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COVID-19's Effects on Students' Educational Growth

Anna Chavez Maples

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Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the education system drastically and created many challenges for families as well as schools. When schools moved to online and virtual learning, many students began to fall behind in their education and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became harder for schools to meet. The following research explored the effects the pandemic caused in schools and how far behind students are today with their education and socialization. The results of this research will share ways to help today's students catch up in their education so that they can reach their full potential.

COVID-19's Effects on Students' Educational Growth

The COVID-19 pandemic was a life-altering time for so many people in the world and it affected the United States educational system. The way that students were taught was life-changing, the manner in which students had to learn was challenging, and many students' needs were not being met due to a lack of resources. As schools have attempted to return to "normal" education plans, students are showing many signs of academic setbacks, social challenges, and behavioral changes that may be a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigated how teachers are adapting to meet the needs of students' post-pandemic.

Problem Statement

Since early 2020, many families were faced with the struggles of not having access to the basic educational necessities needed for online learning such as a computer, Wi-Fi, or even enough cell service due to rural farmland in the central Virginia area. Upon further research of the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown and the digital divide, a significant percentage of working-class families do not own a laptop or desktop computer nor have broadband Internet service (Goudeau, 2021).

As students returned to in-person schools in fall of 2021, they were still faced with quarantines, detailed COVID procedures, and the struggles of adjusting to social engagements. This situation has resulted in a domino effect and created major setbacks for students and schools alike this 2021-2022 academic year. The students' attendance affected their capability to stay on track with the classrooms' course work along with their lack of broadband Internet service at home. When students were put in quarantine due to COVID exposure, they were not allowed to attend school for several days causing them to fall behind in classwork. According to the

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), students are considered chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of the school year regardless of the reason and based on numbers collected from the Richmond Public Schools from fall semester 2021, nearly 28% of Richmond students are considered chronically absent which was up from 19.5% the previous year (Bass, 2022). In comparison to the chronic absenteeism in a rural county in Central Virginia, the VDOE states that in 2018-2019 15.32% of students were absent, and in 2021-2022, that number increased to 21.93% of students were chronically absent.

Schools need to implement a new plan to adapt to our students' current needs rather than the needs pre-COVID-19. This is evident with test results for the state of Virginia dropping significantly from the 2018-19 school year and the 2020-21 school year as found through statistics (VDOE, 2021). The results for 2021-22 showed a significant gap between all subjects since the 2018-19 school year and evidence of a need for in-person learning (Balow, 2022).

Rationale

In this research study, I asked the question: As teachers worked with students virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, what did teachers perceive as struggles for students? The COVID-19 pandemic was a life altering event for so many people in the world and it profoundly affected the educational system throughout the United States. The way that students were taught was virtually life changing, the matter in which students had to learn was challenging, and there were many students' needs that were not met due to a lack of resources such as high-speed internet. As schools have tried to return to "normal" education plans, students show many signs of academic setbacks due to the educational changes that occurred during the COVID- 19 pandemic.

The research and information on what teachers were doing pre-covid and during the pandemic is a way to compare any current evidence on students' growth in education goals. This research worked with a focus group of teachers, 1-2 from each discipline, and questions were based on what teaching methods have been successful post-covid. The current state of our schools' success with testing statistics is evidence of the need to change our process of instructing and evaluating the students currently.

This study investigated how teachers can try to adapt to meet the needs of the post-pandemic students in the post-pandemic environment. Investigating the strategies of teachers' lessons from 2021-22 in comparison to their lesson's pre-pandemic helped to gather information on how to better serve the students today.

Goals and Contributions

The goal of this research was to extend the current literature about student and teacher struggles in a post-pandemic education system. It provided information on laws prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic and post-pandemic so that students with disadvantages may be given an opportunity to succeed in this post-pandemic environment.

Many students are struggling and continue to struggle to even get up to attend school every day, which was clear in the number of absences seen throughout the 2021-22 school year as shared previously. It has been studied that chronic absences effects academic achievement (Klein, 2022).

