LESSONS LEARNED FROM TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: OPERATIONALIZING THE WHAT IF'S

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic teachers were asked to quickly adapt to new instructional methods. School districts, principals and other school administrators provided a variety of guidelines and outreach methods. Teachers expressed a lack of continuity across schools, grade levels and regions. The study reported here surveyed approximately 1000 teachers across one southern U.S. state, capturing real time descriptions of instructional delivery methods, perceptions of student and parent engagement, and the effects on teachers' own well-being and livelihood. Analysis provided implications for professional development and teacher education programs to better prepare teachers to avoid the stress of training, changing evaluation methods and lack of consistency in accountability. Lessons learned on working with parents and caregivers from an additive approach will be included.

Keywords: Teacher education, teacher mental health, teacher, parent-teacher engagement.

1. Introduction

In 2020, teachers were expressing concerns in the immediacy of the first wave of COVID 19 pandemic's impact on schools, families, and communities. Data from a Kaiser 2020 study stated that 1.5 million, or about one in four, teachers in the United States, had high risk condition from the COVID-19 virus (Palosky, 2020). Rumors of a quick vaccination approval were beginning to surface. The numbers of fatalities due to the COVID-19 pandemic were still somewhat centralized into more densely populated and geographically specific areas. In other words,

As teacher educators we felt similar concerns. Not only were we experiencing the stress of the pandemic on our personal lives, but also felt concerned for our teacher education students, the public-school teachers with whom we worked and the children and families of the communities we served. In response, we designed a study of teachers across our state to gather immediate data from teachers on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most surprising findings from our study has been the consistency of responses across teachers' years of experience, geographic locations, grade level assignments and even socio-economic levels of the school populations. In 2023, as we sit with lingering questions about the policies and practices of the original school closings, we continue to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers, schools, homes and communities. The challenge is to take the lessons learned about teacher stress, the readiness of teachers and families to transition to virtual learning, and the support systems within the school and home communities to support learning in both settings.

2. A survey of the literature prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

2.1. Logistics

Training: Across studies on technology use and training showed that most teacher education programs offered courses in technology. Much of the assignments were teacher focused rather than child focused and addressed only a small subset of knowledge and skills (Hughes, 2013; Moore-Adams, Jones & Cohen, 2016). Preservice teachers were often asked to demonstrate knowledge of technology in multimedia projects but were less prepared to design lessons that would bridge school to in-home instruction (Duncan & Barnett, 2009). In teacher training programs, preservice teachers use of technology to address issues of equity and differentiation across cultures, languages, socio-economic differences, and technology ability were neglected (Resta and Leferrier, 2015).

Accessibility: The greater number of device types owned by a student, the greater the level of learning readiness (Estira, 2020). In a study by Fabito et al. (2020), data revealed that one significant barrier and challenge students encountered in online learning was a good internet connection. Other children lacked

laptops and desktop computers and had limited internet access (Cleofas & Rocha, 2021). Additional findings showed the use of mobile devices had the potential to be used and adapted for learning (Jin & Sabio, 2018). A study by Yra, et al, (2020), showed students' readiness for online classes yet burdened from computer and internet rentals in cafes.

2.2. Accountability

School accountability: As virtual and blended schools in the United States continue to expand school accountability — or lack thereof — was an identified concern. Provisions varied across districts and states. Gaps in data made it difficult to assess the extent to which virtual and blended schools successfully met student needs. While some states reported data on individual measures to help parents make decisions about where to send their children to school, others failed to report any data on the measure (Molnar, et al., 2019).

2.3. Social-emotional effects on teachers

One clear factor in children's resilience from adverse childhood experiences that result in stress, or ACES, is the presence of a consistent and caring adult. "The most important factor in restoring a sense of safety is a strong relationship with a competent, caring and positive adult" (Berson & Baggley, 2009, p 378). The responsibility of this work may be heavy. In climate-initiated, health related and other large events, such as political and social unrest, teachers likely experienced the same stress factors as children. Children take cues for how to react to situations from their caregivers, including teachers. As with children, teachers' reactions to stress will differ and may result in anxiety and/or health problems. Teachers may be in denial of importance of the event, or on the other hand, may be hyper vigilant with fear for children being out of their control (Berson & Baggerly, 2009, p. 376).

