

Teaching from a social distance: Teacher experiences in the age of COVID-19

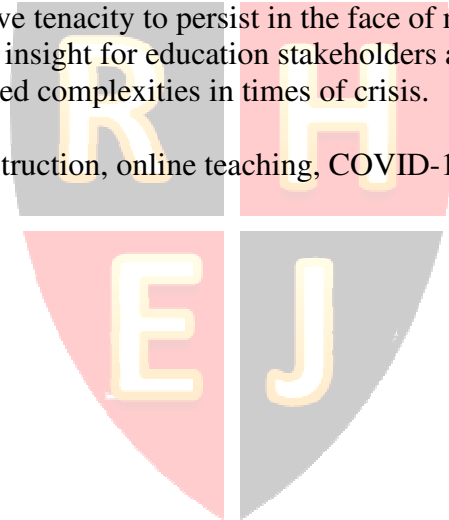
Daniella G. Varela
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

LaVonne C. Fedynich
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of current Pre-K through 12 teachers in South Texas school districts and their immediate need to transition from a traditional classroom setting to virtual instruction as a result of the worldwide health crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using naturalistic inquiry, this qualitative study transcribed and coded participant interviews to reveal several themes: teachers work hard and adapt, teachers need students, parents, each other, and our trust and confidence, teachers worry, and yet, teachers persevere. The findings of this study tell of teachers' impressive tenacity to persist in the face of multiple adversities. As a result the findings provide additional insight for education stakeholders as to the intricacies of the teaching profession and its added complexities in times of crisis.

Keywords: teachers, virtual instruction, online teaching, COVID-19



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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, also known as the ‘novel coronavirus’ as a medical reference stemming from its new strain, has forced global society into a new normal. Widespread lockdowns and stay at home orders, social distancing, masks, gloves and virtual meetings are the standard. Curious that it should be called novel because its impact is exactly that: novel. Especially for the current generation whom prior to this experience, have probably only learned about global pandemics in history books. In fact, by comparison, the last pandemic of this magnitude was the Spanish Flu in 1918—over 100 years ago. Few people alive today have a recollection of life in that time. Thus the impact of COVID-19 is new, intimidating, and uncertain.

One major impact of the global pandemic is school closures, a move recommended by federal government officials at the United States Center for Disease Control (CDC) in an effort to mitigate mass spread of the virus (Gostin & Wiley, 2020; Mahanti, Heneghan & Arosnon, 2020). As of March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 107 countries took action to close schools, some for extended periods of time and others for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic school year (Viner, et al., 2020). Schools and administrators were forced into difficult decisions to shutter classroom doors. In the process, educational leaders wrangled with the complexities of what this would mean for the welfare of their students, employees, and the community at large (Birbnaum, Weiler & Westbrook, 2020) bringing to light the reality that schools are more than just places of learning. In fact, because extended school closures impede the system’s ability to provide students with meals and social support services, concerns grow for significant social and economic consequences (Gostin & Wiley, 2020). At that time, such decisions were made to last a couple of weeks. On April 17, 2020, an executive order by the Governor of the state of Texas was issued mandating schools closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Boundless research confirms that as a stronghold, education is largely responsible for individual and community success, health, and wealth both in present assessments and of future forecasts (Viner, et al., 2020). Given the recency of this global pandemic, it is impossible to determine the how long-term closures of schools will influence the educational outcomes of students currently in the system, and the impact on the health of students across the system. Perhaps the closest estimation of the impact of long-term school closures are found in research related to normally scheduled school closures, like holiday and summer breaks. Van Lancker & Parolin (2020) reported that achievement gaps in math and literacy widen during extended breaks and more so between students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds compared to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Most concerning is the suggestion that over the course of a standard summer break, which in some areas can last up to two full months or longer, schoolchildren experience a loss of about one month’s worth of educational attainment for children of low socioeconomic status (Van Lacker & Parolin, 2020).

What can be expected are the immediate concerns of school personnel and stakeholders regarding impeded student learning opportunities and compounded, possibly now magnified inequities. Viner et al. (2020) cited the disproportionate and rampant effects of school closures during the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic which reported increased dropouts, increases in violence against children and various other socioeconomic and gender disparities. What’s more now

however in the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic and school decisions to move learning and instruction online are the inequities of the digital age: technology access, proficiency, and accessibility. The reality of inequities that have long persisted in education and societal systems are now at the forefront. Every single inequity is now at the surface: access to technology, abusive homes, absent parents, sibling supervision, second language, special needs, drug use, etc. Now and possibly more than ever before it has become clear that schools are safe harbors, community anchors, and equalizers.

In Texas, the move to close schools has not meant the end of the instructional year. For a majority of its 1277 school districts, instruction is now being delivered online. Online schooling at home however leaves behind children in low-income households many of which do not have access to technology, including hardware, software, and connectivity. Anticipating such disparities, school districts have also worked to provide packets of worksheets in an effort to keep students engaged in the learning process. But having some students who have the ability and resources to do so engage in and complete their schoolwork online widens the gap between those who cannot. Although it is an effort to make sure students are still learning something during school closures, it perpetuates the disparities between the haves and the have nots. Students engaging and learning online are developing new proficiencies that may place them far ahead their paper-based classmates.

Still, just as in a normal school setting, districts are responsible for all students, including students with disabilities and language difference. Thus, the intricacies of an effective and equitable distance learning experience for students in the Pre-K through 12 education system have proven plentiful and challenging. Now however are the added concerns of health and wellbeing as a result of school closures as evidence shows that the global pandemic has greatly and negatively affected the economy to the extent of recession. Economic recessions intensify disparities (Van Lacker and Panolin, 2020).