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) statistics show that so many students have fallen behind based on the test results. The state results of the passing math scores from the 2018-19 school year was 82 and the year 2020-21 dropped to 54, science dropped from 81 to 59

and English scores saw the least change but still dropped from 78 to 69 (VDOE, 2021). This study will highlight past successes in helping students reach their true academic potential. Recommendations for changes to bring students up to their grade level will be provided. The goal is to supply information and resources on how teachers can meet students' needs post-pandemic to help them reach their potential.

Evidence and Significance

The research and information on what teachers were doing pre-covid and during the pandemic is a way to compare any current evidence found. This research worked with a focus group of teachers from each department area who were asked questions based on what teaching methods have been successful post-covid, how things have changed pre-COVID, during COVID and post-COVID. The current state of our schools' success with testing statistics is evidence of the need to change our process of instructing and evaluating the students today.

A literature review was conducted to explore and analyze what teachers did during periods of remote teaching and learning and what they experienced about learning loss, engagement, teaching, and access to instruction.

Explanatory Definitions

- The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was established in 2002 to hold schools accountable for how successful students were academically. This law was put in place to help improve the gap between low-income families and high-income families as well as provide better assistance for ELL (English Language Learners) students.

- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was established in 2015 as an updated act based on the NCLB. This law was passed to help improve public schools and meet the needs of all students.
- Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is a law that protects the rights of individuals to prevent discrimination. This law is in place to protect religious freedoms and health information privacy rights.

Literature Review

In researching the education system pre-COVID, during COVID, and most current, there is evidence found of the decline of our students' success rates due to the digital divide. Laws were put in place to help as accountability models prior to COVID, however, the digital divide became a big concern when students had to learn remotely. The social/emotional aspects were greatly impacted as well.

Past Laws

Looking into the history of the plans implemented before COVID, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was established in 2002 by President George W. Bush which amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (House of Congress, 2001). The focus of the NCLB Act was to improve the “GAP” between students and improve the academic achievements of students with disadvantages. “In December 2015, Congress passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to replace NCLB. ESSA moved in the opposite direction—it seeks to pare back the federal role in K-12 education” (Klein, 2015, p. 3). This is the most recent process within the education system.

Research shows that even with the ESSA, there has been a lack of equity for all students (Long, 2015). National Education Association (NEA) Vice President Becky Pringle discussed in a panel, the progress over the four years of the new ESSA but finding the best ways to apply the flexibility and implement new practices from nearly a decade of the harsh testing regime of NCLB is an arduous process (Long, 2015). Moving forward to almost a decade of implementing the ESSA into the education system and add in a pandemic, there is an even greater need for digital tools necessary for education.

COVID-19 Pandemic

For example, the lack of broadband service for many students in rural areas vs cities created a digital divide pre-COVID and became clearer during the pandemic (AU, 2020). Research shows that the digital divide placed about 17 percent of students were challenged with completing their homework, 50 percent of low-income families, and 42 percent of families of color didn't have the technology needed for online education (AU, 2020). How were students supposed to succeed without the proper resources?

“The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries” (Pokhrel, 2021, p. 1). The virtual opportunities during the pandemic were sparse for many students in which evidence shows negative effects in academic growth, widening pre-existing disparities (Golberg, 2021). The biggest divide was with students historically marginalized with systemic racism, classism, and a lack of funding in the schools (Long, 2020). Moving to remote learning during the pandemic created a disadvantage and lack of equity within the education system (AU, 2020).

As the pandemic caused a rapid shutdown in schools, research showed that in the spring of 2020, 36 percent of low-income students couldn't complete their schoolwork because they

didn't have a computer compared to 14 percent of middle-income and 4 percent of upper-income students (AU, 2020). Many educational leaders pushed to bridge the digital divide during the pandemic by supplying hotspots to families and ensuring every student had their own computer (AU, 2020). Data collected from 5.4 million U.S. students in grades 3-8 shows a decrease in test scores for reading and math (Kuhfeld, 2022). The gap between low-poverty and high-poverty schools shows a wider span of approximately 20% in math and 15% in reading during the 2020-21 school year which shows the negative impact students faced during the pandemic (Kuhfeld, 2022). While the pandemic affected all students, children in PreK-3rd grade rely on the education system to set the foundation for their academics, linguistics, social and emotional skills to grow (Allen, 2021).

