

“We Could Only Plan So Much Because Things Were Changing So Quickly”:

COVID-19 and its Impacts on High School Education

by

Britney Sue Vasquez

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Britney Sue Vasquez

Approved: _____
Tricia Wachtendorf, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: _____
Rachel Karchmer-Klein, Ph.D.
Committee member from the College of Education & Human
Development

Approved: _____
Chrysanthi Leon, J.D., Ph.D.
Committee member from the Board of Senior Thesis Readers

Approved: _____
Michael Chajes, Ph.D.
Dean, University Honors Program

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about many changes and exposed vulnerabilities among varying populations both in the United States and globally. The event has required the need for adaptation and recovery efforts, especially in education. The majority of schools around the nation shut down quickly in March 2020 in response to COVID, forcing many teachers and administrators to adapt to a “work-from-home” environment promptly. Disparities arose when the needs of students did not match what they had grown accustomed to in past years with face-to-face instruction. Research from the summer of 2021 identified vulnerable populations and groups within a Delaware school district and weaknesses with the transition from online to in-person. Continuing with this investigation, I conducted interviews with teachers and administrators from a public high school in Delaware to gain an understanding of the challenges, adaptations, and modifications that were in place as instruction returned to in-person during the 2021-2022 school year. From these interviews, I was able to assess the challenges students experienced as a result of the pandemic, and how these needs were addressed. Teachers were compelled to consider students’ needs individually and adapt their lessons to better fit those emerging needs. While many of these strategies were able to help teachers instruct their students throughout the school year, vulnerabilities arose and some students were left behind. Many teachers were faced with burnout and stress as they returned to in-person instruction and new challenges in expectations and engagement arose. The results of this study provide

insight into the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' and teachers' abilities within schools. As the pandemic exacerbated the challenges many students in the school had already routinely experienced, such as economic disadvantages, lack of technological access, language barriers, and intersectionality, it forced educators to consider these vulnerabilities in ways they may not have had before in the classroom. Teachers were made to acknowledge and attempt to work past these issues to accommodate their students and reach them via remote and hybrid learning

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, COVID-19, or the Coronavirus, swept the United States and the rest of the world, resulting in millions of deaths and hospitalizations worldwide. To combat the spread of the virus and attempt to stifle the impacts, many governments enacted mask mandates and enforced lockdowns throughout their nations. In the United States, this led to the shutdown of schools. At the time, it was unclear when they would reopen, and projections shifted constantly while teachers and administrators scrambled to switch to remote learning solutions. ZOOM applications and learning platforms, among other approaches, rose in popularity. Healthcare, economic, and social challenges persisted throughout the pandemic, but contending with the impact on education was also at the forefront of the response needs. Education challenges are common during disasters (Maaruf et al, 2023; Wolmer et al, 2003) and the COVID-19 pandemic was no exception.

The very definition of a disaster implies the need for improvisation (Tierney, 2002; Wachtendorf, 2004). Perhaps this is due to insufficient planning, resources, or guidance, or perhaps the plans were unable to account for particular characteristics of the event. As a result, people collectively improvise, when needed, in a disaster (Barger & Shibutani, 1987). In the case of COVID-19 and education, all school

districts were forced to find new solutions to the disaster while in the midst of it. As recovery commenced, the impacts of virtual and hybrid learning began to roll out. Children and youths' disaster experience and exposure can have impacts not fully revealed for decades (Shonkoff et al., 2012), and, in turn, it is likely that the impacts on those organizations and people (e.g. schools and teachers) who serve youth will suffer long-term impacts, as well.

With a focus on high school educators, this qualitative study of COVID-19 sought to deepen the understanding of how disaster situations impact education, and how the pandemic specifically affected educators in the public school system in Delaware. In 2021, as a part of the Disaster Research Center's work on COVID-19: Community Impact and Adaptations to Crisis in Delaware, the project was expanded to look more closely at the impacts on public high school teachers in the state of Delaware. In 2022, the project again shifted to focus further on the topics of teacher support, students' needs, and measures that had been implemented as issues related to the pandemic evolved.

