships; coherent and well-integrated approaches to supports, including home and school connections; well-scaffolded instruction that intentionally supports the development of social, emotional, and academic skills, habits, and mindsets; and culturally competent, personalized responses to the assets and needs that each individual child presents. To achieve these goals at scale, a holistic vision for youth development is needed in which all the elements that impact students are designed in ways that make sense and are science-based. (p. 36)

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