Promoting Resilience From a Distance: Challenges and Opportunities

Educators can monitor and enhance a student's educational, physical, and social-emotional wellbeing. However, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced and multiplied a plethora of risks that threaten children's physical, academic, and social-emotional health. It simultaneously undermines an educators' capacity to continue this function. This article first identifies numerous risks the pandemic has created to ensure teachers can observe and enhance a child's fortitude in a remote setting. Thereafter, it provides several methods teachers can use to monitor and develop childhood fortitude in a remote learning environment.

Key Words: resilience, adverse childhood experiences, at-risk children, protective factors

Many primary and secondary students are exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that can produce trauma, stress, unhealthy development, and hinder academic achievement (Bethell, Davis, Gombojav, Stumbo, & Powers, 2017). From living in poverty to losing a loved one, such risks can threaten a child's psychological and social wellbeing (Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, 2008). Coinciding with risk exposure, personal factors can also undermine one's ability to overcome adversity. These personal attributes include biological characteristics such as health (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012), coping styles, and the availability of a social support network (Miller & Harrington, 2011; Ungar, 2015). This combination of factors, among others, helps determine whether a person can successfully navigate the adversities they encounter. If an individual surmounts their hardship, they are often referred to as resilient (Ungar, 2015).

The literature is replete with competing definitions of resilience (Cassidy, 2015; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Cassidy (2015), for example, defines resilience as "an asset or strength, a desirable and advantageous quality, characteristic or process that is likely to impact positively on aspects of an individual's performance, achievement, health, and wellbeing" (p. 2). Zolkoski and Bullock (2012) suggest resilience is the ability to live a successful life despite encountering the same or greater risk than average peers. By comparison, Beutel, Tibubos, Klein, Schmutzer, Reiner, Kocalevent, & Brähler (2017) conceptualize resilience as extraordinary, arguing that an individual thrives when encountering adversity as opposed to returning to a homeostatic level of functioning. While these conceptual divergences are theoretically and etymologically important, we broadly define resilience as both a general recovery process and any improvement after encountering one or more risk factors.

The spread of the SARs-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic across the United States, and the federal and state response to the public health emergency, has compounded risks and compromised efforts to build children's resilience. To date, primary intervention centered on student mental health and welfare in the United States continues to lag despite research showing its benefits (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010). Although preliminary research identifies some methods teachers can use to observe, maintain, and build resilience in a face-to-

face (F2F) classroom setting (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019a; 2019b), many of these recommendations are inapplicable in a remote environment. For this reason, this article seeks to fill a significant research gap by drawing attention to the difficulties and possibilities of proactively building childhood resilience from a distance. More specifically, it: 1) outlines numerous risks the COVID-19 pandemic presents to children, 2) highlights challenges that complicate intervention from a distance, and 3) identifies some general methods educators can apply to promote resilience in a remote environment.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Associated With COVID-19

ACEs are defined as "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). These can include substance abuse, familial instability, and mental health issues. At the time of writing, the health risks associated with contracting COVID-19 during childhood have been deemed smaller by comparison to adults (Ludvigsson, 2020). Nevertheless, children are not immune to the virus or its physical impact. A small percentage, for instance, risk hyperinflammatory shock if they contract the virus (Riphagen, Gomez, Gonzales-Martinez, Wilkinson, & Theocharis, 2020). Hence, although current medical research indicates most children who contract COVID-19 will fully recover, there are exceptions to justify public concern.

Beyond the immediate health issues posed by contracting COVID-19, the pandemic threatens children's health in other ways. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the number of children undergoing routine vaccinations has declined as parents cannot have their child vaccinated (Bramer, Kimmins, Swanson, Kuo, Vranesich, Jacques-Carroll, & Shen, 2020). This trend is partially explained by parental adherence to shelter-in-place orders or postponement of vaccinations as a means of reducing the risk of exposing a child, or their family, to COVID-19 (Santoli, Lindley, DeSilva, Kharbanda, Daley, Galloway, Gee, et al., 2020). Unfortunately, any decision not to boost a child's immune system could pose additional health risks.

Additional physical hazards are also present. At one extreme, children are experiencing reduced access to breakfast and lunch at school, leading to food insecurity, especially among low-income families (Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker, & Bleich, 2020). At the other extreme, experts fear a rise in childhood obesity due to unhealthy eating habits during the lockdown (Rundle, Park, Herbstamn, Kinsey, & Wang, 2020). In both cases, these outcomes threaten a child's physical and emotional health.

Widening our scope, COVID-19 threatens families in numerous ways. Foremost, a child could lose a loved one to the virus. Second, the pandemic threatens job security in many U.S. households. Shelter-in-place orders and the forced closure of businesses naturally place families into economic insecurity, especially among employees unable to telework. Reversely, workers deemed "essential" risk exposing themselves and their families to the virus (Bowleg, 2020). These scenarios increase the number of ACEs a household is exposed to and can profoundly impact children and adults through a loss of income, increased social and economic disparities, and stress (Posick, Schueths, Christian, Grubb, & Christian, 2020). The implications on children are evident, as research demonstrates that an economic downturn has a significant impact on a child's mental health and can lead to increased use of special education services (Golberstein, Gonzales, & Meara, 2019).

