

Students and Teachers' Schooling Experiences During the Coronavirus 2019 Outbreak in Taiwan

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 outbreak increased in seriousness countries around the world designed and implemented prevention efforts. Policies such as isolation, quarantine, social-distancing and area lockdowns were adopted by many countries.

It is critical that all elements of the civil society, including all level of schools, become partners in epidemic prevention. In cooperation with government anti-epidemic measures, all level of schools in Taiwan implemented student and teacher self-health management systems, adequate social distancing, postponed or cancelled group activities and moved to on line courses.

In this article we will focus on students and teachers' schooling experiences, regarding implementing school policies relating to the epidemic outbreak. We focus on recognizing the needs and expectations of students and teachers and providing a framework for establishing healthy and happy school learning environments.

Keywords: Pandemic, Taiwan, Schooling, Prevention, Policy

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Foreword

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed”. Human’s greedy pursuit of economic development and excessive consumption of resources has caused global warming and climate change. This climate crisis is creating more frequent and severe natural disasters. Natural and manmade biological disasters are also becoming common place in the 21st century (Shieh, 2018). Towards the end of 2019, the outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused a biological disaster epidemic, sparked worldwide panic, severely impacted human health, daily lives, social interactions and economic activity. These impacts have exceeded the ability of individuals, families and communities to cope thus causing significant trauma. The delay in providing clear information regarding the epidemic has resulted in an excessive spread of the disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” and pointed out that this epidemic is not a problem for only a single area or country, but a global problem (WHO, 2020). Due to factors such as public transportation, population mobility and the movement of goods the COVID virus was easily spread around the world. Many countries have adopted epidemic prevention measures, to curb the risk and spread of the disease, effectively responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Due to Taiwan’s proximity and the frequent travel between Taiwan and China, Taiwan was predicted to be the second most affected country when the disease first broke out in China. (Lo,et al., 2020a). Lo,et al.,(2020a, 2020b) emphasized the need for a partnership between all elements of society to reduce and prevent disasters thus combating individual and collective social anxiety. By focusing on individual responsibility, supporting family and community units, curtailing fake

news and rumors, and eliminating stigma and discrimination, societal resilience towards biological disasters can be elevated. Schools are important partners in this enterprise.

When COVID-19 broke out, Taiwanese schools at all levels became the key to epidemic prevention strategies, which included delaying reopening of schools, setting standards for school closures, school campus lockdown, banning all non-school personnel from the schools, temperature checks, enforcing mask-wearing, schoolwide sanitization, cancellation of big gatherings and events, changing methods of teaching and learning, connecting with other schools, utilizing family and community resources, encouraging school-centered and epidemic prevention and health education. This established schools as an important partner in community-centered epidemic prevention. This article explores teachers' and students' challenges involved in the COVID-19 epidemic prevention process and makes suggestions regarding building safe and secure school environments.

Schooling Experiences During the COVID-19 Outbreak Period

Following are a summary of individual interviews with a number of elementary and secondary school principals and teachers sharing their experiences during COVID-19 outbreak period.

A Heavy Burden

During the epidemic COVID-19, the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) and regional governmental education units gave the command that schools must strictly adhere to epidemic prevention strategies, which created a heavy burden on school principals and teachers.

This is the first time as a school principal I had received an official letter from the Ministry of Education and Education Bureau of city government to delay school reopening by 2 weeks. The school and teachers were all prepared for the re-opening yet we received this sudden notice.

When can we reopen? We were at a loss and faced with daily inquiries from teachers and parents as they have to additionally plan for their child's delayed schooling. Teachers, parents and administrators are under the huge pressure, I strongly believe that the students are the same.

I was so anxious that I couldn't sleep and I had to go about collecting disinfection supplies because the school and classrooms required total disinfection but our supplies have not yet reached us.

The Ministry of Education standardized school closure for: 1. Any single confirmed case within a class 2. Two confirmed cases within a school. 3. All schools within a township to close should one-third of the township's schools close. This is a really big challenge, causing us worry and anxiety, it's a headache.

With the arrival of supplies, we have to make an inventory, manage and allocate, causing us to be really busy, and the school atmosphere is very nervous, we have to prepare for school reopening.

