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Educational Silver Linings in the Cloud of a Global Pandemic: Our students are grittier than we think!

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Abstract

This qualitative study combines two methodological frameworks in an attempt to elucidate the best of what occurred in the teaching and learning practices during the massive school closures necessitated during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U. S. Using a phenomenological viewpoint informed by the practices of appreciative inquiry, interviews were conducted with education professionals to hear stories of unanticipated benefits in education - times where things went well, new insights were gained, new teaching techniques/frameworks explored, or significant student benefits noted. Participant voices, experiences, 'aha' moments, insights, and thoughts form an emergent picture of what has gone well during this profoundly chaotic and stressful time period in the education profession.

Keywords

appreciative inquiry, COVID-19, phenomenology, education, pandemic

Educational Silver Linings in the Cloud of a Global Pandemic: Our Students are Grittier Than We Think!

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Introduction

The goal of this phenomenological/appreciative inquiry research was to elucidate stories told by educators regarding transformational teaching and learning experiences during wide-spread school closures necessitated by COVID-19 of 2020. The unprecedented and profound change in the delivery methods and settings of traditional classrooms presented an opportunity to transcend the difficult circumstances created by social distancing policies and school closures to look for new possibilities in the narrative of professional education. Challenges are yet to be, without doubt, and those challenges will be difficult and time consuming. However, challenges can also become the adaptable genesis of change, and recent events have pointed to an explicit and imperative need for improving equity, access, and outcomes in our educational systems. By allowing readers to hear the stories of real-life practitioners who have experienced transformational insights in their work with students, knowledge gained through this traumatic and challenging time period could be of great use in changing and adapting teaching practices moving forward. We have combined two methodological frameworks, a phenomenological viewpoint informed by the practices of appreciative inquiry, in an attempt to elucidate the best of what occurred in the teaching and learning practices during the massive school closures necessitated by the spread of COVID-19 in the U. S.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a relatively new theoretical approach to research, often used as a positive approach to organizational development (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017; Shuayb et al., 2009; Stavros et al., 2018). In contrast to conventional research, which generally seeks to address problems, AI was originally conceptualized as an appreciative, provocative, and collaborative methodology, first proposed for the purpose of organizational study (Grieten et al., 2018). Using this framework allows the researcher to focus attention on what is working well in a particular setting, rather than seeking to elucidate problems. It has been increasingly deployed over the last decade as a research tool, especially in education (Lane et al., 2018; Shuayb et al., 2009). AI functions by asking questions that generate positive, adaptive responses in order to fuel increases in productive and meaningful engagement among stakeholders of an organization (Stavros et al., 2018). These appreciative and inquiring conversations allow individuals to share ideas,

acknowledge successes, focus on strengths, build capacity, and develop new perspectives (Lane et al., 2018; Stavros et al., 2018).

The human brain will quite naturally focus attention more to negative experiences and events in our lives (Rozin & Royman, 2001), so the potential for teachers' collective discourse regarding the online/remote learning arrangements required by COVID-19 to be negative in tone seemed apparent. Indeed, much media coverage has been negative, and this is not without cause (e.g., Collie, 2021; Dorn et al., 2020; Green, 2020; Perez, 2021; Shorman & Ritter, 2020). Green (2020) wrote of budget shortfalls stemming from the need for districts to provide things like enhanced janitorial services, nursing services, and air-purification upgrades. Dorn and colleagues (2020) predict severe learning losses due to COVID-19, with the most egregious of those effects falling along existing racial and economic stratifications, making already existing achievement gaps even worse. These are just a few stories of the potential negative impacts of remote learning - a quick online search would likely turn up many more, with a wider array of concerns. This makes AI's non-deficit approach to this research particularly applicable given its inherent focus on human strengths and positive experiences (Naude et al., 2013). Grieten et al. (2018) remind readers that AI functions, "not to mirror yesterday's world for purposes of prediction and control, but instead to challenge the status quo, and open the world to new possibilities for collective action" (p. 101). In research, the questions we ask can determine what we find, and once posed, cannot be rescinded. By using questions and language focused on strengths, AI can bring about a transformational process designed to lead to the best outcomes for those involved, while continuing to grapple with the hurdles and challenges yet to come (Grieten et al., 2018).

