

AN UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGE FOR FAMILIES & TEACHERS: COVID-19 AGAINST EDUCATION

UNA SFIDA SENZA PRECEDENTI PER FAMIGLIE E INSEGNANTI: COVID-19 NEMICO DELL'ISTRUZIONE

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Abstract

This work intends to examine the serious impact of tenacious COVID- 19 on the parent – school partnership and its members, parents, students, and teachers, and more particularly on their mental health. Various sources claim that because of the Coronavirus Outbreak and its aftereffects, the induced online learning to almost all students of all ages worldwide, has greatly oppressed Learning, Teaching, Mental health, and Everyday life. Job loss, mostly for the working mothers, and financial distress for the families, in addition to shouldering home-schooling, and the devastating loss of relatives and friends has created a chaotic mental health instability for many (APA, 2020). Digital inequality, and Socio-Economic Status (SES) differences and the overall absence of trusting relationships between parents and teachers seem to have escalated educational disparities which need to get estimated in-depth by the researchers. As the Pandemic persists on changing learning in ways we have known so far, the emerged and imperative for Online Learning parental engagement, whose importance has been the epicenter of a great amount of research worldwide for decades, evokes powerful practices and strategies that will bridge the two agents of pedagogy into a culture of dialogue and trust. The unanticipated rapid technological advance that has overwhelmed teaching, if used for the best interest of the children, could transform education to its better adjustment in the modern era. That is, however, an endeavor that cannot be fruitful without the strategic invitation of teachers to parents into a respectful and trusting relationship.

Questo lavoro intende esaminare il grave impatto del COVID- 19 sulla relazione genitori-scuola, sui protagonisti di questa relazione (genitori, studenti e insegnanti) e più in particolare sulla loro salute mentale. Varie fonti affermano che, a causa dell'epidemia di Coronavirus e dei suoi effetti collaterali, l'apprendimento online a cui sono stati costretti quasi tutti gli studenti di diverse fasce di età e parti del mondo, ha fortemente influenzato l'apprendimento, l'insegnamento, la salute mentale e la vita quotidiana. La perdita del lavoro, soprattutto per le madri lavoratrici, le difficoltà finanziarie delle famiglie, la didattica a distanza e la devastante perdita di parenti e amici hanno provocato in molti una caotica instabilità in termini di salute mentale (APA, 2020). La disuguaglianza digitale, le differenze di status socio-economico (SES) e la generale assenza di rapporti di fiducia tra genitori e insegnanti sembrano aver intensificato le disparità educative che necessitano di essere valutate in modo approfondito dai ricercatori.

Poiché la pandemia persiste nel trasformare l'apprendimento come l'abbiamo conosciuto finora, l'impegno dei genitori, che è emerso come imperativo nell'apprendimento a distanza e la cui importanza è stata l'epicentro di una grande mole di ricerche in tutto il mondo per decenni, invoca pratiche e strategie efficaci che colmino il divario tra i due agenti della pedagogia favorendo una cultura di dialogo e fiducia. Il rapido e inatteso progresso tecnologico che ha travolto l'insegnamento, se utilizzato nel miglior interesse dei bambini, potrebbe trasformare l'istruzione nei termini di un suo migliore adattamento all'era moderna. Si tratta, tuttavia, di uno sforzo che non può essere fruttuoso senza l'invito strategico degli insegnanti ai genitori a un rapporto rispettoso e fiducioso.

