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## Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Stories from Educators Around the World

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# Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Stories from Educators Around the World

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**Authors' Note:** We owe immense gratitude to the many educators around the world who lost the battle against COVID-19. We honor their memory and appreciate their valuable contributions to students.

## **Unexpected Circumstances**

As we approach the end of a year characterized by fear, uncertainty, pain, and anger due to a global health threat, the COVID-19 pandemic that for many of us began in March 2020, we reflect on the unexpected challenges and opportunities which educators around the world have experienced due to school closures, the necessity to turn to remote learning, or the alteration of schedules and strategies when teaching in person. Due to the highly contagious nature of the virus, many countries found it necessary to close schools for part of the school year to protect students, teachers, and family members from becoming ill and spreading the illness to others in their community.

Unfortunately, we realized that our health and daily routines are fragile, and that recovery from a global health pandemic requires an extraordinarily coordinated effort from health and government officials. In addition, we saw that communities where technological resources were unavailable to students and families faced serious challenges to maintain successful educational practices, and in some cases, educational opportunities were extremely limited or nonexistent. Since school calendars vary in different parts of the world, some students were unable to continue a school year which had just started in early 2020, while others were unable to successfully finish their school year after March 2020. Availability of technological devices for students and teachers, internet access, and teachers' and students' ability to navigate remote learning became determining factors in sustaining effective educational efforts during the pandemic.

Educators rose to meet the exceedingly difficult challenges which COVID-19 presented to educational systems. This required flexibility and creativity in both technology use and changes in teaching formats, which in many cases required both in person cohorts and remote learning depending on the number of positive cases in the school and community. Educators worked to develop supportive communities that motivated and encouraged students to continue learning in formats which were unfamiliar to both teachers and students. It was also necessary for educators to practice and demonstrate empathy for those students and families who lacked the resources to effectively use remote learning, and for families who experienced the devastating consequences of the virus in their own homes. Around the world, many educators found themselves in supportive working situations where they were able to access assistance to meet their students' educational needs; others had to function within systems that were not as well coordinated, and in general, lacked the resources to offer effective educational services to their students. Perhaps one of the most painful educational lessons that this pandemic has made clearly evident is the devastating educational inequity which exists within and between less and more economically developed countries. For example, while public schools were closed for the rest of the school year and were unable to offer remote learning in some less economically developed countries, students in these same countries who were able to afford private schools continued to receive either in

person or remote learning opportunities. Inequities were also obvious in more economically developed countries, where students in some school districts had adequate access to technological resources and connectivity at home, while others had difficulty accessing remote learning opportunities because of poor or no connectivity and lack of electronic devices.

Social and economic circumstances in different communities presented multiple challenges for families who depend on their children's school attendance to meet their employment responsibilities. While some families were employed in positions which allowed them to work from home and assist their children with their remote learning school tasks, other families had no other choice but to either adjust their work schedule or quit working while their children were at home because of remote learning. For many families, work and family responsibilities have collided at home creating stressful situations which have been difficult to resolve. These circumstances have resulted in negative financial consequences for many families due to not being able to send their children to school. As Hoffman and Miller (2020) explained, schools also provide important nonacademic services and supports to students, and prolonged school closures increase psychological and economic stresses to both children and their family members.

The following essays were written by teachers from different continents who were teaching when their schools closed for in-person learning in March of 2020. Through their experiences we learn how different school systems approached and managed the challenges imposed by the

pandemic, at least during the initial period of the crisis. These educators also share their personal reflections on their situations and their efforts to continue to help their students during the uncertain times that they were all facing.

### **Ying: COVID-19 - A Thai Teacher's Problem or a Challenge?**



There can be no doubt that the COVID-19 virus has affected everyone in every walk of life like no other in living memory. On returning to school after the extended term break, it seemed as though there was a mountain of problems facing the profession, every establishment and teacher. At first, along with every other teacher, I looked at this mountain of problems and saw it as almost insurmountable. So I decided upon a new approach. Rather than accept it as was, I resolved to break the mountain of problems down into a series of small challenges. Problems dishearten and demoralize, challenges inspire and character build.

I endeavored to transfer this approach to my students, but it was immediately apparent that they didn't see the situation in the same light as

myself and my colleagues. From the student angle, the main challenge was to instill in them the need to build their own self-discipline. Not all students have a parent at home watching over them all day. Many were alone during the teaching hours, so, "going to school" remotely required them to exercise a level of self-discipline that they were not perhaps used to. Convincing the students of the importance of adjusting, and then maintaining, their routine was, and remains, a challenge. It quickly became apparent which of my students easily became distracted from their online schedule, simply due to not having an authority figure watching over them. In an effort to combat this, I have increased my quiet, friendly one-to-one chats with students, using these chats as an opportunity to stress how damaging missing lessons can be to their education, grades, and their future.

