

*Original Paper*

# Flexibility & Grace: Lessons Learned in K-12 during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## ***Abstract***

*The start of the school year 2020 was a tumultuous time for stakeholders. Parents had to make accommodations for school programs. Teachers and students on the frontlines had to make mental and physical adjustments to in-person and online learning. No matter how one looks at it, post Covid-19 school will never be the same. This article takes a deep dive into why schools that had to adjust learners will be in a more situated space to ensure learning occurs in a manner consistent with schools that provide high-quality instruction for students and families.*

## ***Keywords***

*pandemic learning, Covid-19, hybrid instruction, online learning*

## **Introduction**

In the early months of 2020, a cataclysmic virus unleashed itself on our country. Covid-19 has since been the cause of over 200,000 deaths to date. The Covid-19 pandemic has ruptured financial institutions and American businesses to their very core. Such destruction to our financial markets reminded us briefly of the Great Depression of the 1920s. American schools did not escape the onslaught. According to Bhamani et al. (2020), most governments worldwide temporarily suspended schools until there was a better command over how to contain and defend against Covid-19. In New York State, schools were closed in mid-March and remained closed until early September. Each school had to submit a learning plan that required approval by the New York State Education Department, allowing schools to transition into the 2020-2021 school year.

## Literature Review

Teaching during covid-19 may prove to be a challenge. Teaching during regular times pre-Covid-19 has proven to be difficult for many teachers; adding a pandemic to the plate will highlight existing deficiencies. Adjusting to a new routine will take an adjustment period for educators. Haverback (2020) posits we ask teachers to make adjustments on the fly for conditions that they are untrained to handle.

Given the sudden need for adjustments and flexibility from teachers, quality instruction could diminish due to a lack of proper training. Henceforth, “Enhancing and transforming teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs may help to guide teachers through this difficult time” (Haverback, 2020, p. 2). Quite naturally, in order for our teachers to continue to provide quality instruction to students during pandemic learning, school systems, and building leaders will have to provide professional development and coaching to assist educators on how to navigate.

On the other hand, Covid-19 was supposed to cause a reset at how we viewed school. Many things that were mundane and taken for granted were now put squarely in our faces.

The connections of being in-person. The ability for students and teachers to build their bond, a bond that directly impacts student achievement, is critical. In Notes from the Field, an article written to capture the impact of covid-19 on teachers, Nagle (2020) perfectly depicts the first couple of weeks surviving as an educator during the Covid-19 pandemic. The article captures the initial enthusiasm of online learning while also stating how this quickly waned as teachers began to miss their students. Teachers are resilient beings; they make adjustments on the fly. One does not doubt that with a few adjustments, teachers will give quality instruction to students.

The students are essential to the learning environment of schools. Pandemic or not, educators are tasked with providing rigorous learning opportunities for students to thrive. Our student expectations are to make transitions on the fly in order to help facilitate their learning. Such transitions rarely account for proper ways to administer services deemed necessary for the child’s learning, i.e., IEP accommodations and other anticipatory measures put in place to ensure the most vulnerable students receive adequate education during the pandemic. Schaefer et al. (2020) espouse how difficult it can be to educate students in non-pandemic times; now, stakeholders provide instruction to students without factoring in economic stress, health, and socio-emotional well-being. While we know our kids to be resilient, to not account for their mental well-being becomes a vast ask for students and families. Many schools have proven an inability to deal with such a tall order.

Moreover, it is counterintuitive to want to highlight the breakthroughs of pandemic learning. One such breakthrough is relationship strengthening between students and parents. Family engagement is bound to increase, as parents now have to play a more active role in educating the minds of their children. Bhamani et al. (2020) posit that when parents and their children engage in collaborative efforts that facilitate learning, bonding between parent and child increases exponentially, allowing for the accounted time to have a more significant impact facilitating relationship building. The article goes on

to theorize that online schooling could be a catalyst to improve bonds between families.

One downside among many that need capturing in scholarship is the internet dependency for online learning and hybrid learning platforms. Internet access also highlights the inequities that exist in schools. Whereas socio-economically disadvantaged students sometimes do not have access to a stable internet, nor do they have access to devices. Schools that did not invest in their infrastructure by purchasing devices that students can take home and learn may run into obstacles.

Not to mention rural access to Wi-Fi services may also be problematic for schools. Romero-Ivanova et al. (2020) states, “The internet, while it has never been completely reliable or dependable, was found to be even more problematic during this crisis period, and globally students who lived in rural areas, ones who lived in areas that did not have adequate Wi-Fi, or students who could not afford access were often marginalized because of these issues” (Romero-Ivanova, 2020, p. 83).