School Year 2021-2022

As some schools didn't reopen in the fall of 2020, the schools worked diligently to reopen during the spring of 2021, as students and teachers made their way into classrooms with strict protocols. For example, the school district I teach implemented a hybrid plan allowing students to maintain virtual learning for the first half of each day and in-person for a select few for the second half of each day with an asynchronous plan for Wednesdays (Boyd, 2020). As the new school year of 2021-22 began, schools worked to reopen and be back to a full in-person schedule. For the state of Virginia, this meant strict guidelines given by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Virginia Department of Health (VDH), and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) which reinforced the importance of in-person learning with strict masking and prevention measures (Plye, 2021).

Each county was given recommendations and each county decided on what guidelines they felt were pertinent to their schools. The guidance stated that Elementary schools should

require students, teachers, and staff to wear masks indoors while middle and high school students, teachers and staff who were not fully vaccinated were to wear masks indoors (Plye, 2021). Evidence from the decline of virtual learning made it clear that students learn best in school buildings, so schools in Virginia had to give in-person instruction regardless of social distancing and other CDC guidance (Plye, 2021).

As the school year continued following these guidelines for each county and deciding on what best works for each school, there were many absences due to exposure and putting students in quarantine. This increased chronically absent students with COVID-related quarantines and the pressure to keep children home for any illness (runny nose, sore throat, etc.) regardless of severity (Barnum, 2021). Attendance was also affected by a lack of motivation, the emotional state of students, and social anxieties for some who struggled with home life or seclusion during the pandemic. In a Central Virginia rural county, the dropout rate in 2019 was at 2.95% and increased in 2022 to 5.87%, which is 23 out of 392 students that dropped out (Balow, 2022).

Teachers were stressed as well due to added responsibilities, shortage of substitutes, and COVID precautions, including masking and distancing, making it harder to form relationships with the students (Barnum, 2021). These situations have created setbacks for students' success in their education.

New Focus to Help Students

As schools faced the first year back to in-person learning, many challenges arose such as the social and emotional health of vulnerable students. Working towards rebuilding student-teacher relationships and giving the students a safe space to socialize (Allen, 2021). One of the biggest concerns is supporting students with disabilities. The National Education Association

recommended that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act should be fully funded and provide additional support for students with disabilities to enable them to make appropriate progress (Allen, 2021).

Another suggestion is to increase interactive, intensified one-on-one instruction so that students fully understand the materials. This can be done by increasing tutoring support, whether virtual or in person, providing structured programming and resources for parents and caregivers of young children because their involvement is vital to their child's education outside of school (Allen, 2021).

Strength-based learning is one idea of how to help bring students up to speed. The idea is a learner-centered approach that helps students identify, articulate and apply their individual skills to the students learning needs (Paterson, 2022). Students are more likely to succeed if the focus is on building the skills they already possess, rather than focusing on the skills they are lacking (Paterson, 2022). According to Jamie Lipp, an Ohio State University professor, teachers can improve student strengths through "If-Then" models. For example, when a teacher identifies a strength, it becomes the "if" portion of the model while the "then" part is the new learning that can be used to build on the current strengths (Paterson, 2022).

Methodology

A focus group of 8 teachers from a high school in the Northern Neck of Virginia took part in a focus group as questions (see Appendix A) were asked based on their experience in their classroom prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic 2020-21, and the year 2021-22. The School administration of the selected school indicated that once UMW (University of Mary Washington) IRB approval was obtained, I could proceed with the research.

The instructors of the school were asked to take part in this focus group via an email sent to the entire staff of the high school. Requirements for participants are that they taught before and during the pandemic to have a better understanding of the changes that have occurred firsthand. The goal was to have 1-2 teachers per department (social studies, science, math, English, and fine arts) to collect data from all areas of study and how they were affected. Data were analyzed based on the public records of the schools' pass/fail rate of courses from the years 2018-19 through 2021-22 along with the SOL test scores from 2018-19 in comparison to 2021-22.