As a methodology, AI is focused around five principles: an understanding that our social reality is created through language and conversation, the idea that change happens the moment a question is asked, the importance of multiple perspectives, the influential nature of our thoughts, and the concept of positive generativity and the action it inspires (Stavros et al., 2018). In exploring the concept of powerful questions, Vogt et al. (2003) note that they become a compelling tool for learning, adapting, and creating new knowledge when seeking to "meet emerging opportunities and challenges in the more fluid organizational structures of the future." (p. 10).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a research framework predicated on participants' collective experience with some phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2011) and involves researchers reflecting on data to capture the essence of an experience. For the purposes of the current study, that phenomenon is defined as educators who experienced an unanticipated benefit for students amidst the variety of efforts to continue educational activities during a global pandemic of 2020 that necessitated closing schools for weeks or months. It seems safe to assume that teachers and school staff might experience some levels of stress and anxiety during such a profound upheaval as what occurred during the spring and fall semesters of 2020. Most schools closed entirely for a period of weeks or months, and subsequently began reopening in a patchwork of arrangements at the discretion of states, counties and/or school districts. This uneven process of returning students to school was a great cause for additional stress, especially among those deemed at highest risk for contracting COVID-19. Given prior research on the impact of major disruptions or disasters on teachers'

sense of well-being (Malinen et al., 2017), there is little wonder teachers were operating under extreme duress during this period of chaos and uncertainty.

In spite of this challenging context for schools and teachers, it was through our work with students at our university's educator preparation program that we began hearing snippets of conversation hinting at teachers who had discovered some unexpected benefit in their teaching and interactions. We became interested in seeing whether we might aggregate these lived experiences in a way that would lead to some themes that were common among our participating teachers. As researchers, this required us to interview educators in a way that allowed them to fully describe their experiences of teaching during a pandemic without directing the conversations toward our own personal experiences, as we had also both been required to transition to fully online teaching and learning in the spring of 2020.

Teacher stress during a pandemic is not well documented or understood at this time, since previous occurrences that might be similar in nature are historically both sparse and have not occurred recently. However, Malinen et al. (2018) found workers recovering from disaster were better able to cope when given a high degree of flexibility and autonomy over how they performed their roles at work, organizational focus was on well-being and stress reduction, and leaders were more visible and communicative. As schools began to reopen, and teachers were tasked with teaching both remotely and in-person, greater stress levels appeared to be related to change (Collie, 2021). It is possible that when teaching fully remotely, teachers had a sense that their administrators trusted them and their self-initiative to get things done for their students. But as teachers were asked to return to classrooms while also maintaining an online teaching presence, it effectively doubled the workload, along with the attendant feelings of stress and burnout (Collie).

So, it was against this global scenario of both predicted and actual negative outcomes that we decided to embark upon this research, so that in some small corner of the education profession, we might focus and reflect on whatever gifts of insight we might discover. The stress and overload teachers seemed to be experiencing might have dominated conversations had we not combined the phenomenological viewpoint with the tenants of appreciative inquiry. The intent here is in no way to mitigate or minimize the harm that may have been done to students and their families during this pandemic but instead to find those *silver linings* of practice that may provide a path toward preserving whatever the best of outcomes might have been. Doing so allowed discourse to center on, or be directed toward the more positive aspects of practice that formed the overarching questions of this research. By identifying what research participants deemed valuable and generative experiences, we may also be able to enhance educational practices for a non-pandemic world. The huge increase in technology use engendered by remote learning may prove to have benefits to teachers and students, as we move into a post-pandemic world. The research questions that inform this study are:

1. What are teachers' stories of unexpected educational silver linings that were in some way transformational for them, their students, or both?
2. In what ways were those experiences surprising or transformative?
3. In what ways did these experiences challenge teachers to examine or change their thinking and/or assumptions about teaching?

