The Impact of COVID-19 on PreK -12 Teachers, School-Based Mental Health Professionals, and Their Abilities to Support International Children's Rights: A Preliminary Investigation

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This is the first of two companion poster presentations

Introduction

School professionals are suffering some of the worst consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 has led to a worldwide closing of schools which is affecting the education of approximately 1.5 billion students. Article 29 of the *U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child* describes the goals of education and explains that children's education should develop "the whole child" and each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. Teachers, school psychologists, and other school-based mental health professionals play key roles in supporting all aspects of children's development, including international children's rights.

Data was gathered through three sources: 1) reports provided by professional organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists and the International School Psychology Association, 2) interviews with educators and school-based mental health professionals, and 3) responses to an online survey about COVID-19 and its impact on schools.

The survey studied the importance of the three C's in dealing with COVID-19; they are control, coherence, and connectedness (Polizzi, Lynn, & Perry, 2020). Preliminary results suggest that the jobs of school professionals have become much more difficult since the onset of COVID-19. (See Figures and Table 1). Many school professionals are feeling scared, confused, and overwhelmed with virtual learning. They are exhausted having to wear masks constantly, and they feel emotionally disconnected with their students and colleagues.

Although many school professionals appear to be highly stressed, there is also evidence that some are coping well and exhibiting psychological resilience. Of the three C's, connectedness seems to be the most important. According to some school professionals, the pandemic has actually opened doors with connectedness. For example, parents who normally wouldn't be able to attend school meetings due to work obligations, are now able to attend when given a virtual option. Also, some school professionals state that coping with COVID-19 has sparked their creativity and a "community of support."

Methods

Participants.
The participants for this preliminary investigation were 71 anonymous school professionals who answered a brief online survey about the psychosocial impact of COVID-19. The participants included teachers and school-based mental health professionals who were recruited through professional organizations.
Measures.
The survey had five open-ended questions and three questions on a 7-point rating scale. In addition, guest lecturers on COVID-19 provided personal communications.
Data Analysis.
The quantitative data collected from the participants' online surveys were presented with descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were analyzed according to the three stage method describe by Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen (2010): 1. Organizing and familiarizing, 2. Coding and reducing, and 3. Interpreting and representing.
Limitations.
Although we were able to receive IRB approval for our study with school professionals, we were not able to receive IRB approval for our proposed study with children. This is unfortunate because our focus is on the rights and mental health of children.
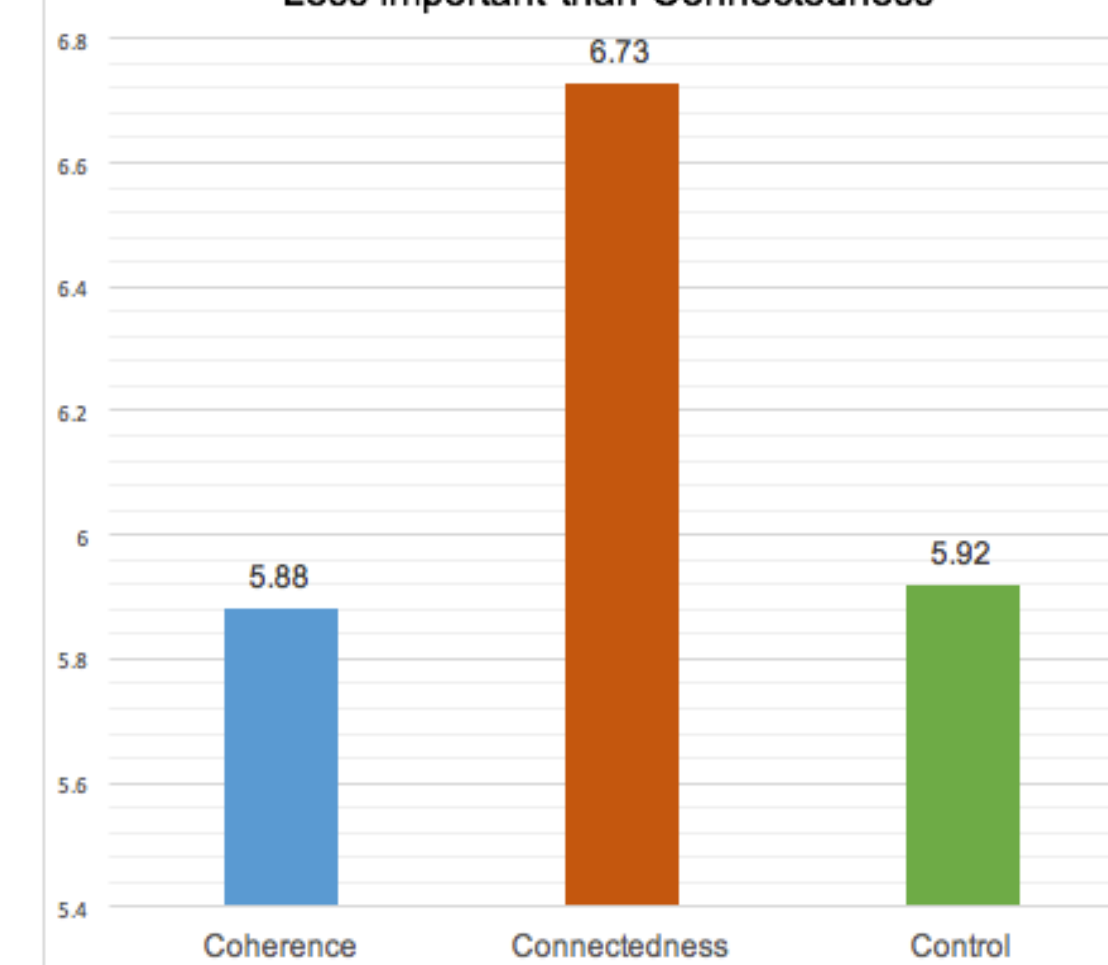
Results and Discussion