There were no restrictions based on gender or race for this research. Those interested in taking part received a printed consent form of agreement. Once all forms were signed and returned, the group met in a private room to discuss the questions at hand. These questions were given during a scheduled panel discussion that occurred with the focus group to further collaborate and ask follow-up questions based on the answers given.

Theoretical Framework

This researcher began her teaching career as an art teacher in January 2020. Looking forward to inspiring the young artistic minds at the secondary level, there was pandemonium in early 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began, and everything came to a crashing halt two months later.

The education system struggles to help meet all students' needs as the education system has found over the years dating as far back as 1965 (House of Congress, 2001). The government has worked to implement ways to help improve the system over the years, such as ESSA and NCLB. Students have still struggled throughout the years in having all their needs met within the

education system. Now that society has been hit with a difficult challenge from a pandemic, the prior plans are struggling to work, and the education system needs a new plan to meet the needs of all students. Evaluating data collected that contains facts about how COVID-19 affected schools and sharing innovative ideas on how to implement new lessons to better assist students will be the focus of this study.

Participants and Setting

A focus group of teachers was conducted to collect data for this research. This data was obtained from a rural high school in the Central Virginia area. Data collected from the group was compared to the testing data found on the VDOE website. The focus group participants discussed each question and were given follow-up questions based on the answers given.

Procedures and Research Approach

To ensure confidentiality, all places and participants were given pseudonyms. The materials and transcriptions are kept in a secure location until the research presentation is finished. This research project is required for degree completion, and findings may be disseminated. However, only pseudonyms will be used in the publication. A statement was made asking all participants to refrain from using their real names and to keep all comments confidential.

There was minimal to minimal risk for the participants involved. Possible risks may include disagreements during the session with the focus group based on answers given by each teacher, or possible fear of retribution if a participant says something that offends another participant. The researchers did their best to create a positive atmosphere where the participants would feel comfortable sharing their information without judgment of their teaching ethics and

the successes of their classrooms. He/ She gave personal examples and reiterated that whatever they say will not be held against them and will be kept confidential. All identifying information has been removed; places and names will be pseudonyms to protect all participants' identities. Participants avoided the use of students' names to reduce the risk of the students' and families' information being shared without their consent. All discussions of the research and questions must remain confidential and not be shared outside of the focus group. The focus group was conducted in person through one chosen school. Sample questions are provided in Appendix A for the focus group.

Data Collection

Information and data were collected by asking a series of questions from teachers on how the pandemic set students back. Data was collected from teachers in the high school grade level. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to conduct the focus group for the use of the research for UMW while the school did not require a separate IRB approval.

The information collected from the group was documented, coded, and compared to research collected from state websites that contain the test score data. The combination of data collected between online research and the focus group was used to answer the research questions at hand. Research is based on past data prior to the pandemic, data collected during the pandemic, and what little information is available from the first year back in person (2021-2022).

Data Analysis

The VDOE (Virginia Department of Education) was used as a resource for evaluating student test scores, absenteeism, and dropout rates. This information was used as a statistic to support the data received from the qualitative information from the focus group to see if students

fell further behind than they were prior to COVID. In addition, the focus group highlighted the strategies that teachers are currently using to meet the accountability required by the ESSA. The data collected from teachers helped schools and students get back on track for goals within their education by providing information on what successful or unsuccessful strategies have worked for teachers over the last couple of years.

Findings

In the focus group discussion, there was a unanimous agreement that students had a better understanding and comprehension of lessons prior to the pandemic. This statement is supported by the evidence of the schools' test scores during the year 2018-19. Teachers were able to have better communication and connections with their students before the schools closed.