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light a myriad of concerns about how prepared we are as a society to deal with a major health crisis. For many school districts, decisions were made to continue instructional delivery using online learning management systems. In some K-12 classrooms, teachers already use various technological resources and online sources to supplement instruction. Thus some students are familiar with the modality. School districts realized however that parents and guardians were thrust into an unknown world and unprepared to guide students through this experience feeling overwhelmed with needing to quickly understand and support online learning. Reflecting on this, school district personnel have voiced regret that there was no time to train or orient parents and guardians to technology as a learning tool specific to the needs of their students and of the curriculum established.

Research supports parental understanding and proficiency as integral part of the success of classroom innovation using technology-based resources (Nogueron-Liu, 2017; Katz, Moran & Ognyanova, 2019; Rideout and Katz, 2016; Warschauer et al., 2014). Under COVID-19 and its related school closures and transition to online learning, parents and guardians with concerns about access to technology or self-described limited proficiency of technological tools and online learning environments opted instead for paper-based instructional materials (worksheets, packets, textbooks) thereby compounding inequities of the student learning experience.

As is the unfortunate reality of inequity, for students in the education system, not all technological worlds are created equal (Rideout and Katz, 2016). As one result of disproportionate connectivity and access to technology, Katz, Moran, and Ognyanova (2019)

found a lack of and therefore imminent need for resources to help parents and children in the most high-need communities build and develop technological capabilities.

It is evident that students in Pre-K through 12 education now are a fast-moving and quickly advancing technological generation of learners. COVID-19 effectively forced the education system to catch up. There remains a responsibility to provide critical assistance in the form of trusted local resources designed to build the proficiency, capacity, and competence necessary to support online learning at home (Katz, Moran, and Ognyanova, 2019). In doing so, this move toward digital equity for all learners hopes to demonstrate with confidence what families and educators can accomplish when they collaborate and work together for the benefit of student learning.

Research is plentiful as to the inequities present in the education system. What is lacking is a discussion regarding what teachers face in an attempt to respond. This study seeks to explore and understand the experiences of current Pre-K through 12 teachers in South Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic who have been directed to move all instruction to online delivery. The study seeks to contribute to the body of literature aiming to better understand the realities of the teaching profession to inform educator preparation programs, educational leaders, policy makers and stakeholders what it means to be an educator during a global pandemic.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to understand and reveal the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers and the immediate need to transition from a traditional classroom setting to virtual instruction as a result of the worldwide health crisis and response to COVID-19. The study strives to contribute to literature seeking to better understand the intricacies of the teaching profession in South Texas. Using the findings of this study, education stakeholders and policy makers can better understand the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers in their efforts to best serve schoolchildren, especially as the education system braces for a new reality as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

RESEARCH QUESTION

RQ: What are the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers and the immediate need to transition from a traditional classroom setting to virtual instruction as a result of the worldwide health crisis and response to COVID-19?

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative naturalistic inquiry as an approach to understand the realities of the Pre-K through 12 teacher experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Naturalistic inquiry enables the researcher to learn from participants in the uniqueness of and within a particular context (Patton, 1985), and in order to find constructed meaning and better understand multiple realities (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allan, 1993).

Instrumentation

This study used semi-structured interviews conducted virtually in the spirit of social distancing using an online web conferencing platform. The interview consisted of 18 questions designed to encourage reflection and conversation about their experiences as Pre-K through 12 teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon the consent of each participant, interviews were digitally recorded. Participations were informed and assured that anonymity would be preserved throughout the process.

Sample

Purposive sampling, central to naturalistic inquiry, was used in this study. In order to understand the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers in the COVID-19 pandemic, participants selected were current Pre-K through 12 teachers in various grade level and subject areas working in school districts in the South Texas region.

Transcribing Responses

With the consent of all participants, interviews were recorded to allow for transcription. Researchers recorded the date and time of each interview, as well as the questions and answers provided by each participant. Transcriptions were recorded on a Microsoft Word document. A copy of each transcribed interview was then forwarded for member checks (Erlandson, et al., 1993).

Data Analysis

As a process of developing shared constructions of reality, naturalistic inquiry requires continuous analysis of data from the start of collection to its completion. Saldana (2012) described the process of coding transcribed interviews as one which enables the researcher to capture the essence of what is revealed. To facilitate the coding process, the researchers thoroughly reviewed transcribed interview data for key words detailing the evocative experience of Pre-K through 12 teachers during the COVID-19 experience, then again to identify recurrent themes.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Reliability and validity in qualitative research are developed through four-pronged process of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study relied on member checks, triangulation, peer debriefing, reflective journaling and thick descriptions. Participants were current teachers working in South Texas school districts in grades Pre-K through 12 during the COVID-19 pandemic who could provide authentic details about their experiences. During the interviews, the researchers frequently asked participants questions for clarification as a process of member checks throughout. Participants and peer researchers were also provided with the opportunity to review and verify interview transcriptions.

RESULTS

Results of this study revealed several themes which emerged from participant discussion about their experiences during the immediate need to transition from a traditional classroom setting to virtual instruction as a result of the worldwide health crisis and response to COVID-19. Generalized information about participants included in the study are provided followed by a detailed analysis of data collected and themed as a result of the interviews process.

Participants

Participants in this naturalistic study included a total of nine (9) current teachers certified and with teaching experience in grades ranging from Pre-K to 12th grade in a variety of subject areas. All participants currently teach in school districts located in the South Texas region. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 2 years to 19 years. In order to protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used and only summary demographic details are provided.

