Real Time Responses: Front Line Educators' View to the Challenges the Pandemic has Posed on Students and Faculty

Stacey Keown *, Rob Carroll and Moriah Smothers

Teacher Education Department, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN, United States

After months of school closures, a variety of educators were surveyed with the goal of understanding their lived experience of teaching during a pandemic and the supports they needed to be successful during this challenge. The educators span different grade levels, school districts, and states. Their responses were illuminating for educational leaders when planning for a new school year. The purpose of this research brief was to collect real time responses from educators as they attempted to meet the varied challenges of educating during a pandemic. The questions focused on strengths needed by the educator, characteristics observed in successful students, and school supports that were helpful to gain successful outcomes. A variety of educators, spanning from kindergarten through high school, were surveyed. All participants were asked the same questions, and their responses were collected, coded, and organized around different educational leadership themes: teacher efficacy, school culture, and student resiliency. The goal of this research brief was to gain crucial information while educators were facing the pandemic and use their responses to frame a conversation for educational leaders as they plan for upcoming challenges they may face. From this research brief, characteristics of success begin to emerge. What does an educator need to focus on to be successful? What can we learn from our most successful students? What role can a school's culture play, even when no one is there?

Keywords: pandemic (COVID-19), self-efficacy, culture, collaboration, leadership, COVID response, communication

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 2020 school year, educational communities faced a challenge unlike anything before. A global pandemic was quickly escalating which necessitated that educators and schools adapt to meet the safety needs of their students and educational partners. Many school districts across the nation opted for closing the doors and doing the best they could to educate students remotely until pandemic related concerns were resolved. This drastic transformation came with little warning and forced teachers, parents, and students to be persistently creative in adapting to this unique situation. Digital access and connectivity remain a pervasive equity issue (Kaden, 2020). Anytime a challenge forces an organization to be creative there is an opportunity for leaders to promote growth in their organization. The impact of the pandemic on education has brought to attention the need to reflect on the successes and failures experienced by various educational stakeholders to better serve students when faced with ongoing or future challenges. The goal of this

brief is to explore and reflect on the experiences of educators that taught through the pandemic and identify themes from their experiences that can be utilized to provide needed perspective to educational leaders.

METHOD

The Study

In this brief, twelve educators spanning two states and three levels of the educational pipeline (elementary, middle, and high school) were recruited to participate in a descriptive research design utilizing an open-ended questionnaire study. The schools represented varied in their respective demographics. The smallest school served an inner-city elementary population of 330 students. The largest school served over 2,000 high school students from an entire county. The six schools represented consisted of two high schools, one middle school, and three elementary schools. Free and reduced numbers varied from 26 to 92% within the schools represented. By the nature of how the questions are designed, this was a qualitative study. IRB approval was granted by the represented institution and informed consent was given by the participants. The questions asked focused on their reflections as teachers, their perceptions of their students facing these changes, and how their schools and districts responded. Identifiers such as email, school, and community information were removed from the survey responses to ensure confidentiality. Topics ranged from needs, strengths, specific examples, and what is needed in moving forward. Here is a summary of their responses.

THE QUEST TO UNDERSTAND

Teacher Efficacy

One of the first themes that emerged from the data is that of teacher efficacy. Teacher efficacy is linked to a larger body of research that is rooted in Bandura's (1977), Bandura (1997) social cognitive theory which specifically references the concept of self-efficacy. Generally, self-efficacy is one's perception of their ability to perform a specific task. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) defined teacher efficacy as "judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated." We submit that teacher efficacy also plays a significant role when it comes to externally challenging circumstances as well, such as a pandemic, because efficacy beliefs are shaped and formed by various experiences (mastery, vicarious, verbal persuasion, and physiological/affective states) (Bandura, 1977; Haverback, 2020). Therefore, exploring these events through survey questions help illuminate the influence the pandemic has had on teacher efficacy beliefs.

The proceeding questions were posed to the educational professional participants. The questions sought to understand the participants' perspectives on the challenges, strategies they employed to support students, how they collaborated with their colleagues, and their perceived strengths.

What has Been Your Biggest Challenge During This Closing?

Eight of the twelve responses focused on the participants expressing that they missed their students, their desire to see interact with them face to face instead of in a virtual setting, and the challenge of overcoming communication barriers to enable consistent communication. Five participants included the need to personally learn how to teach with the required technology fast enough to implement it in their remote instruction so the students could use it. Also, four of the twelve participants mentioned that it was extremely difficult to work from home while teaching and caring for their own children.

