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Make Healing, not Performance, the Goal for K-12 Schools Amid this Global Pandemic

Abstract: The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has had far reaching implications on every aspect of human life – from where we work, to where we feel safe to grocery shop, to how we greet friends. At the same time, the pandemic has exposed long-standing issues of structural racism, xenophobia, social and economic inequities, precipitating multiple large-scale social justice movements and demonstrations in the United States, culminating in “dual public health emergencies.” As Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) students slowly return to school, educators are grappling with how to support their students amid these overlapping crises. In this paper, we discuss the relevance of trauma-informed pedagogy, with a specific focus on 3Rs – relational connectedness, restored trust, and contextualized resilience. We urge educators to keep the whole child at the center of their curriculum, and to make healing – not performance – the priority for K-12 schools amid and following the global pandemic.

Keywords: K-12 schools, pandemic, trauma, resilience, connectedness, social justice

摘要 (Munyi Shea & Alexis N. Awdziejczyk: 对于幼儿园到 12 年级的学生的目标, 治愈而非成绩): 新型冠状病毒 (COVID-19) 已对人类生活的各个方面产生了深远的影响-从我们的工作场所到我们在杂货店感觉安全的地方, 再到与朋友打招呼的方式。同时, 该大流行暴露了长期存在的结构性种族主义, 仇外心理, 社会和经济不平等, 在美国引发了多次大规模的社会正义运动和示威游行, 最终导致“双重公共健康紧急事件”。随着幼儿园到 12 年级 (K-12) 的学生逐渐重返学校, 教育工作者们正在努力应对如何在这些重叠的危机中为学生们提供支持。本文讨论了创伤知情教育学的相关性, 特别关注 3 个“R”: 关系联结, 恢复的信任和情境化韧性。我们敦促教育工作者将完整的孩子放在他们课程的中心, 并在全球性大流行其间和大流行之后, 将康复 (而非展现) 作为 K-12 学校的优先事项。

关键字: K-12 学校, 大流行, 创伤, 韧性, 联结性, 社会正义

摘要 (Munyi Shea & Alexis N. Awdziejczyk: 對於幼兒園到 12 年級的學生的目標, 治愈而非成績) 新冠病毒 (COVID-19) 已對人類生活的各個方面產生了深遠的影響-從我們的工作場所到我們在雜貨店感覺安全的地方, 再到與朋友打招呼的方式。同時, 該大流行暴露了長期存在的結構性種族主義, 仇外心理, 社會和經濟不平等, 在美國引發了多次大規模的社會正義運動和示威遊行, 最終導致“雙重公共健康緊急事件”。隨著幼兒園到 12 年級 (K-12) 的學生逐漸重返學校, 教育工作者們正在努力應對如何在這些重疊的危機中為學生們提供支持。本文討論了創傷知情教育學的相關性, 特別關注 3 個“R”: 關係聯結, 恢復的信任和情境化韌性。我們敦促教育工作者將完整的孩子放在他們課程的中心, 並在全球性大流行期間及大流行之後, 將康復 (而非展現) 作為 K-12 學校的優先事項。

關鍵字: K-12 學校, 大流行, 創傷, 韌性, 聯結性, 社會正義

Zusammenfassung (Munyi Shea & Alexis N. Awdziejczyk: Heilung, nicht Leistung: das Ziel für Schülerinnen und Schüler vom Kindergarten bis zur 12. Klasse): Das neuartige Coronavirus (COVID-19) hat weitreichende Auswirkungen auf jeden Aspekt des menschlichen Lebens - von der Arbeit, wo wir arbeiten, wo wir uns sicher fühlen, über den Lebensmitteleinkauf bis hin zur Begrüßung von Freunden. Gleichzeitig hat die Pandemie die seit langem bestehenden Probleme des strukturellen Rassismus, der Fremdenfeindlichkeit sowie der sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Ungleichheiten offengelegt und in den Vereinigten Staaten zahlreiche groß angelegte Bewegungen und Demonstrationen für soziale Gerechtigkeit ausgelöst, die in "doppelten Notsituationen im Bereich der öffentlichen Gesundheit" gipfelten. Während die Schülerinnen und Schüler vom Kindergarten bis zur 12. Klasse (K-12) langsam in die Schule zurückkehren, ringen die Erzieherinnen und Erzieher damit, wie sie ihre Schülerinnen und Schüler inmitten dieser sich überschneidenden Krisen unterstützen können. In diesem Beitrag erörtern wir die Relevanz einer traumainformierten Pädagogik mit besonderem Schwerpunkt auf 3R - relationale Verbundenheit, wiederhergestelltes Vertrauen und kontextualisierte Widerstandsfähigkeit. Wir fordern Pädagogen nachdrücklich auf, das ganze Kind im Mittelpunkt ihres Lehrplans zu halten und inmitten und nach der globalen Pandemie Heilung - und nicht Leistung - zur Priorität für K-12-Schulen zu machen.

