

Navigating Pandemic Schooling for Novice Teachers

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Abstract: *Teachers navigated a vast set of challenges during the 2019-20 school year when a pandemic shut down school and changed the face of classrooms. The challenges that emerged during this time were heaped upon the already full plates of the novice teachers featured in this study who were just gaining confidence in the classroom. This article highlights the six themes that emerged from interviews done in spring of 2020 as part of a larger longitudinal study following teacher education graduates. This snapshot of the data provides inside into the effect of the early stages of the pandemic on these teachers classrooms, perspectives, roles, and impact on their students.*

Key Words: non-native English speakers, college, barriers, supports

The 2019-2020 academic year was full of new challenges that tested the capacity of teachers throughout America's public education system. For some new teachers those challenges were in addition to an already difficult transition into their first year of teaching. The following study explores the experience of navigating instruction during the COVID19 pandemic through the lens of first and second year teachers.

The data presented are taken from a larger longitudinal study following teacher education graduates from a mid-size Western university. While the larger study focuses on the experiences of teachers more broadly from the point of completing student teaching through the next ten years, data collection in 2020 was also able to capture the effect of the early stages of the pandemic on those experiences.

The results are drawn from semi-formal interviews conducted with twenty-five recent graduates of the university. All members of the student teaching cohorts of the elementary education program were presented with IRB-approved recruitment materials for three consecutive semesters. Some attrition occurred since the time of recruitment (25%), with twenty-five of the original thirty-three participants responding to interview requests in this round of interviews taking place in May and June of 2020. Of the twenty-five participants, four were not working in a classroom setting during the 2019-2020 academic year. One of these participants had formerly worked in a classroom as a full-time teacher following her graduation, but was unhappy with "the fit" of her school and her own philosophy; she was looking for a new teaching job and working as a nanny in the meantime. Three of these participants were in the last cohort to be recruited and had most recently graduated. They had not yet secured teaching positions, but were actively seeking.

The remaining students were working in classrooms, one as an aide, one as a secondary religious teacher, and nineteen were working as full-time elementary school teachers in various locations, representing four states. One to two members of the research team conducted each interview and made digital audio recordings; the interviews were then coded for themes using constant comparative analysis. Six significant themes emerged that illuminated the experience of being a new teacher during this pandemic.

Emergent Themes
1. Teachers felt overwhelmed by the quick change, feeling of uncertainty, and growing list of demands.
2. Teachers had inconsistent levels of support and collaboration, often leaving them navigating new territory alone.
3. Instructional requirements were often changing.
4. Technology became a method of delivering instruction and material to students; however, this was hindered as many students didn't have the resources they needed.
5. Adaptability became a necessary skill as teachers constantly had to adjust and adapt to make their instruction successful and meet the needs of students.
6. Parents became an integral part of the learning team and challenged novice teachers to quickly become comfortable in working closely with families.

FEELING OVERWHELMED

The clearest theme to emerge came as no surprise to anyone: teachers were overwhelmed by the challenge of transitioning to school-supported home learning. There were many elements that contributed to the “feeling of flailing” that teachers described:

- Changing methods of delivery
- Uncertainty about the duration of the home learning
- Unclear expectations for instruction
- Logistical complications of acquiring and distributing learning resources to students amidst a highly contagious pandemic
- The need to utilize previously unused technologies
- The pressures of overwhelmed parents and families.

Given all of those demands and complexities, it is evident that teachers emotions and attitudes were most significantly impacted. When participants were interviewed, it occurred two and three months after their schools had closed their doors to in-person teaching. Many of the issues identified above had to be addressed in order to keep school going; however even after the school year had ended the emotion remained.

First and second year teachers are routinely overwhelmed (Whitcomb, Borko, and Liston, 2008). Even when equipped with excellent teacher education, novice teachers are required to learn and develop pedagogical skills, content knowledge, and workplace culture familiarity on their feet, while assuming responsibility for dozens of children. Several participants articulated that they had just begun to feel comfortable, to “get in my groove,” as one teacher put it, when the pandemic hit. They had worked through early classroom management failures, built cooperative relationships with other school personnel and students. Three of the participants identified how much they were looking forward to seeing end-of-year test scores as evidence of the growth they felt they and their

students had achieved. The experience of transitioning from their now more comfortable classrooms to teaching online was unsettling all over again.

