

Exploring Teachers' Experiences with Blended Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights for Teacher Preparation

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges and adaptations educators faced during the shift to blended learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering insights to improve teacher preparation for future disruptions. It employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analyze teachers' experiences at a Southeastern U.S. private high school, identifying five key themes: frustration with virtual instruction, reliance on reflective practices, low student motivation, increased absenteeism, and "new teacher challenges." The findings highlight the value of annual teacher preparatory training to enhance resilience and instructional effectiveness in post-pandemic education.

Keywords: Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis, Remote Emergency Teaching, Blended Learning, Qualitative Research Methodology, COVID Induced Learning Environment

Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down 90% of schools worldwide (UNESCO, 2020a). This unprecedented disruption derailed conventional teaching and learning operations and posed a serious threat to the achievement of UNESCO's (2020b) Sustainable Development Goal 4 which promotes free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Teachers around the world had no choice but to convert face-to-face classes to distance learning, often with short notice. This proved to be a daunting task for teachers who had designed their courses for in-person instruction (Petzold, 2020). Numerous guidelines were released for teachers in their adoption of effective online distance learning practices (e.g., Commonwealth of Learning, 2020; UNESCO, 2020c). These guidelines however required different approaches to planning and designing than those required by conventional face-to-face teaching.

As the transition to the online environment took place with unprecedented speed, teachers were left unprepared for this crisis situation due in large part to not having adequate distance education support and training. Schools simply were not ready to support faculty with immediate responses and resources. The classroom practices devised and carried out during this period were referred to as "remote emergency teaching" in contrast

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with the term “distance education,” a term denoting the implementation of the full advantages, affordances, and possibilities of an online teaching format (Hodges et al., 2020).

In the last few years, research and publications on COVID related teaching and learning have proliferated with numerous special issues of professional journals appearing on the topic. Some researchers have summarized the trends in online distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Mishra et al. (2021) critically analyzed the publications using a range of scientometric techniques. They found that most of the studies (43.64%) used quantitative methods, followed by qualitative methods (13.33%), and mixed methods (9.09%) (Mishra et al., 2020). Despite Bond (2020) focusing her research on the K-12 environments, there were overlapping themes within both Mishra et al. and Bond’s studies. Both studies found that researchers predominantly focused on the general challenges faced in teaching and learning as a result of the pandemic. Other intersecting issues included the impact of COVID on student learning, teacher capacities, educational technologies for engagement, psychological issues, institutional infrastructure, assessment, and students’ psychological issues. While these studies and others (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020d) documented that COVID-19 had a substantial impact on K-12 education, there is a significant need for more research on K-12 teaching and learning.

Looking deeper into research done on the COVID-impacted learning environment, analysis of 330 peer-reviewed journal articles revealed that 67.88% covered postsecondary education during the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by those covering education and training in general (14.24%), K-12 (10.3%), and workplace and lifelong learning (7.58%) (Mishra, et al., 2021). Of the papers, 33.94% published during this period had no research method, indicating that they may be reflective of opinion-based papers (Mishra et al., 2021). Remote teaching, the assessment of distance learning, emergency online teaching, virtual learning environments, and student readiness have also been popular research topics. COVID-19 had a significant impact on research on online distance learning, and these studies covered a range of issues, focusing on teachers, institutions, students, and technology solutions, predominantly in higher education. Bond’s (2020) systematic review of articles published on schools and emergency remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that studies were “heavily focused on the impact of lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and learning, but particularly on the challenges experienced by teachers as a result of switching to online forms of teaching and learning” (p. 204).

By far, the majority of research during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on postsecondary educators. However, COVID-19 has also had a substantial impact on K-12 education (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020d) and there is a significant need for more research attention on K-12 teaching and learning (Myshira, et. al, 2020). Research in the context of K-12 education is limited perhaps because researchers, mostly professors in higher education, have tended to focus on their immediate contexts. It is important to look more at K-12 education and conduct more research on the impact of emergency remote teaching on students as well as on teachers. While only a few studies to date have focused on K-12 teachers’ experiences during the pandemic, most of those studies were conducted in foreign countries like Turkey, Finland, and Malaysia (Mishra et al., 2021). In addition, no research currently exists that focuses on K-12 teachers’ experiences in the private school setting. This dearth of research on the impact of COVID 19 on K-12, private school teachers has prompted our study.

