March 2023

The Pandemic and Teachers: How Teachers' Daily Life in the Classroom Has Been Impacted

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Recommended Citation

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Introduction

During the pandemic, there were many discussions concerning how the pandemic was affecting students' learning and their ability to function in a remote classroom. However, there seemed to be very little discussion about how the pandemic has impacted teachers. More specifically, the day-to-day routines and instructional strategies of teachers were being overlooked. It is obvious that teachers had to change how they taught with, and learned about, new technology throughout the past couple years, but the finer details were only discussed among teachers.

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first is to provide examples and information on how teachers had to adapt their instructional practices, assessments, and day-to-day routines to address the needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second purpose is to use that information to provide school districts and parents with the teachers' perspectives. This information helps all stakeholders see what teachers have done, and how they can support educators in a way that will lead to success for our students going forward while we recover from any pandemic loss.

Literature Review

If you look at major media headlines during the COVID-19 pandemic, the big push and/or question in education that seemed to be on everyone's mind was about getting students back into the classroom. During the years since, the rush to better understand how the pandemic impacted students and their potential learning loss has been one of great importance. However, much of the focus tends to leave out the teachers' perspectives or how teachers have been adapting to avoid learning loss. Even though previous literature on this specific pandemic may be limited, research is being done at a rapid pace. While reading through these recently published articles, four main themes continue to appear: learning in a pandemic, homework and grading, instructional practices, and technology issues.

Learning during the pandemic has been the focus of concern for educators, parents, and policy makers alike. Setting up a learning environment at home became part of the parents' new role in helping with education, while also trying to manage working (Trybus, 2020). For parents, the most difficult aspects of switching to home learning was typically finding time to help, learning the new technology, and understanding what students were learning in order to help them. For teachers, communication with parents and/or students, while vital, could be difficult. Without that face-to-face time, students were struggling to learn key concepts and adjusting to online learning (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). In a case study by Kaden (2020), the teacher discussed how some of his students were not engaged with online learning or could not be reached. He goes on to describe how checking on students' wellbeing and personal conversations were the most important way to check for comprehension during the pandemic.

One major way we can see how the pandemic has affected our students is through homework, feedback, and grading. Homework has been defined as the tasks assigned to be completed during non-school hours (Rosário et al.,2018; Cooper et al., 2012). As research prior to the pandemic revealed, when students consider academic activity valuable, they devote more time and effort to things like homework. Other aspects that increase homework time and effort are interest in the topic, the homework's meaningfulness, and the homework's purpose (Suárez et al., 2019; Trautwein et al., 2006; Kalchman & Marentette, 2012). According to research done by Midcalf & Boatwright (2020), 60 percent of teachers said homework was not being turned in and were unsure just how much parents were helping with the homework in a negative way (during the pandemic). If homework is meant to be an extension of the classroom to help aid in the learning of the content, the pandemic created a scenario where the home and school borders were blurred. This had an impact on the completion of homework (or lack thereof) or the effort put into homework by students themselves that teachers were not expecting. With this uncertainty, it also led to a shift in teachers' abilities to provide feedback for students.

Feedback is just one instructional strategy that teachers were struggling with throughout the pandemic. However, feedback should be instant and motivating for students, whether that feedback is written or orally provided (Kaden, 2020). Teachers provide feedback in a variety of ways such as praise, criticism, comments, general review with the whole class, and through grading (Rosário et al.,2018). Pandemic teaching provided a new challenge for teachers in the amount of feedback and the type of feedback they were able to give. While technology provided a new way to provide feedback, there were still challenges in providing feedback that would be meaningful and timely (Jiang & Yu, 2021).

Teachers had to find ways to help students make meaning through virtual interactions with their peers and the teachers themselves (Trybus, 2020). The pandemic forced teachers to be innovative, which led to improvement in teaching strategies for some (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Using breakout rooms on Zoom, sharing information in real time, and daily communication were all part of establishing the routines we needed in order to promote learning to the best of our abilities (Kaden, 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020).

Learning, instructional strategies, and feedback were all key to teachers and students alike during the pandemic, but the main thing that caused frustration and problems for teachers, parents, and students was technology. Parents and teachers agree that technology posed problems for everyone, especially Internet issues; access to the Internet was an issue for those in poverty and in rural areas. In addition to Internet issues, parents said that figuring out how the technology works was confusing. For teachers, learning new technology on the fly and having to establish routines for each technology used was time consuming and frustrating (Kaden, 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020).