This work has allowed for the voices and perspectives of teachers to be heard regarding their specific experiences during and in the later stages of the pandemic. The impacts and adaptations revolving around the pandemic may have implications for public education in the United States for years to come, including how best to address the exacerbation of preexisting vulnerabilities during the crisis and how to support adaptations during protracted disasters. Hence, investigating these topics is necessary

to understand the importance of the work that has been done throughout the last three years. The school and community in this study have a high percentage of Hispanics or Latinos, which introduces an important perspective of the pandemic, its impacts on education, and how this specific subpopulation was affected throughout the pandemic.

Chapter 2

COVID-19 AND EDUCATION

Emerging research on the pandemic helps to put this study in context. For example, a 2021 study on the self-efficacy of teachers during the pandemic revealed that there was a decrease in self-efficacy - the belief in one's capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals - that was connected to teacher stress and burnout (Pressley and Ha, 2021). Another study worked to predict possible long-term impacts of COVID-19-related school closure on low-income, Black, and Hispanic Americans, and on the US economy. Significant learning loss, drop-out rates, and exacerbated inequities were predicted. The study found that the pandemic affected students significantly, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year (Dorn et al., 2021). These effects are not only to be seen in the short-term during and immediately following the pandemic but will be revealed throughout time in the years to come.

As teachers were forced to cope with the realities of the pandemic and online schooling, they had to overcome many challenges and hurdles. One report emphasized that supportive working conditions for teaching during the pandemic were critical for their success, arguing that what constitutes support is not necessarily the same for all teachers during all time periods (Kraft, Simon, and Lyon, 2020). The authors stated that working conditions for teachers “are shaped by a dynamic set of organizational practices that can change over the course of the academic year and are experienced in different ways by teachers in the same school” (Kraft et al, 2020). Working conditions

across states, counties, and even districts may differ, but administrators must recognize that issues can arise that are unique and specific to teachers within the same school and that not all challenges apply to every teacher in the same way. Other research has specifically examined the switch from in-person to virtual formats, finding that “while remote learning may sound like an alternative to face-to-face learning, it created a lot of challenges for students and academics” (Mseleku, 2020) and that a “pedagogy of care” (Bozkurt et al., 2020) is critical in such transitions, regardless of country. Indeed, the virtual modes of delivery for education during the sudden shift of COVID-19 brought unique challenges compared to more carefully considered approaches prior to the pandemic (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020). In sum, the emerging literature on COVID-19 highlights education as a critical area of study.

Report Card for Sussex Central High School

This research focuses on the experiences in one public high school in Delaware where school performance had declined between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years. The Delaware Department of Education provides a report card for schools, rating their performance in various categories. For the 2020-21 school year, in this school, 41.94% of students were proficient in English Language Arts and 23.51% of students were proficient in math. Approximately 53.6% of students were on track for attendance, having missed less than 10% of school days, and 75.5% of the class of 2021 graduated within 4 years with a regular high school diploma (*Sussex Central High School Snapshot*, n.d.).

For the 2021-22 school year, 27.76% of students were considered proficient in English Language Arts, 20.4% were proficient in mathematics and 79.63% of the class of 2022 graduated high school in 4 years with a regular high school diploma (Sussex Central High School Snapshot, 2021). The attendance statistics were not yet available at the completion of this project, yet it is likely that attendance policies have shifted again now that in-person schooling has resumed. These numbers were down in comparison with the previous year (See Table 1).

Table 1: Delaware Department of Education Report Card for the High School Studied

Student Successes	2020-2021	2021-2022
<i>English Language Arts Proficiency</i>	41.94%	27.76%
<i>Mathematics</i>	23.51%	20.4%
<i>Attendance</i>	53.6%	NA
<i>Graduation within 4 Years</i>	75.5%	79.63%

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study took place in two phases, both in the summer of 2021 and in the summer of 2022, and uses a qualitative interviewing approach. Due to concerns over social distancing, virtual interviews were conducted using the ZOOM platform. The video format allowed interviews to be conducted in a consistent manner throughout the study, regardless of the level of comfort the interviewee had with changing regulations and recommendations. It also allowed for greater rapport than the telephone would have provided, given that the interviewer and interviewee could see each other. The discussions offered an opportunity to revisit and outline the educational challenges and atmosphere since March 2020, as well as attempts to support both students and teachers.