June, a veteran elementary teacher of 12 years, was the first participant interviewed. When asked to describe her reaction to the news that all instruction would be moved to an online format, June said "panic (ha ha) combined the fact that I knew that this was coming. I already knew this was going to happen."

Gloria was the second participant interviewed. She has been an elementary teacher for 6 years. In her interview, Gloria explained that her initial reaction to the news that she would need to transition to online instruction for her class was "um surprise. I think along with everyone else I was caught off guard. I was a bit lost and I knew I instantly had to figure out what I was going to do. Surprise, shock, scared. I had no idea which direction to take at the time."

Jess, the third participant interviewed, is a teacher with 7 years of experience. Her initial reaction to teaching online was rooted in confusion.

How!? I couldn't understand how I was going to get the kids to know how to use technology this way without them in front of me. It was like I don't even know my own username and password and then the parents have questions, and I have my own 4 kids and I just.....my initial reaction was how? How are we going to do this to where 100% of students are going to get what they need out of this? (kids in the background asking for bananas) my initial thought how (kids interrupting) how are we going do this?

Marisol is an early childhood teacher with over 19 years of experience. As the fourth participant interviewed, she explained that the idea of teaching online for her was daunting.

I was worried, worry, concern, fear, I was scared that, I mean the whole thing about early childhood education is hands on, hugging, singing, playing, and now I have to do all that from a computer screen!? I mean I am old school, I use dirt, toys, play, and so to be thrown this?

Anna was the fifth participant interviewed. She is an elementary teacher with 13 years of experience and expressed concern about needing to teach online. "I was, I was a little nervous. Especially because in our district we really didn't have much set up. We didn't have Google Classroom. The kids don't log on to do anything online, like no assignments online. They do everything in the classroom."

Leslie, a teacher of almost 19 years, was the sixth participant interviewed. In response to the news that she would need to teach online, Leslie confessed to feeling confused.

I didn't know, I had no vision as to how this was going to work out. Every teacher on my

campus has about 20-25 students. I have the whole school, almost 450 students. I didn't know how I was going to connect with all of them. So I was like "whoa! How am I going to do this?"

The seventh participant interviewed was Melissa. She has been a teacher for almost 16 years and described her "state of shock" in response to her district's move to online instruction. "We were all like "now what" because this had never been done before."

Dolly, the eighth teacher interviewed, has been teaching for 8 years. Upon learning that she would need to move her classroom instruction online, she admitted that "At first I was overwhelmed just because I don't do very well with technology, so it's a little stressful trying to learn something new, right now, and trying to manage it from the house."

The ninth teacher interview was Elena, a novice teacher in her 2nd year during the COVID-19 pandemic. She admitted that her initial reaction to the move to online instruction was "confusion. I was convinced it wasn't going to work. I mean, I really thought the kids are not going to show up."

Findings

Data analysis involved a process of coding participant interview responses to reveal emerging themes resulting from teachers' experiences transitioning to online teaching during the global COVID-19 pandemic. After a thorough and repeated analysis of the data collected, it became evident that the teachers' experience was not immune to the fear and uncertainty that has become commonplace during the pandemic. The emerging themes revealed speak to the tenacity of the teaching profession: teachers work hard and adapt, teachers need (students, parents, each other, and our trust and confidence), teachers worry, and teachers persevere.

Teachers Work Hard and Adapt

All participants interviewed addressed the immediate transition to online teaching, going from the traditional classroom to a virtual one in a matter of days. Through this, one of the most prominently noted themes was the willingness of teachers to work hard and to adapt.

Marisol: I mean I've been a teacher for almost 20 years and never would I have thought that I would have to one day teach Pre-K online. I mean we prepare for tornadoes, fires, hurricanes, active shooters, and no one was ready for this I mean isn't that amazing? We are better prepared for an active shooter, but we weren't ready to teach online? No. We had to find a way. And we did. We didn't stop. We didn't quit. We didn't skip a beat. We got a couple of days to breathe and plan but we have teachers working 12-16 hour days just to try to catch up and keep up with this. And we're doing it. I mean right now we are in DEFCON 3. So they can call me, text me, message me, remind me throughout the day. I mean one mom is a nurse and she gets her breaks at 3am. I have to be available to her. And I have one kid with a Facebook profile, and he calls me every night to tell me he loves me. That's usually my personal time, but right now I don't have personal time, I'm always their teacher.

Jess: I have my computer, my cell phone with a battery pack so I don't run out of battery then I have my iPad so I try all the assignments on my computer, on my phone, and my iPad just to see what the students will see no matter what they might be using. I am ready.

June: So there's a lot of things that I feel um are truly just baptism by fire when you get into the classroom. This just tells me I have to be Google Classroom certified. I mean in this day and age when you look at things that happened this winter where we had a large population of our students out with just the regular flu...this could have been...the frustration could have been avoided if we were already ready for distance learning. You're going to be out for 5 days? No problem. Here's your code, here's your assignments, bam.

Melissa: I have to plan much better because I need to cover like 2 days worth of work in a one hour meeting every other day without being overwhelmed or overwhelming them. And the parents and needing to be able to relieve them of that stress. The parents shouldn't be teaching it. It should be me. This is my job. I mean this is a crisis but we are adapting every minute of the day to our students needs.

Anna: I'll tell you last night I was up past midnight trying to get all the activities uploaded for today just so my students could have access to them first thing in the morning."

Dolly: As our admin starts to ask more of us, I mean it's hard because we have to learn something new but I'm staying positive and doing research.