How did You Support Students Who Struggled With This Type of Instruction (Virtual)?

Six of the twelve teachers indicated that they used their personal phones to call, e-mail, text, or video conference with students and parents because they needed real time assistance and support. They also used technology-hosted sites like Google Classroom or Zoom. Five teachers said they recognized that their students needed a more individualized approach to master the content, so they began recording personalized videos that focused on the learning style of the student or small group of students to master the academic skill being taught. Another interesting barrier that was mentioned was the high number of students that live with grandparents and the technology gap that exists between generations. Often the gap caused delays and frustrations in the learning process. Additionally, seven of the twelve teachers indicated that they often responded to parents on evenings and weekends.

Were You Able to Collaborate With Your Grade-level Team Successfully?

Eleven of the twelve responses were of the affirmative that they were able to meet with their team in an asynchronous way utilizing various social platforms such as Google Meet, FaceTime, and text messaging. Only one participant mentioned struggling with connecting with their team in which the participant attributed to interpersonal issues of one team member. The lack of connectivity was not due to few opportunities; rather, it was because some of the team members were reluctant to meet.

What Strength did You Have That Helped Make You Successful?

Eight of the teachers mentioned having grit, persistence, and determination. Two talked about being resourceful, creative, and able to ask questions. Two teachers mentioned reducing the stress of the situation and practicing bravery regarding teaching and decision making.

Teachers compose the front-line in this educational battle with the pandemic, and it is their job to support their students' through the new challenges imposed by the pandemic. Hearing that teachers go above and beyond by texting their students,

sending personalized videos for them that align with their learning style, and are available evenings and weekends could be somewhat surprising to some; however, they should not be. Why? Because they are teachers. Teachers have pliable expectations and rise to meet different challenges every day.

School Culture

After exploring questions involving perceived teacher support and needed resources, the theme that emerged was the broader concept of school culture. School culture in this context is defined as "the traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms from which a school is shaped, enhanced, and maintained through the school's administrator and teacher-leaders" (Short and Greer, 2002). For this study, school culture includes what was already in place before the pandemic, but also the culture that developed in response to the pandemic. The literature on the importance of working conditions within schools has been well documented as being strongly associated with student academic growth and teacher satisfaction, both of which have been primary concerns during the pandemic (Johnson et al., 2012; Simon and Johnson, 2015; Kraft et al., 2020) which necessitates the need to understand the potential influence of prior and developing school culture on the teachers and the students. Therefore, the questions asked focused on the professional development needs, expectations by the school and district, support received from the school and district, overall culture, and an assessment of future needs. The survey question is included in italics above the response and discussion.

What Professional Development did You Need to Implement This Virtual Type of Instruction?

Nine of the twelve responses focused on learning how to use virtual instructional platforms required by the district or school. All the teachers also indicated that they needed more professional development on how to create effective and engaging online instruction. Additionally, all of them mentioned that they needed training on how to make accommodations for students with special needs in a virtual setting.

Did You Receive This Professional Development?

Six of the twelve teachers surveyed reported that they received the professional development they needed when they needed it. Three teachers said they resorted to searching the internet for "how-to" videos to supplement the training they received to be successful at this virtual type of instruction.

Were the Expectations That Your School and District Asked of You Reasonable?

Ten of the twelve teachers reported that expectations were challenging but reasonable depending on the amount of support received. The district and school expectations primarily focused on creating and delivering engaging instruction and contacting parents. Two reported that the lack of clear expectations caused issues surrounding work hours, the use of worksheet packets as a primary form of instruction, and constantly evolving daily expectations.

What did Your School and District Administration Do to Support You?

All the teachers reported that they felt supported when their school and district shared information as it became available. Four of the twelve teachers focused on securing technology for students in need, help in contacting parents, and freedom for teachers to make educational choices.

How did the Culture of Your School Make You More Successful During This Time?

Ten of the twelve teachers reported that the already present, pre-pandemic, spirit of teamwork, and collaboration carried them throughout this challenging time. Other indicators from supportive cultures were allowing teachers to utilize their strengths in the division of work, not micro-managing school teams, and carrying out events that raised the spirit of the students and the teachers.

How did the Culture of Your School Hinder You at This Time?