COVID-19 Stress and Burnout

"Teaching staff are experiencing high levels of stress. They are being asked to do at least two different jobs by teaching in person and remote on top of all the other hats they wear for their job. Burnout is at an all-time high. Then add the stress of your own family's health and well-being on top of it. It makes for a nightmare!"

Figure 1. Participants' Ratings of the "3 C's"

The "3 C s" model explains patterns of coping and resilience in these situations: coherence, connectedness, and control. These types of coping activities help individuals to deal with stressful and demanding situations (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010).
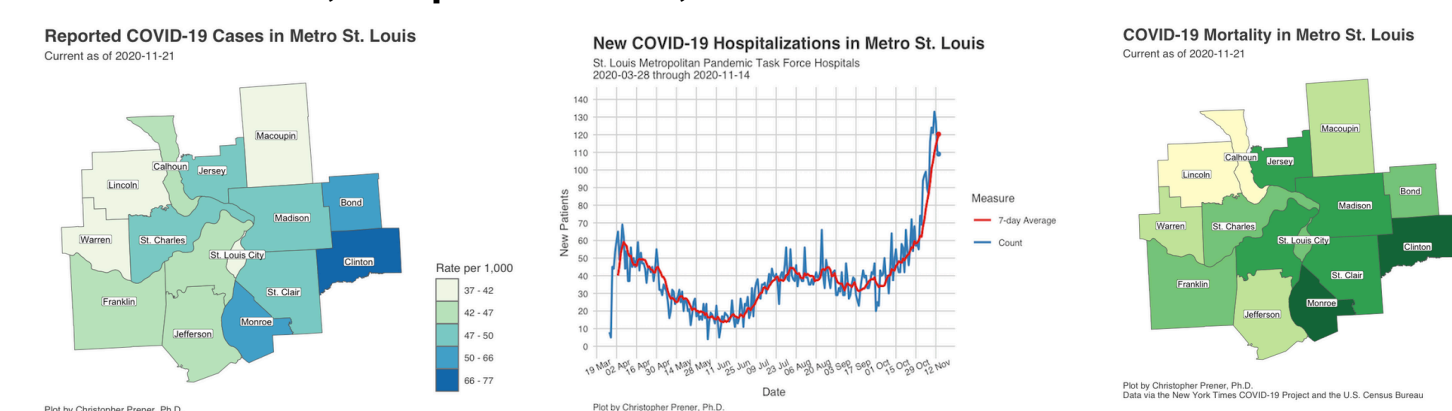

During COVID-19, Control and Coherence Are Rated as Less Important than Connectedness

Coherence: 5.88
Connectedness: 6.73
Control: 5.92

Sixty participants rated the importance of the Means (with standard deviations in parentheses) for coherence, connectedness, and control were 5.88 (0.99), 6.73 (0.58), and 5.92 (1.14), respectively.