My school, in some ways, was woefully ill-prepared for the challenges that we faced. Administratively, the personnel faced, and overcame, the hurdles in front of them, much to their credit. Practically, in the classroom, the story was very different. As soon as it became clear that it would be necessary to utilize the Internet to teach, the school, I feel, should have immediately commissioned an equipment audit in each classroom as to suitability and functionality. It would appear this was not done. The facilities vary from one classroom to another, as does their state of repair. I find myself bringing different equipment to the classroom to supplement missing or malfunctioning equipment in order to accommodate the remote learning aspect of the job. Of course this is no more than irritating, but

I feel that the school, for whatever reason, missed this vital aspect of the challenges we faced.

Lesson preparation has been a challenge that was comparatively easy to overcome, although it has increased my workload. I am now preparing lessons in two formats, remote and face-to-face. Documents, handouts, and Power Points need to be loaded onto the teaching platform in addition to preparing for their use in the classroom. I also have to give time to consider how I physically address students. It is easy to forget that there is no eye-to-eye contact with the remote students, so there is the necessity to clarify differently for the in-classroom and the home-school students.

The COVID-19 situation has forced each and every one of us along a new learning curve. I have learned to shed the traditional approach to teaching, what might in some ways have been blindly accepted as the old norm. My own thought processes have become broader and more flexible, in taking the “not a problem just another challenge” approach, I am evolving along with the teaching profession. However, I feel my school, in some ways, is still being reactive rather than proactive, which is hindering teachers in the classroom and online. Whether we ever return to the traditional norms of teaching, or not, I am better equipped as an individual and as a teacher to face the challenges ahead.

### **María Elena: Were Uruguayan Schools Ready to Fight the COVID-19 pandemic?**



One of the main issues discussed during this period has been whether the educational system of each country has been able to tackle the obstacles that appeared as a result of the pandemic. My experience in a small country named Uruguay, a country in South America located between Argentina and Brazil, and with beautiful coasts on the River Plate and the Atlantic Ocean, has been a great challenge, but I should say, it has also been an opportunity to reinforce the technological resources we have in our Public Education.

To begin with, it is important to highlight that in 2007, during the government of Tabaré Vázquez (Frente Amplio party), Plan Ceibal was created in our country. It started as a project which provides equal opportunities for students who attend public schools (free and compulsory education) in Uruguay. The main goals of the plan are to give access to free wi-fi connection in all public schools and to provide Primary and Secondary school students with a device (computer or tablet) to work with. Moreover, Plan Ceibal offers different

resources, such as the CREA platform, where students and teachers can upload and download any kind of material for their courses, and a virtual library with different textbooks that students could borrow in order to study and read for pleasure. There are many other resources too, some of them are projects related to subjects, such as English and Math, which motivate and encourage learning in a meaningful and memorable way. In addition, teachers have the possibility to be trained and take courses to continue with their teaching development.

The previous background is essential in order to illustrate the situation in my country. We, teachers, could identify what should be encouraged during this period of uncertainty. It is true that some teachers were not even conscious of the benefits that we have been given for many years and that the time had come to make the most of them. Some teachers and students had to jump into the technological world without knowing much about it and others, like me, who have been working with platforms and digital tools, had to maximize these resources and help others in order to succeed. Exactly the same thing happened to students; some of them knew how to work on CREA and others had to learn it from scratch. This is the reason why I consider this period a challenge, but I believe we started to value Plan Ceibal, which has been the pioneer project to implement “One laptop per child” and promote social equity by distributing technology and fostering the acquisition of knowledge.

A fundamental aspect that Uruguay has been working hard on since 2011 (during José Mujica’s government, Frente

Amplio party) in order to continue narrowing the social gap, is the expansion of the fiber optic network coverage in the whole country. It is a great accomplishment in telecommunications that has reached close to 100%. This has definitely made it possible to continue teaching and learning in a synchronous and/or asynchronous way. The fact that there is a stable connection at home meant that many students could work on CREA. Furthermore, many teachers chose to work on Zoom or Conference (an option of the CREA platform), which provided the space to ask questions and explain activities or a specific topic.

To sum up, I would like to say that Uruguay, my country, was ready to fight against COVID-19 in terms of education. This involved empowering our students and teachers to believe in their skills and support the huge effort to succeed no matter the difficulties. We are now working at school again, teaching live sessions with new timetables and routines. However, our work has been modified. The computer has become a key classroom object as we encourage students to continue working on CREA in order to avoid the exchange of materials such as sheets of paper. Our lessons have become more technological, but it has been proved that teachers have a crucial role at school. They are tutors, prompters, resources, and guides, and above all, they are adults who protect and give love.

