



The Lesser Known Impacts of COVID19

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School psychologists have a lot on their minds with the increasing prevalence of the effects of COVID19. Schooling has become homeschooling for everyone, not just a select few, and in-person meetings have been canceled or are now conducted online. That means that assessments are on hold, timelines are not honored, and families, children, and teachers are under increasing stress as they adjust to their new roles. Even those of us comfortable with computers may be struggling to become adept at using Zoom, WebEx, and so on. For those who need to prepare online lessons for children, the difficulties are even greater. At a more general and serious level, many people are facing unemployment, financial losses, food insecurity, illness, and even death. These impacts can be large and very stressful. However, there also are other consequences of COVID19 that can affect school psychologists.

School psychologists use evidence-based practices and depend upon access to current and empirically validated research. A large part of my job is conducting research. My area of inquiry is factors that promote children's educational development. Several of my studies have been at least temporarily stopped because of the virus. I do not dispute the need to stop the studies; indeed, I suggested they be halted. But what is the long-term potential impact of such suspension? At the very least, there will be a delay until any useful findings will make its way to school psychologists and other interested consumers.

One study I was conducting was investigating the role of the classroom library as a means of fostering children's interest in and development of mathematics skills. Other research of mine showed that there is a need to modify preschool classroom libraries to include more mathematic books (Stites, Sonnenschein, Dowling, & Gay, 2021). A colleague of mine and I intended to set up such libraries in several Head Start classrooms to see if providing preschool-aged children with more ready access to mathematics books in a setting where children could control their engagement would lead to their choosing such books during library time. Our working hypothesis was that it would increase their engagement with mathematic books, and such engagement would lead to increases in young children's mathematics skills.

As other research has shown, the mathematics skills with which children enter school is an important predictor of their later mathematics and reading success (Duncan et al., 2007) as well as their vocational success. On average, Children from low-income families are behind middle-income children in their mathematics skills (Galindo & Sonnenschein, 2015). More generally, children in the US are behind children from other countries in their mathematics skills (National Mathematics Advisory Panel, 2008). Finding an effective means of increasing the early mathematics skills of children is critical for closing these achievement gaps. Unfortunately, my colleague and I had just finished setting up the libraries in the Head Start classrooms when schools closed for what we expect is the remainder of the school year. We hope to be able to conduct the study next fall, but we do not know if the people we had hired to assist with data collection and observations will still be available. We also do not know if the books we purchased will still be there or if we will have the funds to replace them, if they are not.

Another study underway when COVID19 hit us was an evaluation of a literacy intervention in several local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) sites. These sites provide some nutritional information and access to food for low-income mothers and their young children. Children learn language and acquire early literacy skills through their interactions with others, such as their parents. This foundation of early skills is critical for the development of subsequent reading skills. We know from other research that providing parents information about the importance of talking, reading, and singing with one's children (even in-

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fants) increases parent report of engaging in such activities (Shanty, Dowling, Sonnenschein, & Hussey-Gardner, 2019).

We also know that book floods, where caregivers are provided with easy access to books in doctors' offices, laundromats, etc., increases children's literacy engagement. Most of this research has focused on children at risk for limitations in language and literacy development due to biological or environmental factors (e.g., prematurity, income). This evaluation focused on the additive or possible interactive effects of providing parents at WIC sites with tool kits of books, etc., information about the importance of using them, and a reading corner where children could interact with literacy artifacts in the WIC waiting room. We had collected baseline observation data before the center libraries were installed in the WIC waiting rooms and given the tool kits to the families when the centers shut down due to COVID19. It may be possible to do this study again next year, but it is not guaranteed. To conduct the study, we would need to be able to find new people to collect, code, and analyze the data as well as obtain more funds.

Both research studies have the potential to make contributions to the field. They focus on important educationally relevant outcomes-- mathematics, language, and literacy. Our field, how we assess children and what interventions we recommend to parents and teachers, depends upon empirically validated information. Being able to collect such information has been curtailed or at least postponed due to COVID19. I am not arguing that this research is as important as the health issues plaguing so many in the country, food insecurities which are increasing, or financial stressors due to jobs being curtailed. Nevertheless, an inability to engage in educational research is another negative outcome of COVID19 that can have long-term consequences on our knowledge base. If the suspension of such research does not permanently impact our knowledge, it will delay it.

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