Purpose

This study examined teachers' experiences with blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to uncover insights that can inform effective teacher preparation. It focused on understanding how these experiences impacted their teaching practices and identifying strategies to better equip educators for future challenges in blended or disrupted learning environments. Blended learning is a form of hybrid learning that is used to increase engagement and rigor in the classroom (Beatty, 2019). This type of learning shifts the use of class time from the traditional model which consists of direct instruction techniques being provided in the classroom and independent practice often being assigned as homework or work to be completed after lecture/notes have concluded, to a more interactive use of students' time focused on the development of higher order thinking skills and student-centered learning experiences. In order for this shift to be effective, research states teachers need support and education with regards to behavior management, effective teaching strategies, the development of intentional content, and technological tools to support this shift (Flipped Learning Network, 2014).

As such, the purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of teachers and administrators as they navigate the new COVID-induced, blended teaching method. While considerable focus has been given to teacher experiences during COVID in public and in postsecondary schools, this study is unique in that it seeks to highlight teacher experiences in a private, secondary school setting during the pandemic. This study will investigate the pedagogical meanings that teachers derived from their transitional teaching experiences during the challenging COVID context where disruptions to instruction times are frequently occurring, attendance was less dependable, and where both placed a greater emphasis on ensuring quality face-to-face instruction. This topic was explored by asking the following research question: What were the experiences of K-12, private school teachers who underwent the blended learning transition as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

This study was carried out using a qualitative research methodology. Specifically, this study used a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the lifeworld of teachers and administrators as they worked to transform their teaching practices during the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Hermeneutic Phenomenology was chosen because it seeks to understand "what it means to live experientially in a given situation" (Dibley et al., 2020, p. 1). In this way, hermeneutic phenomenology is an ideal methodology due to its ability to capture the interpretations and the meanings participants ascribed to their experience of switching from face to face to blended instruction during the pandemic.

Participants and Setting

This study involved the faculty employed at a private, all-male Catholic high school in the Southeastern region of the U.S. who implemented blended learning in their classrooms during the COVID 19 pandemic. Established in 1902, the school serves approximately 400 students in grades 9–12, upholding Catholic traditions and military discipline. Its mission centers on academic excellence, leadership development, and character formation through

a combination of college-preparatory coursework and structured military training. The school curriculum focuses on STEM, humanities, religious education, and leadership training through its Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program. Access to technology played a critical role in the school's ability to transition to blended learning. Prior to the pandemic, the school had a well-established technological infrastructure, including individual student access to digital devices, a learning management system (LMS), and designated computer labs. During the pandemic, additional resources were allocated to support online instruction, which have ensured that faculty had access to virtual learning platforms, digital assessment tools, and synchronous video conferencing capabilities.

The principal at the school began providing teachers with professional development sessions centered around the use of the blended learning instructional strategy and has been gauging their use of this approach since the Summer 2020. Initially, school administrators decided to make a transition from the face-to-face teaching to asynchronous online distance education for a semester, but they changed their teaching modality to blended learning bringing half of the students to face-to-face sessions and the other half to synchronous online learning sessions in order to adhere to the social distancing practice of being 6 feet away from each other in the classroom.

Teachers were recruited for the study via email addresses given to the researchers by the principal. Of the five teachers who were contacted about participating in the study, three responded. All three participants in this study were white, female teachers at the school. One had 14 years of experience teaching Spanish at the school. Another participant taught English for 15 years in college but had no experience teaching at the high school level previous to this year. The third participant taught chemistry. Although she had been a substitute teacher before the pandemic, she was hired as a full time teacher during the COVID 19 outbreak.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection method for this study was phenomenological interviews. The goal of phenomenological interviews is to "generate detailed in-depth descriptions of human experiences" (Roulston, 2010, p. 16). Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to an hour and they all took place in a conference room at the school. Questions were designed to explore teachers' instructional adjustments, perceptions of student engagement, and the challenges they faced during the transition to blended learning. A semi-structured format was used, incorporating open-ended lead questions with follow-up prompts to encourage deeper reflection. Sample interview questions included:

Lead Question: Can you describe the teaching strategies you used before COVID?