Writing letters to parents, reminding them of school commencement, using a single entrance, temperature checks, wearing of masks, everyone is jittery. Even when I sleep at night, I dream of students queueing up just to come back to school.

Cancellation of big events, adopting small groups, reassigning of seats, as a novice teacher, I had to seek help from senior teachers. Really anxious...

My students are deeply affected and discouraged by cancellation of their big activities and they keep complaining.

I have to disinfect after break and after school, especially where the students often touch. Some students help me out, together we work hard, and I like that despite how tired I am.

There's a heavy burden on schools with lack of manpower and facilities, and unfair allocation of resources, which is very obvious, causing anger and deep resentment.

An Anxious School Campus

In addition to the heavy burden on administrators and teachers, the school campus was filled with anxiousness and worry, and due to the lack of manpower and resources, the school principal and administrative staff often became targets of complaints. Worries of new teaching staff were often revealed through their words and actions, and parents were often dissatisfied with the school's epidemic precautions, while students were uneasy and worried about the restrictions on their on-campus activities. Manpower and resource allocation is very messy, causing anger, and finding the principal to complain.

It's tough being a principal, to face the education bureau's rules and random inspections, teachers' complaints, parents' dissatisfaction, and I see lively students who don't adhere to rules, don't wear masks, and don't practice social distancing. It really is tiring that I wish I can retire earlier.

Some teachers find me in the counseling room to talk about their predicaments, anxiety and dissatisfaction, and as the school counselor, I have to deal with both students' and teachers' emotions.

It's depressing, sometimes, to have to patiently explain and contact parents who are dissatisfied with school regulations, and they raise a lot of questions.

Students often complain about cancelling big events, but it's not that I want this to happen! We must patiently resolve their issues, tell them it's a critical period, without social distancing, we might spread the disease to even our peers and family.

My student's family business is in China, students will ostracize them, afraid of getting the disease. I had to discuss the epidemic and healthcare measures of COVID-19 and enforce that we shouldn't discriminate due to their parents' jobs. I still secretly observe these students' health states.

Some parents will tell their kids not to be grouped together with other students, who have parents working in hospitals, it's a headache.

The media reports about COVID-19 daily, causing everyone to panic, some parents have lost their jobs, students have been affected.

Need to change classroom management and teaching style, and enhance students' health education, thoroughly wash their hands, keeping socially distant, causing me to be really tired when I reached home.

The Positive Shift from Impacts of COVID-19

During the epidemic period, the school emphasized teaching students how to exercise daily and lifestyle healthcare, which created good habits in their sanitation. That is the positive way to face an epidemic. Let students and teachers have the knowledge of public health, and habits for fitness.

With Taiwan's dense population, sometimes people cannot stay socially distant. The epidemic taught students the importance of social distancing, which can be applied in daily lives.

I had to change the seat arrangements in the class and think of a teaching method suitable for smaller groups. Actually, this is a rewarding experience as it progresses my teaching profession.

With insufficient supplies for epidemic prevention, I had to try all means to seek help, through community resources, I collected resources. With insufficient knowledge about COVID-19, I invited parents who work in the healthcare or public health sector to educate everyone. This raises knowledge about epidemic

prevention. It is rewarding to integrate resources from different fields and work together.

Teaching seminars and talks all have become online. If the disease spreads, and schools have to close we must adopt online learning which causes me stress. Thus, we must proactively participate in seminars and discuss, test this online learning.

With the 21st century being technologically advanced, it's a future potential for both physical and virtual classrooms. I learned about instructional media technology and students have the opportunity to experience virtual classrooms, enhancing the trait of digital learning.

Suggestions

Enhance Knowledge of Epidemic Prevention for Schools'

Teaching Staff, Administrative Staff and Counselors

The impact of a biological disaster like COVID-19 makes human life, health, environments, economy and culture vulnerable. It creates worry and panic due to insufficient knowledge of epidemic prevention among teachers and students. By enhancing knowledge of teachers, administrative staff and counselors, we can provide students with the appropriate health and epidemic prevention education, thus creating a safe and less worrisome learning environment which also provides more assurance for parents. This knowledge enhancement must be planned and implemented by the CECC and regional governmental education sectors, together with the health sector. Inequitable allocation of rural and urban resources is a long-term problem. However, epidemic prevention must be comprehensive for if implementation is not countrywide the population remains vulnerable. Therefore, we must understand specific needs of

rural and urban areas, to fairly allocate resources and reduce the knowledge gap between rural and urban areas regarding epidemic prevention.

