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Post-Pandemic Socio-Emotional Challenges in Students: A Multidimensional Consultation Approach

Besart Hysniu posted May 17, 2023 1:48

1098

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During recent conversations with various school district staff (as part of a different learning task), I noticed how often the topic of the COVID-19 arose as a new challenge that schools are facing. Echoing the findings of research studies like those conducted by Viner et al. (2021) and Barendse et al. (2021), many professionals are expressing concern over developmental setbacks, particularly in terms of socio-emotional issues reflected in student interactions. These conversations and corroborating research make it clear that extended periods of social isolation have had a significant effect on children's development, especially in K-5 students who are at a pivotal developmental stage.

As students begin to re-enter the social environment of schools, where they have opportunities to interact with peers, staff are noticing challenges such as a lack of problem-solving ability, reduced respect for personal space, increased egocentrism, and an inability to empathize or see problems from a peer's perspective. Many of the observations by school personnel I spoke to align with concerns raised in a study by Almeida et al. (2022). It appears that the unusual circumstances and potential lasting impacts of the pandemic (Viner et al., 2021) emphasize that there is a pressing need to address these issues. As school psychologists in training, we are also asking: **How could we, as future practitioners, inspire and support the school-based team, including educators and parents, to best address the deficits that have arisen due to the pandemic?**

I think and feel that this course has provided is with an opportunity to explore and brainstorm potential strategies to tackle such challenges. A multidimensional consultation approach may be necessary especially for post-pandemic issues such as this, one that involves not only school psychologists but all levels of the school-based team. For example, school psychologists

may need to brainstorm strategies on how to effectively communicate with parents and other stakeholders about the emerging evidence of lasting impacts of social isolation (Almeida et al., 2021). As we strive to understand and address the needs of our students in this post-pandemic landscape, we must consider: **How can we, as future school psychologists, recalibrate our expectations and interventions, taking into account the unprecedented circumstances these children have faced?**

As we consider these realities and grapple with these challenges, let's open up the discussion with the following questions:

1. **How can we, as school psychologists, better inspire and facilitate collaboration among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to address the socio-emotional issues students are facing post-pandemic?**
2. **What specific interventions might be effective in addressing the observed deficits in problem-solving and social interaction skills?**
3. **How can we, as school psychologists, guide parents and teachers to understand and navigate these new challenges?**
4. **Given that norms reflect a pre-COVID population, should we recalibrate what we consider typical behaviour in this new context?**

For those interested in further reading, I will provide an extended source list, and will indicate the ones I explicitly used in the post by making them bold. The book titled "Navigating students' mental health in the wake of COVID-19: Using public health crises to inform research and practice" (Kauffman & Badar, 2022) I am finding especially interesting and relevant to us, unfortunately not available through the UCalgary library at the moment.

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Student 1 response

May 28 at 6:19 PM

Hi Besart,

This is definitely something that I have been considering as well. Many teachers have discussed the impact of COVID on students' behaviour and self-regulation. I've also been concerned about how the past few years has disrupted learning and potentially missing foundational knowledge, especially at the younger grades. We talk about the importance of these key skills, so I can't imagine standardized test performance will reflect actual ability in our current students.

I think the social and emotional conversations are much easier to address, as we have become more comfortable openly discussing mental health. I believe some of that has to do with the pandemic and the immense stress and worldwide mental health issues that became more apparent during lockdown. However, it is still a very tricky conversation to have, especially considering each parent has different comfort levels regarding their child's exposure and safety. For example, some students still wear masks every day, some parents may limit their child's circle or involvement in activities. We wouldn't want to encourage parents to involve their child in more community activities that they don't feel safe engaging in. Moreover, the parents may be experiencing their own mental health challenges.

Even outside of the pandemic, I think we need to operate under the idea that nothing is necessarily normal or abnormal and focus on the needs of the family and child. If the child is showing discomfort or impairment, then we need to problem solve with them on an individual level.

 [Reply](#)



Besart Hysniu

May 28 at 11:54 PM • 287 Words



Thank you for your response and thoughts,

This is definitely something that I have been considering as well in the past week since I posted. Looking back, it feels surreal what we just experienced, with the lockdowns, the isolation, the sudden shift to online learning. And to think of the children who were already struggling with challenges prior to the pandemic crisis, it's heartbreak. Not only did the lockdowns multiply the challenges they were facing but it exacerbated them, turning an obstacle race into an uphill climb with fewer available supports. These will be the children we are first likely to see with increased needs that are both more crucial and complex.

I agree with you that we shouldn't be facing dilemmas, in line with that concern about what the tools are saying, since ultimately we are the ones to interpret those findings; If the screeners and assessment tools we use are showing the impacts despite their limitations in this context (the representativeness limitation of the traditional assessment tools in this unique context), perhaps there is less need for

reframing the "typical" in this new environment and, as you say, just continue focusing on the needs of the students. Thank you for pointing this out. It was the essence of the question posted and the need to do more for this generation of students.

