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Leadership Matters: Supporting the Mental Health Needs of Black and Latina/o Students in a Post COVID-19 World

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in a Post COVID-19 World

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Abstract

Communities throughout the United States were devastated by the COVID-19 virus. For instance, the mortality rates are higher within Black and Latina/o communities compared to the overall United States population. The pandemic represents another problem that will contribute to anxiety disorders and depression among Black and Latina/o students. How we combat these issues is important. During the 2020-2021 school year millions of students returned to schools and some struggled to adjust because of the traumatic experiences associated with COVID-19. Students will need the support of administrators, teachers, and mental health practitioners. For this reason, this review of literature examined the mental health challenges Black and Latina/o students encountered prior to and during the pandemic. Further, the authors developed recommendations for school leaders, mental health specialists, and teachers while providing important resources. Overall leaders can use the article as a roadmap to navigate the challenges at PreK-12 schools.

Keywords: Black, Latina/o, COVID-19, Trauma, Mental Health, Racism

Introduction

The impact COVID-19 is having on Black and Latina/o communities is far reaching. For example, they have higher infection and mortality rates in comparison to Whites (Erdman, 2020). Statistics highlight that regardless of the jurisdiction's racial demographics (e.g., majority White or majority Black or Latina/o) they are in danger of being exposed to COVID-19 despite efforts to inoculate Americans (Poston et al., 2020). The numbers are particularly troubling for those that have a preexisting condition (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). It is important to recognize

that the higher infection and mortality rates are the result of structural racism which places each group at risk. Issues including limited access to hospitals, clean air, food deserts, and housing discrimination are contributing factors to racial and ethnic health disparities (Williams & Collins, 2016). In addition, both groups are more likely to be essential workers, which makes them susceptible to contracting the disease at their workplace.

While essential workers are in danger of exposure, they are also experiencing disparate economic challenges including homelessness and limited child-care options. The challenges place a tremendous strain on underserved and marginalized communities that cannot depend on the social safety net. Prior to the pandemic, the Trump administration sought to make it difficult to seek assistance (e.g., SNAP benefits) for those in need, which contributes to long-term obstacles including access to healthy foods (Reiley, 2019). For Black and Latina/o students from underserved backgrounds and their families this troubling reality causes economic, social, and mental health stressors that are difficult to overcome. School leaders will have to respond with empathy to navigate these issues.

Unfortunately, vulnerable populations including children and adolescents do not have the same coping skills as adults. Prior to the pandemic some Black and Latina/o students from underserved backgrounds encountered primary and secondary traumas which impacted their academic and socio-emotional experiences. According to Walker and Goings (2017) "students may experience a variety of primary and secondary traumas including physical danger, feeling threatened, and witnessing or retelling of events" (p. 3). Some of these experiences may include community and familial violence that can precipitate maladaptive behaviors (Walker, 2015; Espelage et al., 2018). These behaviors included drug and alcohol abuse, absenteeism, and

perceived non-compliance in class. Soon because of stressors from the pandemic school leaders could witness more inconsistent student behaviors.

The aforementioned issues were problematic before the onset of COVID-19. With the additional challenges including housing and food insecurity Black and Latina/o students are faced with tremendous barriers that will likely contribute to anxiety and depression (Walker, 2021). It is important to note we are not suggesting that the problems associated with the virus are only impacting communities of color. On the contrary, COVID-19's reach has touched the lives of millions of other Americans. However, marginalized and underserved groups are always more susceptible to illness during a public health crisis because of structural failures including limited or no access to comprehensive healthcare (Fiscella & Sanders, 2016). For this reason, it will be important that administrators and mental health practitioners are prepared to support Black and Latina/o students.

While epidemiologists, physicians, scientists, and some policymakers rush to deploy vaccine(s) and counter misinformation; far too many Black and Latina/o students have to navigate working from home without WIFI and/or, laptops and iPads because of the digital divide (Dolan, 2016). It is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated societal issues that have existed for years.

