The Pandemic Equalizes: Everyone is a Learner

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ABSTRACT

A teacher educator asks her graduate students to reflect upon their experiences during the pandemic shut down in the spring of 2020 and makes comparisons between her own children's experiences. Thinking about these experiences, she makes suggestions for everyone working with children in these uncertain times and thinks about how her instruction will change in the future as a result of these challenging times.

*Keywords***:** COVID-19, empathy, flexibility, relationships, technology

Life Flipped Upside Down

Seven years ago, my husband and I spent 21 days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) with our twin boys. The supportive nurses helped us feed, change, and take the temperature of our boys every 3 hours - we had never been so structured! When we arrived home, we immediately looked at each other and asked "what do we do with them now?" I often compare this experience to being a new teacher. You take courses, observe veteran teachers, and student teach with a mentoring teacher who's able to make suggestions in real-time. Then as a new teacher, the safety net disappears. There are still, of course, administrators and colleagues there to provide support, but in that room, it's just you and 25 pairs of eyes watching your every move. Every teacher vividly remembers their first year of teaching.

In March of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic closed all schools in CT and in a sense, we all became new teachers again. Veteran and new teachers alike, had to learn how to teach children from age 3 to adults in a solely online environment. Virtual meetings, asynchronous/synchronous, and learning platforms, became common vernacular. As an assistant professor at Sacred Heart University in the Teacher Education department, I wondered about the

parallels between my 1ˢᵗ grade sons' experiences during virtual learning and my students earning their Master's or Sixth Year Degree in Education. I also began to think about the design of my courses. How would my instruction of new teachers/future administrators change as a result of what we experienced in the Spring of 2020?

Common Experiences Across Students of all Ages
To examine the relationships between the experiences of my children and my students, I asked a group of graduate students to share how they felt during this time and to describe any challenges they endured. I received reflections from pre-service candidates and teachers taking course work for their Masters or 6th Year Degrees; some were also parents with young children or teenagers at home. When reading through their reflections, some common themes emerged.

- Everyone woke up each day with a certain level of uncertainty. We all had different decisions to make in the morning: should I answer emails, begin my homework for this week's online session, or should I play with my cars or stuffed animals first? Life lacked the structure we were used to. In addition, some things we had taken for granted were gone. As one of my former students shared, "The novel coronavirus laid bare the fragility of control I claimed to have over my life."

- Technology became part of everyone's second language, and we were adding terms and skills related to meeting in virtual spaces daily. My children had never heard of Google Classroom or Zoom before COVID-19 but now when they see me on a virtual meeting, they instantly ask if I'm the host. Technology at times frustrated all groups of students - little fingers trying to maneuver a mousepad, graduate students being randomly "kicked off" a virtual class session, documents not saving and uploading properly. As one student shared about her own children's experience, "Zoom calls were a mess... One teacher had construction going on in her home and she could barely hear the students and kept asking them to repeat themselves."

- Some of my students described feelings of isolation during this time. They found their children or their students missing social interactions, and virtual meetings were not a sufficient substitute. My own children, however, didn't seem to suffer

from these feelings. Having a twin brother meant having their best friend always with them which left feelings of isolation non-existent.

Moving Forward in Uncertain Times

As the pandemic continues, administration of schools at all levels continue to make consequential decisions about when to re-open the physical and virtual school spaces. Whether school districts are online, hybrid, or in-person, hopefully we can continue to approach the ever-changing situations knowing:

- Flexibility is difficult but necessary. Some students may decide to remain remote, even if schools are open. Students may log into class late because they're having technical difficulties. Certain content that may have always been taught in the first month of school may need to be adjusted. No one has any prior experience with school closures due to a pandemic, so flexibility is needed as everyone learns together.

- Always begin with empathy because we never know how other people are experiencing the current situation. Decety and Lamm (2006) define empathy as "the ability to experience and understand what others feel without confusion between oneself and others (p. 1146)." We are all experiencing the current situation differently and we can't allow ourselves to think that our experiences mimic others.

- When making decisions about how to best support students during online learning, focus on the children who may be having the hardest time emotionally, not the children who continue to thrive. Although my own children may not be feeling isolated, many are, so focusing on relationships and social and emotional learning is critical.

Implications for my Own Teaching

After thinking about everyone's various experiences, I began to think about my courses and how prepared my students are for teaching in both environments - in-person and virtual. In the past, I typically spent one class period discussing implications for technology in the classroom; in addition to the one Educational Technology course offered in our program. My instruction had focused on using technology to adopt flipped classroom techniques, assuming that some instruction would always be in-person. Before 2020, I had never considered that fully online instruction would be a

necessity in K-12 education. Subsequently, I felt like a new teacher again having to quickly learn, adopt, and model the ways we can use technology to create meaningful learning experiences for students in the virtual environment- both for my own students and the students they will teach.

However, more important than the specific technology tools we select is the focus on building relationships. Thankfully, the old adage "As a new teacher, don't smile until Christmas" is no longer taught. Relationship building has always been a large focus of all my courses and now I found it rose to the top as just as important, or perhaps even more, than it was prior to the pandemic. Students of any age needed to feel connected to their instructors, particularly when we feel isolated, are separated by distance and can't connect in the face-to-face ways we took for granted. Building relationships may be more challenging in online environments but with creativity, empathy, and a caring attitude, we can find ways so that students of any age can feel included and supported.

I don't believe that anyone will look back on our time during the coronavirus and say, "well, that was easy." But as one of my students said, "...despite my self-defeating messages and self-talk, I still survived." And that survival is something to not take lightly. For many of us, we survived as a result of the collaboration, the virtual-all-hands-on-deck, and the relationships that support us as parents, teachers, and students of life. It's amazing the changes that can come out of necessity. I'm hopeful that this learning experience has positioned us to be better life-long learners, and that we'll forever think more flexibly and empathetically regarding communication and developing relationships as we move in the future.

References

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Dr. Jennifer Phaiah is an Assistant Clinical Professor at Sacred Heart University, teaching courses in the teacher preparation and educational leadership programs. Her teaching and scholarship currently focuses on how to develop a practice-based approach to support the learning of teachers and teacher leaders.