Key words

Covid-19, Mental Health, Education, Family-School Relationship
Covid-19, Salute Mentale, Educazione, Relazione Famiglia-Scuola

Introduction

About a year ago, the world as we have known so far has been and still is being challenged. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought every person in the world on a journey without destination and without a clear end date. A countless number of people have gone into action selflessly. Anyone who reads these lines would think that the people that are considered here would be the heroes that are called essential workers and work in the front line of Health. However, there are mainly two groups of people that will be discussed in this article and who have also made a miraculous effort to overcome the unexpected stress and adversity of the emergent Health situation. These two groups are so close related as also distanced to one another at the same time. Both groups have been challenged and perhaps slightly positively affected since Covid-19 crisis and so has their relationship. For many decades mounting literature signifies the importance of parents-school relationship but there is also vast evidence of a remaining gap between them even in the US where most research has taken place and most efforts for policies' and related mechanisms are incorporated, compare to most European countries (Pisa, 2012, Dusi, 2012). Perhaps the Pandemic is providing a new opportunity for family engagement, a new baseline for their partnership as long as both sides seize the chance.

1. A great challenge for the families

When Covid-19 was affirmed as a global Pandemic, most governments around the world proceeded collectively to take measures to reduce the spread of the disease. Thus, in the absence of a treatment and/or vaccines, most countries opted for the Quarantine and Lockdown. Consequently, life as people have known so far, changed completely. Initially, and despite the unprecedented stressful situation, women have displayed higher level of resilience according to the President of Global Health Council, Loyce Pace. For those who were having the luxury, they have taken this break from normality to reflect and imagine a new kind of work- and family- life balance (Horsley, 2020). While others, less privileged, mostly from minority and immigrant backgrounds have scrambled with all the uncertainties of pandemic life. Nevertheless, it has been the majority of parents that have been struggling with all the challenges that the Pandemic has inflicted to the world population, as they needed to assure the continuing availability and stability to provide children the feeling of safety in situations as the one, we are experiencing for almost a year now. When the whole world "paused" it has been the parents who encountered the greatest ordeal. While the new situation was taking over it has been the parents of young children, older children, and teenagers who acted with the best available, most creative, and resilient ways, who stressed all limits of their abilities even when food insecurity, social isolation, limited access to medical care, racism and fears related to immigration status overloaded and when the threatening global health situation dissipated their child's future.

For the last few months, an abundance of multiple surveys worldwide, reports and articles on various Journals, scientific and non, describe some of the effects of the pandemic not just on family life, but most specifically on mothers. One of them, refers to families living in the State of New Jersey, US where the restrictions from March 2020 still existing to this day in mid-February 2021, almost a year later. Perhaps the most important of those, it has been the inability of schools to open their doors to primary and secondary school students because of the health uncertainty. American Psychological Association describes, first, the severe consequences for the women / mothers of the pandemic not only in NJ but also in the whole country where the percentages of women workers fell into those of the 80s (Center of American Progress), causing a strong sense of insecurity for the future and a large gap at their line of higher-level jobs. A chasm which at least for the state of New Jersey had almost disappeared lately before Covid-19. However, the greatest anxiety families have been facing and especially the working mothers who are being pulled in every direction while trying to balance work with family life, has been the potential impact on their life-long health and well-being. There are detrimental consequences on the mental health of the population worldwide that could yield serious health

and social consequences for years to come as the experts from the American Psychological Association (2020) sound the alarm. Within the Pandemic, work, education, health care, relationships and social life, and the economy has been seriously disrupted with some groups more negatively impacted than others. Unquestionably, this mental health crisis was not created because these women were forced to spend more time with their family, with their children, even though domestic violence has seen a great increase in the face of the Pandemic (UNFPA, 2020). According to several articles in New York Times, Forbes, NPR and CBS News (Grose, 2021, Hsu, A. 2020, Viau, J., 2020, Gajewsk, M., 2020, Gogoi, P., 2020) almost 1,000,000 mothers have left the workforce with black, Hispanic and single mothers among the hardest hit as the Labor Department reports. And continues that the burden of the emergent home-schooling in addition to parenting and running the household while working was mainly dropped on mothers to bear it (Schneider et.al., 2020) whereas it had previously found that mothers do almost double the amount of household chores and parenting as married fathers. On the other edge, many men who are facing the new reality of women quitting the workforce to shoulder parenting, home-schooling and the household in countless families worldwide, they find themselves spending more time with their children, interacting with the family and even share chores that have never done before (Hsu, 2020). However, job insecurity, financial distress, and uncertainty about the future, has created a chaos that has become unbearable for the families in addition to the devastating loss of life of relatives and friends (APA, 2020). The challenges of shouldering children's Online Learning have been amplified in single-parent and low SES households (UOREGON CTN, 2020) who have been experiencing significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness compare other families and similarly the data applied for their children (APA, 2020). Nearly a year into the Pandemic, with the Covid-19 waves elevating stress, depression and anxiety levels (CDP, 2021) to all people but especially to parents who watch the governments and school administrations still undecided on whether schools should open their doors again after a whole year, or close once again for those who dared to open. On top of all, while families and children struggle managing school classrooms within their households, many reports confirm that there are still many of them that do not have access to internet or to a computer (UNICEF Report, 2020). Even when these services exist, they may not be sufficient for the number of people engaged in homeschooling, work, or other web-based activities at the same time. As a result, many schools refocused their attention to the necessity of shared responsibility with the students' families.