Schlüsselwörter: K-12-Schulen, Pandemie, Trauma, Resilienz, Verbundenheit, soziale Gerechtigkeit

Резюме (Муний Шеа & Алексис Н. Авджейчик: На первом месте оздоровление, а не учеба: такой должна быть цель для детей, начиная с детского сада и вплоть до 12 класса) Коронавирус нового типа COVID-19 серьезнейшим образом повлиял на каждый аспект жизни человека: это влияние ощущается в нашей профессиональной деятельности, в областях, где мы до этого ощущали себя комфортно и безопасно; это влияние сказалось на нашем потребительском поведении, даже на том, как мы теперь здороваемся и общаемся с друзьями. Одновременно с этим пандемия обнажила давние проблемы структурного расизма, ксенофобии, социального и экономического неравенства. Это, в свою очередь, спровоцировало в США массовые акции и демонстрации с требованием соблюдения социальной справедливости. Наивысшей точки в условиях чрезвычайной ситуации данная проблема достигла в области общественного здоровья. В то время как школьники, начиная с младших классов и заканчивая старшей ступенью, постепенно возвращаются в свои классы, педагоги, воспитатели ломают голову над тем, как поддержать своих учеников в этот сложный период, когда кризисы накладываются буквально один на другой. В данной статье мы определяем значимость травмапедагогике с акцентированием внимания на трех составляющих – реляционное единство, восстановленное доверие, контекстуализированная резильентность. Мы настойчиво призываем педагогов удерживать фокус внимания именно на ребенке и считать приоритетной задачей сохранение его здоровья, а не погоню за результатом – как в период пандемии, так и после нее.

Ключевые слова: кей 12 (система образования в США от детского сада до 12 класса), пандемия, травма, резильентность (психологическая устойчивость), взаимосвязь, социальная справедливость

We are at war. Not a war between countries, but one against a deadly respiratory virus that has ravaged the world. As of late summer 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has sickened over 20 million people worldwide. In the United States alone, more than 6 million people have been infected and over 180,000 have died. At the same time, the pandemic has laid bare the government's ineptitude in handling a public health emergency and exposed long-standing issues of structural racism, xenophobia, social and economic inequities, precipitating multiple large-scale social justice movements and demonstrations including Black Lives Matter. Adults and children took to the streets to express their mistrust in the current leadership, anger at the senseless murder and police brutality against Black people, and desire to combat systemic injustice.

With weeks away from the new academic year, the following questions are at the forefront of K-12 educators' minds: *Is it safe for students to return to school? What do we expect to see in our classrooms? What stance should we take to approach our teaching? How do we cultivate a school culture that facilitates respect, understanding, safety, restoration and healing?*

Much has been written on the severe reactions to stress children experience following major calamities such as war and natural disasters. Traumatic events affect children in all the ways they affect adults. They lead to elevated clinical needs and mental health issues including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), functional impairments (e.g., memory loss, inability to solve problems), as well as fear and grief. Many symptoms persist over a long period of time, leading to chronic health effects such as cardiovascular disease, substance dependence and abuse, and premature death.

While we cannot ascertain *how* students' needs will manifest come this school year, we do know *what* challenges they will face. Even prior to the pandemic, 60-70% of all students would have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime by the age of 16 (Copeland et al., 2007). It may not be an overstatement to say that all our students will begin the school year with some degree of psychological vulnerability or trauma; the impact of the global pandemic on children is multifaceted and far-reaching. Here are a few examples:

- **Disruption of schooling.** Due to school closures, many children have been receiving no, or minimal instruction. The impact has been especially egregious for children in school districts under-prepared for emergency remote learning and in homes with limited Internet and technology access.
- **Social and cultural losses.** Physical distancing and home confinement disrupt children's social and cultural support networks (e.g., school, community, church) and interfere with their sense of structure and normalcy, leading to strong feelings of fear, worry, sadness, anger, and loneliness.

- **Illnesses and deaths.** Although children are less vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 and developing severe symptoms compared to adults, they can still become hospitalized and become fatally ill. Furthermore, children may witness adults in their lives succumb to the deadly disease.
- **Economic and familial stress.** The pandemic has dealt a severe blow to the local and global economy. Parents and caregivers might struggle to keep their jobs and provide for their children. Being cooped up at home could intensify existing behavioral and mental health issues, family strife and intensions, and increase exposure to abuse and domestic violence.
- **Moral suffering.** Mass information and grim news of illnesses, deaths, police brutality and systemic injustice, as well as personal experience of race-based discrimination, harassment or assaults (e.g., anti-Asian hate incidents) could lead to children's question whether their community is a safe and caring place.

This is a watershed moment for an educational reframe. Whether we will return to school or more likely, continue remote learning this coming year, the only certainty is that students and families will turn to their teachers, school administrators, and counselors for far more than content learning. We propose that educators should make *healing*, not performance, the priority for K-12 schools during this unprecedented time. Healing cannot begin to take place until we have established a sense of emotional safety and trust. In the following, we outline the 3 Rs – *relational connectedness*, *restored trust*, *contextualized resilience* – as critical elements to the process of healing in the school context.