This study uses as its foundation a study conducted by the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center on COVID-19 Impacts and Adaptations. That project included interviews with over three hundred Delawareans using a very general instrument. Interviews were conducted in 2020 and, therefore, interviews had more recent recollections of the early phase of the pandemic. The study presented here focused on high schools and began with the same instrument, but the instrument was first modified to fit the pool of interviewees chosen for the study, the topic, and the length of time between conducting the interviews at the start of the pandemic. The instrument was approved by the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board.

Emails were sent to teachers at a public Title 1 high school in the state of Delaware. At the time, the school had approximately 1800 students and 118 teachers, making the student-to-teacher ratio 15.28. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the enrollment characteristics of the school were approximately 41% Hispanic, 39% White, 13% Black, and 6% of another race (Common Core of Data, n.d.). The racial demographics for Georgetown, Delaware at the time were 39.3% Hispanic, 37% White, 15.5% Black, and 8.2% of another race (*U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Georgetown Town, Delaware, 2022*)

Research Questions

In the first phase (summer, 2021), the scope of the research focused primarily on the effectiveness of Delaware public high schools' attempts to mitigate issues triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eleven interviews were conducted with teachers who specialize in courses such as special education, English Language Learning, Spanish, social studies, technology, science, and the performing arts. Questions explored included the following:

1. How were teachers in the state of Delaware supported during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How were teachers in Delaware public high schools able to adapt to the needs of students regarding remote learning?
3. What were the needs of students regarding remote learning and hybrid schooling and how were they addressed in the past year (2020-21)?

4. How can teachers and students be supported as COVID-19 restrictions were lifted?

In the summer of 2022, the study was expanded to a second phase that included the early recovery period. More specifically, the questions were updated to include:

1. How were teachers supported during the 2021-2022 school year during the next phase of the pandemic?
2. What measures were taken in the 2021-2022 school year, during the transition back to in-person learning?
3. What were the needs of students regarding the transition to in-person learning and how were they addressed?
4. How were the needs of specific populations addressed in the past school year?
5. How were teachers able to adapt to the needs of students in the transition to in-person learning?
6. How can teachers and students continue to be supported as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted?

In order to provide an accurate understanding of the situation as it unfolded throughout the subsequent year, teachers and administrators who had been interviewed before, as well as new individuals, were contacted for this series of interviews. Three were follow-up interviews with English language arts, science, and history teachers, and one was a new participant in a senior administration role.

Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes, ranging from approximately thirty minutes to ninety minutes. Per the approved human subjects protocol, participants were made aware of their rights as participants. After each interview, the recordings were then converted into a file over the cloud, where a transcription of the interview was generated and then stored indefinitely at the Disaster Research Center. Once the recording was available, each interview was then carefully coded using notes taken as a guide, focusing specifically on the efforts made to support students. These efforts were categorized into codes of communication, consistency, flexibility, increased knowledge, mental health, and well-being, modification, resources and technology, and safety.

Coding Methods

As a result of these interviews and further analysis that had been conducted, multiple discoveries were made. These findings allow for a greater understanding of the issues surrounding education and COVID-19. Issues of communication, consistency, flexibility, technology and overall well-being of students and teachers were at the forefront of these results and created the foundation for a deeper discussion of the effects of the pandemic.

Communication

As a result of COVID-19 restrictions and the physical distance between students and teachers during the lockdown, the level and quality of communication became an extremely important factor in the ability to maintain education through

schooling. A surge in communication occurred, be it between teachers and families, between teachers and students, or the overall school community. While the systems, procedures, policies, and practices and attempts were made to keep students and families informed, one respondent noted "It was a total team effort to keep everyone in the loop as much as possible. But again it was always a work in progress since things were changing so much."

While this added communication burden impacted all teachers as they navigated the complexity of reaching every student and family, some teachers and students encountered challenges. The primary forms of communication mentioned by teachers were email, phone calls, and home visits. Some bilingual teachers noted that home visits occurred most frequently for the English Language Learner (ELL) population due to challenges that arose from the language barrier. One respondent noted that:

I think one of the most challenging parts was the communication piece. Getting Spanish-speaking families to understand the changes. So whenever there was a change like there was an online class, assignment or there was an opportunity or there was a change in schedule, all of those things, it's really difficult to get the Hispanic community to understand those changes and get them to understand what it means for their child's education."