Bussert-Webb and Henry (2016) concluded "Hispanic and Black children face the most difficult economic challenges of any U.S. child population" (p. 4). These problems can contribute to feelings of neglect and isolation (Cheruvu et al., 2015). Collectively with the other barriers school leaders could be overwhelmed with challenging student behaviors unlike any other time in United States history. Thus, the decisions that district and school leaders make will determine whether they are prepared to adequately meet the mental health needs of Black and

Latina/o students. As time progresses there will be an unmistakable difference in how some school leaders planned while others did not during stay at home orders to confront the challenges caused by COVID-19. How will they respond to student's mental health needs?

Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore what steps school leaders should take to respond to the needs of Black and Latina/o students from underserved communities. To situate our discussion, we first examined extant literature for some of the mental health needs and challenges Black and Latina/o students encountered before and during the outbreak. Secondly, we provided recommendations for administrators and mental health practitioners they can utilize. Lastly, we identified resources that can help school leaders support the mental health needs of Black and Latina/o students from underserved communities.

Literature Review

Studies have suggested a higher rate of mental health concerns among Latina/o and Black youth, despite being less likely to receive services (Alegria et al., 2010). The relationship between student mental health and academic outcomes has been well-documented (e.g., Walker & Goings, 2017, Benner et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2015; Prince et al., 2018), with studies showing that children in first grade who were identified as being at risk for mental health disorders scored significantly lower on achievement tests in the fourth grade compared to their classmates who were screened and identified as not being at risk (Guzman et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2015).

Mental Health and Student Success

Many studies have examined the relationship between mental health and academic achievement (e.g., Brännlund, Strand, & Nilsson, 2017; Larson et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2019). One such study by Vander-Stoep et al. (2003) found that among students with low

socioeconomic status, 50% of those who had a mental health disorder failed to complete school. Removing socioeconomic status as a variable still yields a school non-completion rate of 26.7% for students with mental health concerns. Because educational attainment affects future career opportunities and consequently socioeconomic status, early onset mental health disorders have the potential to create challenges throughout the lifespan if left untreated (Benner et al., 2018; Breslau et al., 2008). Additionally, untreated mental health disorders in children may remain throughout the child's development, leading to increased chance of quality-of-life issues into adulthood. These issues can include substance use disorders, increased suicidal ideation, and depression and other mood disorders (Deighton et al., 2018; Larson et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2018). Conversely, positive mental health has been correlated with higher academic achievement and higher social capital (O'Connor et al., 2019).

A study by Breslau et al. (2008) found that students with comorbid disorders or multiple diagnoses had a higher chance of dropping out prior to graduating high school as compared to students with no diagnosis or with only one diagnosed mental health disorder. Students who dropout of high school are more likely to experience housing and work instability as adults than those who complete high school (Vander Stoep et al, 2003). Additionally, students who fail to thrive academically are less likely to gain meaningful employment and are more likely to experience ongoing detrimental mental health outcomes (Larson et al., 2017; Panayiotou & Humphrey, 2018), demonstrating why the mental health needs of children and adolescents are important to identify and address. Schools are one system in which these needs can be addressed. School-based interventions have been studied as effective means of increasing positive mental health in children and adolescents, including psychoeducation, special-emotional learning,

positive coping strategies, and skill building (Garcia-Carrion et al., 2019; Lanfredi et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2019).