- Follow-Up Question: After the onset of COVID, how did your teaching strategies change?

Lead Question: How would you describe your experience with blended learning?

- Follow-Up Questions:
 1. Can you give an example of a time when using blended learning was particularly difficult?
 2. Can you describe a moment when blended learning felt successful or rewarding?

One of the researchers attended the interviews in person while the other attended via Zoom. Both the audio and video of the interviews were captured and transcribed using verbatim transcription. Data analysis for this project was carried out using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 qualitative data analysis software.

In the interest of methodological alignment, analysis of the interview transcripts for this study used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach by Smith and Nizza (2022). In IPA, analysis is carried out in order to “understand people’s lived experience and how they make sense of it in the context of their personal and social worlds” (p. 3). An IPA analysis is conducted in four steps. First, there is an exhaustive reading of the transcript while documenting exploratory notes (first impressions) that come to mind while reading. In the second step, the generation of a series of rich, descriptive, experiential statements is derived from the explanatory notes compiled in the previous phase. These statements should be succinct but also capture the meaning of the experience to the participant. The third step involves grouping these experiential statements together based on similarity. The guiding question in this process is “what goes with what?” In the last step, each cluster of similar experiential statements are then examined to determine a name/phrase for the cluster that adequately depicts the characteristic or idea conveyed by each individual cluster. The name given to each cluster of experiential statements is taken to be a theme derived from the analysis.

Findings

Analyses of the interview transcripts resulted in five themes derived from participant responses. There was a remarkable degree of overlap between participants as they detailed their experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them. The five themes that cut across all participant interviews were (1) Frustration with Virtual Modes of Teaching (2) Relying on Reflective Pedagogical Practices (3) Dealing with Low Student Motivation and Performance (4) Increased Absenteeism due to Relaxed Policies and (5) New Teacher Challenges. Below we present a more detailed discussion of each of the themes.

Theme 1: Frustration with Virtual Modes of Teaching

One of the strongest themes derived from the analysis was the frustration felt by teachers experiencing the shift from face-to-face teaching to virtual learning. Much of the frustration was due to the decision to switch first to virtual learning for all students, followed by a switch to splitting the school in half and having half of the students attend virtually on one set of days while the other half of students attended virtually on another set of days. The confusion surrounding groupings and class days was experienced by teachers and students alike and having to navigate the technological aspects of the new virtual environment often made matters worse. This confusion was exacerbated by the technological difficulties experienced during the switch to virtual learning.

These difficulties included class management issues such as an inability to engage with (physically see) all students as well as the overall difficulty of assessing student learning and understanding. These challenges were exemplified by comments from participants like, “But unless you actually see the work that they’re doing, you can’t really assess how They’re doing...That was super difficult”. While participants felt that school administrators did in fact

provide resources for them to make the transition to online learning, participants also felt more could've been done to provide training and support on the technological and virtual tools provided to teachers.

Theme 2: Relying on Reflective Pedagogical Practices

In an effort to continue teaching after the abrupt interruption of instruction caused by COVID, teachers found themselves engaging in varied and creative strategies while teaching in the online environment. Early on, much of these strategies came through experimentation and trial and error. As expressed by one participant, "I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel like I was grasping at straws at the beginning to kind of figure out what works and what doesn't work." In an effort to connect with students and to continue fostering learning during the switch to the new hybrid model, teachers engaged in a number of pedagogical practices on the fly. Examples included repeating and actually returning to past lessons to assure comprehension, taking extra time to go over (review) past work, making frequent use of online tools to aid instruction, incorporating stories and everyday things that students use, and a deliberate management of lessons; not giving too much work to the students. These were all strategies teachers found to be most helpful to the students. Additionally, teachers found that observing what other teachers were doing in their classes not only served as a spark for their pedagogical ideas, it also relieved some of their stress by allowing them to see that others were struggling to adapt to the new teaching environment as well. One participant expressed,

I spent two weeks observing other teachers...I don't care how long you've been in the classroom. I don't care if you're a 30-year teacher or what, everybody is a first-year teacher this year. Nobody knows how to do this. Nobody.