## Veli: Facing the COVID-19 Challenge in Turkey



I am an English high school teacher in Hendek, a town of Sakarya, a city located in the northwest of Turkey, 150 km away from Istanbul. My school is the biggest high school in town, with over 600 students and about 50 teachers.

I felt lucky I was teaching 12<sup>th</sup> grade students during the pandemic season starting from March until June, because we had already completed all our units. So, I am really proud that my students were trying to focus on their university exams as well as if they were at school. They planned their schedules and studied at least 4-5 hours a day.

I am grateful to have great colleagues and directors at the school. Everyone was really helpful to each other while we were not at school, sharing different kinds of tools in the computer setting, making us and our students reach out to each other like at school. Apart from COVID-19 season, our school has a nice environment and a great yard to let us feel relaxed. Every spring, we have a barbecue party in the backyard. Unfortunately, we could not have it this season.

My school was not ready for such an event, in fact most of the people in my country were not ready. School managers quickly bought all the cleaning equipment for the virus and tried to make school ready for education in a week. Our Minister of Education closed schools temporarily from March until the end of April, but as we still had many deaths, they could not open at the end of April either. We have an online system and TV which can be enough for the students for a while until the pandemic season is over.

Unfortunately, we could not reach the students who are in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and even 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Those grades have university exams when they are in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but they have not attended most of the online classes because of not having Internet connection, not having smart phones, or because of concerns about the COVID-19 virus. As a teacher, I have also felt concerned because of the news telling of the increasing number of deaths. Even in this situation students could follow their classes as our Ministry of National Education has a TV channel and a website in which students can easily watch and listen to the teachers.

However, we know that we are doing the best job we could possibly do. Not having students and not seeing the students have affected us in a negative way, and frankly speaking, I also felt so alone. The greatest lesson that teachers can learn from that experience is how our students really value us.

I think I have spent my time in an effective way during the pandemic season. I have searched some websites, attended some webinars and followed different educators in social media, and gotten some different ideas about the



pedagogical focus in the future. Thanks to our Fulbright Alumni emails, I have attended many webinars, courses and earned badges. It seems that the educational system will be changed in the future and there will be more classes online and fewer students in the classroom. That is why I have converted many resources to pdf and computer-based versions. Right now, I have a few students with whom I am doing my classes online via Zoom and using my resources online. I have been able to leverage the pandemic to address important issues to my students like suggesting they follow many different websites and that the school is not only a place to learn. They have tried to improve themselves by searching and reading on their own as well. One of the positive outcomes for me is to be able to read my popular magazines and books when I was at home all the time and going out less, which I did not have time to read during school time.

In terms of overall reflections or feedback on the experience, unlike others, I can tell that I haven't felt much difficulty about the pandemic season because I like being at home and finding different things to do with my time. After having a curfew period, some people complained about feeling lonely and bored because of staying home for so long. I was so surprised hearing people's complaints, and I learned that I'm ready for all the negative things and can convert negative circumstances into positive ones. I have practiced being positive in a bad situation.

Sadly, some people in my country never cared about the protective measures against COVID-19 and that's why, as of the end of July 2020, we were

still having cases and around 20 people were dying every day. Thus, I do not expect the schools reopening for the first part of the next school year. I guess we will go on doing online courses and that might affect students' educational lives, as they feel bored after a while. That will affect parents as well, because they are having difficulties meeting their children's needs like playing, having conversation, and sharing all day at home. There should be some more activities for the students and different online activities instead of classes all the time. I hope we will have our normal school life and peaceful time in the beginning of 2021. *Update: As of October 2020, I am still teaching online.*

### **Catherine: COVID-19 and School Leadership in the USA**



On March 13th, 2020 the world my teachers, students, and families lived in changed drastically and unexpectedly. I remember explicitly on the evening of March 12th, we brought together all of the teachers of our school in Frederick, Colorado to have a conversation about this situation that might grow into something to be concerned about. We concluded that we would talk about it

the next day. The next day never arrived. Schools were closed by the governor on March 13th.

No level of experience or education can prepare you for immediate and intense change. Five months since we were drastically pulled from our classrooms, I remain impressed with the level of professionalism and commitment from my teachers and staff. We optimistically thought that the situation just sent us on spring break a week earlier than the calendar had planned, but as lockdown orders and the number of positive cases rose, it became apparent that this was not the truth. Within minutes of hearing that we would be shut down for multiple weeks, my teachers sprang into action and jumped on a video conference over their vacations. The plan was quickly laid out and put into action.

As a school principal, there are many new decisions to be made, often without knowing whether or not those decisions will be relevant in a day or two. The constant change encouraged flexibility; and the unique situations brought out critical and creative thinking. I am very proud of the teachers who work for me. Their dedication to their students provided the children of my school the best learning experiences we could provide. Last spring, my students had daily virtual contact with their classroom teachers as well as multiple virtual lesson plans each day. We celebrated the last day of school with a socially distanced reverse parade where students and their parents drove through the parking lot to wave goodbye to their teachers and the most unusual school year ever.

