Reducing Loneliness Through Curriculum Design: Integrating Education, Psychology, Public Health, and Policy

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness has emerged as a pressing global concern that affects psychological [2], public health [4], educational, and social outcomes. Research conducted across multiple countries revealed that 9–14% of the world's adolescents experience loneliness on a regular basis [1]. Large-scale studies conducted in schools across over 90 countries revealed the presence of regular feelings of loneliness among school-going students [1]. In the United States, it was found that 1 in 5 people suffer from loneliness on a daily basis [3]. The younger generation is most affected by this [3]. These results not only place loneliness as an individual-level construct but also as a public health issue that requires preventative measures [4]. Schools are a vital institution for the development of young people and are at the intersection of education, psychology, public health, and policy [5,6,7,8,9,10]. This paper will adopt an interdisciplinary approach to examine the roles of the formal, informal, and hidden curricula in teaching human interaction skills and preventing loneliness [5,6,7,8,9,10,11]. Applying curriculum theory, psychology, and public health approaches to prevention [2,4,11], this paper contends that schools can play a social protection role for students if the importance of relationships, feelings of belonging, and emotional intelligence are brought into the curriculum [11]. The policy implications include developing effective standards for social and emotional learning, positive school climate initiatives, and addressing content not covered in the curricula [6,7,8,11]. In this manner, schools can be a solution to loneliness before it becomes a serious problem with mental health and society [2,4].

Keywords: Loneliness, Curriculum Theory, Education Policy, Public Health, Social-Emotional Learning

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is being viewed as a complex problem and is being associated with the areas of psychological development [2], educational achievement, and healthcare delivery systems around the world [4]. Studies conducted globally on the prevalence of the problem of loneliness among adolescents in the world revealed that 9.2% to 14.4% of the world's adolescents experience frequent feelings of loneliness [1]. Moreover, there is a significant association between loneliness and anxiety, depression, and social functioning [1,2]. Studies conducted in 93 countries on adolescents in schools revealed that 13.2% of the world's adolescents experience frequent feelings of loneliness [1]. This reveals the seriousness of loneliness in education. The problem of loneliness is a matter of concern in the US as well. Research conducted by Gallup polls in the US indicated that 20% of adults in society experience loneliness for a significant part of their day [3]. The youngest generation in society has registered the highest levels of loneliness [3]. From the trends mentioned above, it is evident that loneliness is not only felt by a few individuals, but it is also experienced by society as a collective [1,2,3,4]. In addition to offering academic education, schools are psychosocial environments that are shaped by curriculum, relationships, and policy factors [5,6,7,8,9,10]. This paper argues that curriculum theory, and more specifically the relationship between formal, informal, and null curriculum, is an effective paradigm for understanding how education can prevent loneliness and promote social connectedness [5,6,7,8,9,10,11].

Loneliness At the Intersection of Psychology and Public Health

From a psychological perspective, loneliness is an outcome of unmet human needs for belongingness and significant interpersonal relationships [2]. Peer relationships are considered fundamental for healthy development in children and adolescents [2]. Childhood loneliness has been linked with depression, suicidal thoughts, and emotional regulation problems [2]. From public health research, loneliness has been

conceptualized as a health determinant [4]. Chronic loneliness has been related to increased morbidities, mortalities, and health costs [4]. Prevention of loneliness in school must be included in public health priorities, for the downstream consequences of loneliness, such as mental health problems [4].

METHODOLOGY

The research formulates a conceptual and integrative approach, integrating literature from various disciplines, including education [5,6,7,8,9,10], psychology [2], public health [4], and policy studies [6,7,8]. The curriculum theory will be used in the analysis of social value and interaction norms [5,6,7,8,9,10,11]. A possible empirical study of loneliness could be conducted in health outcomes in public health and psychology [2,4], as well as an impact analysis of education policy implementation [6,7,8]. There will be no data collection in this study, and no ethical clearance is needed.

Formal Curriculum And Social Interaction Skills

The formal curriculum refers to the information or content that is intended, specific, and definite [5,6]. In this regard, social-emotional learning can be used to teach children to be empathetic, communicate effectively, cooperate, and solve conflicts [11]. This is because psychological studies have shown that these skills can serve as protective factors against social isolation and loneliness [2,11]. Social-emotional learning can be enacted through policy to ensure equity in education systems [6,7]. Social-emotional learning can be used to illustrate that relationships are just as important as achievement, thus connecting education to public health prevention [2,4,11].

The informal curriculum is defined as the learning that is learned socially through culture, peers, and school life [7,8]. Some of the factors that may be linked with the reduction of loneliness and increased student engagement include positive school climate, feelings of belonging, trust, and relationship building [7,8,11]. The informal learning opportunities may include peer mentoring, extra-curricular learning, and restorative learning [7,8]. These are the natural settings for students to develop relationships [7,8,11]. The resource allocation policy for extra-curricular activities is a reflection of student well-being and climate, hence illustrating the link between policy and student well-being [6,7,8].

Null Curriculum And The Silence Around Loneliness

The Null curriculum can be described as those concepts and learning skills that are not discussed within the education discipline [9,10]. In other words, concepts such as loneliness, emotional issues, and relationship breakdowns are not discussed within the education sector, indicating that they are of no importance [9,10]. However, these issues form part of the null curriculum [9,10]. To address the null curriculum, there is a need to create space and begin discussing issues of loneliness, emotional intelligence, and digital socialization [11].

Policy Implications

An integrated strategy necessitates an integrated policy base [6,7,8,11]. Some of the recommendations are as follows:

1. Mandating the integration of social-emotional learning into national/state curriculum standards [6,7,11]

2. Supporting work around the value of belonging and connection with peers, which is part of the school climate approach [7,8,11]

3. Clarifying the measures of relational well-being in the accountability measures in schools [6,7,8]

4. Supporting the elimination of the gap in the school curriculum relating to loneliness and emotional well-being [9,10,11]

This approach enables schools to be more proactive in public health, as opposed to their traditional focus on education [4,6,7].

CONCLUSION

Loneliness is a multifaceted problem that requires solutions from education [5,6,7,8,9,10], psychology [2], public health [4], and policy [6,7,8]. The education system, with a curriculum, has the potential to address loneliness as a core condition [5,6,7,8,9,10,11]. This is achievable through the inclusion of formal education in social skills [5,6,11], an informal environment [7,8,11], and the null curriculum [9,10,11], all of which lay the foundation for human connection. The link between curriculum theory and public health prevention/policy implementation is key to reducing loneliness sustainably [2,4,6,7,11].

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