Figures 2, 3, and 4: COVID-19 in the St. Louis area, Missouri, U.S.: Recent Rise in Cases, Hospitalizations, and Deaths in the Greater St. Louis Area

Reported COVID-19 Cases in Metro St. Louis

New COVID-19 Hospitalizations in Metro St. Louis

COVID-19 Mortality in Metro St. Louis

Note: The COVID-19 graphics above describe the situation in the St. Louis area where we are living and working.

Participating School Professionals' Emotional Responses to the Impact of COVID-19: Summary of Qualitative Data (See Figure 5 and Table 1)

Figure 5. 58% very stressed out 22% sad/depressed 20% fearful/afraid

During COVID-19, Participants Report Feeling Very Stressed Out, Sad and/or Depressed, Fearful or Afraid
- fearful/afraid 20%
- sad/depressed 22%
- very stressed out 58%

Table 1. Examples Responses to the "3C's": Coherence, Connectedness, & Control

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Coherence	"School-based professionals are putting themselves at risk to support and teach students during this time. They are being stretched extremely thin, but know that the students need some sort of normalcy in their lives." "In my opinion, teachers are finding coherence in accepting that this is the world we're living in right now and we have to adapt and find creative ways to do our jobs and reach our students. The longer that we've lived in this pandemic, the more educators have accepted the new lifestyle and have adapted to find successful strategies in the classroom."
Connectedness	"Virtual connection is not in-person connection. The school environment is nowhere close to what it has been in the past. Schools are grounded in the community, and the lack of said community is harmful to both staff and students." "In hybrid or in person schools like mine, there is a strong sense of connectedness - staff share worries in the lounge, while distancing for lunch, and chat with other staff in passing in hallways. There is also a strong sense of connectedness with kids in person even if we cannot be physically as close to them as before. Virtual teachers however are struggling to find that connectedness and I believe depression and hopelessness among these teachers might be higher because they cannot share their new stresses with each other daily or support each other."
Control	"Teachers are all stepping up to the plate and helping each other, it's the school leadership that is failing schools." "This is a time when we are reminded that we don't have control. I understand that there are things we can do individually to increase our resilience, but as a mental health professional, I see this focus on personal choices as part of a system that locates the problem in the individual."
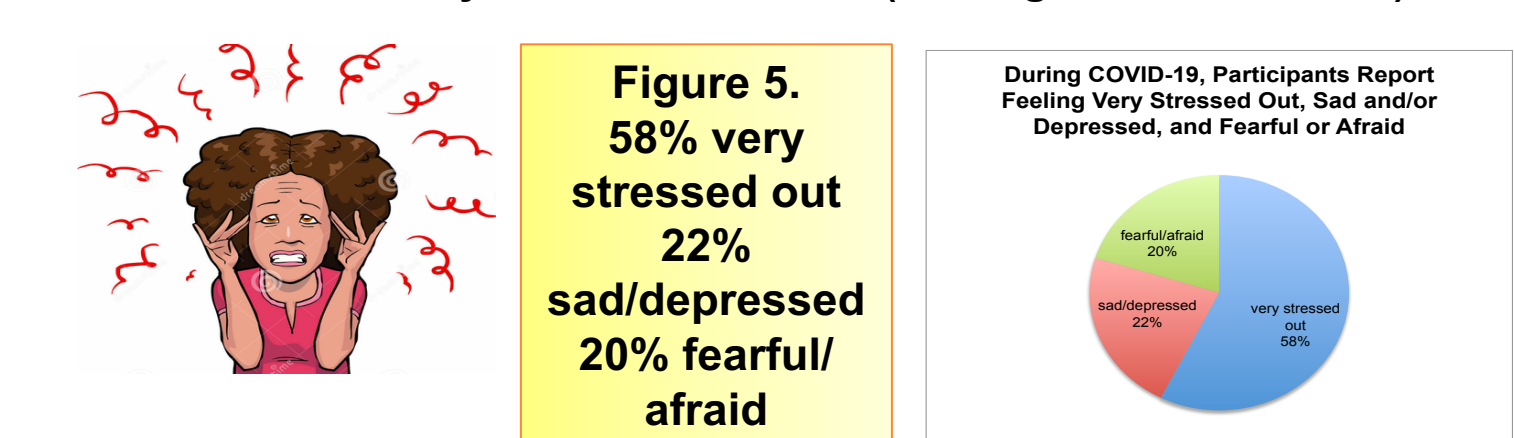
Figure 6. Relieving Stress and Finding Peace with LKM

