

Teaching in the Post-Pandemic Classroom

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Abstract

In 2023, teachers continued to experience reverberations from the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of schools across the United States required the adaptation of classrooms and a dynamic shift in the practices of teachers. As the pandemic subsided, this project sought to understand the ways that instructional practice, interactions with students and parents, and professional expectations have changed for classroom educators. Further, it addressed the need for teacher preparation programs to prepare preservice educators for the post-pandemic classroom environment. Subjects for the focus group were recruited on a volunteer basis from schools within one school district in north Louisiana. Participants discussed shifts in teaching practices, interactions with students and parents, and professional expectations of teachers in the post-pandemic classroom. They also identified changes related to student maturity levels and emotional stability, student behavioral issues, student accountability, student engagement and motivation, student absenteeism and expectations around makeup assignments, use of technology, and parental involvement. These changes cause professional and personal concerns among teachers.

Keywords: post-pandemic classroom, shifts in teaching practices, interactions with students, interactions with parents, professional expectations of teachers

Introduction

Historically, change within PK–12 education has ebbed and flowed, enduring shifts in methodology, best practices, and more recently integration of technology into the classroom. These changes have been gradual and over time shaped the direction of instructional practices without significant or immediate disruption to daily student learning. In the spring of 2020, however, classroom practice experienced significant disruption as cases of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) began to appear across the United States, and a pandemic was declared. In early 2020, as the virus spread worldwide, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released its recommendation that school closures begin in an effort to minimize the spread of the disease

(Centers for Disease Control, 2020). The shuttering of schools presented teachers and students with new challenges and immediately thrust education into a new era.

On May 5, 2023, more than three years after COVID-19 was designated as a pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an end to the global public health emergency for COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2023, paras. 2–3). Though the end of the pandemic was declared, its effects continue to reverberate throughout school systems across the country. Teachers face new challenges in their daily practices with virtual learning, technology usage, and student attendance, along with a host of other obstacles. This study focused on these challenges in order to identify ways in which teacher education programs can better equip novice teachers for the future. Its contribution to the field lies in providing empirical evidence of the complex array of changes in the post-pandemic classroom that reflect both challenges and opportunities for growth in education. Additionally, the study provides practical recommendations for preparing future educators in response to these evolving dynamics.

Literature Review

The pandemic and subsequent lockdown had a lasting impact on education and the teaching profession. McCarthy, et al., (2022, para 6) suggested that COVID-19 contributed to greater stress levels among teachers due to an inability to cope emotionally, mentally, or physically. Hess (2022) argued that the pandemic underscored the importance of a more student-centered and personalized approach to education and brought about significant changes in education, particularly concerning technology integration and instructional practices. These changes continue to present increased challenges as teachers seek to provide positive educational experiences for students.

During the pandemic, teachers were required to implement new technology to reach their students (Klapproth et al., 2020). Funding provided during the pandemic supplied teachers with new resources. As the use of technology in the classroom increased, teacher stress levels also rose from the need to incorporate technology without receiving proper training (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021).

Post-pandemic with the “new normal,” more online or blended learning remains, along with an increased number of teachers incorporating technology into their daily instruction (An et al., 2021, pp. 2606-2608). Further, the need to better train educators in transitioning to and implementing effective online teaching practices has become a primary concern for professional

development (Johnson et al., 2022; McCarthy et al., 2022). Proper tools and training on how to use those tools will reduce anxiety related to the use of technology in the classroom (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021). However, even with adequate training and support, student engagement remains a significant concern for classroom teachers in the post-pandemic classroom.

Christenson et al., (2012) defined student engagement as “the active involvement of a student in academic and non-academic or school-related activities and having a commitment to educational and learning goals” (p. 200). Research has found that student engagement of junior high students in the post-pandemic classroom ranged from 50% to 1% (Farikah, 2023, p. 94). The social isolation during the pandemic resulted in a lack of student interest in learning, which in turn led to laziness, boredom, and a lack of focus when students returned to the classroom post-pandemic (Zulfa et al., 2023).

Amid the uncertainty resulting from COVID-19, new opportunities for engaging families surfaced. According to Wilinski et al. (2022), remote learning assisted teachers in creating “stronger and more authentic relationships” with their students and parents (Wilinski et al., 2022, para 2). Schools and families were forced to collaborate, which resulted in the formation of stronger partnerships. As parents became more involved in their child’s learning, they developed a new appreciation for what teachers do. In turn, teachers demonstrated a new level of responsiveness to the needs of their students’ families.

Regarding the daily activities of classroom practice, McCarthy et al. (2022) noted that the pandemic disrupted traditional classroom routines and structures, requiring teachers to adapt their instructional practices to meet the needs of remote and hybrid learners. This increased the workload and stress levels of many teachers. As schools and students transitioned back to the brick-and-mortar classroom, teachers’ views on classroom management changed.