Despite the shared experiences, teachers felt frustrated by being left to navigate these challenges alone, without adequate institutional support, relying solely on their own reflective pedagogies. One participant expressed this concern, stating, "I think they [administrators] should definitely offer support and training because this was something new that everyone had to handle unexpectedly."

Theme 3: Dealing with Low Student Motivation and Performance

Another salient theme was the lack of student motivation teachers experienced during the switch to hybrid learning. To be sure, difficulty with student engagement was witnessed across participants and with all students. Whether due to the sudden, dramatic shift in the learning environment, the onset of "senioritis", or both, participants did point to noticeably lower levels of motivation and engagement among upperclassmen. For our participants, lack of motivation and engagement manifested in various ways including students turning off cameras during class, not doing the required readings while at home, and doing a poor job of utilizing the online tools made available to them. Speaking on the lack of motivation, one participant was moved to say, "I feel like the kids lost a lot of motivation, because of COVID absences weren't counted so there wasn't the drive to just be here." This lack of student motivation described here by this participant as well as the others was directly linked to our fourth theme, the issue of absenteeism.

Theme 4: Increased Absenteeism due to Relaxed Policies

In response to COVID, schools found themselves routinely making drastic adjustments to classes, curriculums, and policies. Changes to the school's attendance policy was met with unintended consequences according to our participants. In an effort to accommodate and make less punitive the increased absences due to COVID transmissions, and due to the novelty and uncertainty involved in the rapid implementation of a novel hybrid learning program, the school decided to relax many of its policies related to absences. This decision resulted in the emergence of unintended consequences. This dilemma was adequately summed up by one participant when they reported that, "attendance...has been an issue now because they had to relax attendance policy...so now some kids will just miss because there's no negative consequence." The effort to aid students by relaxing the consequences of absence had in fact proved to be the main driver of absenteeism as students began to take advantage of the relaxed environment.

Theme 5: New Teacher Challenges

Given the personal characteristics and histories of our participants, it was no surprise that a relative unfamiliarity with teaching and pedagogy in general would surface as a theme. The fact that only one of our participants consistently taught at the high school level and had taught for an extended amount of time at this particular school was not indicative of the circumstances of the other participants which were summed up by one of them when they remarked, "It's been a really long time since...I was a...teacher." In each instance, the other two teachers' experiences didn't seem to transfer well.

One having been a college professor while the other had been a substitute high school teacher, the experience of transitioning into full time teaching at the high school level was itself a challenge for these participants. Fueling the difficulty in transitioning were personal issues as well. The feeling of not being technologically savvy hampered all of the participants. Having to switch to the highly technological method of virtual learning, learning how to physically use the virtual platforms, and determining the appropriate and effective online resources (tools, websites, programs, etc.) proved to be a stumbling block for participants. In short, the normal uncertainty and anxiety-ridden status of being a "new teacher" was heightened by the pandemic which in turn exacerbated their difficulties by having them rely on technical skills they felt they didn't possess.

Discussion

For participants in this study, the COVID induced switch from a face-to-face mode of instruction to a hybrid model proved to be both challenging and stressful. This was the experiential reality for both teachers and students. While teachers struggled to figure out how to teach as well as how to manage students in this new environment, students themselves wrestled with maintaining their motivation, attention, and commitment to learning. These findings were in alignment with teacher/student reactions to the COVID induced switch to online learning that has consistently been documented in the literature on public schools (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020d). Specifically, in

our study of the private school setting, the meanings made by teachers consistently revolved around feelings of frustration over the disruption to the learning process. While our study found that the interruption of face-to-face instruction had a pronounced impact on student motivation and increased absenteeism among the students, the greatest takeaway from our study revolves around the personal and technological experiences of the teachers.