While these studies provide some insight into education during the pandemic, more research is needed. The themes that are emerging (learning, homework/grading, instructional strategies, and technology issues) are ones that need further research to help us understand the full effects of the pandemic—not only on students—but on teachers as well.

Methodology

To look more closely at the areas described in the introduction and the literature review, I used a mix of different data collection methods: interview, observations, and discussion board posts. Each of these data sets provided insight to answer the following questions:

1. How have classroom instructional strategies changed throughout the pandemic?
2. How have perceptions on the value of homework shifted throughout the pandemic?
3. How have teachers' assessment and grading processes changed during the pandemic?

Participants in the interview included one secondary teacher, one elementary teacher, and one special education teacher. All three participants have been teaching for at least five years. The secondary education teacher and the special education teacher work in urban schools while the elementary teacher works in a suburban area school. The make-up of these schools varies both culturally and ethnically. The special education teacher and elementary teacher work with a more diverse group of students while the secondary teacher works with a predominantly Caucasian population. However, the income levels for students for all three teachers varied greatly.

By interviewing educators in three different locations within the United States with vastly different settings, demographics, classroom types, pandemic models (hybrid, full in person, or remote) and age ranges, the data collected reflects teachers from all levels of education and is inclusive of all students. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length via Zoom, which allowed for recording and transcription of each interview.

Along with the interviews, I observed a secondary teacher for a 55-minute class to see what a pandemic classroom looked like and took field notes throughout the course of the lesson. This teacher has been teaching for 11 years and has been working at their current school for nine. The school where this teacher was observed is a suburban school with a predominantly Caucasian, middle-class student body. The class itself was in a hybrid model with some students in the building while the rest were at home on Zoom. The school has just under 900 students with around 140 students choosing to be fully remote for the 2020-2021 school year. Observing this style of hybrid classroom allowed me the ability to see how pandemic instruction looks and feels for the educator.

Then, using the transcripts from the interviews, my field notes, and a discussion board post on teaching in the pandemic, I was able to code the information for common themes about how the pandemic has impacted educators. These emerging themes were then analyzed and grouped into three major categories to be discussed in the Findings section of this paper: instructional practices, assessment, and school policy or procedures.

The focus of this research is to explore how the pandemic has impacted different areas of teachers' daily routines. As an educator, myself, during the pandemic, this research provided me with some examples of teaching practices that worked in my classroom or allowed me to see how others handled or reacted to teaching during the pandemic. Being a teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic made me both an observer and a participant in this study. While my own teaching practices during the pandemic are not mentioned in the findings, my thoughts and reflections on teaching through this difficult time are echoed in much of the data collected for the research.

Results

Following the interview, observations, and other forms of data collection, three main themes emerged to address teaching during a pandemic: what instruction looked like, what assessments looked like, and what different school districts' policies and safety measures were and how they have shifted. All these themes are interwoven together to give a whole picture on how teachers and schools managed their ability to educate students while dealing with the complications presented in pandemic education. Technology, teaching and assessment strategies, equity issues, and health and safety requirements affected each of these themes.

Classroom Instruction. Technology, in some form or another, has been working its way into the classroom for the entirety of education. However, the pandemic forced teachers to learn more technology in a year than most would learn in five to ten years of teaching. To meet the demands of teaching in either a hybrid or remote setting, teachers and staff had to learn new technology to communicate with students and parents, provide instruction, post materials, and give feedback. The technologies teachers had to learn included video conferencing software, learning-management systems, operating on different devices, and exploring other platforms to engage students.

Many teachers discussed using video conferencing software such as Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meets. Each one has their positives and negatives. One positive is that these video conferencing tools have provided a way for parents to meet with teachers outside of parents having to come into the school building. These conferencing tools are still being used post-pandemic to communicate with parents in a more flexible manner. They also provided a way for teachers and students to stay in touch and communicate during the initial part of the shutdown. A major drawback to some of the software utilized was the ability for students to "hack" into a class. One teacher described how her school had to switch from Zoom to Webex because students were "Zoom bombing" classes by giving out the room information to a bunch of people for them to overwhelm the Zoom meeting and the teacher. While the software does have ways to lock down the meetings and set up a waiting room, the teacher is then responsible for letting students into the meeting. As observed in the classroom, this was a huge distraction, especially if the student joined in the middle of class instruction. During this same observation while the teacher was giving instructions, the teacher had one of her virtual students constantly unmute and make distracting noises. While synchronous learning was possible, students found ways to create new instances of classroom behaviors for teachers to manage.