My leadership team and I spent the summer creating multiple different plans

for what the new school year could look like and how we would approach teaching and learning. The running joke was that we had a plan for every letter of the alphabet because the information we based our plans on changed so frequently. It was finally determined by state and local public health offices that a return to full time classroom teaching was possible. It sounds so ominous, returning to school in the midst of a pandemic, but students and teachers are thriving. Again, teachers have proven their levels of professionalism and commitment through all of the changes and additions to their daily schedules.

Teachers have always needed to wear many hats or have many talents; this year is no different. In fact, we have added even more tasks to the already full schedules our teachers keep. We have implemented temperature and wellness checks throughout the school day. Our lunchroom has been spread out to increase social distancing. Our students wear masks throughout the day with constant reminders from their teachers. They clean desks, door handles, and manipulatives multiple times a day.

Navigating the financial needs of a school during a pandemic has been the most difficult and eye-opening part. We have spent more money than ever on cleaning supplies and health care items. Every classroom teacher has a no touch thermometer. We have purchased additional math manipulatives so students can still learn in a hands-on way without the need to share materials. All these additional purchases come with the reminder that there were budget cuts to education at the state level. Through all of the changes to how we teach, increasing enrollment to make up

for the budget cuts has become a priority. My school started full time in person from day one. Being one of the only schools in our area with this option, we answered multiple inquiries a day about openings. My teachers demonstrated their understanding and flexibility when new students were added to their classes on a weekly basis.

This pandemic has made a difference in the lives of everyone at my school. The students have proven how resilient they are and remain excited about school. Teachers have proved their dedication to their students and families by consistently keeping education as a priority, even through the difficult changes to their classroom environments. Families and community members have shown their support in unprecedented ways simply by bringing their kids to school each day. They are also making additional donations to the school and teachers. There are many unknowns about what the future will hold, but what we do know is that education is a driving force that will change the world. I am thrilled beyond words to be a part of my school community and to work with such amazing and dedicated teachers and staff.

## **Noelia: Teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown in Argentina**



My name is Noelia Mazza and I am one of the teachers who has faced the tough challenge of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am a teacher of English as a foreign language and I'm currently working in three different high schools in Tucuman, a small province in the Northwest of Argentina.

This situation took us by surprise. We started classes the second week of March and lockdown began the third week, so practically we hadn't even met our students. We found ourselves at home trying to find the best possible ways of reaching them with just few resources available.

The pandemic found both teachers and students in unequal conditions; some were better prepared and equipped than others. As for preparation, some colleagues are highly trained and prepared to transform their lessons into virtual ones. However, there are others who are still struggling and learning during this process. Some learners, on the other hand, found less problems dealing with virtual lessons since they have frequent access to smartphones, computers, and this type

of software. Yet, others have faced the struggle of learning content and learning to use technology simultaneously. Equipment has also been a significant issue here. In many cases teachers and their families share a single computer at home, so many of them had no choice but to use their own smartphone or even buy new ones to cope with new demands. The worst part was experienced by those families from a low socioeconomic background. In fact, a significant percentage of students are facing a situation in which they have just a single device for several siblings or they cannot even afford an Internet service at home. Therefore, we can say that COVID-19 worsened the social inequalities that were already part of our education system.

Nevertheless, not everything is negative about this situation. As educators, we can firmly assure that we have learned a lot. We have been able to work collaboratively with colleagues to design and adapt activities for our students. We have modified curriculum, prioritizing content, and, mainly, we have reflected on our practices so as to improve them for the future. Students' performance must also be recognized. Little by little they found a way to transform a so unnatural space like a Zoom class into a real classroom with their laughter, jokes, and funny interventions. Finally, the role of families has been determinant during this process. It has been quite evident that those students accompanied by their parents were able to deal with their process more satisfactorily, even getting better academic results.

In Argentina, schools have always been much more than a place to teach

content. Here, schools also provide students with meals and other kinds of support that children and adolescents need. During this pandemic they continued working for this purpose, too. Meals were offered in a take-away manner, organizing shifts with teachers to provide them. The government has also tried to tackle the issues related to the lack of Internet access by offering students physical materials in the form of textbooks delivered to their homes. Teachers have developed radio programs, especially in the mountain areas where Internet is not accessible. In addition, some schools have created a system of scholarships that offered students SIM cards with Internet data funded by teachers and parents' economic support, among many others.

I can just say that this has been an intense and valuable learning period for me. I am eager to meet my students again soon and waiting for our classrooms to be a safe place again.