Gülmez and Ordu (2022) described how a group of teachers in Turkey implemented multiple strategies and processes to address changes in students’ behavior. The teachers revised lesson plans; used different methods, techniques, and materials; employed more flexibility; and had lower expectations for students than before COVID-19. When managing student behavior, the teachers established clear rules, reinforced routines, described desired behaviors, and monitored students more closely. These new practices carried additional responsibilities for classroom teachers on top of the previous expectations, which increased stress levels of teachers and raised the emotional toll. Gülmez and Ordu’s (2022) findings indicated that the cognitive

changes exhibited by the students included learning and comprehension problems, a lack of obvious maturation and emotional transition between grades, and the inclination to exert minimal effort in classroom activities. Students lacked motivation and concentration. Socially, students displayed a reliance on technology and an increase in self-centeredness. Discipline problems were also mentioned, as students seemed to forget rules or simply not obey them. Teachers shared that instances of disrespect and violence increased. Finally, students reportedly displayed psychomotor changes, such as the inability to sit still and focus during a lesson. Students were easily distracted, resulting in disciplinary problems. Overall, findings indicated that students displayed decreased levels of attention, less agency in completing work, and less appropriate behavior.

The new teaching demands that came about with little to no warning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic were extremely overwhelming for many teachers thus increasing chronic stress, fatigue, mental health, and burnout that Katz et al., (2016) previously identified that were prevalent in the teaching profession. Teachers reported that, during the pandemic school closures, their energy resources were consumed, and as a result, they experienced higher stress levels. (Klapproth et al., 2020). According to Besser et al. (2022), teachers also reported declines in job satisfaction due to sudden changes in work patterns, stress, and confusion, stemming from a lack of awareness of and confidence with new practices. Teachers' perceptions that the quality of teaching was poor negatively affected teacher self-efficacy. Not surprisingly, teachers' mental health and limited ability to cope with work-related stress have had lasting impacts on teachers post-pandemic (Baker et al., 2021).

Hess (2022) argued that the pandemic underscored the importance of a more student-centered and personalized approach to education and brought about significant changes in education, particularly concerning technology integration and instructional practices. These changes present increased challenges to teachers as they seek to provide positive educational experiences for students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide a better understanding of the challenges that current classroom teachers face and how these challenges might impact the development of practices within educator preparation programs. During the pandemic, teachers and school leaders attempted to do the best they could considering the lack of preparation and skills needed

to navigate the new school setting (Netolicky, 2020, p. 393). Since higher education faculties are often comprised of individuals who are more removed from the classroom, they must lean on the experiences of practitioners in the field to better understand the challenges that teachers are facing. Just as K–12 educational systems have changed, so too must the higher education programs that train those teachers change. These changes should be deliberate and based on the needs recognized by practicing professionals. Netolicky (2020) asserts that,

Education systems around the world are grappling with similar challenges in their very different contexts. The COVID-19 global pandemic has led to education reform at a rapid rate but reform out of necessity rather than deliberate and thoughtful planning. (p. 4)

As programs seek to maintain a high level of rigor in preparing future teachers, new challenges that have arisen because of the pandemic require faculty and leadership to consider how their actions impact individuals associated with their practice. Netolicky (2020) goes on to suggest that,

Schools and systems are grappling with the tension between well-being and workload of students, teachers and parents. This can be framed as the tension between Maslow and Bloom, in which Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of learning represent the importance of balancing physical and psychological safety with learning and academic rigour. (p. 3)

In An et al. (2021) the authors suggest four main categories for better preparing teachers for future emergencies which included: professional development for online learning, technology access, technology training for both students and teachers, and action plans and communication (An et al., 2021). This study aims to better define the challenges of practicing educators. Hess (2022), asserted,

The pandemic...upended American life in ways we never could have imagined...It led over a million families to flee public schools [and] transformed relationships between parents and educators...Re-invention must start not with what...administrators are used to doing, but with parents and schools working together. (p. 24)

The study focused on the following research questions:

1. How have instructional and non-instructional expectations of teachers changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What challenges exist for professional teaching practice due to the post-pandemic changes?

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, Chapter 1) served as the theoretical framework to guide this study. This theory posits that transformative learning occurs when individuals reflect on their experiences and critically examine their assumptions. Through this reflective process, beliefs and perspectives often shift, leading to a fundamental change in one's understanding of and approach to learning. The study's results demonstrate how teaching has changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and how these changes should impact the development of practices within educator preparation programs.

In the post-pandemic context, teachers have had to adapt to new forms of technology integration, altered instructional methods, and increased stress levels. This aligns with the theory's focus on changing professional practice through reflection and learning from experience (Taylor, 2008). The literature highlights that teachers have experienced significant cognitive, emotional, and professional shifts, creating the need for a framework that captures the complexity of these changes. Transformative Learning Theory provides a lens to explore how these shifts can lead to changes in teaching practices and attitudes, particularly regarding the integration of technology and the development of new pedagogical approaches (Cranton, 2006).

By employing Transformative Learning Theory, this study explored how the pandemic served as what Mezirow (1991, Chapter 6) refers to as a disorienting dilemma, prompting teachers and educator preparation program designers to reevaluate and transform their approaches to teaching and learning. The framework guided the analysis of how teachers reflected on their experiences, identified new skills required, and modified their practices to meet the needs of a post-pandemic classroom environment. In turn, designers of teacher preparation programs can reflect on the experiences of classroom practitioners and determine necessary changes to preservice teacher education.

