Teaching and Learning: A Psychological Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to place an enormous strain on individuals, families, and communities. Beyond the physical ramifications of the virus, the effects of prolonged social isolation, disrupted routines, loss of jobs and income, and grief associated with the death of a loved one cause considerable distress and trauma. Significant numbers of parents experience high levels of stress and are reporting that their children face social and emotional health challenges, including loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Exposure to varying levels of trauma may undermine young people’s sense of safety and stability, and have long term impacts on their daily lives, including their ability to engage in learning.

While it was a necessary public health measure in the early days of the pandemic, remote learning has, for the most part, not met the challenge of addressing educational needs, particularly as significant disparities exist across different geographic areas and communities in terms of access to technology and broadband connectivity. Even with most schools reopening, absenteeism due to several waves of COVID-19 variants continues to impede educational recovery efforts. These factors contribute to significant levels of learning loss that further risk worsening the existing gaps in educational attainment. Preliminary data show that math and reading scores are lagging during the 2020-21 school year. These losses are expected to be greater for racial and ethnic minority and low-income students, further widening racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.

Large majorities of parents, across all demographic groups, believe that schools should rethink how students learn, by developing innovative ways to teach children due to COVID-19. This includes integrating evidence-based and culturally responsive social and emotional learning programs and trauma-informed approaches to teaching and student well-being throughout all aspects of the school ecosystem. This would help improve outcomes for all students, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Without doing so, it will be exceedingly difficult for schools to effectively address learning loss, close gaps in academic attainment, and build welcoming, inclusive school environments.

Most parents want their children to acquire social and emotional skills—such as motivation and engagement, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, resiliency, agency, and relationship building—and believe that schools have a role to play in providing that instruction. Throughout the pandemic, teachers voiced their concerns about the social and emotional well-being of their students, while expressing a desire to receive additional training on how to address these concerns in their classrooms, both in-person and virtually. Successful social and emotional learning is fully embedded into classroom curriculum and is a partnership between educators, students, families, and communities. An interactive approach to academic achievement, instruction, and social and emotional learning will help to ensure that all children, including some of the most vulnerable, receive a more equitable and higher quality public education.

The pandemic has provided an opportunity to reexamine how students are educated. It has underscored the fact that education and academic achievement do not exist in a vacuum but are influenced by a variety of contextual factors. Isolation, disrupted routines, and ongoing uncertainty highlight the importance of emotional management, relationship building, and problem-solving. These critical skills help students learn and cope with stress, instability, and trauma. Without addressing all dynamics of learning, students will not reach desired academic outcomes.
APA Recommendations

Integrate social and emotional learning, motivation and engagement, promotion of a healthy and safe school climate, and resiliency training throughout all areas of the curricula.

Require teacher preparation programs to include instruction on social and emotional learning; culturally and linguistically responsive teaching; promoting mental health of all students in the classroom; building stronger relationships with parents, families, and caregivers; and fostering healthy climates for learning.
- This should include pre-service instructional training opportunities on how to use various technologies, tools, and platforms to build a sense of community and support social and emotional needs.

Maintain the Higher Education Act’s definition of “teaching skills”—which is grounded in psychological science, and includes the ability to effectively teach social and emotional skills, and support the social, emotional, and academic development of all students.

Institute sustainable, on-demand professional development for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to develop knowledge and skills required to understand and respond to the social, emotional, and personal development of students. This should include:
- Best practices for incorporating social and emotional learning competencies into the curriculum.
- Building relationships with parents, families, and caregivers to help support students’ social and emotional needs and development.
- For online or distance learning, using technology to meaningfully support social and emotional well-being and learning needs of students.
- Increase resources for schools to expand social and emotional learning programs, including by ensuring culturally and linguistically responsive educational principles are embedded in expectations for all teaching and learning standards.

Support trauma-informed practices for teaching and learning.
Implement trauma-informed teaching practices, which should include approaches to managing student behavior and techniques for providing more agency to students.

Provide culturally, developmentally, and linguistically appropriate training for educators and other school personnel on the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on children’s health and development. This training should include:
- Recognizing behavioral indicators of trauma and its effects on learning, behavior, and social and emotional health.
- Understanding implicit biases and how experiences of racism can be traumatic for students.
- Implementing trauma-informed, non-punitive approaches to addressing challenging behaviors, discipline, and de-escalation.
References


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