Today, after 7 months of lockdown, the virus has spread from the capital to the internal areas of the country. We have not been able to return to classes, yet. Remote teaching continues but in a much more alarming situation. A very high percentage of students have quit school, many of them driven by the difficult economic situation. Unfortunately, due to the increasing number of COVID-19 cases, we cannot be sure if schools will open again this year.

## Bechir: Facing the COVID-19 Challenge in Tunisia



I am Bechir Fraoua, a senior teacher who has taught English for 20 years now and for six years at a Middle School in Megrine (the outskirts of Tunis, the capital city of Tunisia). I would like to share some of the hurdles and difficulties both teachers and students have gone through during this pandemic.

I was asked not to leave home from Thursday 12<sup>th</sup>, March 2020 for an indefinite time while decisions were made about whether to go back to classrooms or to put an end to the academic year. That was not extremely worrisome since our two-week spring holiday was starting in two days. Most teachers thought that things would be made clear for them while on holiday. There was some news here and there, both on TV and on social media that students might join classes either in the middle of April or the beginning of May, depending on the pandemic situation, which wasn't alarming at that time. Some teachers started thinking about communicating lessons through online courses, especially via video conferencing, web conferencing and webinars. Most teachers became

reluctant to consider online delivery since few students were enthusiastic or showed interest in those lessons which appeared less motivating and fruitful. Particularly, some students became used to the holiday mood and atmosphere. For instance, spending the night awake using electronic gadgets and sleeping all day long were perfect options for some students.

All in all, face-to-face communicative lessons and compulsory attendance were the only ways to motivate students to participate in classes, rather than begging them to join online courses. Having noticed the fact that many teachers had failed to involve their students in online lessons, I decided to start my own YouTube channel, converting my PDF format into videos and communicating the information via YouTube to my 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at my school. Seventh grade students didn't need online courses because the Ministry of Education planned that teachers and students would join their former classes on September 1<sup>st</sup> instead of September 15<sup>th</sup> to accomplish the missing modules and lessons for three weeks, then join new classes for the 2020-2021 academic year on October 1<sup>st</sup>. Through my YouTube channel, students would be able to learn at anytime and anywhere they wanted, and even watched the videos more than once. I noticed that the number of 9<sup>th</sup> grade viewers reached 111, which exceeded the number of students in my classes (48 students) which has shown how successful this chosen method has been.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education informed us that students in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, (elementary school students), 9<sup>th</sup> grade (middle school

students) and 4<sup>th</sup> grade (Baccalaureate students) would sit for the national exams on 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> June (6<sup>th</sup> graders), June 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> (9<sup>th</sup> graders) and June 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> (4<sup>th</sup> graders). The 4<sup>th</sup> grade (Baccalaureate students) and their teachers would join classes from May 28<sup>th</sup> to June 23<sup>rd</sup> to accomplish the missing lessons as the national baccalaureate exam would include all the modules and lessons accordingly. The 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders wouldn't go back to classes because the Ministry of Education reduced the number of modules to fit the two first terms which had finished by March before spring holidays.

Since I teach Middle School 9<sup>th</sup> graders, who were scheduled to sit for a five-subject, two-day challenge exam to either pass with flying colors and join a pioneer high school, or just pass and join an ordinary state school, I decided to go back to classes to help my students review well for the exam. The Ministry of Education had announced that Tunisia was a country which was safe and free from COVID-19. There were still some safety and precaution rules like taking students' forehead temperatures before moving in the school building, wearing face masks, frequently using disinfectant, and social-distancing. These preventative measures would not be fully and really considered and followed by students or put into practice by school administration. For a period of about one month (from May 28<sup>th</sup> to June 24<sup>th</sup>) I taught my students who were keenly interested and worked hard to be well-prepared for the challenge test. Most of them passed the exam and joined Pioneer High Schools. I showed them that with will-power, determination,

motivation and hard work, as well as dedicated and motivating teachers, they could overcome all the hurdles and do well in their examinations while making their teachers feel proud of them.

I was also selected and asked by the English inspector to prepare a PPT format 7<sup>th</sup> grade lesson from the curriculum (Last lesson, module 5, entitled *Good Bye Peter*) to be sent to the Ministry of Education. This lesson would be included in a 7<sup>th</sup> grade file which would be sent to all 7<sup>th</sup> grade students all over Tunisia as a substitute to online or classroom lessons which would be hard to achieve during the pandemic, especially since some students didn't have access to Internet or couldn't use it appropriately. The Ministry of Education also asked some teachers to volunteer and prepare lessons for those students who would sit for national exams. These lessons would be broadcast on the national TV channel to support students' exam preparation. Last but not least, the Ministry of Education helped students pass their classes by reducing the average to pass to 9/20 instead of 10/20 and to double the weight of the best average among both terms for students who would not sit for any national exams.