In your experience, what's one small change that made a big difference in handling post-pandemic challenges? (I am reminded of your experience both in schools and as a volunteer, wondering what could be done in schools to address some common themes / sources of anxiety such as the level of comfort that youth face in public settings after what they went through)

 [Reply](#)

Student Response
May 29 at 7:10 PM

Hi Besart,

One of the coolest things that I've seen is a practice that one of the grade one teachers implemented. She noticed that her class was really struggling to self-regulate on the carpet. Instead of fighting with them to sit still, she got a number of fidgets that they can use on the carpet. A lot of them were weighted. I think there were some alternative seats as well. It's really helped them sit at the carpet and engage in the lesson. Honestly, I would highly recommend that schools or primary teachers implement strategies like that.

I'm not quite sure about mental health or anxiety, perhaps just approaching the kids with compassion and allowing them to take breaks when needed.

 [Reply](#)



Besart Hysniu

May 29 at 11:21 PM • 361 Words 

Hello again

I completely agree that the techniques some master teachers use in their classrooms are amazing. One thing I had to learn quickly as a substitute this past year was classroom management. Even before that, volunteering in classrooms helped me understand some aspects of what you describe. I saw the teacher pick up on signs of anxiety, those antecedents way before they became visible. They would pull the student aside, lowering to eye level and having a one-on-one connection exactly when it was needed. It's an art form, I have to say. Some simple things really helped me, particularly with the lower grades (K-3). For example, I would show up 45 minutes early for my shift, which gave me plenty of time to go

over the notes, student files, and behavioral needs. I would familiarize myself with what to expect and sort out logistics, such as whether I had a laptop in the classroom or needed to borrow one from the front desk for the day. I'd also test-operate the projector.

By the time the students showed up, I was fully prepared and my eyes were on them the entire time. I greeted each student at the door, chatted with parents (sometimes they would do silent-reading with their child for the first 15 minutes of the day). Then during attendance, instead of calling out names, I would go to the first student on the list, ask how they were doing that morning, a small chat about anything that came up, and then ask them to point to the next student on the list. This allowed me to build brief one-on-one rapport with each and every student, even if it took an extra five minutes. I also found that spending a bit of extra time building rapport with the students I needed to keep an eye on made them more receptive when I needed their attention. I think this ties back to the original discussion. Although I don't have a reference point for what behaviors in the classrooms were like before the pandemic, the way we must approach the needs of the students and what tends to work does not change.

 [Reply](#)



Student 2

June 14 at 11:20 AM

I'm a little late to the party, but there are lots of good discussion questions here. What I find interesting is the idea that we might need to recalibrate our baseline idea of what normal social emotional functioning is following the pandemic. This is really tricky - as things continue to become more normal, I feel like the socially affected children are going to work their way through the system like a bubble that hopefully pops once the next generation of non-covid affected kids comes through. But where does that bubble end? Are we waiting for 12 years to get the kindergarten kids through?

I know anecdotally, different grades even just within high school seem to be affected differentially. At our school, most staff view the grade 10s as the most impacted. They missed some essentially introduction to high school years, and now have notably lower levels of engagement, maturity, and to some degree social skills. The grade nines by comparison are much more typical.

In terms of collecting new data, I think we should definitely be studying these kids to see how and in what ways they may be atypical. However, baseline stats are baseline stats and I think that we should maintain our definitions of what is expected behaviour. In our division, we are using the grade tens as a sort of study.

Using surveys and academics and more, they are looking at how the grade tens are faring, and I think they will be following them through to graduation. I think that type of research is useful. Beyond that, I think teachers and clinicians should simply make considerations for the fact that these kids didn't have typical socialization experiences over the past few years.

 [Reply](#)



Besart Hysniu

June 14 at 11:53 AM • 376 Words



Thank you for revisiting this topic in a way that brings in full circle, back to the original question. I completely agree about the differential impacts of the pandemic on different grade levels. The bubble analogy is very fitting too, I think and made me wonder about whether the impacts linger as opposed to the bubble bursting and some normalization taking hold. I keep thinking this the more I read about how Lazarus and colleagues (2021) argue the dual factor model (one of the pre-readings for this week), where, as you say some do better at recovering than others. In a sense it seems that the gap has widened here, during that 'stress test' we went through for the last few years. The widening gap I am referring to is the one between those who - for a variety of reasons - were more resilient than others. There's that Diathesis Stress Model (Zuckerman, 1999) that also connects to this idea for me (also referred to as the Stress Vulnerability Threshold, or the Fulcrum analogy), where compounded disadvantages, sometimes spanning generations, made it less likely for some children to navigate the social isolation in a healthy way.

In other words, I guess I am wondering about whether the line we draw when referencing norms on what is psychopathology vs what is typical is leaving out the well being component that Lazarus and colleagues (2021) mention.

It is interesting that the conversation about the pandemic inevitably led to the greater debate on how to reshape how we approach mental health in schools; it highlighted a problem that is hard to ignore. I completely agree that collecting data will be crucial here, and hopefully we maintain focus on creating a more inclusive, culturally responsive and resilient model that will serve all students better, regardless of what the threshold is for a condition to qualify as a mental health issue, particularly those who were neglected systemically during lockdowns.

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