Instantly, the presence or the abundance off a trusting and responsive relationship within the immediate environment - microsystem (home + school) described in the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model Theory (1987) has or could have strengthened the necessary defense mechanisms that a parent needs for restoring its child's environment where it will keep growing, developing, learning, and dreaming the future. According to the Ecological Model the immediate environment - microsystem (i.e. home, school), the interaction - mesosystem of the members of the microsystem (i.e. parents, teachers, students), the immediate social environment - exosystem, the cultural environment - macrosystem (i.e. economy, politics, culture) and the synchronization of various chronosystemic events in the life of a child influence and shape its evolution. The developing individual is affected by all subsystems in which is a member. After all, the concepts of "interaction" and "interdependence" of the parts are key components of the ecological system definition. The effect, however, that affects the individual is not the same in the various subsystems of its environment, neither in terms of intensity nor in terms of significance. Microsystems such as it is expected, have the greatest effect. Thus, family, peers and school indicate a key role in child's development. Naturally, all these elements/subsystems shape a person's attitudes and behaviors while each of us participate in the formation of the complex "self" (Georgiou, 2000). Consequently, from the moment that compounding stressors have invaded in all the systems involved and all its members have been impacted in one way or another by the Pandemic, then serious health and social consequences as the experts predict (APA, 2021). The aftermath for children's academic and social emotional growth of such a prolonged activation of stress in the

body and brain within the micro- meso- and exo- systems, need to be urgently acknowledged by the governments especially for the disadvantaged students and communities who were already on the one side of a gap that the pandemic has widen. It is crucial for the administrations to acknowledge the long-lasting damaging effects not just on learning but mostly on behavior and health across the span (World Bank Report, 2021) on the human capital of learners.

According to UNESCO as of 3rd April 2020 over 1.54 billion learners have been affected by school closures in 188 countries. That makes it over the 90% of world's student population that have been suspended learning the way they were accustomed with, because of the wide scale lockdowns. Distance Learning solutions, according to an estimate of a joint UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank survey, have failed to reach hundreds of millions of learners. Problems have piled up immediately after the school closures with students lacking access to devices and internet combined with the job and food insecurity within their homes, mostly for the middle- and low-income households, who according to Pierro (2021) this resulted in at least six percent of the cases in abandonment of lessons in Italy, for example. However, there has been a great effort shortly after the sudden school closure, especially from the most economically advantaged countries to close the digital divide according to UNESCO's Report Team (UNFPA, 2020).