Further concerning, some children are isolated with abusive parents or guardians under COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders. Under these directives, children have limited or no opportunity to escape their abuser, while neighbors, teachers, and other community members are unable to monitor child wellbeing (Cambell, 2020; Posick, Schueths, Christian, Grubb, & Christian, 2020). Resultantly, there has been an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic (Cambell, 2020; Posick, Schueths, Christian, Grubb & Christian, 2020). However, the true depth and breadth are unknown as instances of abuse are likely to go unreported.

Socially, COVID-19 has upended traditional routines, which likewise threaten childhood wellbeing. Students quarantined at home cannot attend school, visit friends or relatives, and have limited opportunity to engage with their community. This restricted movement denies the opportunity to socialize and one's ability to maintain a sense of normalcy. Some scholars warn that shelter-in-place could lead to psychological problems among children, including mood disorders or posttraumatic stress disorder (Liu, Bao, Huang, Shi, & Lu, 2020). A mental health survey in the United States conducted between June 24 and 30, 2020, qualifies the gravity of mental health challenges associated with COVID-19, with 25.5% of respondents aged 18–24 years admitting that they had contemplated suicide (Czeisler, Lane, Petrosky, Wiley, Christensen, Njai, Weaver, et al., 2020).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens academic development in numerous ways. The loss of F2F pressures some school districts to implement remote learning. While necessary, distance education introduces unique challenges for some students. Chief among them is the disparity in access to the technology required to participate in virtual classrooms. According to recent data, approximately twenty percent of school-aged children in the United States do not have access to a computer or broadband Internet connection (Romm, 2020). A disproportionate number of these children hail from low-income households, are minorities, and reside in rural locales (Romm, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Associated with remote learning challenges is the academic regression expected. Collectively, a lack of technology, the absence of F2F educational assistance (e.g., tutoring), and any difficulties associated with learning at home will lead some students to experience declining academic performance, often referred to as the "COVID Slide" (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). For instance, remote learning could overwhelm a child because they do not have a family member that can assist their learning. At the same time, teachers might find it harder to identify students who are struggling academically (Partarrieu, 2015). Within this frame, we expect an increased need for student assistance once F2F schooling safely resumes full-time.

In many cases, the ACEs presented by the pandemic are compounding those encountered before its spread. Equally concerning, the health, economic, and social implications of the pandemic have a disproportionate, negative impact on low-income families, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups (e.g., students with special needs) (Bowleg, 2020). As the risks multiply, educators increasingly need to monitor and enhance student wellbeing, even when teachers interact remotely.

Promoting Resilience From A Distance

Resilience is complex and difficult to measure (Masten, Monn, & Supkoff, 2011; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). One reason is that individuals can be strong in some circumstances while weak in others (Condly, 2006; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). Another reason is that individual resilience can vary over time (Benight & Cieslak, 2011;

Beutel et al., 2017; Marx, Young, Harvey, Rosenstein, & Seedat, 2017). Equally convoluted, children can experience divergent outcomes when exposed to similar backgrounds or risks (Cicchetti, 2013; Goldstein & Brooks, 2006; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). Nevertheless, scholars agree that building and maintaining resilience is a necessary and continuous process because risks are ever-present (Condly, 2006; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013) and because fluctuations occur as children develop and environments change (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019a; Limonero, Tomás-Sábado, Gómez-Romero, Maté-Méndez, Sinclair, Wallston, & Gómez-Benito, 2014).

To this end, scholars argue that resilience can be constructed at home, in the community, and at school (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Ungar, 2015). Educators function as teachers and role models and are vital to child development (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Liebenberg, Theron, Sanders, Munford, van Rensburg, Rothmann, & Ungar, 2015; Masten et al., 2008). The literature encourages educators to regularly observe students to identify vulnerabilities and proactively impart tools that ensure social and emotional wellbeing (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019a; Ziomek-Daigle, Goodman-Scott, Cavin, & Donohue, 2016). Scholars likewise urge that intervention occur as early as possible (Masten et al., 2008; Shonkoff, 2010; Stallard, 2013; Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013).

While teachers are ideally positioned to observe and construct resilience in a traditional F2F school environment (e.g., in the classroom, at recess) (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019a), numerous obstacles complicate assessing or building resilience remotely. Among the challenges outlined herein, the most concerning is the difficulty of observing standard markers of ACEs. For instance, it may be nearly impossible to see bruises or other visual indicators of maltreatment through a webcam. Correspondingly, parents have increased control in a remote setting and can thereby limit what educators observe. Although these and other challenges complicate the task of monitoring wellbeing and imparting resilience from a distance, there are numerous interrelated opportunities available.