Methodology

This research study was designed to provide an understanding of how instructional practice, interactions with students and parents, and professional expectations have changed for classroom educators post-pandemic. Additionally, the researchers wanted to discern how teacher preparation programs can adapt to meet the needs of preservice educators and better prepare

them for a post-pandemic classroom environment. The following questions were posed to the focus groups:

1. In what ways have your instructional practices changed since schools reopened after the COVID closures?
2. In what ways have your interactions with students changed? Regarding teaching, how have students' expectations related to your teaching changed?
3. In what ways have your interactions with parents changed? Have the expectations that parents have related to teaching and their expectations of the classroom teacher changed?
4. In what ways has what is expected of you professionally (noninstructional such as duty, attendance, reporting) changed since COVID?
5. What do you feel new teachers need to know because of changes in expectations since COVID that is different from "the way you were taught how to teach?"

Research Design

The study was qualitative; researchers conducted focus group interviews to collect data from participants who described how teaching has changed since returning to "normal" after the COVID-19 pandemic and identified the challenges teachers have faced as a result of those changes. Data collected during the focus group discussion was transcribed and analyzed using inductive content analysis. According to Elo & Kyngäs, (2008), inductive content analysis is a systematic method that allows patterns, themes, and categories to emerge directly from the data itself without the imposition of preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives. This approach allows the researcher to develop insights grounded in the participants' experiences and perspectives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During the initial phase of data analysis, the researchers read the transcripts in order to become thoroughly familiar with the data, which is essential for recognizing meaningful patterns and themes. Next, the researchers thoroughly examine the transcripts and highlight and label key words or paragraphs with codes to describe their content. Codes are then grouped into broader categories based on their similarities and differences. Next, the categories are refined to identify overarching themes. Finally, the themes and categories identified are systematically linked back to the research questions with direct quotations from the participants used to support the themes and illustrate the findings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Population and Sample

Participants for an initial focus group were recruited on a volunteer basis from schools within a public school district in north Louisiana. Student enrollment was reported to be near 6,000 students in February 2022 (Louisiana Department of Education, 2022), with approximately 48% female and 52% male, 48% white and 52% minority, 97% fully English proficient, and 61% classified as economically disadvantaged.

In January 2023, an email was sent to all principals in the district asking them to forward the email to the teachers at their school. The email contained a brief overview of the study and asked those interested in being a part of the focus group to complete a short Google form asking for their name, contact information, school, grade level, number of years teaching, and their preference of meeting times from several options. Interested participants were asked to respond within three weeks. A reminder was sent the day before the end of the response period.

A total of 26 teachers responded from eight of the 13 schools in the district. All teachers who volunteered were sent an email in mid-March 2023 notifying them of the date and time of the focus group meeting. In this email, they were asked to confirm their attendance by completing a Google form. A reminder was sent one week later and again one week after the first reminder to those who had not yet responded. Fifteen of the original volunteers indicated they were available on the scheduled date.

Of the 15 who indicated availability, 11 participated in the focus groups. The number of years of teaching experience for the participants in the focus groups ranged from 6 to 25, with the average number of years being 13.9 (11.75 for the elementary/middle school group and 13.19 for the middle/high school group). Grades taught, years of teaching experience, and race/ethnicity are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Grades taught	Years of teaching experience	Race/ethnicity
Participant 1	2nd grade ELA	5–10	African American
Participant 2	3rd grade mathematics	>10	White/Non-Hispanic

Participant 3	6th grade social studies	>10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 4	7th grade social studies	5–10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 5	8th grade inclusion	>10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 6	9th–12th grade ELA	>10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 7	9th–12th grade ELA	>10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 8	9th–12th grade ELA	5–10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 9	9th–12th grade ELA	>10	African American
Participant 10	9th–12th grade mathematics	>10	White/Non-Hispanic
Participant 11	9th–12th grade social studies	>10	White/Non-Hispanic

Data Collection

Based on the number of participants, the group was divided into two focus groups: an elementary/middle school group consisting of four teachers grades 2 through 7 and a middle/high school group consisting of seven teachers grades 8 through 12. The focus groups were conducted simultaneously with one researcher facilitating the middle/high school group and the other two researchers facilitating the elementary/middle school group.

The discussions were guided by the facilitators using pre-determined, open-ended questions. Open-ended probes specific to participant comments were used as needed to dig deeper into the thoughts of the participants and to clarify meaning.

With the consent of the participants, discussions were audio recorded. These recordings were transcribed using an online transcription service. The transcribed documents were then reviewed by the researchers to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted following a general order of sequence described by Lune and Berg (2017, Chapter 11). Data from the focus group discussions was first transcribed into text that could be read. The transcribed text was then read independently by each researcher, after which the researchers came together to discuss first impressions and initial analysis. During this discussion, patterns emerged that were then grouped and labeled with codes that were inductively identified from the data. These codes were then sorted into categories of related codes, and the categories were used to organize and group the codes into meaningful clusters or themes. The final list of codes included administrative expectations, student characteristics,

student attitudes, parent expectations, and instructional practices. The transcripts were then read again, independently by each researcher, and the codes were applied to identify exemplars from the discussions to support each theme. According to Bengtsson (2016), performing the analysis separately and then discussing the results to obtain consensus contributes to increased validity and is one form of triangulation.