Methods

Research was carried out through one-to-one interviews using a phenomenological framework and informed by the practices of appreciative inquiry. Interviews were conducted using the principles of appreciative inquiry (AI), that is, questions were designed to be appreciative, generative, and open-ended, in an effort to reveal implicit assumptions, generate information, deepen understanding, encourage discovery, and empower change (Stavros & Torres, 2018). AI functions to focus research on practices that have been successful, rather than a more traditional research approach that might aim to address a problem or deficit (Shuayb et al., 2009). As a strengths-based approach, AI seeks to highlight personal and organizational assets that empower creative approaches to solving adaptive challenges within an organization (Boyd & Bright, 2007). By incorporating AI approaches into a more traditional phenomenological methodology, participants were encouraged to generate a sense of strength and resilience within the professional education community. This data has the potential to shift focus from problems generated by school closures to an increased understanding of best pedagogical practices in order to bring about lasting change in the education profession, whether face-to-face in a classroom or remotely through electronic affordances. For example, a recent article in the *Wichita Eagle* includes local teachers who describe the current crisis as a way to rethink education and how to reach students who “may be unreachable within the brick-and-mortar buildings” (Shorman & Ritter, 2020).

Participants were recruited via a snowball technique, starting from students in graduate courses recently taught by researchers in a mid-western university located in a rural, agricultural geographic area. During closing meetings at the end of the spring 2020 semester, several students were heard to say things like, “I had no idea how much kindergartners could do on their own.” or “I visited each of my students at home to deliver materials, and I couldn’t believe how excited they were to see me! They really miss school!”. Students from two previously completed graduate courses were invited to join the study based on having shared such an experience in conversation. They were then also asked whether they might identify a fellow professional educator who might be willing to share a similar experience, known as a snowball method of recruitment. Participation was restricted to education professionals, and did not include any parents, students, or community members. As additional potential contributors are identified, they were invited and encouraged to participate. Once consent had been obtained, participants were interviewed and then asked whether they knew of anyone else who might also be willing to participate. It was determined that between 5 and 25 participants would be ideal for meaningful data analysis (Creswell, 2013), so the snowball technique was used until the researchers began to experience some degree of saturation in the data. Using this technique for recruitment gave less chance to obtain a participant pool as racially and ethnically diverse as we would have liked, as most participants work and reside in the same rural mid-western area as our university. The demographic make-up of the resulting interviewees is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1
Interviewee Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	# Interviewees
Teaching Level	
Elementary	1
Middle School	4
High School	9
All (K-12)	3
Gender	
Male	6
Female	11
Years in Education	
1-2	0
3-5	10
6-10	5
10-20	1
>20	1

Data collection was accomplished through direct, one-to-one interviews with 17 participants, each of whom has professed to some kind of transformative moment in their teaching activities during the wide-spread Pre-K-12 school closures of March through June, 2020. During these interviews, educators were asked to describe their own personal stories of events and experiences in first person narrative. Interviews began with several broad, general questions regarding their interactions with students and the *silver linings* that played a part in the teaching and learning during continuous education arrangements. Follow up questions were used for the purpose of gaining further explanation, clarity, and/or details. Each interview was recorded in Zoom, generally ran between 20 and 40 minutes long, and was preceded by an oral consent procedure. Interview transcripts are initially in a format that is difficult to understand, so each one was carefully re-transcribed for clarity by graduate assistants. This allowed researchers to more easily read and code the text of the interviews.

The interactive nature of qualitative research will always require some degree of researcher bracketing, and this research is no different. Bracketing personal experiences can be a challenge and required a conscious suspension of our own beliefs, experiences, background, and expectations during the interviews. However, it is these same experiences that inform and shape the nature of the inquiry as the research progresses, so it was important to fully understand what and how the researcher's personal background might encourage participants' disclosure and to reduce feelings of discomfort during interview. While we cannot claim to be completely

unbiased, we engaged in frequent self-reflection in an attempt to ensure our participants were free to share their stories in an atmosphere of trust and positive regard.