Most of the responsibility to connect with these families fell on Spanish-speaking teachers. While keeping attuned to the dynamic circumstances of the pandemic might

have proved difficult for all families, the challenges for those who did not speak or easily understand the dominant language experienced an exacerbated vulnerability.

Additionally, the mode technology was a significant factor in how actively students were able to communicate with their teachers, as phone calls, email, and ZOOM were the main platforms used to communicate between groups within the school. One interviewee noted:

There was a handful of teachers who, in the beginning of the pandemic, were tasked with calling home to these ELL students and speaking Spanish to them to inform them of what was going on and what the requirements were and that was just a constant challenge all year long. It's always hard to get in touch with most of those families because phone numbers aren't connected or they don't have email addresses ... that was a huge gap for our ELL students not having access to good internet or [any] internet. Then the school allowed internet in the parking lot but then the family only had one car, and everybody worked so how [was] the student going to get there? Where are they going to use the bathroom? All of these kinds of solutions created more problems.

Presented with these challenges in communication, employing multiple methods proved to provide some support for teachers trying to contact their students regarding assignments, school policies, and general check-ins. This, however, did not resolve all the issues that arose as a result of the pandemic's rise. Specifically, strategies often rested on certain assumptions, ignoring that many families do not have equal access to resources. Adaptations were only successful if such assumptions were held. When

they did not, additional adaptations (frequently on the part of teachers, schools, and districts) were necessary; otherwise students could fall through the cracks. While those responsible for education identified and tried to address such issues, some students ran the risk of falling behind.

Consistency

Interviewees stated that they had worked hard to remain consistent throughout both the Spring 2020 semester and the 2020 to 2021 school year. Remaining in constant communication with students and families, teachers found that their efforts were necessary to ensure students remained on track. One respondent noted, “I had to follow up, basically every day, because of that. Just to catch the kids who missed a portion of testing.” Once remote, teachers and administration worked quickly to adapt to online instruction, switching around lesson plans, setting new expectations, and even providing new forms of instruction and guidance for families and students. One teacher noted that in doing so, most of the school switched over to using PearDeck, an online learning hub, that allowed students to have a structured set-up. They stated:

That was really successful, and that made a huge difference. In the beginning, I was thinking if they do the same thing all the time they're gonna be bored but I think the tech guy was right. I think having it consistently empowered them to do it, instead of them always feelings like 'Oh Dear God I have to learn something new' [or] 'Oh no I just got used to this now I gotta do this' type of

thing. That and the instructional videos that I learned ... those were the key things for me.

Some of the examples they gave to illustrate this strategy were having each week's content posted at a specified time, getting grades in quickly, and overall having a strong organization system for their classes and their students' needs. Some noted that they had attempted to have an organized Schoology page and would attempt to have them structured similarly to that of other teachers. Additionally, the organization of days of the week allowed teachers and students to know what days certain tasks would be done and what days there would be examinations.

Flexibility

Flexibility was another approach that flourished as the school year went on. Relaxed deadlines, additional credit opportunities, after-school availability, and language accommodation on assignments were among the examples of flexibility given to students during the pandemic that had not existed previously. Teachers who had traditionally been stricter on deadlines and due dates found themselves allowing for extensions and late assignments for students. One participant noted that:

I am very strict on deadlines, and I found myself extending deadlines often.

Like 'Okay it's due on x day' and then I have several students sending me messages, emails, telling me why they couldn't get it done and I think this year

I accepted a lot of excuses that I normally don't just because I'm like 'alright just get it done at some point' but that not normally the attitude that I take on.

Hence, all teachers found themselves working to understand the differences in students' home atmospheres and setting reasonable expectations for work and student participation. Despite what they may have traditionally done in in-person learning, once they went remote, teachers found that they "had to adjust what [they] considered to be online learning to what my students were actually able to do".