Two of the participants discussed how much their own parenting demands increased and added to their feeling of being overwhelmed. They were not only trying to develop their professional response to the transition, they were also trying to help their own children transition to home learning. Other participants also acknowledged the added burden of being a parent to school-age children for teachers navigating the transition, though they themselves were not in that situation, commenting on how much more difficult this was for their colleagues who were. Teachers were not alone in finding the work/life balance demands of working from home while supporting their children's learning at home difficult. This has been a widely reported phenomenon for working parents during the pandemic (Ferdig, Baumgartner, Hartshorne, Kaplan-Rakowski, and Mouza, 2020). For those few new teachers in our study who were parenting and beginning their careers as teachers, the added burden was significant.

While the experience of feeling “stretched to capacity” was something that every participant identified independently, the approach their individual schools and districts took was far from unified. Each of the participants working in schools were working in different schools, with the overlap of one district by only two participants. Even within that overlapping district, the direction these new teachers received was by no means replicated. On virtually every possible measure, schools took different approaches. The transition period was made over various timelines, with some teachers reporting having a weekend to make that transition and other teachers having a full week to prepare before being expected to provide instruction in this new format. Some teachers reported that they were directed to provide asynchronous instruction, others were directed to provide synchronous instruction, and still others were given the choice to decide for their own class about synchronicity. The platforms for instruction were even more varied. Some schools provided paper packets solely or in addition to an online platform. Almost all the teachers used an online platform for delivering content and instruction, but those included nearly a dozen different platforms. Teachers reported that at the end of the school year, their schools had narrowed the selection of platforms they expect teachers to use in the coming year. This need for consistency and focus came as families, and even teachers, reported chaos and stress in trying to navigate multiple platforms across classrooms and children during the spring of 2020.

VARIANCE IN COLLABORATION & SUPPORT

The level of collaboration across schools and grade level teams also took many forms. Some teachers reported collaborative meetings within large school districts between all grade level teachers. Other teachers divided content areas within a school grade level team, combining all second-grade students, for example, with each teacher providing online instruction for all second-graders in math only. In most cases, teachers collaborated with their grade-level team by sharing ideas and technology tools, but maintained autonomy as a singular classroom teacher.

While two of the participants reported never receiving any type of professional development specifically geared toward new teachers, the rest of the teachers had begun their teaching careers with a variety of structural supports for their early career, including district level trainings, instructional coaches, and teacher mentors. All but two of those participants reported that the supports they had been receiving were discontinued when the pandemic struck. The two participants for whom those supports continued identified them as a lifeline. At a time when these new teachers were most desperate for support, most of them lost the situation specific supports on which they had relied in better times.

INSTRUCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

The amount of instruction they offered was also not unified. Most teachers reported in the beginning by trying to provide instruction closer to an equivalency of the time they had been spending in the classroom, but ending the school year with much less daily instruction. One teacher was directed by his district to provide one third of former classroom time worth of instruction for his students, which, in his case was complicated by teaching both a morning and an afternoon session of kindergarten, while his school colleagues were responsible for only one group of students. Another teacher was directed to provide 40 minutes of content two times per week, while another was encouraged to check in with all students by phone at least once a week. Content narrowing was also different from school to school. Some teachers continued to provide instruction in all subject areas, while one teacher was directed to reduce instruction to language arts and math only, with a different selection of subject areas focused on by each districts.

TECHNOLOGY & RESOURCES

While these novice teachers reported feeling significant disadvantages in this pandemic by virtue of their novice position, they almost all reported experiencing an advantage for the very same reason. All of these teachers had been exposed to Canvas as an online learning platform recently during their own teacher education training. That familiarity was consistently cited as an advantage by these participants. As one teacher said, “[Moving our instruction to Canvas] was definitely an adjustment for all of us. But for me, you know taking Canvas classes online and also college at [. . .] State, right? It was a lot easier for me, really smooth for me. But then for a lot of the older teachers, it was definitely a bigger adjustment for them.” Additionally, the teacher education program from which these new teachers have recently graduated requires all students to take a course focused on how to use technology in the classroom. Many teachers specifically named the value of the things they learned in that course – particularly if they had already applied them by introducing students to new technologies for learning – helping them to successfully transition their instruction to online formats. This recent technology education was cited by participants as not only giving them an advantage, but also making them a new valuable member of their school teams, able to provide useful instructional support to their colleagues: “I’m the youngest one. So I’m always the one who has to try to figure out how [the technology] works. But I love my team; it’s fun.”

Attentive students of public schooling in the United States have long identified the impact of differential resource distribution on schools (Cochran-Smith and Fries, 2005; Holme and Rangel, 2012). The impact of the pandemic is no different - resource distribution matters to the educational achievement of students and the working conditions of teachers.