Data coding and analysis was accomplished using DeDoose collaborative software. Both researchers contributed to and collaborated on code development, then reviewed the codes and came to consensus about their assignment. Initial reading resulted in a preliminary code structure that was subsequently expanded for additional detail. Thirty-one distinct codes were developed through an open coding process, assigned to 180 excerpts from the interviews. The following sections will elucidate the findings of our data analysis and the transcripts of our conversations with participants.

Results

Analysis and coding resulted in 239 applications of 31 distinct codes to the data. The top six codes applied to the transcript data were as follows:

- 1) improving relationships with students and families,
- 2) creative responses to the pandemic,
- 3) learning about and using technology,
- 4) improved student engagement/motivation,
- 5) increased levels of collaboration among faculty / staff, and
- 6) use of project-based learning initiatives.

It became clear that study participants' experiences were best described and summarized by these 6 areas and formed the emerging structure of themes used in recounting teachers' experiences. Other highly applied codes were added to the themes, as they appeared to represent something of a shift in thinking about the expectations teachers' might have held regarding online education. Codes that had been applied less frequently were easily incorporated into these larger themes. Examples of this include *students' perseverance or grittiness*, which was subsumed under Increasing Engagement, and *a breaking down of the traditional four-walled structure*, which fit nicely with Creative Responses. Table 2 below represents the full spectrum of code applications to excerpts and the code presence among participants' interviews in this study.

Table 2
Codes, Code Applications and Code Presence

Code	Code application	Code presence
Improving Relationships with students and families		
Building connections with students and families	32	11
Patience/grace/flexibility with students and families	9	5
Increased parent involvement	1	1
Creating solutions		
Creative responses to the pandemic	30	10

Breaking down of the traditional "4 walls" structure	10	2
Virtual Field Trips	2	1
Better address remote students from now on	1	1
<u>Intervening with Instruction</u>		
PbL: Use of project-based initiatives	12	6
Increased ability to personalize instruction	9	4
Flipped classroom successes	6	4
Differentiated instruction	3	2
Increased focus on SEL	3	2
Increased teacher focus on student feedback	1	1
<u>Increasing Student Engagement</u>		
Student Growth Characteristics		
Improved student engagement/motivation	19	9
Students' perseverance or "grittiness"	8	5
Students more adaptable and open to change	4	3
Decrease in student discipline problems	3	2
Students assuming more responsibilities/independence	3	2
Helping Marginalized Students		
Some students prefer online format	5	5
More one on one help for students	5	3
Increased student socialization/leveling of hierarchy	4	3
Decreased social and academic anxiety	1	1
<u>Employing Technology</u>		
Learning about and using technology	24	9
Communications became more concise	1	1
<u>Collaborating with Colleagues</u>		
Increased collaboration among faculty/staff	13	6
Teacher perseverance	4	3
Teachers more adaptable	3	3
Deepened teacher-teacher camaraderie	3	1

Reflecting

Increased teacher reflection, clarifying intent, re-examining purpose	8	4
Students missed school	6	4
Increased teacher focus on student academics	3	3
Students’ self-discovery and focus on their own mental health	3	1
Totals	239	118

Discussion

Using our wide-ranging code structure as a guide for identifying “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82), we found several prominent themes in the information gleaned during participant interviews. In consolidating and synthesizing codes, several significant areas emerged that appear representative of the common experiences shared by these teachers and their students (See Table 2). In the sections below we share these broad themes, illustrated with the words participants shared in recounting the stories that are emblematic of their experiences.