In addition to learning how to use the video conferencing software, teachers also had to learn different learning-management systems (LMS) to provide information and materials to students. Google Classroom, Schoology, Moodle, and Canvas have all become important resources for teachers and students. While observing a Spanish class, the teacher provided a Google slide deck to all her students via Google Classroom. Students who were at home were able to pull up the slides and complete the activities in class synchronously with the teacher while on Zoom. One of the special education teachers interviewed discussed how during the initial shut down, she teamed up with other teachers on their Google Classrooms to aid her students enrolled in those

classes. Another teacher described how she would post homework and notes to Schoology for her students who were quarantining at different times throughout the school year.

These technologies provided a way for teachers to continue to do their jobs while teaching hybrid, remote, or quarantined students. However, one key issue that arose was with equity for all students. For a few teachers who were interviewed, their students were one-to-one with iPads. Other districts used Chromebooks to meet the needs of students. While many districts have been able to provide devices for students, especially older learners, the issue was with Internet connectivity or families sharing devices. One of the teachers interviewed stated:

> Because of equity issues, we would not be able to require students to attend Zoom meetings because of things like having Internet access, other responsibilities at home, or students that might be sharing a device with other family members...

For these reasons, making sure every student was online for class proved difficult. One of the teachers interviewed said that during the initial shut down, they were not allowed to require attendance for online learning. While observing another teacher, her class was interrupted several times by students rejoining the Zoom meeting because of their poor Internet connection or computer had shut down. Toward the end of the lesson, the teacher's Zoom crashed. By having these technological problems and equity issues for students, teachers struggled to meet the needs of all students in their classes.

To reach all students and keep them engaged, teachers had to adapt their teaching strategies during the 2020-2021 school year. For some teachers, this involved thinking outside of the box for class activities. All teachers in their interviews mentioned some level of technology to engage students that they adapted for their teaching strategies. Boomcards, Kahoot, and Quizlet were all mentioned for working with vocabulary. One teacher mentioned using YouTube videos to relate to her students. Another mentioned StoryCorp as a way to engage students in the lessons. While technology does help teachers and adds to their arsenal of strategies, technology itself can also start to wear on the students.

Even with technology tools at their disposal, teachers had to find ways to engage students either remotely, in a hybrid setting, or in person in different ways than ever before. Guidelines on social distancing and sharing materials made some of the teachers' pre-pandemic strategies difficult. Collaborating in groups or partners was non-existent in person. One teacher said:

> Hands-on or group-oriented, I've basically had to not do or implement this year. So, things like food demonstrations—where we are going to have a whole lesson, where I would bring the ingredients, and we would prepare it all and take turns—we can't do things like that.

Teachers once again proved themselves to be resourceful. One teacher took her students outside to do interviews for their French class so they could be safe and stay socially distanced. Another teacher used the Zoom breakout rooms for the remote students while in-person students interviewed one another socially distanced. At the start of class, this teacher also made sure to individually greet every remote student for that day. She also used synchronous teaching and random calling to engage both students at home and in person. Teachers found ways to change their teaching strategies in order to make this work.

All teachers who were interviewed and observed had one strategy they either dropped or did not use pre-pandemic: the assigning of homework. All teachers interviewed stated that they did not give homework prior to the pandemic, or if they did, it was minimal. The few instances where teachers described giving homework had to do with ways to improve students' literacy skills. The French teacher said, "I'll give things like Quizlet lists, have them look at Boom cards to practice, or have them get Epic accounts to read books. Or maybe we'll have something like a project that will be working on their homework, but that's really it." One of the elementary teachers said "Initially, my homework was just read for 20 minutes. But now, with our push [back in], I send the decodable reader home, based on the phonics pattern that we're learning and have students read that passage out loud to their parents so their parents can hear their fluency…" Teachers focused on making sure students were getting the instruction they needed, and all teachers interviewed or observed seemed less concerned with how homework fits into the pandemic, unless it could be used in a formative way.