So what happened was the gap just got bigger. So my kids that were already doing well in school, kept doing well because they were the ones that had the home support and then my kids who didn’t have internet or computers, or I had several that mom and dad didn’t even have smart phones or anything like that. They just had no way. I would call and check in once a week and just like see – social, emotional needs and just see what they were reading. So, yea, my gaps just got bigger.

As this participant identified, the reality is that while everyone in the study experienced the cataclysmic effects of the pandemic on their school, the resources available to families and parents were not equal. Most of the participants in the study worked for schools that were able to distribute devices to students in some measure – whether one device per family, or one per student. Most schools had relatively few students who didn't have internet access before the pandemic. However, some participants reported that their schools couldn't distribute devices because they didn't have them and all participants described variable levels of parental ability to navigate the changes.

Student engagement was one of the clearest measures that related to resource distribution. Only one participant reported that all of her students engaged in the school supported home learning fully throughout the spring of 2020. Most participants reported that most students engaged most of the time, with a small percentage of their students engaging irregularly, with more disengaging as time passed. But for participants at schools where home resources were scant, engagement was a much harder goal to achieve. "It's been crazy. It's been especially hard, just with the demographic of kids that I teach. I'm in a really low income area. So out of 25 kids, on my best day, I had ten participating. So that was hard. But I also learned quickly that I could only control what I could control, so that helps." The impact of students' home lives on their academic achievement has never been more profound than it was during the pandemic, according to these teachers.

ADAPTABILITY

Another theme which emerged during the interviews was the centrality of adaptability for these teachers in their responses. Because conditions were constantly changing, and expectations were also on the move, teachers were never able to feel settled in their approach or methods. As one participant identified, for most of these teachers, that was a habit of mind that they had sharpened throughout their education: "You know with elementary education, I learned to be really adaptable." It's a dynamic profession, which requires individuation and differentiation.

However, beyond the adaptability required for changing conditions and instructional platforms, the very role that teachers assumed required adaptation.

It was kind of tricky because as a teacher, you know you're used to having that teacher hat. But then during this I kind of shifted from being a full teacher to more of like a guide for parents and students. And that was kind of an interesting role to figure out what part I played because I definitely wanted to allow parents the independence to be able to do what works for them and their families, but also I had the teacher hat where I needed to make sure my students were still getting the content they needed to be able to finish second grade where they need to be. So that was kind of a tricky balance to find the first couple weeks. But I think really strong communication with parents, several times a week checking in, figuring out what they wanted me to do to help them, and where I needed to just step back and let them be the parents.

INTERACTIONS WITH PARENTS

For many of these new teachers the degree of parental interaction necessitated by the shift to home learning was intimidating. Having this formerly relatively small part of their role take on significantly more import and time was fatiguing, but it was also a place of growth, as one new teacher reported that it was the most profound skill improvement she experienced.

While communicating with parents became a more significant part of their role during the pandemic, all but two of these participants identified their most important role as emotional support for their students. They described that portion of their role in different terms, as "providing a sense of familiarity," or "continuing the relationships I'd formed with students during the year";

I think, honestly, some of these kids, school was like their getaway, like their normal. And I think just having the interaction with them twice a week of you know, asking how they were doing, having help on assignments, and still have some sense of normalcy and seeing their teacher, I really think that helped some of them. So just being like a support for them.

Participants over and over described the value of this part of their job during the pandemic. So much was unmoored for students during the pandemic, that position of their teachers in their life was perhaps exaggerated. As one participant stated, "[My most important role] was the consistency. Just knowing that they needed to be up in the morning for our meeting." At such an unsettling time, these teachers found their value primarily in continuing relationships of trust and affection with students.

CONCLUSION

This pandemic is unprecedented in so many ways for teachers and the impacts on these early career teachers are difficult to predict. However, there are some initial takeaways that teacher educators and policymakers can consider as we move forward. The results of this study point to some ways that we have "gotten it right" – increased technology education for teachers, the flexibility of local control of schools and the selection of empathetic and adaptable professionals in our elementary schools, for example. These findings also point to areas of weakness in our system that are highlighted in this time of crisis – the uneven distribution of resources across schools and the lack of state and national leadership that leads to uncertainty and extreme variation in schools across our nation. As our communities have leaned heavily on teachers over the past several months, it would behoove us to listen carefully to their voices as we consider how to best grow from this experience. Leadership at broader levels of schooling systems could have enabled consistency and reliability and would have reduced stress levels on school administrators and teachers. Schools that support demographics of students who have fewer home resources would have been in a different position to respond if they had concomitant structural resources. Given the fact that 92% of respondents indicated that their most crucial role was tending to the social and emotional roles of their students, it seems prudent for state and local educational leaders to give direction to teachers to prioritize those needs.

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