Improving Relationships

In what feels like an odd juxtaposition of expected outcomes, the largest number of comments made by interviewees fell in the category of improving relationships with students and their families. Previous concerns educators might have had regarding confidentiality and anonymity among students become utterly mute, as parents were suddenly and inadvertently included in classrooms every day. Whether in the kitchen preparing meals or nearby working from home, parents within earshot were privy to everything happening in their students’ educational lives on a daily basis. Teachers reported making productive connections with students and parents via viewing the Zoom backgrounds of their home context. Things like recognizing the hobbies and interests of students, introductions of family pets (kittens, puppies, hamsters, lizards, etc.), playing online games, or shared allegiance to a professional sports team became fodder for conversations that served to deepen and expand existing student-teacher-family relationships.

Comments like, “...when they're on Zoom, it's definitely more of a different kind of... it was more of a personal relationship to me because I was seeing inside their lives that I don't see at school.” and “my biggest silver lining I think has been some connections that I've been able to make with my students this year” hint at insights teachers gained into their students’ lives. This additional context provided a window into students’ environments that previously may have felt removed enough to also diminish the deep understanding of life circumstances we know exerts a profound influence over students’ availability for learning. One participant noted,

...with the ability of knowing these families, the truth is if you build relationships, you're willing to understand another person's perspective. We have new relationships this year that we have had trouble making for years, especially if we had children whose families rarely engaged.

Deepening personal connections with some of the students and their families within the context of their own homes was one of the unanticipated benefits reported by several teachers. This seems also to have expanded to an increased sense of grace and patience, not just with families, but also with students. One teacher acknowledged,

And so, I think having had the experience now kind of loosening the reins, so to speak, and being a little bit less stringent upon, you know, due dates and completeness and you know, all of the XYZs of turning work in.... I think that's something I'll definitely carry with me from here on out because it made a difference to me and I think it'll make a difference for at least a handful of kids.

Another added, "I think that maybe we'll learn to be a little bit more flexible with families and with kids." Yet another teacher mused, "But I was more flexible when we were remote than I am in person." It is possible that, as we grapple with the potential for breaking down some of the traditional practices used in schools, we may also find we are in some ways increasing the equity in our schools (Feldman, 2018). Perhaps, as educational professionals, we can use this moment in time to question some of our dearly held beliefs and strategies that may have inadvertently contributed to less-than-equitable classrooms and teaching practices.

Creating Solutions

The second most frequently coded concept found in the data was the application of creative solutions. Interviewees reported a new collaborative energy applied to problem solving in the school context. Risk taking and innovation were suddenly valued much more in the climate of a pandemic. As one interviewee put it,

So, let's come up with the next round of maybe bad ideas of academic risk and then lay those on the table Let's lay them on the table, step back, look at those wild ideas and say, which one of these might actually work. I think the next steps are teachers leading in this conversation.

With more traditional instructional methods unavailable to them because of building closures and remote learning, teachers more readily adopted new and improvised strategies suitable for remote or blended learning. Interviewees mentioned a number of creative approaches including flipped classroom instruction, independent project-based learning, improvised games, egg drop contests, construction challenges using frozen turkeys, creating haunted auditoriums, virtual field trips, and international collaborations. One Family and Consumer Sciences teacher effusively described a new *Game of Life* she created to help students understand budgeting, financial sustainability and to improve their independent thinking. Then, using virtual meeting software and newly flexible scheduling, she was able to remotely add guest teachers, like the math teacher, who addressed topics like interest on loans or understanding a bank statement.

On a more systemic and school-based level, creativity emerged in many new school structures and protocols. Reduction or elimination of snow days, moving forward, was one example. Online learning enabled schools to encounter fewer sick days for students and faculty as remote learning opportunities replaced absences or closure of school.

Remote and blended learning responses to the pandemic also resulted in increased and more diverse ways to include those students with anxiety, depression, and social disorders. In some cases, students who participated less in face-to-face settings due to peer pressure and powerful classroom personalities, ended up more participative in a remote environment with a more level playing field.

Intervening with Instruction

Educators seemed to find creative and innovative ways to adapt commonly used approaches to classroom instruction for use during remote or hybrid teaching models.

Project-Based Learning

One theme of interventions that emerged in the interviews is the use of project-based learning approaches. Twelve excerpts from six interviewees mentioned a shift to project-based learning in their classroom or school accompanied by a positive student response.