As Covid-19 continues to impact lives around the world, we can see the Pandemic fallout having a regressive effect on children's social emotional well-being (APA, 2021). On one hand, the World Bank estimates that 6.8 million children and adolescents of primary and secondary school age are at risk of drop-out (Azevedo et al., 2020), while UNESCO expects around 11 million children not returning to school (United Nations, 2020). A Report that has reviewed studies on the psychological impact of quarantine include post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger and indicate the need to ensure their psychological support. Lockdown in combination with online learning schooling and studying along with online socializing, have caused a considerable increase of at least four to six hours per day for the young students which inevitably increases respectively to the ages (APA, 2020). That means that the older the student the more hours of screen use from the students. Especially for the teens, ages 13-17, the impact of pandemic-related school closures have been negative in 81% while almost half, the 51% say that the Pandemic makes planning the future impossible (APA, 2020). «Loneliness and uncertainty about the future are major stressors for adolescents and young adults who are striving to find their places in the world, both socially, and in terms of education and work» said Adam E. (2020).

2. Teachers as First Responders

Teachers on the other hand, who also might have been parents themselves in their primary role, have been called from one day to the other to keep teaching but in a completely different environment. They were asked to rapidly adapt, be creative, motivate their students and transfer their teaching through a screen regardless their own levels of stress and uncertainty in a life that had been abruptly disrupted in addition to their ignorance to teach remotely in most cases. They took all the burden of keeping regularity in each student's home without any training and before even the State had the chance to organize the differentiated learning that it was needed and still is. In most cases, even in a country like the US, where mountains of research and resulting policies on parents - school partnerships have resonated in public education, schools closed the windows of communication to the families as a first response. Gradually, communication has been partially restored but it has been either those teachers who had already invested in building trusting relationships previously with the families, that kept all lines open or those who realized they could not reach and teach their students without supporting their parents. Undoubtedly there has been a profound impact in education, and no one was trained in responding to such a challenge. It has been an uncharted territory (C. Geoffrey, 2020) as an educational leader has stated, and 'it's the time for the educators to act as scientists'. It should not be overlooked, that

the biggest challenge for an educator it has not been just using the technology but overcoming the traumatized, fearful worry about their kids, their students, their families and even their jobs in many cases. As it is well known, trauma has a tremendous impact on children's learning, healthy development can be derailed (NCCDC, 2014) and that could not be ignored. More specifically, it is scientifically confirmed that when a young child's stress response systems are activated depending on duration, intensity, and timing, and in the absence of support and intervention then brain development is negatively affected (NCCDC, 2014). Therefore, during this challenging period, it cannot be the quality academic work that needs to be teachers' priority but the selfless support to all students and their families. Education has never been and will never be just academics, or just knowledge but the social and emotional development and stability for the students, that needs to be dealt with great urgency. Throughout the world there have been students who have never gone back to their classrooms or have never seen their classmates and teachers for almost a year now. There are others, who are going back and forth from in person to remote learning and it is not yet known which case of the two, will have the worst impact on those students' souls and minds in the long run. It is however a certainty that all students of all ages, all races, all ethnicities, and SESs have been traumatized deeply and it is the teachers together with the parents the ones who need to support them. More than ever before, today, during the COVID-19 epoch, it is Parents' – School partnership critical to the academic, and Social Emotional success of all the children.

Conclusions

To mitigate the vast impact on students, countries will need to design and implement re-enrollment mechanisms, as UNESCO Report Team has suggested, consisting of national campaigns and incentives targeted at encouraging students return to school. Especially, for the marginalized groups who have fallen behind from where they could have been if they have continued their school education. Reaching out to their families, inviting them, or even better visiting them at their own homes could possibly become one of the solutions. It is easy to lose sight of what needs to be done in times of crisis, let alone a prolonged Pandemic, especially for leaders who encounter such unprecedented cases. Nevertheless, there are hidden opportunities for great changes if communicated appropriately and in a democratic way to the public. Changes that were long needed but the society might not have been ready for them. Potential pathways for the next step to normality cannot run without having all sides of the community working together. A resourceful community that is based on a culture of partnership and shared responsibility where a trusting relationship can flourish. A center of equity and democracy where clear information can be conveyed, dialogue will be the tool for communication and the profound gaps will be bridged. By developing or strengthening school relationship with the families, teachers could find the opportunity to approach the traumatized students, develop a trusting relationship with them and their parents and thus adjust communication and teaching accordingly.

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