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Mental Health in Elementary School Children

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Mental Health in Elementary School Children

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Abstract

Due to the Global Pandemic of 2020, there have been a lot of changes in society. These changes have presented challenges to people's mental health. Two of these changes have been the need to Shelter-in-Place and learn remotely through online and video conferencing. This capstone project is a case study investigating how remote learning has affected elementary school aged students' mental health and what might be done to support elementary school aged students with their mental health. The investigation takes the perspectives of 2 teachers, 2 parents, and 2 students living in South Monterey County. The purpose of this project is to answer the following questions: How has COVID-19 changed students' mental health? How has being at home affected your motivation or your engagement on remote learning? Have you given resources to parents that they can use in case needed? In order to find the answers to these questions I conducted a literature review, by studying and reviewing peer reviewed articles that discussed remote learning and the current COVID-19 pandemic. As an outcome of the findings of the literature review, I interviewed participants to find how remote learning has affected elementary aged students? And what can be done to help support these young students? The results found that a lot of the students did not like being in remote learning, they felt stress, anxiety and depression during this time. Parents really saw a change within their children, when they noticed the lack of motivation and engagement in their remote classes. Teachers noticed that students felt unconnected and as though they were overwhelmed or their work stressed them out.

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Mental Health in Elementary School

During the Stay-at-Home order in response to the COVID -19 Global Pandemic of 2020, I became very aware that there are a lot of young children who have had their mental health affected by the conditions they endured during the Shelter-in-Place order. Drawing from my own experience, as an adult it was very hard for me to switch from in-person to online learning, it was overwhelming. If an adult feels overwhelmed, I could not imagine how a child feels. During my service learning hours, which were also conducted remotely, I also noticed that a lot of the students I was working with did not seem as enthusiastic as when they were in the actual classroom. The aim of this investigation is to understand what challenges affect children's mental health during the pandemic and what might be done to support them?

Literature Review

As child development specialists note children come to school and form relationships which inspire them and motivate them to learn (Stringer, 2020). They are used to "learning in groups, discussing lessons, and asking peers for help" (Stringer, 2020, para. 5). Yet, with the current pandemic and the regulations that surround it, schools and other public areas had been closed for over a year while awaiting for a vaccine (Dickson, Lischer, Safi 2021). The reasoning behind the closing of the schools was meant to help keep all children safe during this pandemic, but for a lot of the students it has done the opposite (Stringer, 2020). Some students are facing difficulties, which include anxiety, depression, and other very serious mental health conditions (Jones, 2020). Making changes that help keep students safe has also had a lot of negative effects towards the mental health of students. Malboeuf-Hurtubise, Léger-Goodes, Mageau, Joussemet,

et al. (2021) state that, “Elementary school children, ages 5 to 12 years old, seem particularly affected by the current pandemic, which has led to an increase in mental health problems and psychosocial adaptation problems” (p. 2). As mental health issues increase in adults and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has started to affect the mental health of the young elementary school children.

Impact on Young Children

Early evidence states that even young children have had mental health challenges, and it is starting to appear in literature (Jones, 2020; Pincus, Hannor-Walker, Wright, Justice, 2020; Ali, Bao, Cao, Cronbach, Dziuban, et al. 2020). Ali, Bao, Cao, Cronbach, Dziuban, et al. (2020) reported on the disruption the pandemic has had on what was considered normal. Jones (2020) reports that children feel overwhelmed. Children miss seeing family and friends and worry about their families' and friends' well-being. Children worry about the financial instability their families suffer. Moreover, Pincus et al. (2020) reported on more serious impacts of the social isolation required by Shelter-in-Place. In sum, there is much to learn about the impact on young children and the future implications of life under the pandemic.

Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression

One symptom of mental health decline is anxiety and depression. Jones (2020) explains that a symptom of anxiety and depression is sleep disorders. Another symptom described by Pincus et al. (2020) is that some students are starting to withdraw and lack interest when engaging in school, with their family members, or classmates. While Zoom provides an opportunity to see their peers, a symptom of depression is when children refuse to participate

(Jones, 2020). Moreover, eating disorders can be another symptom of anxiety and depression, in which children either binge or stop eating (Ferreiro, Wichstrom, Seoane, Senra, 2013). These are some of the symptoms which parents and teachers might be alerted to and are especially concerning in young children. Students are now facing isolation, due to the inability to socially interact face-to-face with other students and their teachers. Students are not just feeling anxious about their health and their family's well being, but they are also facing their parent's unemployment and other personal issues. Pincus et al. (2020) stated that mental health experts predict a high level of students who will be exhibiting depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicide ideations. This pandemic appears to have resulted in a mental health crisis.