One teacher exemplified this with her description of a gamified environment she called “The Game of Life”. Below is her description of this project.

And so, I created literally the Game of Life online for kids. And so, my students researched their learning styles and then they plugged that into our career cruiser, and they plugged that into the Occupational Outlook handbook and then they researched this career and then they became that person in my classroom. They get hit with ethical dilemmas and life dilemmas throughout this time. So, like if their computer breaks maybe, they get that, or that life dilemma of their computer breaks. They have to find out if we have a computer tech person in the classroom and then they have to go to that person and say, hey, my computer broke. I need a new one. And they have to write a check to that person, that person puts it in their checking account. It's this really cool thing and I just love it. It's so I just, I kind of have to thank COVID-19 for bringing this to my classroom because it has been so much fun to do.

Despite being new to the project-based learning model, another teacher reported,

I'm currently getting ready to start one with my algebra one class, it's a mathematical flight project. They're going to research paper airplanes, um, and wings, how to design a wing that is going to best fly your airplane. Um, I haven't done it before.... And I thought, well, no better way to start a project or intermingle that project type based learning...

While for some teachers the projects were developed individually in their classrooms, in other cases it was reported that the entire school engaged in projects and worked on them collaboratively one or more days in the week. In some cases, these projects were used when “... the whole entire school is just collaborative learning online. So every single student is online. They're supposed to be doing project-based learning for every single class that whole day...”

Personalized Instruction

One interviewee noted that he found students’ more willing to approach him when they needed assistance with content. He conjectured that students realized they could request and receive

assistance privately, and avoid the kind of “social taboo” that might happen if students approached with questions during class. He reflected that, “the way that I conduct the classroom actually does serve to help kids. ... be comfortable in school, just as a person. And that’s central to being able to learn. It’s just to feel safe and comfortable.” Another commented that she was simply able to “keep them online longer if there’s a kid that’s struggling” so she could “work individually one on one with each kid to get them caught up or their work finished. I don’t feel pulled somewhere else, because I can focus just on that one kid.”

Another interviewee reported that her daughter found a more functional pace and workload as a result of experiencing hybrid learning. She put it this way.

The other silver lining I have is for my daughter, she’s in high school and she has five honors/AP classes. And the amount of homework that she has is just overwhelming. But since she’s in a hybrid model, she’s at school two days a week, learning online three, if she’s in a school building and has science homework, math, won’t let her do science, even if she’s finished with math. But if she’s at home, she does her Zoom meeting for each class and then you’re free as long as we get your work done, get your work done whenever you want to. And so she’s been able to get all of her work done pretty much during the school hours instead of having four hours of homework in the evening and on a bunch of waste of time during the school day. So even her, she would prefer to be in the school building, but I mean, that is a big silver lining for her just stress wise and time. And it’s been good for her.

Flipped Classrooms

Several teachers reported that remote learning seemed like an ideal environment for use of a flipped classroom model, where students do much of the background needed for understanding before they enter the classroom so the teacher can focus on guided implementation in the classroom. One teacher reported,

... I didn’t expect flipped classroom to work as well as it did. I really thought I’d get a lot of negative feedback from parents.... And then I saw how it worked in my classroom and just how phenomenal it’s been and helpful for me, too. Because if kids missed ... everything’s right there. The access is there at their fingertips. I had kids, listening to my lectures, while on the bus to a football game up from their phones. So just the, I think the flipped classroom has been the biggest ‘oh my gosh why have I not been doing this?’

Especially for a time when students are not in the classroom under the direct supervision of a teacher, flipped learning seems to be a pathway to increased understanding as students access content materials at their own discretion. The technology used also allows teachers a window into how, when, and how often students are accessing content. One participant discovered, “I’ve seen kids pausing my recording and working along with me or rewinding it... until they understand the steps. So, they’re getting me over and over, explaining the steps in the process. Then they need less help from me.”