Similarly, many teachers worked to increase their knowledge to better serve their students. Some stated that they would ask other teachers or students to help them navigate certain online functions, as well as invest additional hours into creating engaging lessons for their students. Specifically, a drama teacher at the school paid for virtual summer acting courses out of pocket and was able to work with others around the world on the virtual platform. He found that as a result, he was able to quickly learn to navigate ZOOM and learn what would and would not work with virtual learning. On a similar note, the choir and band director investigated data collected by music industry experts and NAfME, the National Association of Music Education, to learn of the breath disparities caused by the pandemic. They then used this additional information to decide how to approach their classes while keeping themselves and their students safe.

While flexibility was not limited solely to deadlines and attendance policies, teachers found themselves having to navigate new platforms and work outside of

regular hours to maintain a level of consistency within the school year. Their curricula may have shifted, projects and assignments changed, and general expectations for students adapted to reflect the realities of the situation at hand. Rather than simply transferring in-person instruction and materials to an online platform, teachers had to adapt and find new ways to engage their students throughout the pandemic.

Technology

Technology was a topic that all interviewees found important to discuss. There were many students who, for a variety of reasons, may not have had adequate access to technology or knowledge of how to navigate the educational platforms through the online format. As a result, as teachers would attend district-led workshops to learn how to navigate new technology, they would then have to turn and immediately teach their students those same platforms.

To reach students who had difficulty accessing technology, the school district provided Chromebooks, routers, and a “drive-in” Wi-Fi program, where students would be able to access the internet from the school’s parking lot. For some, these solutions allowed students to access their classes, remain on track, and continue on with their studies. One respondent stated, “For the kids who wanted it to work, that solved a lot of the problems.” However, despite these attempts, some students still slipped through the cracks. One teacher noted that despite the program, some students would still be at a disadvantage as “the family only had one car and everybody worked so how is the student going to get there, where are they going to use the bathroom, all

of these kinds of solutions created more problems.” Nonetheless, teachers pushed their students to obtain school-provided Chromebooks to have some sense of uniformity regarding who was able to perform certain functions and access materials on their devices. Many teachers as a result found that they had to restructure their courses and assignments to be accessible on different devices, a feat that often led to working extra hours outside of what they had been used to.

Wellbeing

Many teachers noted the efforts they placed into the mental health and wellness of their students, as well as the personal struggles they had experienced in the past two years. One teacher mentioned, “I think a lot of kids were very isolated and I think that was really hard on their mental health. I think that was hard on adults. I think being isolated from my children was hard for me so I would say to my students, ‘I can’t even imagine doing this as a teenager.’” As a result of these understandings, many teachers searched for ways to motivate and support their students, recommending seeking out support from the Student Wellness Center on campus or listening to students themselves. One participant noted, regarding a day when they were unable to do their lesson due to a scheduling conflict in spring 2021, that:

We just ended up honestly talking and it didn't have anything to do with the lesson and it was really nice to just have a normal conversation because it was the first time it happened in May. It was the first time all school year that we actually had a normal conversation just about everything that was going on.

There wasn't really anything academic that came out of it but being able to see the kids smile and laugh and enjoy each other's company was nice because I didn't do very good in improvising and was like 'We're just gonna go with the conversation and see where it ends.

Along with taking time to listen and get to know students also came the need to mediate and support students in different ways. Examples of such support appeared in the shape of ZOOM check-ins, weekly mental health surveys, and promotion of the wellness resources provided by the school. One teacher noted incorporating coping mechanisms to ease anxieties regarding the pandemic and their education, while another discussed how they pushed their students to advocate for themselves with the school and for their education.

Chapter 4

CHANGES DURING VIRTUAL AND HYBRID LEARNING

To combat the projected learning loss and attempt to find a way to continue teaching, schools went fully virtual for the 2020 spring semester and 2020-2021 school year. Teachers, administrators, and districts scrambled to find ways to adapt to the new learning environment and provide sufficient support to students and families as the pandemic went on. As time went on, it became apparent that different populations of students faced varying vulnerabilities and obstacles when it came to remote and hybrid schooling. These challenges, while a result of preexisting conditions in the United States, became so visible that teachers and districts had to make changes to attempt to reach every student.