Enhance On-site Training for Teachers

Many procedures need to be carried out during an epidemic prevention period that are not part of normal lessons. For example, keeping a social distance, cancellation of big gatherings and events, environmental sanitization, healthcare education for students, and online learning. These are not within the regular training for teachers. Through on-site teacher training we can reduce teacher anxiety, address teaching difficulties, enhance teaching knowledge, so as to plan a safe, comfortable and non-discriminatory teaching and learning environment.

Sooth and Eliminate Worries and Panic Among Students and Parents

School closures and lockdowns have created many negative impacts. Fantini, et al., (2020) pointed out that school closures and re-openings caused policymakers, administration workers and teachers a dilemma, and created tremendous impact on students' academic progress and mental health. Taiwan has set a standard for school closures, and schools strictly adhere to temperature checks and wearing of masks, but more can be done to soothe and eliminate anxiety and panic among students. For example, enforcing social distancing, planning appropriate activities, changing the style of teaching and learning, regular sanitization of school materials and toys and providing education on the disease. In consideration of the economic downturn, parents' loss of jobs, and the overburden on families, Taiwan's Ministry of Education has provided emergency relief funding for economically affected students.

Establish a Dialogue Mechanism

It is critical to establish a mechanism for a dialogue to better understand the needs and expectations of students, families and communities, and build mutual understanding and trust. This can also help to recognize and manage rumors and fake news, reduce stigma and discrimination, and collaboratively find solutions.

Provide Healthcare Information

Information on transmission of this infectious disease and epidemic prevention is highly complex and requires cultural sensitivity by professionals from public health, social science, and academic education sectors. By providing transparent and accurate health education and epidemic prevention strategies, and by preventing cluster infection in schools, teachers and students can be more proactive in epidemic prevention, thus more appropriately handling the next wave of infection.

Establish Co-learning within Schools, Families, and Communities

Lo, et al., (2020b) pointed out that the dynamics between individuals, families and communities is powerful. Epidemic prevention should not only be focused on biological safety, but on community-centered prevention. Due to the focus being students, through co-learning, we encourage communal proactive participation, in assisting disadvantaged students and people in schools and communities. Together, we face and overcome the impacts of COVID-19 on our society, culture and economy.

Eliminate On-campus Bias and Discrimination, Establish Friendly Learning Environment.

During the epidemic, due to parents working in the healthcare sector related to COVID-19, students might have faced discrimination by peers and even teachers. Such bias and discrimination violate students' basic rights to education. Thus, teachers must face the issue of

privacy and safety for such students as well as any COVID-19 patients, assisting them to recover free of bias and discrimination, and support them in returning safely to the school environment

Providing Fair Allocation of Epidemic Prevention Resources and Funding

Funding of many governmental sectors had been reallocated to first-line defense work, while education resources of rural and native communities have often been cut off. A fair allocation of resources is the foundation of building an unbiased and fair society, and to reducing racial, social and gender discrimination and xenophobia.

Conclusion

Humankind in the 21st century will certainly face many other infectious disease outbreaks, and as COVID-19 continues its spread, the number of persons infected and dying will continue to rise. Epidemic prevention work is highly complex and burdensome, and sometimes seems unending. With Taiwan's dense population and strained international status, it is difficult to acquire international resources, thus we must be self-reliant. With a comprehensive epidemic prevention program, collaboration between professionals and the combining of resources from different fields, we can overcome our challenges. As Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen (2020) said, "Taiwan is a resilient island, and its key to epidemic prevention success is in our cohesiveness." Schools are the cradles of human knowledge, morality and culture. By Taiwan integrating our industrial, government and academic resources within our educational environments we have effectively addressed epidemic prevention and risk management. Certainly, a major component of future responses to natural disasters needs to be the planning and implementation of a friendly and equitable educational environment for our students.

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