Two characteristics emerged which seem to indicate that the culture hindered the participants' success during the pandemic. Those characteristics were a lack of communication in the school or district and a lack of collaboration between the grade-level team serving students. Two teachers reported being more stressed and more apprehensive about what will happen in this upcoming school year in part because of their concerns surrounding the communication and collaboration aspects within the school culture.

What New Changes Need to Be in Place When You Return to School Full-Time?

All twelve of the teachers put a priority on having a multi-tiered plan going forward. A pre-set, multi-tiered plan would allow for targeted professional development in all the areas identified in that plan. Eight of the twelve teachers reported wanting to use some of the same virtual learning platforms in their regular classrooms so that if a shift is back to learning from home, the students will be ready. One to one technology and access to Wi-Fi for students are priorities. Finally, school and community partners must collaborate to figure out ways to help students to gain what was lost academically during this challenging time.

The answers from these questions helped illuminate the difference in outcomes between effective and not effective schools during the pandemic crisis. Communication and collaboration at all levels was a resounding theme in many teachers' responses regarding how to move into a new academic year. Additionally, planning and specific professional development were top priorities for the respondents as well. The teachers have made us aware of their needs. Now, it is up to schools and districts to execute effective solutions.

Student Resilience

Student resilience was another theory that developed as the interview questions were analyzed because it became apparent

how critical it is for students to possess these characteristics if they are going to be successful academically, socially, and emotionally during crises such as a pandemic. Newman (2005) defined resilience as "the human ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, adversity, hardship, and ongoing significant life stressors" (p. 227). The questions focused on the challenges the students experienced as well as the strengths that seemed to carry them throughout the pandemic. The responses are from the same participant pool but focused on the teachers' perceived needs of their students and characteristics that contributed to them being resilient in the face of difficulties.

What Challenges did Your Students Face That Made This Time More Difficult?

Eleven of the twelve responses focused on the lack of internet access. Some districts provided laptops or tablets for their students to use, but these were of little value if the student's family did not have consistent access to Wi-Fi at home. Half of the teachers reported this as an issue for at least some of their students. Four of the twelve answers ranged from the students' possessing little familiarity with online education programs to the challenge of having working parents that did not have the time to provide structure or support. One special education teacher mentioned the difficulty of providing accommodations to their students through this type of instruction.

What Strengths did Your Students Face That Helped Them Be More Successful?

Answers to this question were varied. Seven of the twelve teachers said that students' familiarity with technology was an obvious strength that helped them be successful. Three of the teachers discussed that students having parental support was a significant strength. Finally, character traits such as grit, resilience, creativity, and possessing a strong work ethic enabled students to push through many of the challenges they faced.

Students are the focus of all decisions being made in the face of the challenges the pandemic poses to schooling. Knowing the difficulties, they undergo can be a great resource in planning for future instruction. Being aware of student strengths that translate into successful instructional outcomes can help educators develop programming to enhance those strengths in all students.

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DISCUSSION AND LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving forward into a new school year, lessons that all educational stakeholders learned can and should be applied to the upcoming semesters. Professional development opportunities can be carried out so that teachers and students can adapt to distance education more easily, and the necessary infrastructure support can be further strengthened to eliminate technical problems (Hebebci et al., 2020). These opportunities as well as taking advantage of information gleaned from practitioners shortly after finishing the semester provides a unique learning opportunity. What they listed as challenges are now opportunities to be solved. What they listed as strengths are characteristics that need to be shared.

To illustrate, some schools created 'caring committees', where staff and parents volunteer to ensure ongoing connectedness, in a virtual format, for all in the communities (Luthar et al., 2020). First, primary challenges should be addressed. The participants indicated that they need to maintain their emotional connections to the students they serve, support students virtually when applicable, stay in close contact with parents, and effectively collaborate with each other. Primary challenges for schools and districts are the creation of a multi-tiered plan of how to serve students this fall and beyond, clear expectations and consistent communication for the staff of the schools, and ongoing responsive, professional development (Hebebci et al., 2020).

Finally, what are the strengths that make all this possible? For teachers, it is the characteristics of persistence, grit, a sense of calmness, and a willingness to be vulnerable and ask questions. For students, it is having grit, technology proficiency, and supportive adults outside of the school. For districts and schools, it is building collaborative cultures that focus on finding solutions and putting the needs of students first.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SK and RC devised the project, the main conceptual ideas, and collected educator responses. MS edited the manuscript and revised technical details. SK and RC wrote the manuscript.

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