Home Environment: The good, bad and ugly

While it may be helpful to bring the symptoms of anxiety and depression to the attention of parents, in some cases, the parents themselves may be suffering financial strains due to unemployment (Jones 2020). Additionally, there has been a documented rise in alcohol consumption and a 30% rise in hepatic liver disease since the pandemic (Noguchi 2021). Moreover, family violence has also been documented more frequently during the pandemic (Pincus et al. 2020). These situations create stressful and traumatic home environments for children. Unfortunately remote learning has meant that they are contained within potentially stressful and traumatic home environments. Pincus et al. (2020) mentions that when students re-enter schools from this COVID-19 lockdown, they might be returning with experience or have witnessed of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) that include child abuse which can be either sexual, emotional, or physical in nature. These students may be facing danger in their own homes, and with the Stay-at-Home order, they are having to face it more and more often. These

include children experiencing family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, sickness and death, which can lead to childhood trauma. This can impact their development in a negative way. In fact, educators may not know the source of children's anxiety and depression.

Surviving Stressful Times

The importance of having a good mental health is very crucial not only for adults and adolescents, but for children as well. Elementary school aged students during this time are finding it very stressful staying engaged in class and doing their schoolwork. Berman (2020) states that strengthening students' relationships is important to help them understand that they are not alone during remote learning. When a student holds a strong relationship with their teacher there is a sense of protection and safety (Berman, 2020). Students without this sense of protection become stressed out not only because they cannot complete their assignments but also because they do not feel capable of telling their teacher that they need help. The purpose of this work is the need to find ways to connect with students.

Solutions

Building Self Regulation

Though students have had a difficult situation during this COVID-19, teachers and counselors are trying to look for ways to support students. Schoolstaff must be prepared for what is to come when students return to face-to face learning. A lot of school counselors are taking a variety of training to help prepare for the reentry of students in face-to-face classes. Stringer (2020) describes that if parents and teachers are willing to work together, they can help and

support their children when going back to school. Stringer (2020) states that even though staying home from school is taking a toll on elementary school age children, it can also have a benefit to them because it can help them develop their self-regulation skills. For example, parents can mitigate the impact by helping students think about how to create strategies to manage classwork. In the online environment students can learn to self regulate. Parents can ask their children about what they are learning, help students break down the assignments into manageable tasks, and give children choices about which tasks they do first. Even though they are faced with many assignments it gives them an opportunity to learn how to organize themselves.

Assistance from Free Resources

There are many public resources available for students which parents can also access. For example, Monterey County Free Libraries has a program for children where they get free lunches and an activity pack. They did provide this program weekly every Tuesday in King City. This program is available for students 0-18 years of age. Programs like this one could be a part of a solution to helping students have a healthy way of dealing with the mental health issues. Elementary school aged students can also use the Monterey County Free Libraries website to find other resources to help them keep their mind from being distracted. Their website includes zoom storytelling times, games, activities, and even e-books they can check out. For some, using the internet might be difficult because it is not always reliable but every Monterey County Free Libraries has usable free Wi-Fi to use in their parking lots. This could be a solution although not long term, but it can help students who do not have wifi and also help them cope with their mental health issues through the participation of activities.

Storytime

The Monterey County Free Libraries have many resources available for children during this pandemic. In the past the libraries have had different resources to help kids during difficult times. They have had different events to help students or children enjoy reading and books such as storytime. The Monterey County Free Libraries has virtual storytime requests for individuals or a class. During storytime staff read to the children or classes.

Homework help

The Monterey County Free Libraries not only does storytime or allow books to be checked out but they also offer online homework help. They have homework centers, student resources, and a link to Brainfuse, a website to help you with your assignments. All of these are free, and easy to use and follow.

Arts/Crafts/ Music

One last resource that may help students in this difficult time is the arts, crafts, and music links the Monterey County Free Libraries offers. They offer links to museums, experiments, drawing tutorials, music, and projects. These are also free and available for schools and students. These are all good resources that students, teachers, and parents can benefit from during this hard time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the review of the literature has explored some of the negative consequences of the Shelter-in-Place requirement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health

overall is very important for all ages. Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19, students now face the reality of having to do remote learning, which causes a negative impact in some of the younger elementary school age children's mental health. Now it is more noticeable that children miss the social interaction of school, the relationships with peers and teachers. Moreover, due to the pandemic and COVID-19, families are facing many challenges which include financial strain, increased alcohol consumption, and family violence. Students in elementary school now are experiencing this abnormal time and experiencing higher levels of mental health issues. These issues are important to address because it is affecting not only elementary school age students' academically but also their lives overall. Children who do not have the adequate support may have a higher risk of suicidal ideations or even self-harm. Remote learning was made to keep children safe but it may have done more damage. However, there are many solutions which may help children survive this situation.

Methods and Procedures

Given the findings in the literature review about how the conditions of the pandemic have impacted the mental health of elementary school aged students, this capstone project is a case study looking more deeply on the impact of 2 teachers, 2 parents, and 2 students in South Monterey County. The research questions investigated change in elementary school age students' mental health during this period.