Try the "Loving Kindness Meditation"

Start by focusing on yourself. Think or say the following:

"May I be filled with loving kindness May I be held in loving kindness... May I feel connected and calm... May I accept myself just as I am...May I be happy...May I know the natural joy of being alive."

Now think of someone dear to you. Repeat the mantra. Then do the same for a neutral person, perhaps the mailman or a store clerk. Now do so for someone with whom you have a difficult relationship.

Now expand your awareness. Focus on your community and say the mantra. Then your city, state, country, and finally the world.

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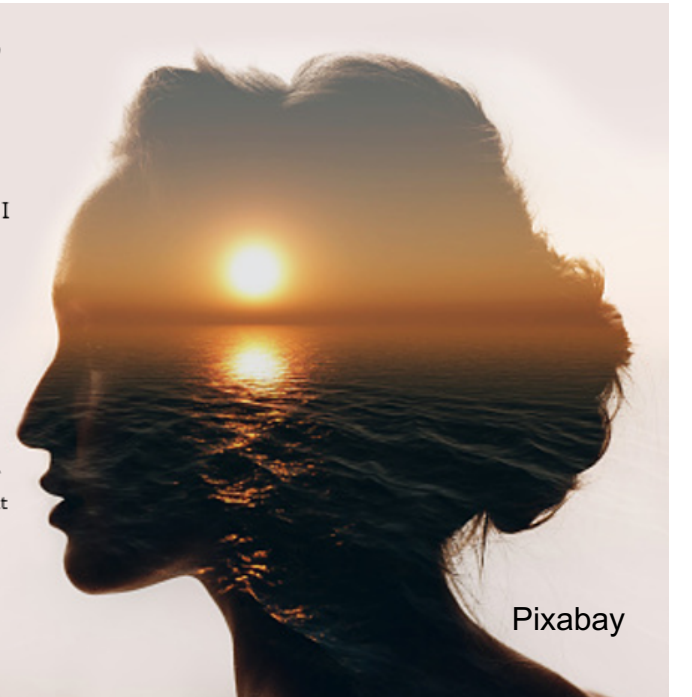
"The impacts of COVID-19 have been felt in every community in this world. Individuals across the globe have been sickened and died, families and friends have grieved, and countless numbers have suffered from isolation and disruption to normal rhythms of life. The Loving Kindness Meditation reminds us that we are all connected." (Courtney LeCompte, Personal Communication, 11/15/20)

We hold weekly Resilience Meetings that are based on the seven steps of healing described by Kalayjian (2017). The purposes of these meetings are to relieve stress and build community. "Our Resilience Meetings provide a safe, confidential place to identify our feelings, garner support and be heard by our peers, free from judgment." (Sara Price, Personal Communication, 11/12/20)

Summary Statement

This preliminary investigation found that many teachers and school-based mental health professionals report feeling stressed out, sad, fearful, and overworked as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Our study is a beginning. The results from our study suggest that we should do more in depth studies of emotional responses to COVID-19, the effectiveness of our Resilience Meetings for coping with stress, and the implications of COVID-19 for international children's rights and children's mental health. In order to support Article 29 of the *Convention*, school professionals should find a way to create meaning for ourselves, share that meaning with others, and focus on interconnectedness and resilience. (Natasha Morales-Rivera, Meaningful World, personal communication, November 11, 2020).

References

Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorensen, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth

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