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 and could not attend school.
● In those instances, the children's right to education was abridged. (Article 28 of the *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 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 the "3 C's" are important in dealing with COVID-19; they are control, connectedness, and coherence. Much of our COVID-19 research study is based on understanding the importance of coherence, connectedness, and control.

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

● In many places, a lack of connection and online teaching were the 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).

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. ANOVAs and Pearson correlations were used to study the results of the 7-point rating scale.

The qualitative data from the open-ended questions 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.

Results

FIGURE 1. PARTICIPANTS' RATINGS OF THE "3 Cs": CONTROL, CONNECTEDNESS, & COHERENCE

■ 2020/2021 ■ 2022

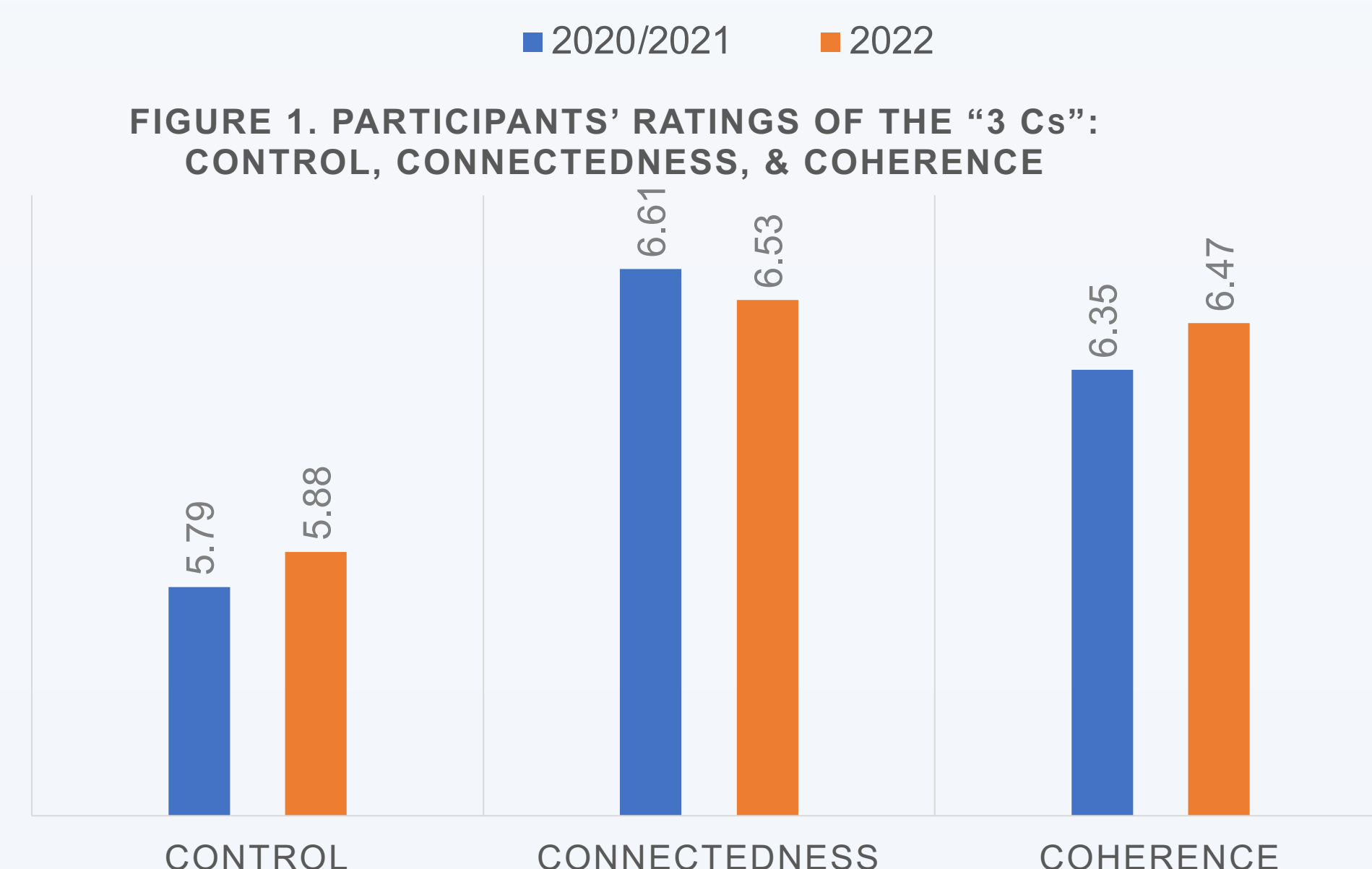|	CONTROL	CONNECTEDNESS	COHERENCE
2020/2021	5.79	6.61	6.35
2022	5.88	6.53	6.47