Teachers Need

A prominent theme revealed in participant responses was the reality that in any circumstance, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers need. Teachers need students, parents, each other, and teachers need our trust and confidence.

Teachers Need Their Students

There is a special bond between teachers and students. The participants of this study revealed how special this bond is not only for the quality of the learning experience but for their own professional and personal validation. Students are clearly their primary concern, and each and every teacher included in this study, without hesitation and choking back tears, said students were the number one thing they missed the most. With emotion and sadness in her voice, Marisol said she misses "just that every day connection. The hugs. Around my leg. I miss them." Other participants shared the sentiment:

Gloria: I miss the interaction with them every single day. Having our routine. Telling them hi. The intimacy in the classroom. The laughs, the tears, the disagreements, the agreements. The connection in the classroom. That's the hardest part.

Jess: My kids! I get so sad I need to have them with me. It's so emotional (crying). There is no way, I mean the interaction. The pat on the back, seeing that light bulb go off, the classroom is their safe place. I try to do Zoom meetings but I can't even make it 2 minutes (crying) and I am just in tears. I miss them so much.

Melissa: I miss just seeing my students, interacting with them, because of course I do see some of them, some don't want to use their camera, they don't want to show their bed head or whatever (laughs)...I miss the interaction, the high five, the pat on the back, the positive reinforcement, bonding with my kids, I definitely miss that. And I am so proud of them, because every time I log on with them...now I'm going to get emotional (voice begins to crack) um... every time I log on with them they're smiling, they're ready to learn, they're

listening, they're focused for the most part. They have a good positive attitude, and they're all wanting to tell me something.

June: OH my students. 100% my students. Um. Um. And not to be emotional I mean (holding back tears). I think about it every single day.

Anna: MY KIDS! (thru tears) It makes me so emotional. I look forward to meeting them online when we can. It's the best part of my day. I think being in the classroom, you take things for granted. I value their presence. I just want to be back there.

Leslie: I miss them and I think about them all the time. It's just um (clears throat, voice cracks) it's just so different of not having the daily routine with them.

Teachers Need Parents

Good parental involvement is an important part of a child's educational experience. Participants in this study spoke to the significance of parental involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marisol: If I didn't have those good relations with the parents, I mean, this would have been so much harder. And they know I am a single mom. They know I am not going to overwhelm them because I'm in their shoes and I know how that feels. We have a trust.

Leslie: Parents are more involved now. I mean, they're completely, involved! I mean (laughs) no one is questioning parental involvement now, right? I mean we laugh and giggle and we all know we'd love to have it back to normal but everyone is coming together, to be better, do better, and to stay healthy. But right now parents are making this happen.

Jess: I mean the parents, some of them I just knew they were going to come thru. It became a community. They have been so helpful. I didn't realize they were going to be so helpful and understanding. They're so understanding and they're backing me up. I mean it takes a village! I mean it really does, and it always has. It's not just me. It has to be the parents too. And now that accountability is out the window? I am so glad parents are working with me as a team. They help the kids succeed.

June: I know that this is a very scary time for them but how a family treats and interacts with them in this time is also going to be pivotal and so these kids are going to grow up and look back and say "that was the scariest time in my life because I didn't have the structure that school provided, you know, I didn't have that safe place" or they'll say "that was the best time of my life because my family, we went on walks and we did puzzles, and we did this."

Anna: I think I'm the most proud of my students and their parents. I have heard no one complain. I mean a real complaint. Frustration yes but no one says "I'm not doing this, this is too much." I'm proud of them for taking this on. The collaboration between students and parents and myself, I'm the most proud of that. It's nice to see that relationship

Teachers Need Each Other

Themed data also revealed the power of community in the teaching profession. Especially in uncertain times, teachers need each other.

Gloria: Taking cues from the more experienced teachers about technology. The high school BCIS instructor was very helpful. My teaching partner, Facebook, social media has been

a huge help: YouTube, Reddit, twitter, just a lot of collaboration with other teachers going thru the same type of things right now.

Marisol: the district has been really proactive. They've uploaded trainings, they've grouped us with other teachers so we can collaborate, because they feel if we web a foundation with our schools the instruction will be strong.

Anna: The high school has done some of this before but the elementary campuses had NEVER so we lean on them. My team. We are leaning on each other.

June: I can't imagine, and for my experience I've always been surrounded by good teams that have had grade level experience or teaching experience, I can't imagine being thrown in, into this, and you don't have anybody else to use as a resource.

Melissa: My colleagues. We lean on each other. I mean some of them have been really helpful in creating tutorials for us. The administration has been beyond supportive of everything that we are doing. Every Thursday we have our own district level meetings. We need that. We need that time to collaborate. It's wonderful because without it I would feel so lost. We all need to be on the same page because the lack of communication would be our biggest downfall and the community will see that. And the district, all the teachers are working together and problem solving and collaborating. It has really taken my breath away because I've experienced other district dynamics and this... this is just a breath of fresh air.

Teachers Need Our Trust and Confidence

Participants in this study made it clear that our trust and confidence in them and in their ability to know what is best for students is a crucial part in ensuring successful learning experience, and an additionally important contributor to their recognition as knowledgeable and competent professionals.

Marisol: If they didn't trust me, and I didn't know them, I would have been talking to a wall. I think the whole view of education is distorted. Like they really didn't think we were working. Glorified babysitters is what people think sometimes. And now we were forced to make a whole new classroom in a matter of days. And one that works for my kids versus their kids versus high school kids. I mean....so no! We are working? Long hours, long days, every single day, for every single kid, every single lesson, always differentiating, even if I'm not in the classroom. Please don't take us for granted.