Findings

The findings from this study highlight a complex array of changes in the post-pandemic classroom that reflect both challenges and opportunities for growth in education. While the data predominantly indicates several areas where teachers are struggling, these findings must be framed within a broader context that acknowledges both the negative and positive developments caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the analysis of the data, several themes were noted. The following paragraphs summarize the findings.

Decrease in Maturity Level and Emotional Stability

During the interviews, many teachers reported that students seemed less mature than students of the same age group prior to the pandemic. Teachers suggested that the maturation process of students has been delayed because of the time students spent out of school learning virtually, coupled with their isolation from social interaction. A fifth-grade teacher stated, “It’s like they’re stuck [in that mindset of elementary school]. Just because time moved forward, they’re still stuck in the last full year of school, which was third grade.” A ninth-grade teacher reported that she saw similar behaviors among her students. She (having previously taught the same population of students as seventh graders) stated that the students were “worse than they were as seventh graders. That seventh-grade year was that hybrid year with these kids.” She felt that she struggled more with them as ninth graders because of the changes resulting from the pandemic. The teachers indicated that directions and basic tasks that came easily to students previously now presented challenges in the classroom post-pandemic. Further, this lack of maturity was not limited to activities in the classroom. One teacher reported that during lunch duty, high school students were “literally rolling in the dirt, and before COVID...they would just sit and chat and hang out and talk and eat their lunch. And now they forget to eat their lunch because they are rolling in the dirt.” As one teacher summed it up, “They are literally stuck where they were when they left [before the pandemic closures].”

Another major change noted by those interviewed was that since returning after the COVID school closures, students were more emotional. Comments such as, “I don’t think I anticipated what they would be like emotionally after coming back to school,” and “They expected us to carry them emotionally in a way I didn’t anticipate,” summed up the feelings of most teachers interviewed. The teachers discussed the new challenges this change presented with the ongoing challenges with curriculum instruction. Many felt that they must be more careful about what they say to avoid a student becoming overly emotional. Teachers indicated that students had an increased desire for emotional support post-pandemic. As one teacher stated, “When somebody hurts their feelings, we’re supposed to stop the class” to deal with it. In addition, several teachers indicated that students now see them as “their safe person.” Teachers often have to act as therapists for their students because the students feel more comfortable going to the teacher than to the counselor. The decreased maturity level displayed by students was also found to be a factor in behavioral issues at school.

Increased Behavioral Issues

While managing behavioral issues has always been a key component of classroom practice, the participants in the focus groups indicated that behavioral issues have increased post-pandemic. Since the return to classrooms after COVID-19 closures, teachers have been presented with behaviors that are not typical for the grade level. One teacher indicated, “This is the first year back with rules in place, and so it’s kind of a battle.” Teachers noticed an increase in negative student behaviors such as lying and taking things that are not theirs, as well as disrespect and destruction of classroom property. Oftentimes the behavioral issues were very subtle, such as incidences of disrespect. Students often “teeter[ed] on the line” of what was acceptable and what went too far. One teacher discussed destructive student behaviors she had experienced with students writing on and poking holes in cardboard testing walls purchased for the classroom. She indicated that these boards had been used for several years, and this was the first year they had been ruined. Another teacher mentioned an issue with students damaging their Chromebooks, and when confronted about it, the student’s attitude was that it was okay, because it “was purchased with COVID money” rather than school funds. Teachers suggested that these types of behaviors were showing up in both elementary and secondary classrooms. The student behavioral issues and inability to follow school rules were also evident in the lack of student accountability regarding classroom performance.

Lack of Student Accountability

When asked about the level of accountability that students had before the pandemic compared to after, teachers suggested that a lack of accountability that became the norm during COVID school closures continues today. The teachers indicated that students now assumed that they should receive unlimited attempts at assignments and that due dates should not be enforced. This assumption presented significant challenges for classroom teachers in maintaining student resources and results in unclear student performance data. One teacher stated, “A lot of unaddressed issues that impact student grades and their scores...[are] just not dealt with.” The teacher further explained, “I think about 30 of them [students] were not passing with a C or better in math or reading,” to which her principal responded, “We can’t fail half the first grade.” The teachers all suggested that the decreased amount of accountability resulted in promoting students who may not have been prepared for the next grade level.

The teachers also reported that it was now common for parents to expect their child to receive an A regardless of the effort the student put into the work. Because of the myriad of challenges that students faced during the pandemic, leeway was given to provide students with ample opportunities and means to complete assignments. However, post-pandemic, as schools returned to pre-pandemic activities, many students and their parents raised issues with how assessment of learning took place. A teacher shared, “They just want a good grade. That’s all they’re concerned about.” In a conversation with a parent, one teacher reported that the parent stated, “I don’t care what my child has learned. Why don’t they have an A?” These frustrations were vocalized in the focus groups as one teacher stated, “We’re not talking about their learning...Parents want to know...Why don’t they have an A in your class?” When told that their child did not do the work, the parent responded, “But they tried really hard.” These diminished expectations on the part of the parents have continued to be a struggle for practicing teachers as they navigate the current classroom climate and attempt to engage and motivate students.