Figure 1 shows the ratings of the "3 C's" from 2020/2021 and 2022. When the ratings from 2020/2021 were compared with 2022, the only statistically significant result was that connectedness 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.

The qualitative 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". In their written comments, some participants 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).

When the participants' comments from 2020/21 were compared with the participants' comments from 2022, there were no statistically significant differences in the number of participants who mentioned the words anxiety or anxious. When 2020/21 was compared with 2022 on the number of participants who mentioned depression, depressed, or suicide, there were significant differences in the two time periods, X^2 (1, N = 68) = 3.904, p = .048. More participants mentioned the words depressed, depression, and suicide in 2020/2021 than in 2022.

Discussion

● In this photo, 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).

Some school-based mental health professionals may have also felt "wildly overwhelmed" by the high expectations and intense demands placed on them.

● "Within the context of school psychology, the COVID-19 pandemic implores us to enhance our crisis management skills … School psychologists can provide interventions to help individuals impacted by the virus as well as all its related risks to healthy social, emotional, and behavioral functioning" (Nickerson et al., 2021, p. 274).

● "I have seen an increase in aggressive behaviors, apathy towards learning, and generally frustrations from teachers and students." (Quote from anonymous survey participant (school psychologist), 2021).

● "I see people that are stressed, depressed, and disengaged. They are easily frustrated and can become overwhelmed" (Quote from anonymous survey participant (teacher), 2022).

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, coherence, and control.

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

Coherence:
Through conversations with students, staff, teachers, and administration, school-based professionals are able to make sense of what is happening in the world around them. Additionally, school-based professionals often conduct their own research or professional development in order to make sense and meaning. ." (Quote from anonymous survey participant)

Connectedness:
"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." (Quote from anonymous survey participant)

Control:
"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." (Quote from anonymous survey participant)

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. With one exception, 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. Also, there were no statistically significant differences on the mention of the words anxiety or anxious.

However, more participants mentioned the words depressed, depression, and suicide in 2020/2021 than in 2022. One anonymous participant from 2020 commented, "Last weekend, a teacher committed suicide due to stress from COVID."

Conclusions

In their article about COVID-19, Polizzi and colleagues describe strategies that "are geared to help individuals make meaning, build distress tolerance, increase social support, embrace a view of our deep human interconnectedness, and take goal-directed value-driven actions in midst of the stealthy and terrifying threat of COVID-19" (p. 62).

Our study shows that school professionals are feeling very stressed due to COVID-19. Being told they need to practice self-care places too much responsibility on individuals. Self-care is very important, but school professionals have an even greater need for social support and community. These kinds of healing approaches will enhance the coping skills and the psychological resilience of school professionals.

In our applied psychology programs, we have developed our own strategies for meaning making and stress reduction during COVID-19. " In our programs, we hold Resilience Meetings that are based on the seven steps of healing described by Dr. Ani Kalayjian (See Meaningful world website). The purposes of these meetings are to relieve COVID-19 stress and build community. Most often the Resilience Meetings are held on Zoom.

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 some sense of control.

These school professionals were on the front lines of COVID-19, and they protected children's right to education.

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