Leslie: I mean we see them every day, we're in the classroom, we know them best. We know who is behind academically, and I think that's the part they don't understand. It's not a one size fits all. It's not just about the test. It's a whole lot of other things and I think parents are probably realizing that now. It's okay to slow down. It's okay to teach other things.

June: The biggest challenge right now is getting the parents, the kids, really just everyone to see that this is still important. I hope that they will trust us to make the right decisions, to trust us that we know how to make the right decisions for our students. You don't stand over the mechanic and point out all the things he's doing wrong and say "well why are you doing it this way?" You trust that the mechanic knows how to fix your car. The same thing with a surgeon. You trust that the surgeon knows how to fix and make that person better. I would like to hope that the powers that be and the people in charge can begin to

trust that we know what we need to provide for our students to make gains and that the student is more than a state assessment. Because now we are looking at something that is not even a blip on the radar right now. Right now all we can count on is what the individual student can do with individual work and their level of understanding.

Gloria: I think there is a lot to consider. I mean look at the way we have transitioned, look how flexible we have become! They don't see what happens in the trenches and what teachers are really and so I think those are some things that need to be taken into consideration. Kids need developmentally appropriately materials. Not everyone can do the same things at the same time. Standardized stuff doesn't do it. We know that and we need more folks to understand that.

Teachers Worry

One theme revealed in this study proved to be reflective of the overall sentiment during the COVID-19: worry. As professionals and for a multitude of reasons, teachers worry. In general, and as a result of their unique position in relation to student realities, teachers are keenly aware of student inequities. Participants noted a variety of observed inequities magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic and through their experiences with teaching from a social distance. From access to technology and connectivity to a stable home life, hot meals, physical and mental health, teachers more than ever find themselves needing to creatively and strategically level the field for their students.

Inequities

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related school closures brought to the forefront student inequities like technology access and network connectivity. Participants in this study exposed the deeper impacts of these inequities. Anna spoke to this stating "I saw online the other day someone shared that we aren't grading student ability to complete work right now, we are grading what they own. And that really opened my eyes. It's not equal." Other participants echoed the sentiments:

Jess: I feel like we're on the Titanic. We don't have enough lifeboats. The biggest concern is how is new information going to be given to the kids? How are we going to do this to where 100% of students are going to get what they need out of this? How do we make sure they are learning it? In the classroom I can work in small groups and I can see which student is struggling and pull them aside and do individual instruction. So how do I do that now?

Melissa: Not all of our students have technology from home. So that is the biggest issue, was making sure that we provide consistency with the students that need packet learning and those that need online learning because it needs to be exactly the same across the board.

Dolly: I mean yeah if every kid has a computer and the internet and every kid gets everything we try to teach right away, and they are all ready to work on their own, yeah we could probably keep this up. But we're not there. We never have been.

Elena: I have one student who contacted me and just said he can't do this. There are 11 kids in his house and there is just now way. The internet is too slow and there is just too much else going on.

Jess spoke much more in-depth about her concerns of student inequities that existed prior to school closures that will not only persist and worsen during the online teaching experience, but may jeopardize any potential for growth altogether.

We are having to work in teams with all the other elementary school so all the 4th graders in the district are getting the same stuff. So when we were planning, we're like, 'ok let's do one composition a week. We're already doing that, the kids should be ready, we can keep that going.' And the other elementary schools were like 'no, we're not there yet, our kids can't do that.' (Pauses and shakes her head as if in disbelief) What do you mean?! STAAR would have been like 3 weeks away! How are they not there yet? That explains a whole lot. A whole lot. They're not even ready to begin with. I mean I feel bad for those kids. That just really brings so much to light. There's a problem there.

The Learning Experience

As a result of student inequities magnified and compounded by the complexities which resulted from COVID-19 school closures, teachers expressed worry about the quality of the student learning experience. The unfamiliarity with online teaching, and for students, the unfamiliarity with online learning, created a myriad of additional challenges for teachers which added to already existing points of concern.

Melissa: I mean in general, we struggle with attention spans so that I worry about. I don't know if I'm reaching all the kids, just in that one hour meeting, I just could use more time with them. I mean we had to go from 8 hours or 7 hours of instruction every day to one hour, you know, every other day. So that worries me. That I'm not reaching every student.

Jess: I think just not being able to hear the full, a full lesson from me. You know just explaining, modeling, they're missing all of that. They're just practicing skills and concepts but it's not the same. They, they have gaps, and they're going to have gaps from now on. They're missing information. Going into 5th grade, they'll have gaps. Then if they don't get closed in 5th grade, they'll take them to 6th grade. I'm just worried for them.

Dolly: in a lot of ways, I had to kind of start all over setting my expectations for them now going online because like some of the kids were turning in one or two sentences for a writing prompt, and I have never allowed that. I mean come on! They know this! So I'm worried that they are either overwhelmed or uninterested or trying to just to the minimum.

Regression

Participants explained that because the student learning experience is interrupted, teachers now worry about regression. School closures began in mid-March and continued for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic school year. This meant most school districts in the state of Texas delivered instruction completely online for anywhere from 9-12 weeks. Despite the fact that state officials canceled the STAAR test, the state's standardized test for accountability purposes, participants expressed concern that with a displaced focus, student learning will suffer.

Dolly: You know we really didn't even have time to process, I mean to really exhale and say 'ok, no STAAR testing this year' because before we could even finish that sentence, we

were already working twice as hard to make this possible. And even then, it's just review. We aren't introducing anything new. So we are already expecting to have even more work to get kids ready next year because of everything they've lost.