Procedures

In order to find the answers to the questions of what can be done to help support students during remote learning, what are the barriers that students might face, and what are some

suggestions that can be done to improve remote learning for elementary students, I decided to conduct interviews. The first interviews were done to the teachers, parents, and students. The interviews were performed in the preferred language they wanted. The questions that were used for the first interview can be viewed in Appendix A, and the questions asked in the parent interview can be viewed in Appendix B, and finally the student interview questions can be seen in Appendix C. The questions that were in the interview were based on the information that was found in the literature review. The interview questions were structured to find the changes and the effects of remote learning in elementary school age students. In order to administer the interviews, I created the questions by reflecting and examining the prior research done, this would help get a deeper sense and understanding to the teachers, parents, and students perspective. Even though the questions were not identical to each other, they still followed the same concept, and it helped me understand each person's perspective. I also wanted to find resources to help elementary school students find an outlet to support them during their remote learning. All participants gave consent to participate in the interviews. Their names have been changed in respect of their privacy.

Participants

Drawing on qualitative research methods described in Avineri (2017), I wrote three sets of questions documented in Appendix A, B, and C. The interview was done with two teachers, two parents, and two students. The teachers who participated in the interview are both elementary school teachers in the South Monterey County area. Both teachers that were interviewed identified as White. One of the fourth grade teachers had been teaching for fifteen years, and the other teacher was a kindergarten teacher who had been teaching for seventeen

years. Parent one interviewed is a Hispanic/Latino who lives in South Monterey County, Parent two is Caucasian and lives in South Monterey County, both of these parents are stay at home parents. Student one and two are both in elementary school, student one is a kindergartener and student two is a fourth grader. Data was collected on a total of six participants.

Findings and Discussions

In the next section, I will address the responses to the interview questions to understand the perspective of teachers, parents, and students with regards to how mental health has been affected due to remote learning. When doing the interviews a lot of the responses were similar to each other, revealing many examples of how remote learning has affected them. Their responses helped me better understand my primary research question, which is: How remote learning has affected the mental health of young students.

How has Remote Learning Affected Young Students' Mental Health?

Teachers' Perspective

The teacher interviews reported that they noticed about 90% of the students to be easily distracted and only 50% of the students were turning in their assignments. They also noticed that the children were very stressed out when they had to be online for a long period of time. Teacher one, the Kindergarten teacher, stated that her students were easily distracted by family phone conversations during school time. They were worried and embarrassed about what was going on around them. They did not want to turn on their cameras or they would be late or not logged into class. About 10% of the students had to be muted because shouting was going on in the background or their signal was very bad. These very young students were regularly apologizing

to their class and their teacher because of the constant disruptions in their home environment.

Moreover, the teachers were concerned because the parents were harder to reach, or they would not help their child when they needed it. Teacher two, the fourth grade teacher, stated that a lot of the times the students would just not want to participate because they felt like the cameras were all on them. Both teachers mentioned that the students seem to just turn the cameras off and went off to do their chores rather than do their schoolwork.

Parents' Perspective

One of the parents I interviewed shared with me during an interview that their child, a fourth grader, was a victim of cyberbullying. The child was being called names and was sent explicit edited pictures by some of their classmates. Students seem to find ways to humiliate each other through cyber bullying. An eleven year old boy from the San Joaquin Valley, shot himself during Zoom distance learning class (Solomon 2020). The parents both mentioned this tragic incident. If a student already has the diagnosed depression or anxiety, this can cause them to become worse. The parent to the kindergartener stated that their child was not as happy to be online and missed being with other kids and meeting their teacher. They also said that they noticed them to be easily distracted and upset if they could not do things on their own. They noticed the students would get anxious if they couldn't connect to class or the internet was not working

Students' Perspective

When the students were interviewed they had similar answers. They both did not like being at home doing school. They also mentioned that they felt like they were stressing out over

having to have a nice home environment around them. The students also both stated that they felt like they were not doing a good job when working at home. The fourth grader stated that 50% of the time they were trying to log in so they missed a lot of what was going on in the morning meetings. They also stated that they felt very sad to not be able to be around other children or play in their playground. The kindergartener said that they did not like being at home because they felt like they were trapped in their home and they had a lot of distractions. They both stated that doing creative activities helps them and that they enjoyed reading and going to the library to get their free activity and lunch.