A major risk factor for poor academic achievement and for mental health concerns is racism and discrimination on both an individual and a systemic level. Youth who identify as racial or ethnic minorities are at higher risk of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, decreased self-esteem, and exposure to trauma (Alegria et al., 2010; Butler & Rodgers, 2019; Prince et al., 2018; Walker & Goings, 2017). In particular, low-SES Black and Latina/o students are at high risk of traumatic experiences due to interpersonal, societal, and systemic adversity. While Black and Latina/o adults may report similar or perhaps lower rates of mental health issues, their experiences of mental health disorders may be more severe due to these additional stressors (Butler & Rodgers, 2019). Parents' socioeconomic status has a significant impact on academic achievement (Brännlund et al., 2017). Furthermore, Black and Latino/a students whose parents are low-SES are far more likely to have been negatively impacted by the coronavirus in terms of school disruptions, which have also been associated with poor mental health outcomes (Hawrilenko et al., 2021; Imran et al., 2020). They are more likely than their White peers to live in areas with high rates of violence (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2013; Pole et al., 2008; Walker & Goings, 2017), and are more likely to be entered into the juvenile justice system should they exhibit mental health disorders compared to White students (Alegria et al., 2010; Lopez et al., 2008; Marrast et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2020;).

Higher risk of food insecurity, poverty, exposure to violence and "compounded community trauma" are all risk factors for mental health disorders that are disproportionately experienced by Black and Latina/o children and adolescents (Alegria et al., 2010; Horowitz et al., 1995, Sun et al., 2020). This leads to negative outcomes such as increased incarceration, low

educational attainment, increased rates of teenage pregnancy, increased mortality, and negative

mental health effects for socially and economically disadvantaged youth, especially young Black

and Latina/o children (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2013; Benner et al., 2018; Lopez et al., 2008). The

pandemic has disproportionately affected Black and Latino/a households due to school closures

and job or income losses (McArthur et al., 2021; Panchal et al., 2020), which has been shown to

impact the way families function. Challenges that impact family function increase the potential

for substance use disorders and mental health disorders in children, adolescents, and adults

(Imran et al., 2020; McArthur et al., 2021; Panchal et al., 2020).

Barriers to Access for Black and Latina/o Students

Despite the well-documented need for mental health services among children of color,

Black youth are less likely than White youth to receive services (Garcia et al., 2016). Barriers to

services include insufficient accessibility to services stemming from location, lack of insurance,

financial barriers, and insufficient cultural competence on the part of providers (Alang, 2019;

Alegria et al., 2010; Holden et al., 2014; Holden & Xanthos, 2009; Lopez et al., 2008; Stafford &

Draucker, 2020; Valdez et al., 2019). Additionally, mental health care for Black and Latina/o

youth is often initially non-clinical, coming first from family or community resources, or at times

the court system, as opposed to school personnel (Lopez et al., 2008; Marrast et al., 2016;

Vazquez et al., 2021). However, court-mandated mental health services have been found to be

higher for White compared to Black and Latina/o youths (Lopez et al., 2008).

Finances and lack of access to insurance are also identified as barriers to services, with

Latina/o children and adolescents showing the lowest rates of care under fee-for-service models

compared to managed care (Lopez et al., 2008). For Latina/o youths, language barriers may also

present an issue in seeking treatment (Malgady et al., 1987; Stafford & Draucker, 2020). A study

by Marrast et al. (2016) found that 13.6% of Black youth and more than one quarter Latina/o youth were uninsured, while almost 50% of Black youth and 38.5% of Latina/o youth were insured through Medicaid. This highlights the need for better identification and response to the mental health needs of children in schools.

Outreach and school-based programs that specifically target children in need of mental health services have shown promising outcomes in academic achievement (Murphy et al., 2015), reduction in behavioral problems (Alegria et al., 2010; Larson et al., 2017), in managing depression and anxiety, and in emotional self-regulation (Alegria et al., 2010; Stafford & Draucker, 2020). Outreach may also focus on other protective factors, such as anti-bullying, diversity education, and identity development. For example, researchers have found that a positive connection to one's racial and cultural identity can protect against the emotional and psychological effects of discrimination and increase academic achievement (Wong et al., 2003). School counseling is also an important protective factor for students. A study by Cummings et al. (2010) found that there are no racial or ethnic differences in service use for school-based mental health services like there are for community mental health care services, further showing the protective role that schools can play in the mental health needs of students of color.