During 2020-21, it was challenging for many of the teachers to properly observe if students could comprehend the information due to other factors such as home life, type of student, motivation, and initiative. The lack of testing for the year seemed to cause a lack of motivation as one science teacher said in their observation. A math teacher said that it was challenging to help them comprehend since there was no way to see what they were capable of during COVID. Much of what teachers do is based on face-to-face with students and being able to view their work firsthand. Attempting to do that on a computer screen created a barrier. However, the challenges seen in math often stem as far back as elementary school. This didn't seem to be caused by COVID since math is a building block process.

During the virtual learning of the school year 2020-21, many teachers were challenged not only by student comprehension declining but also by the lack of social-emotional connections. Many teachers observed that their students stopped communicating, turning on

cameras, or even showing up to class. Some issues were due to the number of children in a household using one hotspot.

Upon the full return in the year 2021-22, students still struggled to find the motivation to do the work and showed challenging behavior problems in the class that seemed to stem from a lack of structure during virtual learning. The lack of social interactions leads to an awkward room for students who didn't want to interact. One teacher expressed that the students' maturity levels were extremely low, and they had to deal with middle school type of behavior problems. This is a repercussion of not going through the lockdown institutional structure of middle school. Those that were often in trouble prior to COVID are just finding other reasons they don't have to be in school. There is an increase in the pushback of structure and refusal to work. The students seem to struggle with time management, deadlines, organizational skills, and prioritization. All of these are part of the teachers' lecture and classroom management challenges. The focus group discussed how to implement methods that are often used in lower schools to maintain better classroom management.

Conclusion

Results in researching the impact of COVID-19 on central Virginia schools show that schools need to implement some changes to better meet students' needs. With the statistics from the VDOE showing the decrease in students' pass rates and the lack of means for students during the 2020-2021 academic year, there is a need for creating a new method to provide latest information to students (VDOE, 2022). Through research, evidence shows that in-person learning is vital to helping students' growth in supporting their social-emotional aspects along with their comprehension of information from lessons. The data collected did not give evidence

of the teachers' methods of how we can help students overall but rather the increase of social-emotional and behavioral struggles stemming from a lack of maturity in many.

Discussion

In reviewing the research and findings from the focus group, our students are struggling to succeed. While these findings are clear, the understanding of how to help students get back on track is still a question that ultimately is dependent on each student individually, each subject being taught, and each student-teacher relationship. A key factor is the lack of motivation and accountability the focus group sees within their school. This may be different for other schools, and the data could be better evaluated by contacting other school districts with a more direct approach to the questions.

Appendix A:

Questions that will be asked with follow up questions based on answers of the focus group. The following questions are based on teachers' experiences prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic, and post- pandemic. The information provided should not include your name or the names of anyone else in your answers to the questions.

1. Were students able to comprehend your lessons well prior to the pandemic in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020?
2. Were students able to comprehend your lessons during the pandemic in virtual school 2020- 2021?
3. Were students able to comprehend your lessons during the year 2021-2022?
4. How have your student pass/fail rates changed from the year 2018-19 into this last year, 2021-2022, if at all?
5. What are some contributing factors to those changes if you had any?
6. What sort of setbacks did you struggle with in the year 2021/2022?
7. Did students struggle with social/emotional connections when returning to the building in 2021/2022? If so, how and in what ways did they struggle?
8. How were the social/emotional aspects of the students prior to the pandemic in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020?
9. Did your student attendance have a significant impact on the learning/ comprehension of the subject in 2021-2022?

10. In your opinion, was the attendance issue in 2021-2022, due to quarantines or due to students lack social connections within the school? Please explain your reasoning.

11. How were you able to reconnect with your students when you returned to the building in 2021 for hybrid teaching and in 2021-2022 when the school fully reopened?

Appendix B:

Initial email request to all staff will be as follows:

“Good morning,

I am completing my research thesis as a master's student at the University of Mary Washington. I need some teachers who are willing to participate in a focus group to answer some questions. I need one or two teachers from the following departments: English, Science, Math, History, and Fine Arts. The focus group will meet for approximately 30 minutes to an hour.

If you are willing to participate, please message me separately and we can discuss the consent form needed along with a time that works for the entire group.

I greatly appreciate your time!”

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