For instance, the interviewee noted that when it came to students who had limited access to certain resources, the school district had to take a direct approach to address the need. “For the kids that were low income or homeless, we were their food, that might've been the only food they'd gotten for the day. So, our district is scrambled. I think a month in and we started doing school buses to distribute food throughout the city.” In doing so, volunteers were attempting to adapt and solve one problem, while also facing another: potential Covid exposure. Similarly, having access to online coursework became a problem even for teachers as they struggled to transition to online. As one interviewee noted, “How do you get a book to a kid when they're not in school...How do I as a teacher even scan it to make it available?” Internet access, online resources, and more were issues that were exacerbated by the

pandemic, and teachers worked to quickly think of solutions, whether short-term or long. This mindset, however, of addressing problems as they emerged was an added stressor on teachers. According to one educator, “I don’t think we had any policies in place other than ‘make it work’ and that was frustrating.” As time passed, these challenges shifted and strategies were put into place to address the needs of students and teachers, and as the pandemic threat dwindled, the world began to shift once more.

After schools began to reopen and restrictions were lifted, new challenges arose that forced teachers to once again improvise their lesson plans. From going virtual to shifting towards hybrid and then fully in-person, teachers learned and faced many challenges in each transition. This interviewee noted that in regard to his deadlines before and after the pandemic, he had become much more flexible and changed how he viewed assignments as a result. “Now, knowing that they’re so scattered and so overwhelmed just in general. I’ll give you an assignment Monday and make it due Friday [...] We just have kids that take a little longer now.” Mental health, attention, and focus issues are something that became much more publicly acknowledged because of the Covid-19 pandemic, something that has pushed teachers and administrators to further consider the holistic well-being of their students (Williams & Drake, 2022).

Even so, challenges still exist as teachers struggle to keep their students engaged and focused on lessons. Many have already changed approaches from how they were previously taught to accommodate virtual learning. Then, they had to change again suit the “new normal.” This interviewee stated, “It’s still a challenge and

I don't think we've figured out a way to overcome it yet because it's something new that we're addressing. I think we've all figured out that we need to make our subjects more entertaining and definitely limit the amount that we're focusing on a topic." These changes do not occur without cause as they are reflective of the social and behavioral shifts that occurred as a result of the isolation of the school years prior (Ferren, 2021).

Among these interviews, one respondent pointed to the significant and persistent changes that occurred once the school returned to fully in-person instruction.

We were building the plane while it was flying and now we're in a regular setting, giving them regular classwork and it's more than what they've done, and quite frankly they're learning how to do school. Lessons ninth graders would typically learn in the first semester of their freshman year they're learning now as eleventh and twelfth graders.

The future of education for these students remains uncertain; however, looking at the learning loss that has occurred within the past two years, it is apparent that there will be long-term consequences to these losses. The learning gap not only places the added responsibility onto the students, but also on teachers as they attempt to catch up or set new expectations for what is considered the baseline for their respective year. This knowledge gap was not limited to academics but additionally impacted the social and cultural knowledge of students. Respondents noted that there was a lack of social awareness and many students found it difficult to engage with other students when

given the opportunity. Interviewees observed a huge shift in what would have once been considered “normal” social situations among students. For example, one educator noted:

For a lot of students there’s this re-acclimation period that we’re still going through where they’re just learning what it's like to be around other people and learn things. In some of my classes, in specific periods, I’ve had to completely ban the use of cell phones or computers and we only do print assignments or write things on a sheet of paper. Just because anything that had to deal with technology they were taking off the internet.

Noting that the students faced new challenges in social settings and reliance on technology, teachers were forced to acknowledge and deal with the newfound impacts of the pandemic in a post-pandemic environment. Not only has this resulted in issues within the social context, but impacts on students’ ability to maintain focus in the classroom was also noted:

The explosion of TikTok ... I’m not a social media hater but the TikTok videos, they’re all, what - seven seconds - and I’ve talked to numerous teachers where [we’ve found that] that is essentially the attention span of the students. Like, they will look up, make eye contact for ten seconds and if we can’t grab them in those ten seconds, they’re gone for another ten minutes.

It is apparent that the social impacts of the pandemic are still emerging and evolving. Students’ attention as well as their ability to maintain focus and conversation within the classroom are all areas that may directly affect how well they perform in their

studies. The concern raised by educators as their students are struggling with these factors is apparent throughout these conversations and interviews.