Lower Student Engagement and Motivation

A key point of discussion during the focus group revolved around the new challenge of working with and engaging students in the classroom. The teachers indicated that they felt the extensive use of technology and forced isolation during the pandemic created a decrease in student engagement in the return to the face-to-face classroom. One teacher suggested that the reason for lower engagement was that students became comfortable with the practice of working

alone and at their own pace when schools were closed during the pandemic. This autonomy created habits in students that became more challenging to manage.

Teachers reported that previously simple tasks, such as listening and following directions, presented greater challenges for students post-pandemic. One teacher said, “They are just missing the mark of paying attention, following directions, and just checking their work. So, we spend a lot of time going back over directions.” Another teacher stated that she must “repeat things sometimes 10 to 15 times before...the majority of kids actually listen.”

Many teachers mentioned the need to constantly stop instruction to get students’ attention. The consensus from the elementary teachers interviewed was that students were only able to sit in a chair and do work for about five minutes at a time, a level that is significantly lower than pre-COVID instruction. One teacher explained,

If you’re going to give instruction, it needs to be about five minutes. And then they need to do something, and you can come back and do some more instruction. Five minutes is about the max that you’re going to have true attention without them getting bored or them drifting off.

Secondary teachers also echoed the feeling that students were showing decreased ability to engage in classwork for extended periods.

Procedures and daily routines were one area where teachers felt there had been a significant shift. Many felt this was due to students being socially isolated during the virtual learning period for so long without daily routines being ingrained in them. The teachers suggested that now teachers were having to start over, teaching even the most basic routines learned in earlier grades. One teacher pointed out that her room had consistent procedures and routines throughout the school year, but students struggled with basic routines even late in the school year, including routines such as entering the room, sitting down, putting their name on their paper, and doing the bell work. As one teacher said, “It’s like they are waiting for it (another school closure) to happen again.” Another added, “They are waiting and they’re expecting too much...now it’s just debilitating.”

One teacher suggested that the lack of engagement was because students knew that there was no accountability, especially when it came to academics. Expectations for academic work decreased during the pandemic, but as expectations returned to pre-pandemic levels, students have not engaged in the work in the same way. One teacher stated, “They [students] know that

they can do little to nothing and there's not going to be a consequence, and we're not going to hold them back (a grade level)...They can do the at most minimum and get enough." The attitude of many students seemed to be that "Mediocre is okay." One teacher pointed out that it was hard to change the mind of a teenager and make them realize expectations have gone back to normal levels or even increased levels to catch up on learning lost. She stated, "Now more is expected. We're back to normal, and you need to be doing more." Teachers indicated that even when they explained the negative impact of not doing the work, there was still little effort from many students.

The focus groups also discussed how students now had a more grade-centric mindset. Rather than wanting to learn the content, students were more focused on completion rather than learning. Student attitudes transitioned to "What do I have to do to get this grade? What do I need to put on this paper?" As one teacher stated, "The learning motivation is gone." When students returned to the classroom after the pandemic, teachers gave them a lot of help or information to get the products expected because of the learning gap caused by the closures. This seems to have resulted in learned helplessness where students expect teachers to continue doing that for them regardless of their in-person attendance or effort towards completing work they missed.

Increased Absenteeism and Expectation of Individualized Makeup Assignments

Teachers reported an increase in student absenteeism since COVID began. They felt that this was a result of the requirement to stay home during the pandemic school closures and the subsequent requirements to stay home if students showed symptoms of the virus. These guidelines were provided to the schools by the CDC and state departments of education as guidance to slow the spread of the virus. Now that classrooms have returned to somewhat normal, one teacher indicated that she felt like it was still being used as a crutch and that parents felt they could "take [their] kid out of school to go do this, and it'll be okay." Another teacher stated that "it seems like everywhere is still giving COVID days, except you're getting an excuse, or you get a day off or whatever for exposure," and the parents did not understand that it was no longer an excused absence. In some instances, the parents simply said their child was not feeling well, so they kept them home.

Regardless of the reason for the absence, the teachers all felt that parents were still expecting their children to receive makeup work as individualized assignments in a manner

consistent with the work given during the pandemic school closures. One teacher stated, “The parents still expect everything to be given to them with no delay and snap your fingers and there’s your child’s assignment, and everything should be great.” Another teacher stated, “Usually, with the illnesses and absences, there’s still that expectation that...we’ll have endless patience and endless time.” A consistent theme of the focus groups emerged that preferential treatment for student absences was still expected by students and parents, even after schools returned to typical academic activities.

Further, when students were absent, they seemed to lack the initiative to complete missed work. Teachers reported that students no longer took the initiative to inquire about what they missed or what needed to be made up but instead expected the teacher to go to them and provide all the information the student missed and additional support to complete the activities. One teacher reported that often the excuse students used for not having something done was, “Oh, I was absent, so I don’t have to do it,” indicating that students have carried over behaviors from virtual learning when some assignments were not required. When they did expect makeup work, students expected everything to be given to them digitally in the same manner as it was during the pandemic, regardless of the format it was given in class.

Changes in Use of Technology

Although teachers described many negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, they also noted positive impacts to instructional practices. Many felt that even though the rapidly increased usage of technology required during the pandemic presented challenges, learning how to use new technologies led to positive changes. The teachers also reported that most classrooms were now one-to-one technology. This increase in the availability of student technology led to more or better differentiated instruction. Additionally, the teachers indicated that the usage of newer technology provided students with increased levels of technology usage skills, an improvement which resulted in less instructional time for skill development and more focused time on curriculum content. The teachers also reported that student resources and assignments were now more organized through the use of Google Classroom.