All in all, both the Ministry of Education and Tunisian teachers tried hard to save the academic year by every means we could use to connect with students. I think that we have reached positive, encouraging and effective outcomes, but we are still waiting for the beginning of next academic year to accomplish our job and start again with a smile on everyone's face.

**Back to school: 2020 – 2021 Academic year in Tunisia which started in September 2020.** The pandemic

situation has become alarming with the increasing numbers of COVID-19 victims and deaths. However, keeping students at home and communicating lessons through online courses might not work wonders. The Ministry of Education announced September 15th, 2020 the beginning of 2020-2021 academic year with a one-month period to catch up with the missing lessons during the previous term with all possibilities and means given to teachers to manage time and reformulate lessons. October 19th will be the first day to start the program for each level with a two-third reduction of lessons (one or two lessons from each module have been chosen to be not included in the 2020-2021 curriculum). For safety reasons, each class has been divided into two groups (half class each) and each group has to attend lessons three days a week. For instance, group one has to attend Monday, Wednesday and Friday lessons for the first week; then, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday lessons for the following one; and take turns with the second group. So, half of the number of students will attend classes each day and thereby we can respect social distancing. The 3-term and examination systems have remained. I hope all of us will stay safe.

### **Hamna: COVID-19 Zoom-ing Teachers and Students in Pakistan**



Life in general has shifted from its normal rut to an altogether new pathway since the world was hit by COVID-19 pandemic. The significance of online pedagogy is now felt around the globe. In Pakistan, first cases were reported in the month of February 2020. Initially, the educational institutions were closed under the directive of the Ministry of Education with effect from 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020- the time when final examinations are conducted on the basis of which students' annual performance report is attained and then promoted to next grade. All the schools, colleges and HEC (Higher Education Commission) approved universities having access to resources required for conducting online classes and were instructed to continue educational activities virtually with immediate effect. The directive issued had no concrete framework, planning, or allocation of finances to support online classes, and as a consequence, the teachers and students encountered problems in carrying out educational activities. The HEC demanded online pedagogy from all institutions which was unjustified, as the teaching staff lacked in training and

resources vital for conducting online classes with maximum inclusion of their students. Due to limited available resources, the majority of the schools and colleges have never been prepared for such a transition from conventional mode to online learning. Apart from a small number of private sector institutions, most of the schools and colleges are deprived of necessary training, equipment, technological and technical support required for effective online teaching. The condition of public sector institutions is deplorable as they still resort to traditional teaching practices due to lack of professional development programs and resources. During the current crisis of COVID-19, technical and technological assistance needed for these institutions was not provided which created great deal of frustration among teachers and students.

The overall literacy rate in Pakistan ranges between 59 – 61 percent. More than 60% of the population lives in the rural areas where majority of the youth population have no or limited participation in educational programs due to lack of finances, non-availability of educational services and infrastructure, non-conducive learning environments, or even lack of interest and motivation on part of the individuals. Some have enrolled themselves in the universities in urban areas, but feel excluded for not being privileged enough to have all the support required for attending online classes. For most of the students, online learning experience is altogether an alien concept and they find it difficult to adapt themselves to it mentally and physically.

Efficient connectivity is a prerequisite for conducting online learning programs. The majority of the students do have phones as communicative devices. A student with enrolled siblings has difficulty joining online class due to limited gadgets available for all to be part of the learning activity simultaneously, as provision of individual phone or laptop is impossible. Remote areas like FATA, KPK, and villages in Punjab and Sindh have no access to internet which leads to exclusion from online classes or disruptive learning for thousands of students who were forced to vacate the hostels as soon as lockdown commenced. The government, however, soon after the directive for going virtual, initiated a tele-school channel catering to the pedagogical needs of students from the play-group to intermediate level and engaged able teaching staff. This endeavor is highly commendable and proved to be beneficial for millions of children around the country.

All the schools and colleges with access to connectivity, started online classes via Zoom, which opened up a new world in teaching experiences for them and their students in such critical situations. Initially mismanagement was obvious, as the administrative body of the institutions were exhibiting incompetency and students and teachers had no or little knowledge about its usage. This channel is effectively in use in urban areas, though the attendance of students remains below 50%. It also provided them with a chance to enhance their IT skills engaging a variety of online teaching tools for effective learning. As far as students' participation in ZOOM classes

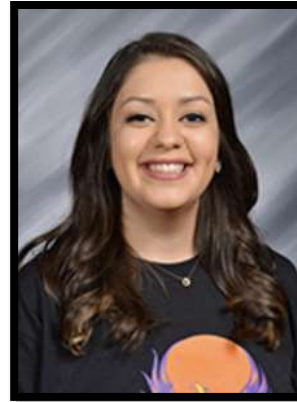


is concerned, their mental and cognitive involvement is impeded by the domestic distractions leading to disruptive learning.

