



Back to School After COVID-19: Considering Emotional Well-Being

by [Luis Javier Pentón Herrera](#)

I remember growing up in Cuba and attending elementary school in the 1990s. During those years, it was customary for Cuban schools to enforce unannounced drills in preparation for a possible U.S. attack. I was very young and do not remember much about those drills, but I do remember feeling scared during that time. “*¡Al piso, agáchense! ¡Rápido que nos atacan!*” (Get down on the floor! Quickly, we are under attack!), teachers would frantically scream after the school-wide alarm would unexpectedly go off in the middle of the day. When these memories come back every now and then, they are often accompanied by the same feelings I experienced at those drills: fear, uncertainty, anxiety, helplessness, and sadness. Even though these memories are more than 20 years old, these unaddressed, unmanaged emotions have stayed with me throughout my entire life.

Emotional Outcomes of the COVID-19 Crisis

I share this personal vignette because, in today’s world, our students are dealing with these same emotions I felt as a child in Cuban schools. Certainly, we are not rehearsing war-like drills but, nonetheless, children are still experiencing fear, uncertainty, anxiety, helplessness, and sadness caused by the global pandemic of the COVID-19 and all other saddening events occurring simultaneously in our nation. As I write this article, my biggest hope is that my words will help us—educators—understand that neglect and avoidance of our learners’ mental and emotional well-being are not solutions. We cannot expect this new school year (2020–2021) to be similar to previous school years. The reality is that COVID-19 has affected all of us physically, mentally, and emotionally, and in this new school year we cannot just look the other way. More than 3.1 million people have been infected in the United States and more than 130,000 people have died from COVID-19 (CDC, 2020), and the numbers continue to increase every day. Simultaneously, over 40 million Americans have filed unemployment since mid-March with more continuing to file (Lambert, 2020). Our students are seeing this new reality and, whether they vocalize their feelings or not, they are being impacted by it.

Although COVID-19 is certainly affecting the nation as a whole, our English learners (ELs) are once again in one of the most vulnerable positions. For ELs and their families, COVID-19 presents unique, additional challenges, and they have limited spaces to turn for help. For example, many immigrant families do not qualify for automatic federal stimulus payments while others may not know they qualify because of language barriers (Grantmakers Concerned with

Immigrants and Refugees, 2020). In addition, noncitizen immigrants—including those who are frontline workers—remain disproportionately uninsured and have a harder time accessing medical treatment if they contract the virus (Chishti & Bolter, 2020). Certainly, COVID-19 has amplified the [impact language barriers](#) have for immigrants and their families' access to [food, work, health services](#), and [information](#) to keep them healthy and safe. The pandemic has reminded us that the topic of visibility is, in many cases, a matter of life and death.

Now that we are returning to schools, we are faced with difficult truths: Some students have lost family members, others have been sick and recuperated from COVID-19, while others are still facing economic hardship, homelessness, and hunger because they or their parents have lost their jobs. In this new reality, we must outgrow our definition of schools as only places of teaching and embrace the idea of schools as communities for holistic child development and well-being. Although the full scope of COVID-19's impact in the United States is still unfolding, [mental health](#) is now being considered an emerging crisis of the pandemic; the rise in mental health problems in the nation even has some professionals considering mental health as the possible next pandemic (Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, 2020).

What You Can Do: Three Simple Suggestions

As teachers, reading this information might provoke feelings of confusion or anxiety. Without a doubt, teaching during and after COVID-19 has been and continues to be very stressful for all of us. “What can I do? How can I help myself and my students?” might be questions coming to mind. In the following section, I propose three simple considerations we, educators of English learners in K–12, adult, and higher education settings, should consider in our learning spaces.

1. Self-Help Comes First

You cannot provide effective support to anyone if you do not take care of yourself first. It is okay to acknowledge that coping and finding balance in this new reality is challenging. At the same time, it is important to know that there are also steps you can take to take care of your mental well-being. As Palmer (2019) shares, teachers' well-being is important because it directly impacts performance, student learning, and teacher working environments as a whole.