Foremost, teachers must ensure the remote learning environment is safe and structured (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Condly, 2006). Within this controlled setting, educators must balance expressions of support, empathy, and encouragement while consistently establishing and enforcing clear, transparent rules (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Masten et al., 2008). On the one hand, teachers must manage disruptions and misbehavior promptly. On the other hand, it demands an educator model appropriate behavior, including extending respect and remaining positive. Combined, these approaches ensure a remote climate is conducive to learning, model and encourage positive social behavior, and instill in the child that they are worthy of positive treatment.

Next, research demonstrates that strong student-teacher relations can motivate and inspire a student socially and academically (Liebenberg et al., 2015; Masten et al., 2008; Masten, Monn, & Supkoff, 2011; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). To this end, it is of utmost importance teachers proactively encourage students and urge them to actively engaged during remote lessons. Teachers may need to adjust their online method to elicit active participation when students are passive. When necessary, educators can lessen student's fear of failure by directly supporting, praising, and empowering them in a digital classroom (Masten et al., 2008).

In addition, students gain confidence, motivation, and fortitude when teachers use strength-based educational methods (Masten et al., 2008; Masten, Monn, & Supkoff, 2011; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). For example, pre-teach difficult concepts or vocabulary and conduct modeling and

think-alouds as part of your remote teaching strategy to aid student acquisition. At the same time, instructors should help students identify their learning styles and teach them the most effective strategies to succeed academically (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008). By providing skills and opportunities for a student to excel, a teacher not only motivates and encourages their students, but advances their aptitude as well (Masten et al., 2008; Masten, Monn, & Supkoff, 2011; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Teachers can likewise remind students many individuals face hardship, especially during the pandemic. An educator sharing their personal feelings or experience might help advance this message. The objective should be to empathize with the student and remind them adversity and challenges are common. Such discourse, nonetheless, should be offset by emphasizing qualities such as patience, fortitude, and positive thinking (Condly, 2006; Goldstein & Brooks, 2006).

A further approach to improving resilience is to augment a student's ability to communicate (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008; Ungar, 2015). By its nature, remote learning requires solid communication skills and offers an opportunity to teach students to share their feelings during online courses. Within this context, instructors may need to empower students by teaching them appropriate vocabulary and expressions to ensure they can express themselves with clarity since meaning and context can be easily obscured by distance and technology. A secondary advantage to this recommendation is that the impartation of communication skills and provision of opportunity for expression increases the possibilities of gauging student wellbeing.

Interrelated, we believe educators should increase teacher-student interaction during periods of remote learning. One opportunity is to schedule one-to-one virtual meetings with students that are struggling or determined at risk. One-to-one interaction offers multiple advantages, allowing a teacher to focus their teaching strategy and provide targeted assistance to a student. By setting priorities and accommodating one's teaching style to student needs, it is possible to improve academic performance and build confidence.

Correspondingly, we encourage teachers to make themselves available to their students outside of the virtual classroom. Teachers can establish online office hours or by being accessible before or after remote lessons. Once established, teachers should inform students of their extended availability and encourage them to engage with academic or personal issues. In short, we encourage teachers to openly express and demonstrate interest in their students' academic development and personal wellbeing and make themselves available.

Associated with the latter point, teachers should be aware that children are at increased risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression due to COVID-19 and shelter-in-place orders (Racine, Cooke, Eirich, Korczak, McArthur, & Madigan, 2020). To counteract loneliness and isolation, educators might encourage peer-to-peer interaction beyond remote lessons. One option is to schedule remote interaction or study groups to promote virtual social connections between classmates. However, this technique is subject to parental approval and is more challenging to implement with younger children who lack basic computer skills and need adult supervision or assistance.

Ultimately, a teacher is one pillar in a network of actors capable of fostering resilience among youth (Brooks & Goldstein, 2008). Their importance, nonetheless, has been elevated as a result of pandemic mitigation measures. This article presents several techniques educators can use to monitor and augment student resilience remotely. If a teacher determines an at-risk child requires immediate support, they should promptly refer these students to a parent, school counselor, or other responsible stakeholders for further evaluation or assistance.

Future Research

Continued research needs to be conducted into how COVID-19 impacts overall child development. On the one hand, this requires studying the physical and emotional implications of the virus on our youth. Knowledge of its impact will provide insight into how its adverse effects can be addressed. On the other hand, research should be conducted into how remote learning has influenced student academic and social development. Among the latter, we should seek to establish best practices and standards for remote education to ensure lessons are learned from this unfortunate experience.

Conclusion

The promotion of resilience at school is essential for the development of physically and psychologically healthy children. Since today's students face multiple, and sometimes cascading, Adverse Childhood Experiences as a result of COVID-19, we recommend educators become proactive to ensure our youth's wellbeing. Although COVID-19 complicates this endeavor, this article identifies some methods educators can use to monitor and enhance childhood fortitude in a remote learning environment. Utilizing these techniques, we believe educators can continue to equip students with tools and techniques that will help them endure and thrive in the face of current or future challenges and hardships.

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