Race, Ethnicity, and Equity

Despite the adaptations that teachers implemented, both in and out of the classroom, to accommodate the needs of their students, many challenges and vulnerabilities became apparent as the school year went on. Teachers interviewed stated that ELL students were among the most vulnerable student populations as they were often children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. As a result, many of them either lived alone or with guardians or family members that were also primarily speakers of a language other than English. This, in turn, added to the stresses of technological access and knowledge of resources available to support students during this time. The school attempted to support these students the best possible, with one teacher mentioning that:

There was a handful of teachers who, at the beginning of the pandemic, were tasked with calling home to these ELL students and speaking Spanish to them to inform them of what was going on and what the requirements were and that was just a constant challenge all year long. It's always hard to get in touch with most of those families because phone numbers aren't connected or they don't have email addresses ... that was a huge gap for our ELL students, was not having access to good internet or internet.

It was noted that one teacher served as an ELL coordinator on top of teaching and was tasked with contacting families and students and working to ensure students were not being left behind. However, because of this additional role, they were often unable to attend the class that they were co-teaching. Additionally, monolingual teachers would use translation apps to communicate information regarding assignments or coursework to their students, and some would allow students to complete assignments for their courses in the language they were most comfortable with, often Spanish.

Comparably, students of economic disadvantage were often placed in circumstances where they felt the need to work to support their families. Many of these students were also of the ELL population and had gone to work full-time instead of attempting to complete the year. A participant explained that they would often send messages and call their students to encourage them to return to school; however, “it was really hard to convince a lot of my students to stay in school and we probably had the highest dropout numbers that we’ve ever had. And, you know, the graduating class wasn’t as big as it should’ve been.” Hence, while many teachers attempted to help their students and motivate them to go to school and complete their assignments, each circumstance had different needs, resulting in many students slipping through the cracks and failing or dropping out entirely.

Moreover, the added stresses of racial justice, equity, and economic disparities led to many issues that some teachers felt they were unable to resolve or address in the classroom. However, despite the overall neutral stance that many of the teachers

interviewed took this past year, one stated, “It was very important to maintain that neutrality but display factual evidence and display arguments.” In other words, while not instigating or drawing attention to issues of race and ethnicity, some teachers found it necessary to prioritize acknowledging the topic as it arose naturally in conversation. Some teachers noted how they had intentionally incorporated more diversity into their courses in the past year, whether that be for Black History Month or year-round, and the positive response they had received from students. Overall, teachers found that some students wanted to discuss these topics as “it was impacting their lives, it was impacting their stress. Again, they look at what the world is doing, and they get stressed out and I didn’t bring the topics up but sometimes they came up and we had to talk about them.”

In summary, the many disparities, both racial and economic, that received greater attention because of the pandemic and social unrest revealed issues that teachers attempted to address for their students. Both the response and early recovery phases provided the education system with different challenges, solutions, and further impacts throughout the years.

Chapter 5

IMPACTS AND ADAPTATIONS

Adaptation in Response Phase

The response phase of the pandemic was initially focused on finding solutions to pressing issues throughout the education system in the district. Not only were governments forced to quickly set regulations for schools, but states and districts were also rapidly working to face the challenges that arose. As seen in other types of disaster risk management, the response phase during a pandemic is constantly changing and requires revisions to sufficiently confront all that occurs.

At the high school in this study, the response phase focused primarily on maintaining some form of structure for students throughout the spring 2020 semester. Lending out resources, switching lesson plans around, pushing communication, and quickly learning the resources available online were among the main efforts made by teachers to reach students. Many of these adaptations were enabled only through countless hours outside of the school day, furthering responsibilities, and pressure on teachers. Administration through the district provided teachers with technical support groups, information regarding the pandemic, and mental health support throughout the semester. However, despite this, teachers found difficulty in planning and adapting to the newfound and exacerbated needs of students. One respondent noted:

We could only plan so much because things were changing so quickly. So we would have this idea, this idea, this idea, and then two weeks later say 'Oh we

can't do that' because the guidelines have changed. So it was really a work in progress.