Discussion

The study conducted was to investigate what affects remote learning has on elementary school aged students' mental health. Through the different interviews conducted with teachers, parents, and students, the results suggested that a lot of the stress, anxiety, and depression came from the lack of social contact. Moreover, their home environment was conducive to study. There were distractions and there was not a reliable source of internet or technology. The result also suggested that these students need an outlet to help them and support them in developing strategies to manage the strain of the pandemic. In the literature above we see the different ways in which remote learning has affected students during this pandemic. After conducting the interviews I was very surprised by what a negative experience remote learning has been on students. It was emotional to hear the students talk about their experiences. Another surprising thing that I noticed was that something as little as doing creative activities or "brain breaks" helps students find a form of relief and distress.

Limitations

After reviewing and analyzing the information, the limitations found were having a small group of participants. Not having enough participants from various backgrounds limits the interview or the data collected because it is only based on a few participants. Another limitation is the relatively short questions or interview time. This is a limitation because if the interview were to have been a little longer than 30 minutes, it would have given more data to collect and the quality of the data would increase. If more teachers, parents, and students would have participated in the interviews that were done, there would be more information to be used and different perspectives to explore. One other limitation that I encountered was that some of the questions were answered quickly and not really thought about deeper. This last limitation I found was that I should have done a lot more deeper research on how to conduct interviews.

Recommendation

After reviewing the information in the literature review and the findings section, the recommendations that I would have is to do more research on how remote learning has affected elementary school aged students. My suggestions would be to use the resources and library resources that are available to the community. My next suggestion would be to provide students with some of the resources mentioned above if they are not able to access them. My third recommendation would be to provide teachers and parents with training or ways that can support their students at home and during class time. I believe that researching and finding ways for teachers, parents, and students can work together to create a stronger connection between them to find what resource works best for them.

This project fulfills the Liberal Studies Major Learning Outcomes (MLOs). The Major Learning Outcomes that I fulfilled doing this project were MLO 3: Innovative Technology Practitioner and MLO 4 Social Justice Collaborator. Major Learning Outcome 3 was fulfilled through the use of technology, investigation, and research on how remote learning has affected elementary school aged students. As a future educator, I will use this research and resources I found to implement them in my classroom. If we were to hit another pandemic I will be able to use the resource for my students and their parents. Doing this extensive research in the literature review, methods, the findings sections, and using technology, I was able to learn more on the effects of remote learning on students.

Major Learning Outcome 4 was met by doing adequate research about the effects of remote learning on elementary school aged children and how it has affected their mental health and their well-being, and ways that parents and teachers may support their students during this difficult time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the extensive research study above showed that remote learning during this pandemic has had a big effect on elementary school age students. The study also shows how important it is to have an outlet for children to help them with their mental health and how having resources available for support is important. After conducting this study, it is clear that remote learning has a big impact on elementary school aged students. This project demonstrated how impactful not being in-person school is and how we can find solutions to supporting students during remote learning. Throughout this study and along with the interviews done with

the participants, and their answers based on their experience and what they have witnessed, I was provided with data that shows that this remote learning has drastically affected young elementary school aged students. How remote learning has affected elementary aged students? And what we can do to help support these young students? This project has demonstrated how remote learning affects elementary school aged students and how these young students can be supported. Some suggestions that I would give is to find more creative activities and resources that can help students while doing remote learning and during this pandemic.

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Appendix A

Mental Health in Elementary School Children

Teacher Questions

1. How has COVID-19 changed students' mental health?
 - a. Drastically
 - b. Moderate
 - c. Some change
 - d. No change

2. Have you had any training regarding mental health? If yes, how effective do you think they are?
 - a. Very effective a. yes
 - b. Moderately b. no
 - c. Not very effective

3. What do you think will be more helpful regarding children's mental health during remote learning?

4. How can remote learning be improved during this pandemic?

5. How have remote classes been for your students?
 - a. Negative
 - b. Positive
 - c. Neutral

6. What do you think would be more helpful?

- a. Brian breaks
- b. Meditation
- c. Breathing exercise
- d. 1 on 1
- e. Other. _____

7. Have you given resources to parents that they can use in case needed? (ie. sticks and stones)

8. When back to in-person how do you think students will react to being back in a classroom setting instead of being remote?

- a. Back to Normal
- b. Unhappy
- c. Hard time settling
- d. Neutral
- e. Other. _____

Appendix B

Mental Health in Elementary School Children

Parent Questions

1. As a parent do you believe that remote learning has affected children's mental health?
2. Do you think them going back to school would benefit them more?
3. How do you think that as a parent you can help your child not be as affected by remote learning, especially their mental health?
4. Is there anything else you would like to input?

Appendix C

Mental Health in Elementary School Children

Student Questions

1. How has being at home affected your motivation or your engagement on remote learning?
2. What is making it difficult for you to want to be in your remote classroom?
3. How do you feel not being able to play with your friends or meet your teacher in-person?
4. What would you choose to do if there was an opportunity to go back to in person learning? Would you like to go back to school?
5. Is being home hard for you? How do you feel about remote learning?
6. What else would you like to discuss about remote learning and in-person learning?