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to better inform teacher educators of the challenges of school-home virtual instruction, particularly in a forced situation as experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study design gave us a chance to gather a wide range of data so that unidentified and unanticipated issues and events would emerge. Using a method of coding that revealed both trends and outliers, we anticipated a wide range of responses due to the rapid transition and the vast differences in the regional, geographic and economic demographics across the 100 counties in our state. Questions were designed to discover instructional tools and methods teachers used in both the onset and the continuation after six months of virtual instruction due to the pandemic. Questions asked teachers to state the amount of direction they were given and from whom, to describe the communication between school and home, and to describe concerns they had for children, parents and caregivers. As an overarching question, we asked teachers how they were feeling about the transition from traditional face -to -face teaching to a blend of models of virtual teaching. This question, "What are three words that best describe how you are feeling about your teaching today?" resulted in further inquiry into teacher stress and response to trauma

3.1. Design

We chose phenomenology, a qualitative methodology, which has as its goal the description of a particular phenomenon from those who have first-hand experience of it. Being that change was occurring rapidly, with much of its new experiences for participants, this first-hand experience was important to examine.

Fraenkel, et al. (2012) point out that phenomenological research is one of the more difficult to conduct because the participant must relive the event as accurately as possible. We collected data from the participants early on, from April 2020 and again in November 2020, as they were experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic as they transitioned and then began to accept, make choices, and sharpen skills in virtual instruction. As explained by Neubauer, et al. (2019), we engaged an interpretive phenomenological analysis in that we as researchers played an active role in interpreting the data.

4. Findings

Because of the timeliness of the data collection, limited to the three months just after the transition to virtual learning, survey results reflected the urgency of the moment. The data proved emotional and authentic, with participants thanking us for asking the questions. Teachers felt a need to be heard and counted in the tumultuousness of the time. Demographic analysis of participating teachers revealed a range of teacher years in experience, rank, grade levels and classroom designations. Other quantifiable questions addressed specific logistics of accessibility, training for technology and support for delivery and curriculum

design. concerns for training, changing demands and roles of teachers, job security, accountability for self and students, and overall health of the participants. Analysis across and inter-regions showed emerging patterns and outliers among respondents. The large data set showed consistency of concerns and issues, including from teachers across social-economic differences in school populations, in teachers of different grade levels from Kindergarten to high school, and with teachers whose level of education and ease with technology differed. In other words, concerns over the logistics of virtual instruction, accountability of children's learning during virtual instruction, and the social emotional effects on children, families and teachers were consistently expressed. Representative data are listed below that address each of these areas.

Accountability: Concern for Children's Academic Accountability

- I feel stressed about being asked to provide feedback to my students and hold them accountable when many cannot even do the work.
- Questioning my essential-ness to the profession as more than 70% of my students are not participating in my lessons causing me to question how my effort I put into my work, therefore maybe causing the quality of content to slip.

Accountability: Concern for Evaluation of Teaching

- I am receiving a summative [evaluation] and that scares me. I was out for 3 weeks with COVID-19 pandemic and then schools being closed the rest of the year. I am worried that my sickness will be counted against me because teachers are penalized in their summaries for their attendance…I hold myself to a high standard as an educator and I don't want to be marked down on things she didn't get to see this year… My district said I would be paid through the end of the year. That is all I know.
- The prolonged questioning of if I am earning my 8 hr day pay from someone's subjective judgement when in fact I'm doing everything I've been asked while maintaining a home and family as well.

Logistics: Concern for meeting the needs of all students with limited Wi-Fi access and technology

- Nearly half of our student body does not have internet access. Even if the state tried to say that a Google Meet is equivalent to a classroom setting, which it isn't, there is no way that a paper packet can be equivalent to a teacher.
- …If a student participates in our Weekly Zoom, then that counts as a weekly communication. However, only about 20-25% show up for Zoom meetings. A phone message or an email sent does not count as a communication according to my administration. I must achieve a two-way communication with each family, each week. At the end of the week, I have to submit a report to my administrator with the names of students I failed to connect with. Last week, they added the requirement of doing a virtual walk-through evaluation of my peer's at-home learning "classroom." …I'm already anxious about this Friday's staff meeting, wondering what new requirement administration will add to my plate.

Social Emotional: Concern for Health of Teacher

- My concerns are primarily for my own mental health. Sitting in front of a computer screen 8.5-9 hrs. a day to complete all of the work that is expected of me is not too great for my mental health.
- I am most concerned about a different kind of burn out. One not from long workdays, but from not being able to escape the job. Emails/turned in work after 11 pm are hard to ignore. Also, I'm a single mother, so I've been trying to balance out teaching my classes, helping my daughter with her own, in addition to just finding that "family" time.