As you balance online, hybrid, or full face-to-face instruction with the daily and simultaneous bombardment of COVID-19 news and other erupting social events, remember to take time for yourself to find peace. Try incorporating activities to help you find peace and balance in this time. Some ideas to support your mental balance and well-being include:

- social online gatherings with your teacher-colleagues and/or friends
- disconnecting from (social) media, internet, and devices for 1–2 hours every day
- joining Deepak Chopra and Oprah on their [21 days of meditation experience](#)
- exploring new hobbies you have been planning on trying for a while (e.g., writing poems, painting/drawing, creating videos)
- connecting with nature on a daily basis by taking walks in the park, listening to the sound of the river or the wind, or just working on your garden

For additional ideas and habits, please see Palmer (2019).

2. Silence and Neglect Are Not Options

Addressing the mental and emotional well-being of students, educators, and school staff should be schools' primary concern at this time and in the foreseeable future. If school leadership has maintained silence about mental and emotional well-being, it is our responsibility to approach our leaders and let them know their school staff and students need mental and emotional support. I am not proposing a focus on mental and emotional well-being at the expense of academic rigor. Instead, I am proposing mental and emotional support as essential practices for effective teacher performance and students' academic engagement. If your institution and leaders are already focusing on social and emotional well-being, congratulations. If your institution is not, then it is time to communicate with your leadership and propose a short- and long-term plan for schoolwide mental and emotional support.

In the Classroom

The incorporation of practices that focus on and support the mental and emotional well-being of teachers and students needs to be gradual and layered at the classroom, school, and county levels. These practices take less preparation to implement in classrooms than adopting such an initiative at the school or county levels. At the classroom level, prioritizing human communication and stability for our students and ourselves will be fundamental. To do this, you can incorporate short, simple practices, like 5–10 minutes of mindfulness in your learning spaces. At the same time, you can fuse the topic of mental and emotional well-being within English learning activities; this way, ELs have the opportunity to talk about their emotions and experiences in a safe, judgement-free space. As an important clarification, these activities and practices supporting mental and emotional well-being can be implemented in face-to-face or online learning spaces. For more detailed practices you can include in your classroom to support the mental and emotional well-being of your ELs, please see Pentón Herrera (2020) and Pentón Herrera & McNair (2020).

At the School and District Levels

Schools and counties planning on adopting practices that support teachers' and learners' emotional and mental well-being should consider this implementation as a gradual process. The goal should be to make the adoption of these practices both effective and sustainable—they cannot be rushed to act as a superficial band-aid. For school leaders hoping to incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) practices at the school and county levels, there are several different frameworks already in place. For example, [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) has more than 20 years of experience supporting districts and schools around the nation on the best practices for SEL. Also, [Mindful](#) offers free publications on how schools can be transformed through the incorporation of mindfulness. Lastly, the [International Institute for Restorative Practices](#) shares free school resources and guides for implementing restorative practices in school and counties.

3. We Need to Support English Learners' Emotional and Academic Needs

In this new school year, all students will need restorative and emotional support; that is a fact. At the same time, as English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) educators, our advocacy for EL equity in our learning spaces and institutions will be more vital now than ever before. Through sustained communication with colleagues or through school-wide training, we need to help our schools recognize that our ELs will return to us at an even more vulnerable state than most mainstream non-EL students. Why? Because prior to COVID-19, our ELs were already dealing with culture shock, language learning, adaptation to a new society, intergenerational trauma, literacy development, legal and documentation concerns, and economic hardships, to name a few, as well as with situations that may arise as a result of a combination of all or some of these factors. In addition to these realities, our ELs have also been trying to balance feeling safe in schools while witnessing the stable increase of [school shootings in the United States](#) since 2009 (Grabow & Rose, 2018). Now, if we add COVID-19 to our ELs' realities, I think most of us can agree that this is more than any child, or even adult, can deal with alone.

So, why is ESOL teachers' leadership crucial at this time? Ensuring equitable access to restorative and emotional well-being practices in our learning spaces is essential. Our ELs will return to us with varying levels of English proficiency. In my experience as a high school ESOL teacher, most students' English skills regress a little over the summer break. For this reason, I think it is safe to expect that most ELs' English skills will also regress a little after this unexpected, extended period of virtual instruction. With this reality in mind, our ELs' language skills should not become barriers to accessing restorative and emotional well-being experiences in our schools.