Ensuring schools, specifically administrators, meet the needs of Black and Latina/o students is paramount. For instance, Black males encounter a variety of internal (school based) and external stressors (community based) including trauma (Henderson et al., 2021). Research suggests that COVID-19 continues to impact the Black community in a variety of ways including the disproportionate mortality rates compared to Whites (Krouse, 2020). Additionally, they are more likely to encounter housing and food insecurity because of the pandemic (Morales et al., 2021).

Additional challenges faced by Black males include the rising suicide rate. Walker (2021) explained that "recent evidence (suggests) that the suicide rate among Black males has risen" (p. 2). This is critical because Black males have to overcome stressors that contribute to suicidal ideation (Opara et al., 2020). Further, data highlights that suicide is a problem that is impacting all Black students. Walker (2021) asserted "the alarming increase in suicide rates among Black youth is consistent with research that suggests there is a mental health crisis" (p. 2). Overall, the mental health crisis has reached a tipping point among Black and Latina/o students because of COVID and years of ignoring underserved and marginalized communities.

How schools respond to these increasing problems will foretell whether Black and Latina/o students can thrive. Overall, administrators, teachers, and mental health practitioners have to utilize data driven methods rooted in culturally relevant practices (Khalifa, 2020). Ensuring educators meet the needs of Black and Latina/o students is critical. The students represent the nation's future and should receive academic and socio-emotional support to overcome the barriers associated with COVID and other issues (Hoffman & Miller, 2020). Failure to meet their needs will have long-term implications for the nation.

School Discipline, Black and Latina/o Students

Thus far we have discussed challenges to receiving adequate treatment, school and community stressors, and access issues. Another factor is the expulsion and suspension rates between Black and Latina/o students and White students. The topic has been deconstructed by Lindsay and Hart (2017) among others. Analyzing school disciplinary rates is critical considering Black and Latina/o students are more likely to experience harmful outcomes related to COVID. Additionally, both groups were suspended or expelled at higher numbers prior to the pandemic (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

These issues reflect how the nation has struggled to address racism in PreK-12 school settings. Regrettably, the onset of the pandemic and troubling expulsion and suspension trends may create an *imperfect storm*. For example, the percentage of Black and Latina/o students that are expelled or suspended may increase. If the federal government and states do not increase funding for mental health services public schools will struggle to adapt. Unfortunately, this failure will disproportionately impact Black and Latina/o students. Research highlights the reasons these students are targeted and the long-term implications. According to Welsh and Little (2018) "Exclusionary discipline policies and practices disproportionately affect African American students and leave these students most vulnerable for entry into the school-to-prison pipeline" (p. 753). The racial disparity between how Black, Latina/o students and White students are treated impacts students' time in class and career trajectory (Chu & Ready, 2018).

The literature on the school to prison pipeline illuminates the racial treatment gap in schools (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Marsh, 2018; Nelson, 2017). Recently researchers have examined how specific factors have caused the current challenges. Rocque and Snellings (2018) asserted "Scholars posit numerous causes of the pipeline including the criminalization of student behavior, the passage of zero tolerance policies at the federal, state and school levels, fear of crime, increased educational inequity, and racial bias" (p. 4). Each issue contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline but it is important to acknowledge that Black and Latino/a students are punished more harshly than White students for similar infractions (Morris & Perry, 2017; Wegman & Smith). While race continues to be a flashpoint in the United States; there is clear evidence that Black and Brown students suffer because of administrator bias (Gullo & Beachum, 2020). For this reason, administrators will have to become reflective practitioners and implement student centered practices.

School leaders will have to consider how they will utilize socio-emotional learning (SEL) practices and other methods to empathize with students. This must include hiring more mental health practitioners, professional development for the school-based staff, evaluating disciplinary policies, working with the community, and understanding racism. The challenges are immense, but we believe with strong school leadership, educators can support the needs of Black and Latino/a students. Thus, in the next section we provide the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Over the next several years the United States will continue to grapple with challenges associated with COVID-19. This will include an overall increase in the mental health needs of all students. However, because Black and Latina/o students disproportionately live in underserved communities with fewer resources their needs will be substantial. School administrators will have a greater responsibility to these communities while balancing future funding shortages and unforeseen barriers. Though their training prior to and after becoming administrators will be critical; they will be tested and required to address issues that leaders of prior generations never experienced. Further, mental health practitioners and teachers will have to respond to student and family mental health challenges. Thus, we identified recommendations including:

School Administrators

1. Develop a school crisis plan.

2. Collaborate with state and local governments to obtain clear guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) regarding school COVID plans.

