

POLICY BRIEF

June 5th, 2020



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

Psychological and Emotional Well-Being in the Context of Outbreaks and Stress: Practices for Educators in Urban Contexts

by Tanetha Grosland, University of South Florida, Tampa

The current pandemic presents serious issues for educators and students alike. It certainly will be a traumatic experience for students, with children and teenagers likely to lose focus or experience serious emotional states of fear, overwhelm, and stress.¹ Educators similarly will have gone through the trauma of the pandemic, while also attempting to manage and address the needs of their students, meaning the emotional wellbeing of students and educators are at risk.

This is particularly true in urban areas, which are being heavily impacted as they manage the effects of massive unemployment rates that disproportionately impact how families in urban areas meet their basic needs (e.g., shelter, food, and safety) due to racialization and disproportionate health care.² Considering these overlapping health issues and emotional concerns, educator well-being needs to be examined and addressed.³

Maslow's hierarchy of needs reminds us that humans must meet their basic and psychological needs before they can adequately, or at all, engage in creative pursuits—including the process of educating.⁴ This leaves educators with questions like: *What can we do to address these critical issues and the overlapping workplace demands? How do we keep personnel and staff emotionally healthy so they can show up to work, be in the best mindset possible, and fully carry out their professional responsibilities?*

In order for teachers to feel able to adequately address the mental health challenges resulting from the pandemic, and foster a healthy, productive learning space, strategies need to be in place to manage stress and prioritize mental health in the classroom for both students and teachers.

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

Address Workplace Emotions in the Workspace

When educators return to the classroom, they will not only be handling their own stress from the pandemic, but will need to witness and respond to the psychological impacts children will be experiencing. If teachers do not have the support and resources they need to manage this stress, it will almost certainly have an adverse effect on their students. Children typically respond to situations based on how the adults around them respond, yet many adults do not understand how their workplace emotions affect their practices.⁵ Therefore, they dismiss these emotions as a non-workplace concern or ignore their emotions overall.

If educators do not plan how they will address emotions now, many educators will likely leave the profession altogether.⁶ Such planning requires leadership implementing institutionalized policies (school-based and/or beyond) that make it safe for educators to experience emotions in the workplace. Any one in a school can implement a policy – as they are all stakeholders. Of course involving leadership (teachers, administrators), educators, community members, and students make for a robust team to develop and implement policy. A policy of this type might be a school-based policy concerning the health wellness for educators. Educators can publicly negotiate contractual pay for their workplace-added stress in the context of conflict and trauma.⁷ Other ideas include, developing a policy to have a wellbeing coach for educators, in which they have a specific time of day that is built in, to design individual strategies to address their own wellbeing concerns. This would involve the steps like: designating a grant writing team, writing a grant, hiring substitutes to cover coaching time, and developing a schedule. It is critical for educators working within communities hit hard by racialized housing segregation, like Baltimore, Detroit, and Chicago, receive the support needed to feel any emotions without stuffing or shaming so they can then model resilience and emotional curiosity to students and families.⁸ If educators cannot feel safe enough to experience their own emotions at schools and universities, how are they to facilitate this for the communities they serve?

Use Emotional Literacy

Talking with children about their emotional experiences is key to coping during this time of extreme stress and is helpful for students of any age and in any type of program.⁹ In particular, using a framework of action research or inquiry during educator healing circles regarding critical incidents is a promising approach. A framework of inquiry is a process that systematizes professional critical thinking.¹⁰ Inquiry takes up emotions as a way of informing practice, rather than just discussing emotions to simply talk about them. This lessens judgment about emotional incidents, since these incidents are instead used to change the way we approach educating.

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

Inquiry becomes a powerful tool to professional learning when teaching any student, at any age, and in any context (online, in person, or elsewhere) thus helping build their own emotional leadership. Outlining action research in the classroom, for example, includes:

1. Develop a wondering about emotional health in your everyday workplace experiences
2. Collect data in your workplace related to your question (statistical, talk, student work, or your own journal observations)
3. Analyze/organize the data by looking for themes, reoccurrences, and/or critical incidents
4. Write down what you found from your data organizing
5. Develop a strategy based on your theme to improve ways to connect emotionally
6. Share your action research with other professionals and community members
7. Implement the strategy

Strengthening emotional fortitude in the workplace also enables educators to better help their students develop the ability to effectively respond to change.¹¹

Accept Emotions to Change Emotions

Accepting emotions without attempting to change them is an important first step in protecting and promoting the wellbeing of educators. When followed by a framework of inquiry, educators can use students' stories to inform practice and go deeper. Enduring a global pandemic is a novel time to plan to practice leadership skills in the context of stress that actually move humanity forward and not stifle communities in fear.

Tanetha Grosland is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa. She is interested in what it means to understand, not just policy itself, but rather, what urban educators' experiences with policy and what they consider to be important social policy in their everyday lives.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020). *Coronavirus disease 2019: Stress and coping*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fmanaging-stress-anxiety.html

² CDC. (2020). *Coronavirus disease 2019: COVID-19 in racial and ethnic minority groups*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>; World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). *Constitution*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>

³ Grosland, T. (2019). *Why Educational Leaders and Policymakers Should Attend to Emotions*. Cambridge, MA: Scholar Strategy Network. Retrieved from <https://scholars.org/contribution/why-educational-leaders-and-policymakers-should-attend-emotions>

⁴ Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396. Retrieved from <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>

⁵ CDC. (2020). *Coronavirus disease 2019: Stress and coping*.

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

⁶ Janzen, M. D., & Phelan, A. (2015). The emotional toll of obligation and teachers' disengagement from the profession. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research (AJER)*, 61, 347-350. Retrieved from <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ajer/article/view/56115>

⁷ Grosland, T. J., & Matias, C. E. (under review). When dissent and emotions move us towards racial justice: A critical theoretical emotional analysis.

⁸ Agosto, V., Wolgemuth, J., White, A., Grosland, T., & Feldman, A. (2019). The emotional labor of 'taking a knee.' *International Journal of Critical Media Literacy*, 1, 102-117.

⁹ CDC. (2020). *Coronavirus disease 2019: Stress and coping*; Grosland, T. J., & Matias, C. E. (under review).

¹⁰ N. F. Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2020). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research: Learning to teach and teaching to learn through practitioner inquiry* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin; Dana, N. F., Thomas, C. M., & Boynton, S. S. (2011). *Inquiry: A districtwide approach to staff and student learning* (1st ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin; Dana, N. F. (2009). *Leading with passion and knowledge: The principal as action researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

¹¹ Agosto, V., Wolgemuth, J., White, A., Grosland, T., & Feldman, A. (2019)