5. Discussion

Analysis of results showed patterns across the state's one hundred counties in the data collection. With very little variation, the most frequent response to question describing their current status in 3 words, was "overwhelmed," followed by "tired." This overarching response was then explained in the qualitative responses regarding logistics, accountability and the social emotional status of participants.

When asked about professional concerns, with examples such as pay, job security and other, provided in the question stem, participants most frequently shared concerns over accountability measures to satisfy district and school administrators' changing demands. This was followed by concerns to meet the needs of children virtually as well as the children's ability to attend class and accomplish tasks in this new system. Their knowledge and effectiveness with new technologies as instructional methods was a concern it would now be used in evaluation.

Teachers showed concern for accountability for children's academic growth. This was often expressed as the lack of attendance and/or "logging in" or "showing up" in the virtual classroom.

They described frustration with their district's lack of guidelines, consistency, and encouragement for grading. While this was generally attributed to variations in technology and connectivity in children's homes, this logistical gap left teachers stressed about children's progress. Because children and parents were told that grades would be on a Pass/Fail status, or, in some cases, not taken, teachers felt their work was devalued by both administrators and families.

Training logistics and the expanding job demands were described in detail, with similarities across the schools. Many reported long hours on the computer with children's synchronous instruction and then mandatory phone calls to follow-ups with children who had not checked in. Mandatory training in technology and subsequent paperwork were described by multiple respondents, sometimes occurring on the teachers' own time. An increase in workload was described in every region and across all grade levels, with many citing needs both to teach virtually and to prepare paper packets to be distributed to children without technology in the home.

6. Closing: implications for the *What Ifs?*

In writing this article we sit with hindsight not available when the study began. In March 2020 we were struck by the call for teachers, including our preservice education students, to quickly convert face-to-face instructional methods to a form of virtual instruction. As teacher educators we designed this study to better meet the needs of teachers in the event of the need for further school closings. Almost three years later we see the acceptance of virtual instruction as a method to provide schooling when traditional classroom instruction is not possible. In just the last half of the 2022-year, school districts have announced "No more snow days" as policy, virtual instruction when schools were shut down due to political unrest and violence, and continuing health concerns for COVID-19 pandemic closing schools on an intermittent basis.

We have observed our students and partnership teachers in the field expressing a desire to ignore the implications of school closings and return to pre-COVID-19 pandemic practices, often described as "getting back to normal." In spite of Molnar, et al's 2019 report, as well as numerous indicators of stress on teachers, children and families from the quick pivot to virtual teaching, a call for a change in teacher education programs is not prevalent. In our state, recent statistics show the teacher turnover was one of the highest in the country, with 16% of teachers leaving after the 2021-22 school year (Barnum, 2023). Logistics, accountability, and the social emotional health of teachers—that ultimately affect children and families—has driven us to now ask what we learned and what are the changes that need to occur.

Following are strategies from local, national and international reports on what worked, what we can have ready and what we now can be positive changes, with or without a sudden transition to virtual education.

- Free Wi-Fi access for public use across regions and economic conditions: One of the most revealing "aha moments" of the public's awareness of the vast effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was discovering the discrepancies of internet access across the US and other so-called "first world countries." As part of the Biden administration the Affordable Care Act was instated to provide $30 a month to families to help cover costs of internet access, with a one-time discount of $100 to cover the cost of a laptop (Get Internet, n.d.). This does not alleviate however the infrastructure necessary to deliver the access or to provide ongoing assistance in the case the ACA fades with the advent of political change.
- Professional development for teachers and administrators that focuses on building consistent accountability measures for virtual instruction—Development of guidelines for both parents and teachers is a first step. In Colorado, Senate Bill **(SB22-137)** Transition Back to K-12 Standard Accountability, was signed into law in 2022 in response to the need for transparency in student learning data. This will allow the state to target support and resources to the districts and schools that need it the most.
- Professional development and a refocus from teacher educators on a learner centered technology tools, to alleviate the stress of technology training while practicing. Tools and strategies that provide content and outreach to homes, compared to current technology focus on efficiency of lesson plans and presentations.
- Trauma informed counseling and interventions made available as a routine procedure for both teachers and administrators: little attention has been focused on resiliency factors needed to sustain qualified teachers in the profession. In a study of 163 teachers looking at "the trauma informed trenches," researchers found a need for compassion and support for occupational well-being to sustain and maintain the teaching workforce (Christian-Brandt, Santacrosse, & Barnett, 2020).

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