After mitigation of the virus, the government decided to reopen the educational institutions, observing strict SOPs to avoid spread of COVID-19. The students in each class were divided in two groups, attending school on alternate days each maintaining social distance and physical contact. The syllabus was reduced and smart syllabi were circulated by the Federal and Provincial boards of secondary and intermediate examination, as each group gets to study three days a week instead of five. This is especially applicable to classes appearing in external examinations in the year 2021. The curriculum committee has vigilantly excluded the topics to ensure completion of syllabus in given frame of time.

The world has to coexist with COVID-19 for time unlimited and unknown. Government has to initiate programs for the institutions, specifically in the education sector, to tackle such a crisis without risking the future of youth, and release generous budgets for health and education. It has become a momentous time of need to equip the institutions and faculty with technical and technological support, and provide professional development opportunities for successfully dealing with such endemics and disastrous situations in the future. Only then can Pakistan achieve its objective to have better future for its youth.

### **Susana: Building Cultural Capital as Education Is Redefined in Greeley, CO**



There are a variety of things I am proud of in regards to my students during this time period of the pandemic. I am especially proud of the strengthened communication skills they have developed. When our academic plans changed to digital learning, students also played the role of teachers as they showed their parents/families/support people how to navigate new means of communication focused on technology. They showed tremendous patience and resilience when they had technology issues, and they were especially graceful in modeling how to access materials when their support people needed guidance.

My school is more than just a place to learn because we focus on raising awareness of biliteracy and biculturalism. Our students experience an environment where they are embraced, supported, and guided to be proud of who they are and where they come from. We don't just learn in our school, we practice culture and language, we share our different strengths and support our community members to be cohesive and

successful by celebrating their uniqueness. We also serve as a place where many students have their most basic needs of food and shelter met.

My students faced difficulties on a variety of levels when being at home during the pandemic. Many of them experienced hardships of not being challenged- or being too challenged- by the academic work, so we had a fairly low return rate of academic work. Some students faced family members losing jobs or having some kind of financial barrier. Some of my students learned about death for the first time, when they lost family members, friends, and neighbors to COVID-19. A fair amount of my students experienced isolation and a lack of emotional support and they really missed the routines and procedures they loved as part of in their daily work at school.

The greatest lesson I took away from this experience is to be graceful. Not just with myself, but with others. As teachers we place a lot of emphasis on being academically prepared to support students, but this time the big push was that we needed to be prepared with compassion and love. Our students weren't just struggling to understand academic topics, they were struggling to understand love, loss, patience, and support. I really felt more connected to my students and families during the pandemic, because I made myself available in a variety of ways and that is my biggest takeaway. Teachers need to be equipped with academic tools and knowledge, but they MUST be equipped with LOVE, care, and compassion.

My pedagogical focus has shifted since the pandemic because I now center more on identity. I teach a predominately

Latinx community, and people of color are affected at larger levels by the pandemic, yet receive less resources to survive and thrive. Instead of addressing my students from a deficit model and reminding them what the odds are against them, I center their effort and pride to be different and unique. I talk to my students and their community about our strengths as individuals and as a collective. We are not the type to be pushed around and minimized. My people are resilient, admirable, strong and dedicated, and I remind my students of this every day. Not only is it important to have knowledge of content, it is also critical to be aware of the self and who/where we come from; this is something that is now very rooted in my pedagogy.

When our school's academic plan changed to online learning, I took the opportunity to address the importance of ancestral knowledge with my students. Many of them have family members who work with the land, and I felt it was important to talk about how we can learn skills from our family members when we are not in school. Knowledge doesn't just come from books, it comes from conversations and sharing experiences, so I encouraged my students to share moments with their loved ones and try to learn something new every day. The more they know, the more cultural capital they will be able to share with their families and communities.

The positive outcome of the pandemic is that I feel both students and teachers are taking on a new definition of education. Education now feels more like a partnership and students are encouraged/challenged to advocate for themselves more. In some cases, I also

saw an increase of parent/community involvement, and that to me is very positive.

Our school was not ready to make the transition from in-person learning to digital learning. We did not have the tech resources available and in place to have a smooth transition, and we struggled tremendously with reaching all families to distribute the necessary materials and information. Communication difficulties are an issue that we have had among parents, administrators and educators at our school, and we definitely experienced them again during this transition.

I learned a lot about myself. I challenged myself to learn more about technology tools that I can use to make work more exciting for my students. I also challenged myself to be more graceful and patient with family communication and made myself available to connect with families after hours since many head of households worked through the pandemic. Personally, I struggled a lot with not being able to see my students 1:1, so I think that this experience has made me realize how grateful I am to have the ability to connect with my students whether online or in person.