Anna: It's not rigorous enough. It's not where the students are right now, and I kind of worried about that when we got started. It's not what we would usually be teaching in the classroom, it's not where we are as a class. But we have to make it so that everybody understands, even parents. So it's a compromise.

June: I think really that the fear and anxiety of knowing that our students that, they're...they're learning has been interrupted and as much as the team can do and do their best to prepare to continue, it is a change. And um, so I think anticipating where our students are going to come in next year and knowing that it's going to be a year of heavy review um, and then we're passing these students on that have gone heavily in review into a STAAR grading level, that to me is a concern, not for this group now, but the coming group and what happens down the line.

Jess: I wouldn't have wanted to have the test like this...in a pandemic anyway, but I don't see ganas (Spanish slang term for 'motivation'). They don't feel like what we are doing online is worth it. They feel like it's busy work.

Gloria: I mean teachers are relieved of the stress, as are students. But at the same time, I think it might lead to a little bit too much relaxation I think that has been replaced by the anticipation of the deficit that we will encounter next year.

Marisol: Teaching virtually is a band aid. This is going to give them enough to survive the next couple of weeks, but in the long run, it's going to hurt us. I'm worried to see the regression. I really really am worried about that. The regression is going to be huge. I feel like it's pointless to teach online if I'm going to see 6 months lost come September.

Elena: I have 109 students across all my classes, and I have 11 engaging with me online. That's it! I can't reach the others, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

Anna: All content cannot be delivered online. Not the way we are doing it. This is not sustainable.

Health and Wellbeing

Teachers worry about their students and students' families. School closures during the COVID-19 global pandemic impacted society on a multitude of levels including matters of personal health and wellbeing. For teachers, their worry is focused on their students in their home lives, their ability to process what has happened, and their absence from the classroom which many teachers work hard to create as a "safe place."

Marisol: We took away everything they knew about school, their safe place, and asked them to do something new, and I don't know that we are worried enough about these kids. You can tell which families have it and which families don't. The ones who do are going the virtual field trips, the NASA games. All this new material. And then my other kid who lives across the street, with foster parents, 10 other kids in the house, and doesn't have a computer. It's not an equal battlefield, I mean learning field. In the classroom, everybody is equal. A lot of my parents who are essential workers are like in low salary jobs-convenience stores, Walmart, like they're pulling double shifts, 16 hour days and then here I am asking the kids "draw me a picture of something that starts with the letter H and turn it in by Friday" like I feel like I should be asking them, like "have you slept? Have

you eaten today?” Like I feel there are more important questions than letter knowledge right now. But as an educator I know my role and I know that it’s still my duty to teach them, to give them some sort of instruction, but it’s hard. Oh my God it is just so hard. And you know what? Kids don’t have coping mechanisms. Not my little ones. They don’t know how to deal with stress, or even to communicate that they are stressed. They aren’t going to say “I’m stressed. And a lot of those soft skills, how to communicate with each other, how to conflict resolution with each other, are being thrown out the window right now because we are so concentrated on core academics. I think a lot of teachers are worried about that. I HOPE they are worried about it.

Leslie: If a parent has lost their job, I can’t even imagine beyond that point because they’re worried about where their next meal is going to come from. So um there’s so many factors that are concerning to me.

Melissa: I have actually quite a few students that are asthmatic so they’ve been experiencing a lot of allergies which makes them nervous because with COVID-19 being a respiratory virus they’re worried about getting sick. So some of the parents have reached out to me to tell me that their focus right now is their child’s health. And they’re doing the best they can to get the work done but at the same time they’re in a constant state of worry and anxiety and so um, I’ve had to be very flexible for them. I’ve always considered myself to be a flexible teacher but even more flexible now you know and come from a place of love for these parents because they’re stressed, a lot of have lost their jobs. It’s just a lot of reassurance for the parents through phone calls, emails, remind, and you know. Just peace of mind.

Factoring in their valuable perspectives as parents of school children, too, participants pointed to their recent interactions with other teachers as confirmation of the intricacies in effectively leading the online learning experience. Marisol talked about her son’s frustrating experiences with Zoom meetings. “My son needs interaction, and he’s not getting it this way. When he gets on his zoom meeting, he goes off! Like he wants to talk and talk and the teacher has to mute him. I mean what does that do to a kid, to mute them?”

Jess addressed the frustration in the lack of compassion for the home realities of students, even in her own home.

I’m mom to a 7th grader and some of the teachers he has had, I’m like “you talk to people that way? You can’t talk to people that way!” This is new for everyone. I don’t want to hear that it’s hard for you. It’s hard for me too. It’s hard for everyone! We are home, we are working from home, we are schooling from home, we are panicked, we are worried, we are bored, we are anxious, but you know what? We need to work together. Teachers need to imagine what the home life looks like. We don’t all have kids who are able to sit at a desk and do this work. Some of them are going to sit on the floor. Some of them are going to sit at the crowded dining room table. And no one is going to help them. And think about what that feels like for the child! We need to have empathy.

Teachers Persevere

Above all, participant responses revealed an indisputable ability to persevere. In the face of all the challenges presented during school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unease about teaching online, themed data reveals and strongly supports the contention that always in the best interest of their students, teachers persevere. Of the seven participants in this

study, six are parents of multiple school age children. Jess explained the difficulty in wanting and needing to persist as a teacher from a social distance, and still be present for her children: “I mean I couldn’t... (child crying) well no body could have anticipated that we were going to have to do this but (child continues crying, Jess tries to console her) But I think (child continues crying, Jess is continuously distracted) you know what? THIS is a big challenge! (points to child crying). Jess needed to pause the interview for a moment to get help with her child. When she returned, she continued:

It doesn’t matter if you have all the resources or if you have no resources. There is always a way to make it work. You want me to teach online? I’ll teach online. Heck I’ll even start working on signing up for grants to get a computer for every child. That’s my number one goal next year.