Relational Connectedness

Relational connectedness, also known as social connectedness, refers to a sense of closeness and belonging to a social network (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Positive social interactions boost oxytocin, a neurochemical that promotes trust in others and activates learning centers of the brain. Educators could weave in activities and assignments in their curriculum to foster connectedness in their classrooms, and tangibly show care for their students. For example, teachers could invite students to tell a story about themselves and their families during the COVID-19 lockdown. Such an activity would not only allow students to share their individual perspectives and articulate their feelings, but also highlight their shared experiences of fear, loneliness, frustration, perseverance and hope during a very uncertain time. Teachers could do home visits to increase connection with students and families. During the lockdown, teachers from my (Munyi Shea) children's school made surprise visits to our house, dropping off learning materials and personalized cards while keeping safe distance. Through authentic relationship building, educators can better understand the needs of their students and acknowledge the myriad factors, including trauma, that shape their students' psychological landscape. Rather than asking students who are not doing well to start identifying with school, trauma-informed educators would reflect on their own practice and ask how they could identify with these students. Supportive and trusting relationships are critical to bolstering student resiliency and foundational to creating a community that values all its members.

Restored Trust

Healing requires more than putting a bandage on the wound; it calls for an examination of the causes of injury and an actionable plan to stop the re-wounding and suffering. Educators committed to the well-being of marginalized groups of students, including those identifying as black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), must go beyond individual-level student care and advocate for structural changes. For both white and non-white educators, this would mean taking responsibility for our biases, power, privilege, and internalized oppression beyond self-reflection and intellectual dialogue. This would mean critically examining how our assumptions and worldviews inform our notion of education. For instance, are we creating a curriculum that reflects the history and realities of BIPOC and gender diverse students? Are the instructional methods and assessments – whether in-person or online – designed with our most economically disadvantaged students in mind? How does remote learning help certain groups of students thrive (e.g., reduced social distractions and increased physical safety), but widen the learning gaps for others? Do school principals and district administrators share an antiracist vision and demonstrate

concrete support by investing resources in related professional development? Only by actively identifying and eliminating systemic racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice, discrimination and structural inequalities, can educators disrupt the perpetuation of injustice and power imbalances and show our students that we deeply care about them and the world that surrounds them.

Contextualized Resilience

Resilience is an important concept in children's social emotional learning. Instead of focusing on adversity and psychopathology, resilience emphasizes strength, adaptivity and an ability to navigate through and bounce back from difficult experiences (American Psychological Association, 2011). However, resilience – like many other mental health concepts – originate from Western culture and is rooted in the biomedical model that asserts that mental disorders are biologically-based brain diseases and tends to minimize the relevance of psychosocial or behavioral contributions (Deacon, 2013). The assumption that mental and behavioral problems are located within an individual person often calls for individualist, person-centered coping responses such as self-awareness and self-management. A contextualized understanding of resilience, on the other hand, encourages educators to acknowledge the varied and indigenous ways of responding to and coping with life challenges amongst our students. During the pandemic lockdown, some school bands and choirs came together online to rehearse for and perform a virtual concert, demonstrating a communal practice to cope with the collective trauma. A contextualized understanding of vulnerability and resilience also frame our understanding of the limitation on students' access to resources that shape their lifestyles and health behaviors. For some students, having a set routine in their households or taking a leisure walk in their neighborhoods is not an option. When students show up to class with symptoms resembling anxiety, attention deficits/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or major depression, educators could move from a deficits-focused mindset toward a more compassionate approach in providing flexible accommodations.

The elimination of coronavirus and school re-opening may still be in the distant horizon. As educators, we must also tend to our own healing and restoration to avoid compassion fatigue. Honor our limits and acknowledge that this is the "new normal." As we push onward with our students, it will likely not be the lessons we teach that carry them through hard days and despairing moments; it will be how we teach and show up for our students: with courage, dignity, hope, and perseverance.

Practical Resources for Educators

In the following we provide some resources for educators to consider and implement the 3Rs strategies (also included under references). For relational connectedness, we recommend *Teaching Tolerance* (Coombs, 2016); *Multicultural counseling: Understanding bias and practicing humility* (Francis, 2020); *Classroom mental health strategies for students and teachers* (McClintock et al., 2019); and *Training teachers in relationship building* (Pianta, & Allen, 2018). For restoring trust and engaging in social justice-oriented education, we point our readers to the websites of American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.), National Education Association (n.d.), Teaching Tolerance (n.d.), and the Center for Teaching and Learning of the University of Washington (n.d.). For contextualized resilience, readers may want to consult the works by Collins (2020), Minahan (2019), Strauss (2020) on social emotional learning and trauma-informed teaching, as well as to visit the websites of National Equity Project (n.d.), and SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.). Finally, we recommend Neff (2019) and Nelson et al.'s work (2017) on the importance of and tools for cultivating self-compassion.

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