While the increase in technology available to students had positive impacts, the teachers also reported some drawbacks associated with the changed instructional practices. One challenge highlighted was that, because of the issues surrounding technological accessibility, it could be difficult for students to continue being engaged at a high level if they did not have their

technology or if it is not working appropriately. The teachers also indicated that because assignments were provided digitally during COVID school closures, some students and parents still expected that assignments would be provided digitally even if the assignment was completed as a paper and pencil activity during class time.

The increased use of technology during the pandemic seemed to give students a dependency on technology. Teachers reported that students have become very reliant on using Chromebooks for the completion of coursework. As one teacher said, “If I give them a worksheet and like a digital reading or whatever, they will not use the reading.” She indicated that students have developed a reliance on simply searching for answers via search engines and using whatever information is generated first in the search. She stated that whatever “...pops up [first] is what’s going to get written on the paper because they don’t even have the skills enough to go through the search results...They don’t know how to find the answer.” Another reported that some students displayed emotional instability when they were not allowed to use their technology as desired. She said there were “tears the other day when I blocked Google because they did not even know how to get to Google Classroom without typing it into Google.” This technology-dependent behavior was also seen by teachers when students were not allowed to have unstructured time using their technology. One teacher stated that students “seem very entitled to their time on their Chromebooks.” She reported that her students had a “meltdown” if they did not get free time on the Chromebooks as they had experienced during virtual learning. Whereas some parents were more involved with monitoring the work completed and technology access during the isolation period, the teachers expressed concerns that parental involvement seemed to decrease with the students’ return to the brick-and-mortar classroom.

Decreased Parental Involvement

Study participants also suggested that during the pandemic parents became more engaged in their child’s schoolwork. Because students were working from home, a greater level of engagement from parents was necessary, but after classrooms returned to normal, that “just went away immediately.” The teachers indicated that parental engagement decreased significantly post-pandemic. One teacher felt that if she were to call a parent and talk to them, she would not get much help. She said, “I hear from them way less than I used to.” Another teacher said she believed since the parents of her students had been out of the loop for so long, they “just kind of were okay with that and don’t even volunteer to do anything.” Involvement in open house and

those willing to provide snacks or help with parties was extremely limited since the pandemic. She said, “It’s like the same two parents keep sending the macaroni for the 4-H students or sending the candy bags when we had the Mardi Gras parade in the hall.” The teachers all agreed that when the parents were not involved and did not hold their children accountable, student involvement and engagement levels were lower. They further suggested that this had become a trend starting with the younger students. One teacher said,

When COVID first started, I felt like parents were interested... From my experience, parents were interested in wanting to know what was going on. I feel like everybody signed up for my Remind... I had a lot of Remind members. Parents wanted to know how to get onto Google Classroom. You could hear parents in the Zooms in the background saying, ‘Turn around and listen to her.’

During virtual learning, parents played a more significant role in redirecting student behavior and working to ensure that students were engaged in the learning taking place. Another teacher said, “They would ask me... they would get on their kid’s chat... is my son doing what he’s supposed to be doing?” Since returning to normal activities after the pandemic, teachers felt that parents were less supportive and more likely to take the student’s side when issues arose. The teachers indicated that this shift away from engagement and the placement of responsibility back in the hands of the teacher was a challenge in the classroom. One teacher said, “It used to be when you called the parent... you could discuss it rationally and you could kind of work together. Well, now it’s like, just like the kid’s way or the highway.” The teachers indicated that this could be due to the highly personalized support that students received as a part of virtual learning during the pandemic.

The factors discussed above—student maturity, behavioral issues, lack of accountability, lack of engagement and motivation, increased absenteeism, changes in the use of technology, and decreased parental involvement—all contributed to teachers feeling overwhelmed and under-supported in their classroom practices.

Increased Professional Expectations

One of the biggest concerns raised by the teachers interviewed was the increase in professional expectations and lack of classroom time to perform their daily duties. Many of the responsibilities added during the pandemic, which were above and beyond the normal expectations, have continued post-pandemic. One teacher said she felt like they were “expected

to do a million things and [didn't] have any time to do them." Another said, "Everything feels like it's our responsibility, even things that aren't our responsibility." The teachers indicated that the increased expectations were focused on technology, providing substitute support for colleagues, and other expectations for which there was no compensation or help. Because of the challenges facing all levels, the teachers felt as though when they needed help, they should not or could not ask for it. One teacher said, "I felt like I was going to have a breakdown because so much was expected of me." These expectations were also echoed by other teachers who stated, "I feel like I can never catch up," and "There [are] just not enough hours in the day." One teacher even went so far as to say, "I just have to wonder, what legitimately can I let go of and not get penalized for?"

One area in which teachers perceived increased expectations was their availability outside of their defined working hours. Teachers felt that the administration expected them to always be on call after hours and on weekends and to be available to students and their parents whenever possible. This expectation was also found in work attendance. Teachers felt as though their administrators expected them to be at work daily regardless of the circumstances. The participants suggested that this expectation ultimately left them feeling overwhelmed and undervalued as professionals.