Marisol: I felt pressed for time to try to learn as much as I could to be able to do this to the best of our ability. Everything just happened in the span of one week. I crammed as much as I could and I did it. We did it. I’m proud, because something was thrown at me, and I was like “got it!” I didn’t panic. And I did what I needed to do. I’m proud of my work ethic because without it I would be working 12 hour days for nothing. Instead, I’m working 12 hour days to maintain developmentally appropriate practices for pre-k kids at our school who mean the world to me.

June: If I am being really honest, my counterpart and I crash course taught ourselves Google Classroom in a matter of 3 days to be ready to go. I feel very strongly that we’ve risen to the occasion. Has it been executed perfectly? By no means, at all. But we’re trying. We are literally doing the very best that we can. We are throwing everything (choking back tears) that we have of ourselves into this to make this functional...to make it work. And I feel that we’ve done it with a “it will be done” attitude. We’re not giving up on our students. We still have expectations of growth and learning for and from our students, you know? I mean.... It’s what we do.

Anna: I never anticipated having to do this in my career, in my life. Never. But I was....am willing to do whatever needed to be done.

Melissa: I haven’t cancelled on my kids. I won’t. I never will.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand the experiences of teachers in their need to move all instruction to an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collected from participant interviews confirmed what research has suggested about the complicated reality of this new normal. Participants spoke to concerns of student inequities including access to technology and network connectivity, concerns of regression, and concerns about student health and wellbeing. Moreover, participants also addressed the challenges of balancing their own workload as teachers and their own responsibilities as parents, and to the daunting task of learning how to transition to teaching online in a matter of days providing deeper insight as to the challenges of this experience.

In the process of coding and theming data collected, what was revealed however is something far more powerful about the individuals who make up the teaching profession. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of life, but two constants have held true: teaching and teachers. The emerging themes are characteristics that prove teaching is a work of

passion: teachers work hard and adapt, teachers need (students, parents, each other, and our trust and confidence), teachers worry, and teachers persevere.

COVID-19 closed school doors, and in the process, shuttered classrooms that doubled as safe harbors, canceled sports and other extracurricular activities which provide students with an outlet to showcase their talents beyond academics, and impeded on the daily social interactions that are crucial to the development of the whole child. Every participant in this study was quickly forced into online teaching; a shift into unknown territory with no guidebook or precedent. And still, with their students at heart and equipped with their resiliency and determination, every participant in this study worked hard to do what they needed to do to make this work. They took the hand they were dealt and adapted. The need to adapt however is not an uncommon one. In fact, “the defining feature of teaching work is that involves novelty, change, and uncertainty on a daily basis” (Collie and Martin, 2016, p. 27). In the teaching profession, the curveballs that require adjustments at the classroom level are usually a result of policy changes, standards revision, and local governance. COVID-19 challenged the usual with new trials, and as expected, teachers rose to the occasion- tired, worn, and afraid, but nevertheless, they rose. Teachers work hard and adapt every single day.

Teachers work hard and adapt in order to provide the best service and learning experience for their students. Teachers need their students. Positive teacher-student relationships are central in positively affecting student achievement (Wentzel, 2016). What this study additionally revealed is that just as students need teachers, teachers need their students. Participants noted that the most difficult part of the distance learning experience was their inability to be with their students. Teachers rely on daily interactions as the building blocks for positive relationships. Those positive student-teacher relationships do more than feed student motivation and facilitate increases in student learning. Just as well, those relationships are important for teachers’ professional and personal satisfaction and validation (Veldman, Van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013). Even without the stress of standardized accountability looming over, Melissa noted, “I’m still taking teaching very seriously and I have that expectation from my students too. I need that and my students need that.” A recurring theme in the collected data, a teacher’s work is never in vain.

In fact, as revealed in this study, teachers need parents, each other, and they need our trust and confidence, too. Perhaps one positive aspect to COVID-19 related school closures and distance learning in Pre-K through 12 is the reversal of the long misguided notion that gains in student achievement are solely a result of what happens in the classroom. If this experience has helped to discover anything about education as a system and as a process, it’s that all together, it is most successful in collaboration. It truly does take a village. Participants repeatedly confirmed the integral role parents are playing as they guide their children through distance learning, and pointed to the wakeup call parents are simultaneously experiencing. Marisol said “now that the parents are doing it, I’ve had parents apologize and tell me, ‘I cursed you when you wanted four sharpies on the school supply list!’ (laughs) And now they’re saying sorry and they don’t understand how I do it with twenty kids when they only have one.” Over the course of nine interviews, data collected detected mention of parents a total of 73 times. Teachers need parents and when parents come through, so do the possibilities and potential for success. Marisol continued noting that “so far I have 19 out of 20 kids complying with learning! So high five! That’s the parents, man. I mean if I didn’t have those parents doing what they need to do for these kids, this would have been so much harder.”

