COVID-19, Teachers, Mental Health Professionals, Well-Being, and International Children's Rights

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Introduction

● In 2020, we presented a poster, "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" at the ICP virtual conference.

● In 2022, we are presenting a follow-up study that compares responses from 2020/2021 with responses from 2022.

● In 2020, COVID-19 led to a worldwide closing of schools, affecting the education of approximately 1.5 billion students.

● Lack of access to education exacerbated the vulnerabilities of children because many schools switched to online delivery methods and children no longer had direct contact with their teachers or the school-based mental health professionals.

● The school professionals were on the "front-lines" of supporting the learning and mental health needs of children; their work became exceedingly difficult during the pandemic.

● Their challenges were further complicated because children in some living situations did not have access to the internet or computers.

● In those instances, the children's right to education was abridged. (Article 28 of the *U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child* declares that children have the right to education).

Objectives

1. To draw attention to the 2020/2021 and 2022 impacts of COVID-19 on school-based mental health professionals and teachers.
2. To discover what might lead to stress-reduction, positive coping, and psychological resilience in school professionals.

Selected Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Schools and School Professionals

● In many places, a lack of connection and online teaching were most difficult challenges for teachers during COVID-19 (Baker et al., 2021).

● In Puerto Rican schools, the coronavirus pandemic was added to other disasters including Hurricanes Irma and Maria and multiple earthquakes. (Boulon et al., 2022).

● A study of COVID-19 stress and coping among students grades 4 through 8 found high levels of anxiety and depression in students (Demaray et al., 2020).

● Canadian school psychologists reported "significant decreases in their own mental health/well-being as compared to before the pandemic" (Ritchie et al., 2021, p. 358).

● During COVID, Filipino teachers receiving emotional and instrumental social support experience higher levels of psychological well-being (Casanova et al., 2022).

Selected Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Stress, Coping, and Psychological Resilience

● A study of 21 countries found that social connection is key to how people adapt and cope with the worldwide COVID-19 crisis and may facilitate post-traumatic growth in the context of the threat experienced during the pandemic (Matos et al., 2021, p. 1).

● In Sweden, "the most frequently used coping method was nature as a resource in dealing with stress and sadness" (Ahmadi et al, 2022, p. 770).

● We can learn from "how people have coped in the past in order to identify strategies that may be particularly effective in managing [COVID] distress and cultivating resilience during these perilous times" (Polizzi et al., 2020, p. 59)., Polizzi's three C's are important in dealing with COVID-19; they are control, connectedness, and coherence.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to compare survey responses from 2020/2021 with 2022. The 68 anonymous participants in this online survey about COVID-19 were recruited through convenience sampling. In both time periods (2020/2021 with 2022), the researchers used email lists for graduate students and school professionals connected with an international university based in the midwestern United States. The final sample for the comparison study was limited to those participants who competed all parts of a brief online survey about the psychosocial aspects of COVID-19. Coincidentally, there were exactly 34 participants in each of the two time periods. The brief survey had five open-ended questions about COVID and three questions on a 7-point rating scale about the 3 C's (Control, Connectedness, Coherence). 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

FIGURE 1. PARTICIPANTS' RATINGS OF THE "3 C'S": CONTROL, CONNECTEDNESS, & COHERENCE
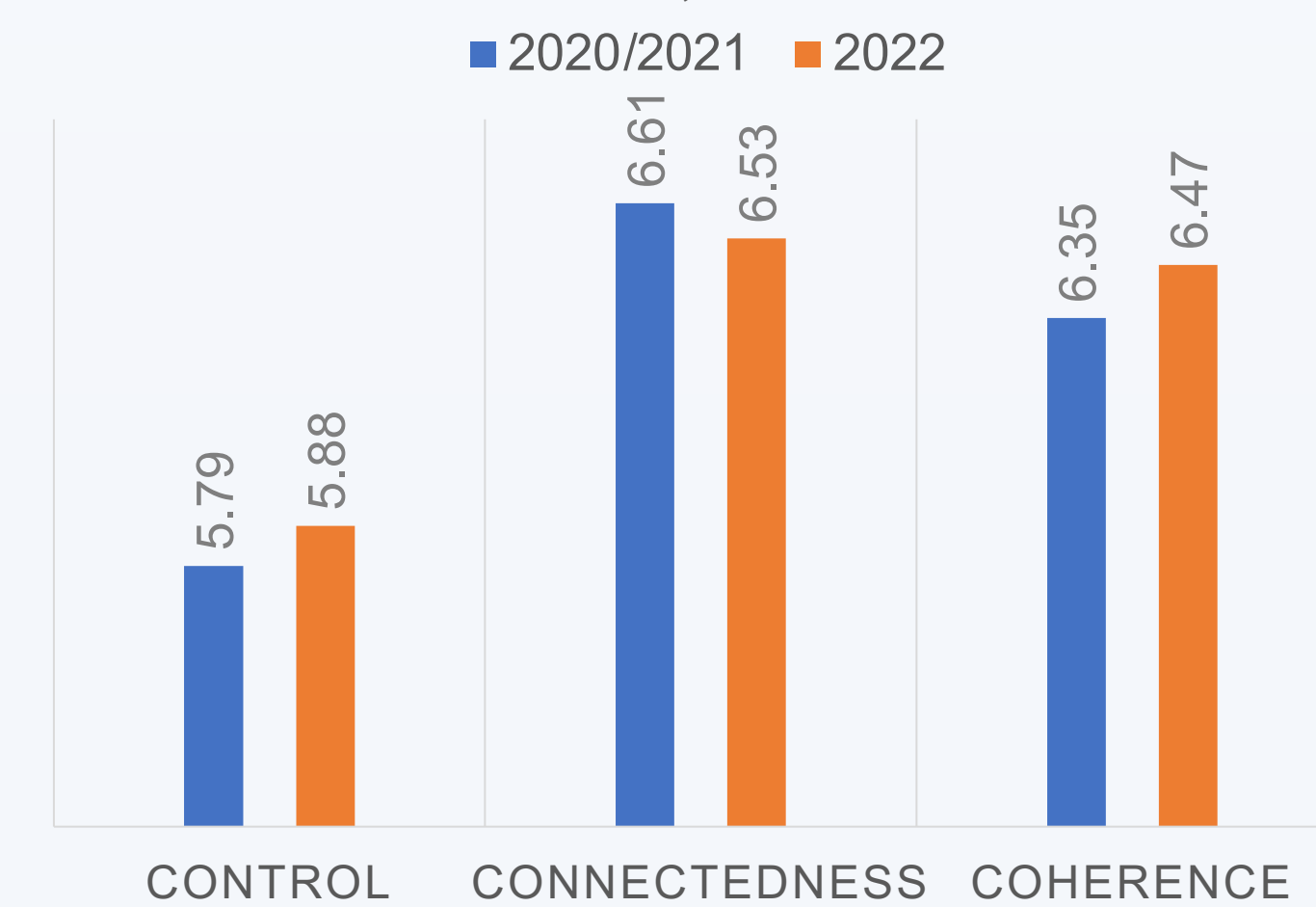
	2020/2021	2022
CONTROL	5.79	5.88
CONNECTEDNESS	6.61	6.53
COHERENCE	6.35	6.47