This means that, as ESOL educators, we must share our knowledge with our mainstream colleagues, as well as with our school administrators and school counselors, about the importance of integrating, as much as possible, ELs' first language to support their process of finding emotional and mental well-being. For our ELs, it will be difficult to make meaningful, supportive human connections with others and learn how to take care of their own mental well-being if they do not understand the language. Sharing multilingual school-wide materials with practical tips they can apply to take care of their mental well-being will be, more than ever, a matter of equity and social justice. Consider the following resources:

- [Resources and Examples: Learning in the Time of COVID-19, English and Multilingual Learners](#) (Learning Policy Institute)
- [You Are Welcome Here: Supporting the Social and Emotional Needs of Newcomer Immigrant Students](#) (AFT Share My Lesson)
- [SEL Resources for Parents, Educators & School Communities Related to COVID-19](#) (Inside SEL)

No one should expect ELs, or any students for that matter, to succeed in our learning environments when their mental health and well-being has neither been properly supported nor addressed.

Final Thoughts

It may sound like a cliché, but COVID-19 will become an important experience for our lives. As a society, we will begin to reassess many definitions that we'd taken for granted in the past. In the teaching field, we will be pushed to redefine our criticality in society as professionals who do more than just teach. My hope, as a Spanish and ESOL language educator, is that COVID-19 will, in some way, contribute to placing *language* at the front of our educational system. As language professionals, we are in a suitable position to educate leaders about the critical role language has and will continue to have for our society to cope, balance, and seek mental and emotional well-being.

In addition, language will be vital for all members of our society as we reevaluate the need for human support, interaction, and (inter)connectedness. Today, more than ever, I think of us, ESOL educators, as important bridges to support our students in our learning environments, our colleagues at our school buildings, and individuals within our communities.

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020, July 11). *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Cases in the U.S.* <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>
- Chishti, M., & Bolter, J. (2020, April). *Vulnerable to COVID-19 and in frontline jobs, immigrants are mostly shut out of U.S. relief*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/covid19-immigrants-shut-out-federal-relief>
- Galea, S., Merchant, R. M., & Lurie, N. (2020). The mental health consequences of COVID-19 and physical distancing: The need for prevention and early intervention. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 180(6), 817–818. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.1562>
- Grabow, C., & Rose, L. (2018, May 21). The US has had 57 times as many school shootings as the other major industrialized nations combined. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/21/us/school-shooting-us-versus-world-trnd/index.html>
- Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. (2020). *COVID-19 Pandemic impact on immigrant families and communities: Recommendations for philanthropic action*. <https://www.gcir.org/sites/default/files/resources/GCIR%20COVID-19%20Funding%20Recommendations%204.7.20.pdf>
- Lambert, L. (2020, May 28). Over 40 million Americans have filed for unemployment during the pandemic—real jobless rate over 23.9%. *Fortune*. <https://fortune.com/2020/05/28/us-unemployment-rate-numbers-claims-this-week-total-job-losses-may-28-2020-benefits-claims-job-losses/>
- Palmer, P. (2019). *The teacher self-care manual: Simple strategies for stressed teachers*. Alfabeta.

Pentón Herrera, L. J. (2020). Social-emotional learning in TESOL: What, why, and how. *Journal of English Learner Education*, 10(1), 1–16.

Pentón Herrera, L. J., & McNair, R. L. (2020). Restorative and community-building practices as social justice for English learners. *TESOL Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.523>

Luis Javier Pentón Herrera is a dissertation core faculty in the Department of Educational Leadership and Administration at the American College of Education and an adjunct professor at The George Washington University and University of Maryland Global Campus. In addition, he serves as the Social Responsibility Interest Section (SRIS) co-chair-elect and as a member of the Affiliate Network Professional Council at TESOL International Association. Luis had the privilege of serving as Maryland TESOL's 38th president during 2018–2019.