Assessment. As mentioned above, teachers had to find ways to make technology work in their instructional strategies. The same was true for assessments. Teachers had to find ways to make assessments digital and equitable for students. Whether it was a formative or summative assessment, teachers had to find a way for remote, hybrid, and quarantined students to be able to not only complete the assessments but also to be successful on them. For some, thinking outside the box proved to be a success.

While many tools exist to create online assessments, choosing the right one for what you need proved a difficult task. The French teacher interviewed had to completely change how she gave both formative and summative assessments. For her formative assessments, she previously used a "Euro" strategy to keep track of how students were comprehending or understanding the target language. Each student would collect Euros throughout the week for their formative assessment. However, the touching and sharing of these Euros was not allowed during the pandemic. The teacher found a solution: Class Dojo. This app allowed her to digitally keep track of how students were doing with the target language. She gave quick, direct feedback within the app to their "monster," so students could see how they were progressing. Another example for formative assessments came out of observing a Spanish classroom. The teacher had been instructing the students on inviting someone to the movies or a concert. Rather than giving them a paper-pencil vocabulary quiz, she planned on texting them via the Remind app to "make plans" to attend a movie or a concert in Spanish. Students were given the format of this formative assessment prior to the end of class so they knew what to study.

While formative assessments could be done on the fly, summative assessments proved to be a bit more challenging. One of the elementary teachers started by using Google Forms for assessments, but once the students were back in person, she reverted to paper-pencil assessments. One concern for the Spanish teacher was the use of translators during assessments by the remote or quarantined students. The French teacher stated that the biggest difficulty was having to make the assessments accessible online. It was very time consuming and could be tricky. However, just making the assessments available to everyone regardless of their learning environment was only one of the issues and changes teachers have dealt with for assessments.

The pandemic brought the 2020 school year to a screeching halt. Many states canceled state testing and focused more on engaging and enrichment types of activities that could be done remotely. For example, the state of Massachusetts did not allow for new material to be taught for the month of April. Teachers and students were put in an impossible situation. At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the gaps in knowledge from the shutdown were immediately felt. The elementary teacher interviewed put things into perspective quite well by saying:

> It's a lot of content that you're trying to pack [in], and when you have these students who are coming in with gaps in their learning, we're just pushing new curricula on them. We're not taking the time to close those gaps, and that makes it hard for us and for the students because they're frustrated…

She went on to describe how she used standards-based grading to work with her kids on mastery of skills by allowing for retakes and giving them lots of grace. This idea of patience and grace was echoed throughout the interviews and observations. It seemed that was, and is, a theme of school districts across the country.

Institutional policies. When discussing instructional strategies and assessments, all interview participants consistently mentioned the policies and guidelines put into place at their school districts. These policies ranged from social distancing and masks to classroom configurations to technology usage and so much more. Every school discussed how best to require and implement the wearing of masks and social distancing. While all the schools had varying degrees of students in the classroom such as fully remote, hybrid, or full in person at certain times of the 2020-2021 school year, all school districts did, and have been doing, their best to provide an education to students while also keeping them safe.

As discussed in previous sections, technology played an important role at the school level in every aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the district level, it was not any different. Districts provided devices for students or making sure teachers had access to the different platforms at their disposal. One school purchased Webex licenses to run their virtual classes for when students were forced to quarantine. Others have purchased Zoom accounts for their teachers. One teacher interviewed wore a microphone so her students could hear her through the mask. Another teacher had two computers running Zoom so the students at home could see her smartboard and her teaching at the same time. By providing the technology, districts helped teachers to be successful in their new pandemic teaching life.

While technology was a key area that many districts had to address, the guidelines and safety protocols that districts implemented had a direct impact on management strategies for teachers. Keeping students socially distanced could be challenging in small classrooms, in the hallways, or bathrooms. Many schools also required breaks for hand washing or sanitizing as well. One elementary teacher pointed out, "There is a lot of 'cover your nose,' 'you're too close,' 'stop touching your friends.'" She also said, "I have a timer on my phone, so that every hour children get hand sanitizer when the alarm goes off, [and] we wash hands before specials." While observing the Spanish class, the teacher reminded a student several times to keep their mask above their nose, and had to remind them to stay six feet apart. All these guidelines and procedures, while important, took away from learning time which was already limited and

interrupted. Teachers had to adjust their routines to be efficient in the handling of class time and managing the new policies.