In addition to the increased expectations, many teachers felt that more guidance from administration at the district and school levels was needed. They expressed a lack of communication post-pandemic, leaving them with little to no guidance on how they should proceed with the daily activities of being an educator. One teacher stated, "I think we were pushed to a point to do all of these things during [the pandemic], and the expectation...I don't think it went away." The teacher went on to say, "While we went all back to normal, we still had to do all the COVID things." While the teachers did indicate that they felt that expectations had slightly decreased, there had been no official communication to indicate that was the case.

During the pandemic, teachers felt the need to provide constant communication to students and their families to ensure that learning loss was minimal. The teachers interviewed indicated that now they felt parents still expected them to be "on call" after hours and on weekends as they were during the pandemic. The expectation of parents to receive an immediate response from a teacher related to issues in the classroom was inconsistent with their own displayed levels of engagement. Teachers stated that they communicated with parents as much as

they could but felt that parents had become more distant and expected teachers to reach out to them individually if their child began to fall behind. This expectation went above and beyond the typical automated communication that parents receive from the school system when a student fails an assignment, has a failing grade, or is absent from school. One common way many of those interviewed provided additional communication with parents was by using the text messaging system Remind. Many times, parents gave the excuse that they either had not signed up or had taken themselves out of the Remind system because they felt they were receiving too many messages. Yet these same parents still blamed the teachers for not communicating, again showing inconsistencies in their engagement/expectations. One teacher made the following statement:

I had one parent at an IEP meeting tell us that it was just too many messages coming through her app and that it was too much for her, so she had to take herself out, but then was very upset that her child was not getting the study materials that were being sent out on Remind.

While not recognizing the increased workload strain an activity like this would place on the teacher, one parent requested that instead of sending the materials out on Remind, the teacher should print out copies and give them to her child. Teachers all agreed that many parents blamed the teacher even though there were many resources available for parents to receive communication and stay up to date on their child's progress. A teacher shared, "Parents are expecting more... individualized communication, like one-on-one communication. So, mass send-outs aren't cutting it for them anymore, or they're ignoring [them]. Maybe they're just getting too many." These challenges in communication were not limited to activities outside of the classroom; they were found in the classroom as well.

Discussion

As the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic slowed in most geographic areas across the United States and schools attempted to return to normalcy, findings from this study revealed that teachers in the post-pandemic classroom faced numerous challenges. Many of these challenges stemmed from both the immediate disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the lasting changes in instructional practices, student behaviors, and professional expectations. This discussion aims to critically analyze the findings while acknowledging both the challenges and the resilience demonstrated by educators during this period of change.

Reframing Teacher Experiences: Navigating New Realities

Teachers' descriptions of increased behavioral issues, lack of student accountability, and lower engagement levels highlight a significant shift in the classroom environment post-pandemic. However, these observations can be understood within the broader context of transformative learning. Mezirow's (1991, Chapter 6) Transformative Learning Theory provides a lens through which these challenges can be viewed as catalysts for change and adaptation rather than merely negative outcomes. The pandemic served as a "disorienting dilemma," prompting teachers to reevaluate their teaching strategies and adapt to a new educational landscape (Mezirow, 1991, p. 153). As students reacclimated to the learning environment, it was crucial for teachers to develop a robust classroom management plan and employ strategies that address the new behavioral and engagement challenges arising from the pandemic's disruptions.

The findings revealed a noticeable increase in student behavioral issues and a decline in maturity levels. For example, teachers reported that many students appeared to be "stuck" in a pre-pandemic mindset, displaying behaviors more typical of younger students. Similarly, high school students were observed engaging in behaviors previously unheard of before COVID-19. These challenges have compelled teachers to adopt more flexible and creative classroom management strategies.

To address these behavioral shifts, teachers revised lesson plans, employed varied instructional techniques, and adjusted expectations to better meet the new needs of their students including establishing new routines and reinforcing clear rules to manage disruptive behaviors effectively. This adaptability reflects teachers' commitment to maintaining a productive learning environment despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic. As Katz et al. (2016) noted, teachers' ability to cope with and manage stress in such high-pressure situations demonstrates their resilience and dedication to their profession.

Balancing Student Needs with Academic Expectations

The findings indicate that teachers have faced considerable challenges related to student engagement, accountability, and motivation in the post-pandemic classroom. Many students exhibit decreased attention spans and reluctance to engage in traditional academic tasks. For example, teachers reported that students struggled with basic tasks such as listening and following directions, often requiring instructions to be repeated multiple times before they were

understood. These issues illustrate a significant concern among educators regarding students' readiness to learn in conventional ways.

Despite these challenges, the increased use of technology, initially seen as a barrier, has also created opportunities for innovative teaching practices. Teachers noted that classrooms have transitioned to one-to-one technology setups, a shift which has facilitated differentiated instruction and allowed teachers to address diverse student needs more effectively. For instance, teachers reported that using platforms like Google Classroom has helped organize student resources and assignments, making it easier to provide tailored support. Although the dependency on technology has led some students to expect all assignments to be available digitally, even when classroom activities are paper-based, it also encourages educators to rethink their engagement strategies.