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

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."

"It's hard to make sense of what's going on in the world for our students when it comes to the pandemic because, again, there are still people who are ignoring science and calling it a fake disease, or "just the flu…just a cold." And the stigma around the vaccine is hard to explain to kids."

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."

It's harder to connect virtually, and the masks make [in-person] connections difficult.

EDUimages

"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."

"No control. Because we have no resources. We are drained."

"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."

Results

●. Results were that all 68 school professionals reported job-related COVID-19 stress. In both 2020/2021 and 2022, more than one-third described highly negative COVID experiences such as being "exponentially stressed out", "wildly overwhelmed", "constantly bombarded", "extremely stressed", "feeling unlimited stress", "suffering with stress", "extremely helpless and hopeless", and "very stressed, exhausted, and overworked."

● A "wildly overwhelmed" teacher is "very stressed, exhausted, and overworked" as she attempts to teach (at the same time) young children in-person and online.

(All photos are from EDUimages, a project of All4Ed).

● ANOVAs and Pearson correlations were used to study the results of the 7-point rating scale. When the results from 2020/2021 were compared with 2022, the only statistically significant result was that control and coherence were correlated. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed and there was a positive correlation between the two variables, $r(66) = .44, p < .01$.

● On the rating scale, the most highly rated items for coping with COVID-related stress were connectedness and coherence. Responses to the open-ended questions provided insights into the importance of connectedness and coherence.

● One participant wrote that "Connectedness is important to school-based professionals to establish a relationship that's based on trust with the children and families that you service."

● Another participant wrote, "I would say that school professionals need connection more than anything right now; that seems to be the most important piece of the equation in managing the impacts of COVID-19."

● About coherence, a participant wrote, "I think coherence is a line that defines if teachers are satisfied or not. In the ideal situation, there would be coherence and a level of continuity that lets the teachers feel like they are in an environment that is predictable and where they know what success is and the means to achieve it. When teachers feel like there is an inability to understand the actions of the school, or where there is a discontinuity between the school's overall purpose of 'supporting students in learning' and the [school administration's] actions of giving teachers little ability to support the students learning, this creates incoherence that causes teachers a lot of personal strife.

Discussion

We hypothesized that the negative impact of COVID-19 on school-professionals and children would be less severe in 2022 than it was in 2020/2021. It appears that we were wrong. When comparing the two time periods, there were no statistically significant differences on the "3 C's", and participants from both both time periods described highly negative COVID experiences.

In their written comments, the participants described many losses – both deaths and non-death losses. They expressed dismay about putting themselves at risk and feeling a lack of control at school. They complained that the school administrations did not understand the extreme stress they were feeling and some participants wrote that they wanted to quit their jobs. A recent study from the American Psychological Association found the following, "Rates of interest in quitting their careers or transferring schools are troubling and high across the board, ranging from 29% to 34% for school staff, administrators, and mental health personnel" (APA, p. 1).

Conclusions

"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 (LKM) reminds us that we are all connected." (Courtney LeCompte, Personal Communication, 11/15/20). LKM has psychological and physical benefits (Lee et al., 2012).

At our university we hold Resilience Meetings that are based on the seven steps of healing described by Kalayjian (2017). The purposes of these meetings are to relieve COVID-19 stress and build community. The sixth step of healing is described as "connecting with mother earth"; this "nature as a resource" is the same approach to COVID that the Swedes take.

"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).

Limitations and Strengths

Among the many limitations of this follow-up study on the impact of COVID-19 on school professionals are that it has a small sample size and it is a sample of convenience. Nevertheless, this study highlights what has been ignored by so many people: COVID-19 caused extraordinary stress for many highly dedicated and competent school professionals. And yet, many teachers and school-based mental health professionals were able to cope with COVID-19 and even be resilient due in part to their capacities for meaning-making (coherence),as well as having personal connections, and a some sense of control.

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