My expectations are that we OVER COMMUNICATE. In order for us to be on the same page and keep our communities as safe as possible, we need to be ready to keep in touch with all essential members: staff, students, and families. I also expect that administration give space for educators to express their needs during this academic year, as they may be very different to other prior teaching experiences.

I am currently teaching in person. One of my concerns is that I won't have community support to follow safety regulations such as keeping a mask on, constantly sanitizing, and being mindful of supply use/sharing. Another concern is that one of our staff or community members will become ill, and we may not have the systems in place to support them. My greatest concern is that students will feel emotionally affected because they are not able to physically connect. I teach an elementary grade, and we used to be in constant physical connection, whether it be hugs, high-fives, or handshakes, and the adaptation of no physical touch at school has been difficult for students to grasp.

### **In Closing**

These teachers' narratives illustrate frustration, optimism, resilience, and creativity. Most importantly, they provide honest accounts of the limitations they faced in their efforts to help students and families. Analysis of their reflective narratives provides insight and understanding about the following: how the pandemic influenced their thoughts regarding the roles of teachers and schools in the lives of their students; how they can learn and be better prepared for the future; how collaboration and support is essential in a time of crisis; how inequalities present barriers for students and families; and how re-conceptualizing problems helps to confront unexpected challenges. We have selected comments from the teachers' narratives as illustrative of the overall ideas shared among them. Collectively, the following messages point to a group of educators who understand their essential roles as

teachers and who are willing to collaborate with others and learn new skills, while simultaneously being open to

expose the shortcomings of the systems in which they work as educators:

- Teachers have a crucial role at school; they are tutors, prompters, resources, guides but, above all, they are adults who protect and give love.
- The pandemic found both teachers and students in unequal conditions: some were better prepared and equipped than others.
- We have been able to work collaboratively with colleagues to design and adapt activities for our students, we have modified curriculum, prioritizing contents, and, mainly, we have reflected on our practices so as to improve them for future interventions.
- The worst part was experienced by those families from a low socioeconomic background.
- Teachers need to be equipped with academic tools and knowledge, but they MUST be equipped with LOVE, care, and compassion.
- The positive outcome of the pandemic is that I feel both students and teachers are taking on a new definition of education. Education now feels more like a partnership and students are encouraged/challenged to advocate for themselves more. In some cases, I also saw an increase of parent/community involvement, and that to me is very positive.
- I challenged myself to learn more about technology tools that I can learn to make work more exciting for my students. I also challenged myself to be more graceful and patient with family communication and made myself available to connect with families after hours since many head of households worked through the pandemic.
- I am so grateful to have great colleagues and directors at school. Everyone was really helpful to each other while we were not at school, sharing different kinds of tools in the computer setting, making us and our students feel each other like at school.
- I think I have spent my time in an effective way during the pandemic season. I have searched some websites, attended some webinars and followed different educators in social media, and got some different ideas about the pedagogical focus in the future.
- The Covid-19 situation has forced each and every one of us along a new learning curve. I have learnt to shed the, what might in some ways have been blinkered by the old norm, traditional approach to teaching. My own thought processes have become broader and more flexible, in taking the 'not a problem just another challenge' approach, I am evolving along with the teaching profession.

As we write this article, John Hopkins University (2020, December 28) reports that worldwide, over 81 million people have tested positive for COVID-19 and over 1.7 million people have died of the disease. Currently, we are experiencing the approval and distribution of promising and timely vaccines which will eventually help stop the spread of the virus, decrease positivity rates, and ultimately deaths. However, the health, economic, and educational consequences of the global pandemic will likely have long-term repercussions in both society as a whole and for individuals, particularly in the lives of those who have been affected by the disease. Educational systems have learned important lessons as the unfortunate result of the pandemic which should guide the design of future schools and learning opportunities. We have always known that schools are essential in creating a well-educated work force for the future, but the pandemic has shown us that school attendance is essential for maintaining a stable economy as well. We have learned that the working conditions of teachers are equally as important as students' educational and social needs. Students will not experience success unless teachers are supported and respected for their work. Teachers need safe and caring working conditions which allow them to do their important work without risking their physical or mental health. We have confirmed that warm and supportive relationships are crucial to learning. When teachers, students, and families work together to achieve the goals of education, students experience both academic and emotional success. Lastly, and perhaps most

importantly, we have recognized that the long-term equity issues which exist in schools intensify in a time of crisis. Lack of sufficient resources and support create devastating learning environments for students in low-income communities which lead to extreme disadvantages regarding educational and long term well-being.

While there is tremendous promise for the relief vaccines will bring as this global health crisis is addressed, we must also be hopeful that attention to the voices of teachers from around the world will shape the future of educational institutions and the lives of students in a post-pandemic world.

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