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Teacher Stress in the Current Covid-19 Pandemic

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Keywords

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TEACHER STRESS IN THE CURRENT COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The Covid-19 infection drastically altered the 2019-2020 school year, shortening and preventing its completion. As a result, we do not know if the school will return as normal in the fall or not. This uncertainty causes stress for parents, students, and teachers. We need to recognize these stresses and develop a strategy to deal with them.

Introduction

On December 31, 2019, a rapidly progressive viral illness began to spread in Wuhan, China. By January 30, 2020, it had become a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and spread rapidly across the globe. In Mississippi, the rapidity of spread reached such a level of concern that on March 18, 2020, classes were temporarily halted until further notice. Initially, school interruption was only intended to last until March 30. However, on April 14, 2020, schools were officially closed by Governor Tate Reeves. Lesson plans were interrupted, children's lives were interrupted, and teachers were left to wonder what they needed to do to continue looking after the children's welfare in their classrooms.

Teacher Stress in the Current Covid-19 Pandemic

Stress is a fact of life for teachers. In the 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey, respondents reported that 61 percent of teachers felt that their jobs were always stressful, twice the rate reported by workers across the United States. The survey also showed 58 percent of teachers cited poor mental health as the result of stress. It went up 24 percent from 2015-2017. Now we are three years down the road, and we have the influence of Coronavirus completely disrupting the entire educational environment.

Shelter at home orders jerked children out of classrooms. Children undergoing advancement testing suddenly were unable to receive additional attention from professional teachers, and parents had to take up the role of being their child's educator. Many of them have no professional training to do so, and they are trying to maintain their careers from home. Another consideration that the public may not be aware of is the large number of children that depend on the school system to provide nutritious meals. Children who received most of their daily nutrition at school now have no regular balanced diets. Many parents lack the resources to provide their children balanced meals. Teachers are left to worry about these children and their welfare while they are away from school.

Tiny eyes behind facemasks hide smiles of recognition. Small hands wave with enormous gloves at the grocery stores in small towns across America. Because of strict social distancing requirements, teachers cannot give the affection to their students that both student and teacher crave and need. It solidifies a new reality of social isolation. Teachers were required to utilize zoom to notify their students and parents that school would not resume in the classroom this year. Not only seeing their sweet smiles turn to disappointment, but for some, hearing that they would not advance to the next grade level was heartbreaking. Teachers, parents, and students

know that they would have reached their goals and made significant progress if given another two months.

Those of us who teach in underprivileged communities, particularly in Mississippi, face a situation where computer access is often limited or non-existent. This presents a challenge as to how to get material and instruction to the students. In addition, it leaves the teachers with an almost desperate inability to compensate for the disruption caused by the virus.

There is fear and uncertainty. Will school resume next year? If so, what form will it exist in? No one is sure. The answer relies on an, yet unanswerable question. What will the virus do? The only pandemic of this magnitude occurred from 1918-1920 and was widely known as "the Spanish Flu." It, too, required strict quarantines, facemasks, and social isolation. When the incidence of flu dropped in early 1919, restrictions were eased, and the resultant secondary wave was significantly worse. In all, 500 million people were infected, a third of the world's population. Fifty million died, the vast majority in the second wave. Fear of a similar resurgence could easily lead leaders worldwide to delay the resumption of normal educational activities. But even if schools generally resume in the fall, there will be a sense of fear and dread that hangs over every group activity. Some of our students will experience critical illness and death due to this virus.

So, what do we do? First, we as teachers must ensure that we use every resource at our disposal to take care of ourselves, each other, and our students. Wellness must become a priority. In 2007 the University of Virginia started a unique program for the time. It was designed to be a lifeline for teachers in distress; CREATE Cultivating Resilience for Educators, Administrators, and Teachers. Designed to help educators of all levels rediscover the joy of their profession and designed to help them find ways to overcome the obstacles that prevent them from achieving their true potential.

We will also need to find a way to talk to our students about what we have all just gone through and will likely continue to navigate. We must do this without creating additional fear and anxiety. The United Nations Children's Fund is a humanitarian organization sponsored by the United Nations devoted to the well-being of children. They have come up with eight specific suggestions for how we might best speak with the children we interact with about the COVID-19 virus. First, they suggest you start by simply openly talking to your child to find out what they already know about the topic. Second, to have a reasonable baseline and to try and correct mistaken ideas and unrealistic fears. It is essential always to make sure that the child feels that they are in a safe environment to think that they can talk freely. Third, make sure you are educating the child about Coronavirus in a kid-friendly way that is age-appropriate. Fourth, try to avoid excessively technical language that is too complex for the child to understand. Finally, it is imperative always to tell them the truth to maintain faith that what you tell them is something they can trust and believe in. If your child has any questions and you cannot answer them, don't just make something up; use this time to use the resources around you to prepare to answer their questions. Fourth, offer reassurance when your child is not sure. Make sure they know what they are saying when telling others about it.

On a practical note, do the necessary things. First, make sure you are giving your children routines to stay healthy. For example, washing their hands and sanitizing areas. Second, share acts of kindness, whether a card, balloons, or treats for people around you. Lastly, make sure you take care of yourself and make sure your child is not stressed because of your insecurities.

We as teachers have the responsibility of teaching academics, but for many students, we are the voice of reason and compassion. This virus and the havoc created have also created an opportunity to teach our students discipline, patience, obedience, and compassion for one another. They are learning that we will all work together to navigate a terrible situation and come out of it with grace and love for one another.

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