Strengthening Family and Community Engagement

One positive result of the pandemic highlighted in the findings was the strengthened relationships between schools and families. Remote learning fostered deeper connections as teachers and parents were compelled to collaborate more closely to support students' learning (Wilinski et al., 2022). During virtual learning, parents were significantly involved, often redirecting student behavior and ensuring that students were engaged in the learning process.

However, as schools returned to traditional learning environments, the relationships established during the pandemic seemed to dissipate. Focus group participants reported that parents shifted the responsibility for their student's education back onto the school, engaging less in providing support or alignment with the teacher. One teacher noted, "I hear from them way less than I used to," reflecting a broader trend of decreased parental involvement. Further, the teachers indicated that parents increased expectations for the role of the teacher, expecting them to go above and beyond by creating individualized expectations for student work and behavior and by being available to provide support at any time.

While this presents a challenge for teachers, it also provides an area of focus for growth and development in the training of preservice teachers. Educator preparation programs should focus on equipping future teachers with strategies to sustain meaningful family engagement in both virtual and in-person settings. Teachers' efforts to rebuild these relationships post-pandemic demonstrate their commitment to holistic student development, even as they navigate increased expectations and reduced resources.

The decrease in parental involvement post-pandemic may reflect broader societal shifts, yet it also underscores the need for innovative approaches to maintain family–school partnerships, which are crucial for student success. This shift away from cooperative engagement with parents highlights the importance of finding new ways to foster and maintain productive relationships between families and schools (Netolicky, 2020, p. 394).

Addressing Increased Professional Expectations

The increased professional expectations placed on teachers during and after the pandemic have been substantial, often leading to feelings of burnout and frustration (Baker et al., 2021). Teachers described how many responsibilities added during the pandemic, such as additional communication and technology use, have continued post-pandemic. The expectation to be “on call” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, has become a significant source of stress, with one teacher stating that they felt pressured to be available to students and parents whenever possible, even outside of traditional working hours.

These increased demands highlight the urgent need for clearer communication and support from educational leadership. Teachers indicated that they often felt overwhelmed and lacked guidance from their administration on how to manage the additional expectations placed upon them. Educator preparation programs must recognize these evolving demands and better prepare novice teachers to manage complex, multifaceted roles that extend beyond traditional classroom instruction.

Moreover, the pandemic has underscored the importance of professional development focused on resilience-building, self-care, and effective workload management. Many teachers expressed the need for support in balancing their professional responsibilities with personal well-being. Providing teachers with tools to manage their workloads effectively while maintaining their well-being is essential for sustaining a high level of educational quality and teacher satisfaction (Brencio & Novak, 2019).

Limitations

In qualitative data collection through focus groups, issues can arise that may impact the findings. Focus groups should be conducted by a trained moderator who is knowledgeable about group dynamics and can moderate the discussion appropriately. In this study, the moderators had experience in conducting focus groups and researched best practices before conducting the sessions. Also, in focus group research, the quality of the discussion and its resulting usefulness

to the researcher often depend on the moderator's skill and ability to guide questioning, probe where needed, and facilitate opportunities for all participants to engage in the discussion. In this study, researchers explored best practices to prepare for and conduct the sessions to collect useful and accurate data. Another limitation can be found in the difficulty of analyzing the available data from the focus group. As individuals participate in the discussion of challenging topics, it can often be difficult to distinguish individual opinions from the opinions of the group. Before conducting the focus groups, relevant research was evaluated to determine the necessary protocol for collecting and evaluating the data as researchers designed these focus groups. Finally, another challenge is that the volunteers participating in the focus group may not be representative of the population, and, therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to the entire field of teaching. They do, however, provide insight regarding current practice.

Conclusions/Areas for Future Research

While the findings of this study indicate several areas where teachers are struggling in the post-pandemic classroom, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexity of their experiences. Though the pandemic created significant challenges for teachers, it also provided opportunities for growth, reflection, and transformation within the teaching profession. By reframing these findings within the context of transformative learning, the study highlighted not only the difficulties faced by teachers but also their resilience, adaptability, and dedication to providing quality education in an ever-changing environment.

Future research should evaluate how teacher preparation programs are adapting to the post-pandemic educational landscape, which should include an assessment of the preparedness of new teachers to handle increased emotional and behavioral challenges, ways to integrate technology effectively, and strategies for engaging with parents. Also, given the observed decrease in student maturity levels and increased emotional needs post-pandemic, future research could explore the effectiveness of socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs and interventions in supporting student development. Due to the decline in student engagement and motivation reported by teachers in this study, future research should evaluate innovative pedagogical approaches that enhance student engagement and motivation. This research could focus on the effectiveness of methods such as collaborative group work, project-based or inquiry-based learning, and gamification. While the pandemic accelerated technology use in classrooms, it also

created a dependency that, in some cases, hindered learning. Future research could investigate how to balance technology integration with traditional teaching methods. Studies might focus on identifying best practices for technology use that support, rather than replace, fundamental learning skills. Finally, future research could also focus on developing and testing new classroom management techniques that address increased behavioral issues and decreased maturity levels among students. These areas of future research can provide valuable insights into how the education system can adapt to the new realities of the post-pandemic world, helping to build more resilient, effective, and equitable learning environments for all stakeholders.

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