The most significant challenge faced by our teacher participants was technological in nature. This is evident in the fact that three out of the five themes we derived from the data involved some technological aspect. Much of this difficulty involved having to learn, on the fly, how to teach in an online space (Zoom). Not being trained in or having experience with online pedagogy and having to carry out face-to-face instruction meant the experience of our private school teachers were fraught with anxiety and stress related not just to how to teach but also how to manage the class in this disconnected and impersonal virtual space. The experience of the online mode of instruction was made more difficult for teachers when it came to determining what online tools would best help them in their instructional practices, particularly for older teachers. This finding aligns with González et al. (2023), who found that teachers with low self-perceived digital skills struggled, particularly at the onset of emergency remote teaching. Similarly, teachers in this study expressed feelings of disorientation, especially older educators.

These technological challenges linked to the abrupt change of instructional modalities was exacerbated by what participants understood as personal deficiencies that hampered the transition. In short, our participants' experience of transitioning to an online teaching modality was made more difficult due to their lack of technological proficiency. Not being "technologically savvy" to begin with, moving to a technology driven classroom and needing to implement virtual instruction tools and resources proved to be another complicating factor in an already difficult transition. Additionally, for two of our participants, the lack of technological comfortability and expertise was also compounded by the fact that the onset of the COVID pandemic and the switch to online learning was also their first year as a full time high school teacher. For these reasons, private school teachers navigating the COVID induced, online mode of instruction interpreted their experiences as a frustrating endeavor where classroom learning was essentially disrupted and made worse by personal characteristics exhibited by both teachers and students alike.

Conclusion

In this study we sought to examine the lived experiences of private school teachers who underwent a switch from face-to-face learning to an emergency, online modality of instruction. Although much has been written on this phenomenon from the perspective of public school teachers, this study attempts to fill the lacuna of knowledge by foregrounding the experiences of private school teachers. In doing so, we found that private school teachers came to understand their experience of the new COVID induced learning environment in ways similar to their public-school counterparts. Of particular note was the focus on technological unpreparedness both from a school-wide perspective as well as from a personal, skills-based perspective.

Given the ubiquity of technological unpreparedness across public/private school settings and teachers, we suggest that consideration be given to the idea of yearly teacher preparatory training as discussed by Huck and Zhang (2021). In this way, rather than being

caught off guard by the next catastrophic disruption to society (and hence school), yearly technological training would equip teachers with the platforms, the know-how, and confidence to be able to switch to an online modality if the need would ever arise. In addition, this type of training would get teachers accustomed to the use of virtual tools that have indeed proved to be useful, engaging, and informative during the switch to online learning. This training could also encourage the assimilation of online tools, platforms, and resources into the face-to-face environment so as to lessen the abruptness of a future change from face-to-face to online learning should the need arise. We feel that this approach could be an insightful and proactive way of preparing teachers, of ensuring the continuity of the learning process, and of retooling the traditional modes of teaching in an effort to face the realities of educating students in the post-COVID educational environment.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is its small sample size, as it included only three participants. This limited number of voices makes it difficult to generalize the findings to a broader population of educators who navigated the transition to blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the study was conducted at a single private, all-male Catholic high school in the Southeastern United States. The unique characteristics of this institution, including its religious affiliation and structured military discipline, may not reflect the experiences of teachers in other educational settings, such as public schools or coeducational environments.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of diversity among the participants. All three teachers were white and female, which limits the range of perspectives included in the analysis. As a result, the study does not capture the experiences of male teachers, educators from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, or those with varying levels of teaching experience. Given that factors such as cultural background, professional experience, and personal teaching styles can shape how educators adapt to blended learning, the findings may not fully represent the broader teaching community. A more diverse participant pool would provide a richer understanding of the challenges and strategies employed by teachers in different contexts.

The study also focuses exclusively on the perspectives of teachers, without incorporating insights from students or administrators. While teachers provided valuable reflections on their instructional adaptations, a more comprehensive understanding of blended learning during the pandemic would require input from students, who directly experienced these instructional changes, and from school administrators, who made key decisions about policies and instructional support. These limitations suggest the need for further research that includes a more diverse sample, examines multiple educational contexts, and incorporates the perspectives of students and administrators. Future studies could also explore the long-term impact of blended learning on teacher preparedness and student engagement beyond the immediate disruptions of the pandemic.

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