Teachers also need each other. Upon learning of school closures and the move to online teaching, participants reported feeling an overall curiosity and uncertainty as to how this would be carried out, and done so effectively. Participants credited their teams of colleagues and administrators as a strong support, often describing the collaboration as “leaning” on one another. In the absence of guidance from the state’s education department or any type of emergency plan outlining how to transition to online teaching, and in the absence of training and resources to anticipate this, the primary sources of guidance were teachers themselves—the wealth of resources in online learning communities, the expertise shared across social media platforms and groups, and the positive and encouraging attitude among their local colleagues and administrators. Gloria cited “YouTube, Reddit, Twitter,” as some of the sources for the crucial collaboration opportunities that provided the grounds for her success with the transition to online teaching. June also cited social media as a saving grace: “I am in probably 4 different Facebook groups just related to Google Classroom alone.” Villarreal, Jones, Chaloo, and Fedynich (2018) found that social media platforms like Twitter provide teachers with free access to professional learning communities that help them grow as professionals in ways that ultimately help them to better serve their students. This proved true and vital to the success of a quick transition to online teaching as a result of the global pandemic. Moreover, the fact that teachers felt lost and underprepared adds value to the concern that professional development for teachers must be intentional and relevant to teacher needs. Jess expressed concern that in her district, “we were lacking the actual training. I mean our district apparently had it (Google Classroom) for years and we didn’t know and we were never trained. We could have been ready.” In agreement, June stated “I think just some basic operative training would have gone a really long way because when this hit, instead of starting at literally the bottom up, we could have already had that brief understanding and how to build on that and transition into the actual education portion of it.” Going forward, it is difficult to imagine how the Pre-K through 12 education experience can revert back to pre-pandemic times. In fact, at present, the state is asking schools to plan for the possibility of an immediate move back online again in the upcoming academic year. Still, even if there is never another cause for extended school closures, it is quite likely that online teaching in some form is here to stay. Findings provide educational leaders at local, state, and even federal levels with the justification needed to enhance training related to instructional technology as a means of supporting Pre-K through 12 teaching and learning.

In late March 2020, the Texas Education Agency detailed an Instructional Continuity Framework which provided detailed phases as guidance for planning to move instruction online. Recognizing that at the time of its release, school districts may have already initiated their own local response, the agency made sure to clarify that the framework served only as reference and was not mandated. Now, the agency is working almost on a daily basis to update guidance for instructional continuity and encouraging school districts to prepare for the possibility of intermittent closures in the 2020-2021 academic year. New information is posted regularly and includes reference to plans developed by other school districts. Additional resources are added often to help support those providing services to students with disabilities, and to those who work closely with English Language Learners. Although a commendable effort, the problem is that there was no plan in place before COVID-19. With much of the guidance disseminated after the fact, the appearance is that Texas was not prepared. The findings of this study urge the need for continued conversation and more developed guidance such that all school districts can build a locally appropriate instructional/learning continuity plan to include intentional teacher training, meaningful support, and access to the resources needed to affect student growth no matter the

learning format. The disparities exposed in this study beg for the authentic attention of policymakers at state and federal levels to recognize and appropriately respond to the inequities that exist in the education system, online or not.

With that, teachers need our trust and confidence. Teachers need policymakers to recognize their work, to believe in them as professionals, and to support them as they work hard to support their students' needs. Each participant almost jokingly cited more pay as a possible outcome of this experience, but noted a much more serious concern about their feelings of being undervalued and underappreciated. Participants hope that the experience of teaching from a social distance has helped many to see the extent of their work on a daily basis: the finesse required to differentiate, the persistence needed to make the lesson stick, and the flexibility needed to adjust when it doesn't. Teachers need our trust in their ability to know what is best for students and our confidence in their competency to deliver. Teachers have a uniquely informed perspective that stems from their work on the ground and in the trenches. Thus the findings of this study encourage policymakers and educational leaders to solicit teacher input in policy development. Neglecting to do so omits a valuable perspective and denies teachers the opportunity to further and more positively impact the educational landscape, an impact teachers aspire for and one which promotes teacher retention (Varela and Maxwell, 2015). As June stated, "I feel like the people who are calling the shots either never really spent a lot of time in education or have no idea about what education is actually about."

Themed data found evidence to suggest that teachers worry. Teachers are incredibly invested in their work and in their goals to facilitate gains in student learning and achievement. Teachers recognize their charge and take ownership of their responsibility to students, not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. Participants in this study discussed how teaching from a social distance in the age of COVID-19 added several new layers of worry for teachers. Teachers worry about student health and wellbeing, regression, and student inequities. Although these are likely concerns that existed prior to the pandemic and its related school closures, participants revealed that without daily interaction with their students, their ability to keep an eye on these sorts of things is impossible. For now, teaching online creates a space to deliver just the teaching part. As a result, teachers are left to worry about everything else.

It is worth noting that the findings of this study support the simple but very meaningful idea that teachers care. Teachers don't need to worry. By definition in the state of Texas, a teacher "an individual who is required to hold a certificate issued under the Texas Education Code, Chapter 21, Subchapter B" (Tex. Adm. Code, §230.1(9)). A teacher of record is an "educator employed by a school district and who teaches in an academic instructional setting or a career and technical instructional setting not less than an average of four hours each day and is responsible for evaluating student achievement and assigning grades" (Tex. Adm. Code, §230.1(9)). Nothing about either of those definitions suggests that a teacher must worry about student inequities or student health and wellbeing. Nothing suggests teachers are expected to worry about parents, materials and resources, or school closures and global pandemics. Teachers worry because they care.

Despite the fact that teachers need to work hard and adapt every day, even though they find themselves relying on students, parents, each other, and our trust and confidence to validate their profession, and even though they worry, teachers persevere. Participants projected an impressive tenacity to persevere in the face of multiple adversities. If ever there were an embodiment of true grit, it is found in the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers and the

immediate need to transition from a traditional classroom setting to virtual instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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