As a result of this constant need for shifting ideas and plans, teachers found themselves on the verge of burnout early on. The district provided teachers with different platforms and options for use throughout the year. While this allowed for various options, some respondents noted the overwhelming amount of resources they were handed, and how that affected their ability to teach. One stated:

I did feel like they were giving us too many options, and it was like 'Oh my God if they tell me I need to learn one more thing I might lose my mind.' So it was just, for me, finding a couple of platforms that I felt the most comfortable with, and I also didn't want to continue to introduce my students to like 'OK you need to log into this website, type in this code', and it's like, by the fifth step, they're like 'OK lady let's just get this activity on the road.'

These efforts in adaptation pushed many teachers to consider the future of the education system. As vulnerabilities among certain groups of students were exposed, and challenges routinely experienced by students were exacerbated, teachers had to remain creative and adaptable throughout the school year. As the pandemic continued and schooling shifted to a hybrid structure, different challenges arose and pushed teachers to once again adapt and overcome.

Adaptation in the Early Recovery Phase

In the early recovery phase, the school began working towards a hybrid learning structure, with rotating in-person and online days. As a result of the mixed hybrid structure, students and teachers faced many new challenges that they had to work tirelessly to combat. In doing so, teachers were able to talk in detail with their students to gain a better understanding of the situations they were facing as students and how teachers could potentially support them throughout the school year.

At this institution, the hybrid model was an option for all students after the first marking period, providing teachers with a bit of time to prepare for another shift in their teaching. One respondent noted that once students were returning to school, they were able to discuss why virtual participation was so low amongst them and their peers:

They would try to explain to me that at home they couldn't focus for a wide range of reasons. I think a lot of kids were tasked with taking care of their younger siblings so doing their own schoolwork was not really feasible. And then, other kids said they just could not, said there were too many distractions at home they just couldn't be motivated to get on ZOOM and do the work.

Students and teachers did not have an in-person option during the peak of the pandemic during the school year, and the reflections made during the hybrid model revealed just how devastating the realities of virtual schooling were. As the situation continues to unfold, more issues will be revealed in the coming years. The effects the

pandemic has had on the education system have and will continue to shift how administrators and educators view their efforts in teaching and learning.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this research revealed many interesting findings. Many teachers regarded their need to adapt and increase their creativity and knowledge to work throughout the school year and reach their students. As the pandemic exacerbated the challenges students in the school had already routinely experienced, such as economic disadvantages, lack of technological access, language barriers, and intersectionality, it forced educators to consider these vulnerabilities in ways they may not have had before in the classroom. Teachers had to acknowledge and attempt to work past these issues to accommodate their students and reach them via remote and hybrid learning.

Recommendations in the Recovery Phase

Learning loss throughout the pandemic, changes in expectations and behavioral shifts have all amounted to increased workloads and stressors on teachers. According to research that has been done thus far, by the end of the 2020-21 school year, “students were on average five months behind in math and four months behind in reading” (Dorn et al., 2021) in the United States for grades 1 through 6. After having this discussion with a high school teacher and gaining some of his insights on the pandemic and how schools would continue to adjust to meet the needs of students, it has become clear that adaptations and improvisations would not stop at remote and hybrid learning.

Teachers have had to adapt not only to virtual and hybrid learning but now also must relearn and re-teach what is expected in the classroom and do so in a way that

acknowledges the collective changes that have occurred. In a short amount of time, it has become more than obvious that the ramifications of Covid-19 and education are still rolling out, and will continue to for years to come.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. The pool of participants was relatively small and focused on participants from a single high school in Delaware. There would be many benefits from examining schools in other Delaware counties or other states across the country as the perspectives and procedures differ among schools and districts. The interview sample did not include teachers from every subject area, such as the math department, or a range of administrators from across the school and district. Moreover, comparing schools that serve different age groups or comparing experiences between public, charter, and private school educators would provide additional information as to how teachers and schools adapted to the needs of students of the students they serve with the resources they have. Hence, although saturation was reached among the respondents, particular perspectives given the composition of the interview pool may have resulted in missed perspectives or challenges.

In addition, the research only examined the perspectives of educators, not students or parents, both of whom would potentially have their own views regarding what did or did not work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, these limitations point to ways researchers may develop studies to examine school impact and adaptations in response to future disasters.

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