Not only were teachers familiarizing themselves with novel technology and classroom management strategies due to changing institutional policies, but they were also evolving their instructional practices. As mentioned in an above example, both of the World Language teachers had to find ways to make small group or partner communication/collaboration activities doable at a safe distance. Both the elementary and secondary teachers discussed how these new policies cut out some of the more "fun" activities like cooking demonstrations or performance skits. Many of the "engaging" activities were not feasible as students were not permitted be close to one another or share items, nor could the teacher provide things like food for students to try. While teachers made the best of these guidelines and policies, it was difficult for them to maintain the normal level of enthusiasm for school when so many of the things they normally did in a school year were unavailable to them.

Summary. Clearly, teachers had to change their instructional and assessment strategies to fit into the guidelines provided by the school and district during the pandemic. Many of these changes involved technology and creative thinking about how to provide engaging and accessible lessons for all students. This proved to be incredibly difficult, especially when issues of equity were prevalent. However, teachers persevered through the 2020-2021 school year and will continue to do so. These changes and strategies provided the opportunity to have a discussion on current practices both improved and hindered by the pandemic.

Discussion

This study set out to discover how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted educators' daily lives in the classroom. While it is clear the pandemic had an impact on education, the impact on educators has only been discussed among educators. When looking at both the previous research and the results of this study, more thought and discussion needs to happen concerning how teachers had to adapt and change to meet the challenges presented during the 2020-2021 school year and beyond.

As described above and in the research, teachers have been forced to change their teaching strategies and practices to match not only the health and safety guidelines to keep students and staff safe, but they also had to learn and adapt to new technology to provide education to all students whether hybrid, remote, or fully in person. These shifts in teaching strategies have provided new, engaging ways of interacting with students, but they also proved stressful and challenging for teachers, students, and parents. Equity issues doubled the challenge especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Teachers did, and are still doing, their best to adapt, but patience and understanding could make the school year progress more smoothly.

All teachers interviewed and observed seemed to have in strategy in common: their use of (or lack thereof) homework. All teachers interviewed stated that prior to the pandemic they rarely gave homework. The pandemic has further shifted teachers away from homework. The observed teacher also had no homework assigned other than to study for the upcoming quiz. These

decisions to eliminate homework and focus on the learning during the pandemic provide a path to discussing the value of homework in the future.

Teaching strategies and homework are not the only changes teachers have made. Assessments also had to shift. For many teachers, figuring out how to give assessments virtually was a challenge. Trying to figure out what to assess and where students need to be academically also proved difficult. Schools also tried to figure out how to give standardized assessments to students both in person and remotely. Some districts decided to focus on power standards to zero in on what is essential for a child to know to be able to succeed. These decisions affected what and how a teacher approached the 2020-2021 school year as far as assessments, instruction, and homework were concerned. Furthermore, these decisions continue to have a ripple effect post-pandemic as teachers continue to play catch up and fill the gaps in learning.

Limitations

The study presented above points out the impact of the pandemic on educators themselves as well as the impact on students, parents, and districts. However, this study does have a few limitations which mainly exist in the literature review and the methodology sections. Due to the pandemic being a recent event, the amount of previous literature available is limited. As time progresses, more research will become available and should be added to provide more details and information. Having only three interviews, along with one observation for a one-hour class due to safety guidelines and quarantining procedures, was another limitation. To fully understand the impact of the pandemic on educators, conducting more interviews and more observations would add depth and detail to the study.

Conclusion

This study shows that there was a major impact on educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers had to adapt, learn new technologies, and rise to many challenges facing them on a daily basis. Further research and interviews are needed to gain a well-rounded picture of how the pandemic has impacted teaching, not only now, but for years to come. This research should include studies on instructional strategies, the validity of homework, and assessment practices. By adding to this study or doing additional research, the impact of the pandemic can be more fully understood and provide insight should the field of education face another COVID-19-like pandemic.

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