### **Participants**

The researcher is a school superintendent uniquely situated in a charter school district that serves students and families from grades K-9.

The school has over 700 students located on Long Island. The demographics of the school are 78% Hispanic, 20% African American, and 12% White. The researcher tasked the school’s principal with creating and sharing a Likert-styled survey to obtain feedback related to questions and concerns exhibited by the school’s teachers. The purpose of obtaining the feedback was to help the school leadership team adequately prepare the learning environment while helping to mitigate teacher concerns identified from the survey. The researcher thoroughly explained the purpose of the survey and the usage of the survey data. All teachers that participated in the survey are certified by the New York State Education Department (NYSED).

### **Apparatus and Materials**

The researcher explained that participation in the survey was voluntary. Teachers could opt out of taking the survey with no judgment or recourse. The teacher demographics of the survey participants are 83% White, 15% African American 2% Asian. Sixty out of sixty teachers provided with the link responded to the Likert Survey. The Likert survey was composed of several questions, with responses ranging from 1-5, 1 representing strong disagreement, and 5 representing strong agreement. The survey was created using google forms, which also collects and analyzes the data as well. There was also space providing to teachers to leave additional thoughts and concerns that may not have been captured in the survey.

## **Procedure**

The survey tool selected for this study was a Likert Survey instrument. The questions in the survey encompassed how teachers felt about returning to live in-person instructions and procedures that would need to be put in place for teachers to feel comfortable delivering live instruction to students. The survey link was sent to teachers via our online google platform, the teacher's first initial and last name, followed by Rcsli.org. The link to the survey was sent to all of the teachers simultaneously.

## **Discussion**

During this time of utter chaos and uncertainty, it was important for school leaders to hear the voices of the teachers on the front lines. We knew there would be some reluctance to teachers returning face to face to teach students. Rather than force teachers back into buildings, we thought the best approach would be to allow teachers to participate in determining the likelihood of returning into school safely.

One of our immediate goals was to commit to being overly transparent with our school community. Conversations that may have previously been on a need-to-know basis were now opened up for feedback and criticism. It was vital that we also set realistic expectations for staff and instructors. We also made sure to ask students and staff to be flexible, given pandemic learning was uncharted territory (Ross & DeSalvo, 2020).

As a parent and a school leader, one was immediately able to identify the weaknesses presented by our online learning program. Unlike many other schools, we anticipated the need to invest in our infrastructure. We had already transitioned to one-to-one devices for students. The problem we uncovered was not a groundbreaking one. However, we were able to ascertain that in-person learning was more impactful than our more than robust attempt to educate students online (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020).

We watched many other districts make decisions as top-down directives, and we wanted to ensure that we approached the situation differently. Teachers had just as much of a right to express their concerns as anyone else involved in pandemic learning. By listening to our teachers, we were able to quell many of their concerns. Having teachers eager to return to a safe building got us to our ultimate goal: to return safely to face-to-face learning.

## **Hypothesis**

The hypothesis for the study was if teachers were provided with protective gear (PPE), they would be okay with returning to work to provide live instruction.

## **Results**

Out of the surveyed staff, 65% of staff members were okay with returning to face-to-face instruction. 35% of staff members expressed concerns with returning to work. Compared to some of the data

released from the three largest school districts in the United States, our teacher's willingness to return to face-to-face instruction outperformed those districts. Teachers that fell into the category of willing to return to work also requested enhanced cleaning protocols, social distancing, and consistent health screenings. The teachers also insisted that we follow the advice of the Center for Disease Control.

### **Study Limitations**

The limitations of the study are finite in that the study is being conducted during a pandemic. There are underlying factors such as mental health and well-being that the study does not take into account. Another limitation is that the researcher could not extrapolate additional data sources, i.e., interviews, due to pandemic concerns. Lastly, opening the study up to include additional schools would have been beneficial to the results and claims of the study.

### **Further Research**

The Covid-19 Global pandemic caught many by surprise. It is safe to say that most Americans were unprepared to adjust to the ramifications presented by Covid-19 properly. If history has served us correctly, we know that there will be future pandemics. The hope is that this research will help in preparing for future pandemics. Education in the United States is central to everything. With our country coming to a screeching halt, while teaching and learning become proportional compared to where it has always been, we know there is still much work to do in K-12 education. Using lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic will serve us well in how we address our need to be prepared for future emergencies.

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