3. Provide resources for students and families.

4. Provide information to teachers, students, and families to ensure they can access mental health support services.

5. Provide professional development (PD) training for staff and teachers to discuss student challenges including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

6. Listen to the concerns of students.

7. Share personal struggles adapting during the pandemic.

Mental Health Practitioners

1. Create a resource list of community support for caregivers in distress.

2. Develop a school crisis response plan.

3. Implement a social emotional learning (SEL) component to address student anxiety and fear.

4. Conduct daily check-in with students.

5. Work with community-based organizations to provide services for students.

Teachers

1. Monitor student absenteeism.

2. Collaborate with school mental health practitioners and school nurses to review daily hygiene practices recommended by CDC guidelines.

3. Encourage students to discuss (if they are comfortable) how COVID impacted their family and community (socio-emotional learning).

4. Enroll in professional development and/or graduate classes to understand the relationship between mental health and student success.

5. Consider utilizing art based activities to allow students to express their concerns.

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Resources

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The nation is entering a new era. COVID-19 has contributed to numerous deaths, long-term health issues, an economic collapse, and mental illness. This is particularly troubling

considering Black and Latina/o communities were already buckling from systemic failures. Consequently, school administrators' roles will mirror a captain guiding a ship through troubled waters. They will depend on the support and feedback from school mental health specialists and teachers. Their ability to work as a cohesive unit will determine the future of Black and Latina/o students from underserved backgrounds. We believe there are resources that can aid in their response to students' needs. Below are websites, apps, government resources, and other helpful information.

1. American Psychological Association

   Website: https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19

   Description: The website provides research and resources related to COVID-19 for

   practitioners, researchers, and educators.

2. Centers for Disease Control

   Website: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/checklist.html

   Description: The website includes a COVID-19 checklist for teachers and parents.

3. notOK App

   Website: https://www.notokapp.com/

   Description: This is a free app developed by siblings that allows someone with a mental health crisis to signal family and friends that they need immediate assistance. Contacts can respond via text, phone call, or use GPS for their location.

4. The National Association of School Psychologists

Website: https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center

Description: The website is COVID-19 resource center for educators and families. It includes important mental health information.

5. National Association of Social Workers

    Website: https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/Infectious-Diseases/Coronavirus

    Description: This COVID-19 website provides important information including supporting clients in need.

Conclusion

School leaders adapted during unprecedented times. The new normal included ensuring students and the school-based staff were vaccinated. Furthermore, leaders had to balance school and family life. For new or veteran leaders, the strain will be considerable. In addition, schools located in predominantly Black and/or Latina/o underserved communities will have to navigate various other barriers including food and job insecurity. The problems associated with these challenges will place a tremendous strain on Black and Latina/o students. Recent reports already suggest that adolescents, children, and parents are struggling to adapt (Preston, 2020).

Mental illness is a challenge that all Americans from various ethnicities, races, and socio-economic backgrounds encounter. Unfortunately, because of issues that are already present including limited economic investment, under-resourced communities will experience added problems. How will leaders respond? In a post COVID-19 world, administrators will have to circumvent new obstacles that educational leadership faculty at post-secondary institutions and/or district professional development sessions could never envision. These skilled administrators or *post COVID-19 practitioners* will serve students that have anxiety disorders,

depression, and suicidal ideation. They will have to respond carefully and with empathy. This is particularly important considering certain cultural norms are important in Black and Latina/o communities. Overall, more than ever school leaders will have to utilize resources and develop new systems to combat the current challenges.

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