Engaging Students

While it was widely acknowledged by interviewees that many students do not thrive in the remote or blended learning environment, they frequently mentioned that particular students did seem to be more comfortable and participatory. In another counter-intuitive finding these teachers reported that certain students became more engaged in remote learning. As one teacher put it, “Which is crazy because I've not gotten any like one assignment out of some of these kids’ whole four years. And now all of a sudden, we're doing stuff, which is insane. It's self-motivation that's come from like a weird place.” This renewed engagement is perhaps coming from a subset of students who have found a new sense of autonomy and safety outside of the traditional classroom setting.

Student Growth Characteristics

One teacher talked about how her students had used the time during quarantine to engage in high levels of self-reflection. What they wanted to remember, she recounted, was “dominantly about relationships, family, and friends.” She also added that there were students who started YouTube channels, or small online businesses, and others who used the additional time available to take courses that might not be included in a typical high school curriculum, like comparative religion.

Another teacher recognized that students had to increase their level of responsibility for learning. He said, “They have to manage their own time and make sure they're paying attention, taking notes, you know, doing all these things that I can normally kind of prompt them to do. And it does impress me a lot. How able some of them are to seamlessly shift from what they used to do in the classroom to what they do at home without so much support.” Still another, who teaches special education, realized her students had become more adaptable to change, and mentioned how vital this skill will be for their long-term success, both in education and beyond.

Student Perseverance or Grit

In her study of grit as a measure of perseverance and passion, Duckworth et al. (2007) found that grit was related with the concept of conscientiousness. One participant told us “I never had a kid give up. They kept asking questions ... Kids need to understand the buy in and why it's important and yeah, they just, they just, I never had anybody give up or just not do it”. Another noted, “kids are grittier than what we think they are. They are tough and they will work hard for people that they love and respect”. When asked to identify some of the strengths uncovered by the unusual learning circumstances, one teacher responded,

I think perseverance... [When] the pandemic happened and we went through all that all together... Like it's not, some things are not as tough as they sound, things are gonna get better. Right. And we're going to work through this together there. I've noticed that they are, they're working harder to get through things, to challenges, and then they're there for each other.

Another teacher noted that in addition to perseverance, resilience was another characteristic found in students, and added that students are, “still bringing that excitement and energy” to the subject, even though this particular class met only once per week. For one teacher, persistence

was the big take-away, telling researchers, “That resiliency is the big one. Being resilient and persevering.”

For some teachers, remote learning presented an opportunity to discover how self-reliant or persistent students were able to be. Without the support and prompting that comprises much of the normal day-to-day classroom management strategies teachers employ, students were tasked with monitoring their own engagement, attention, and task completion. In our interviews, several teachers mentioned that their students had not just monitored their day-to-day work in the remote classroom but had in some cases gone beyond minimal expectations. One interviewee noted that a high school student did more than just turn in essays, they had also created a YouTube channel for sharing creative work.

Helping Marginalized Students

Those difficult-to-reach students seemed to represent a population that was a target for teacher worry. Many professed concern that some students would simply disappear during online learning. In reality, many school districts report some percentage of students who either never logged onto online learning platforms, or were rarely present (Perez, 2021). For some small segment though, online learning arrangements appeared to be a benefit. One teacher expressed dismay over strengthened bonds with several of her “super quiet” students. As an extrovert, she commented, I try to get in with everybody” but noted, “there's always a couple of kids that just still hang back no matter what, even those kids ... are making their voices heard They feel comfortable speaking in front of our group because we've had this unique experience together.”

Technology enhanced discussions, using formats like discussion boards in many learning management systems, also appears to have benefitted students who tend to be shyer about engaging in a face-to-face classroom. A participant felt it gave “slow processors more time to formulate and contribute to discussions.” Another teacher added that this gave timid students a chance to be heard, which might not have been happening in a busy, talkative classroom setting. Online discussions also gave each teacher time to individually respond to each student, which she felt was instrumental in helping her shy students to “come out of their shell a little bit.” One teacher remarked that, using a hybrid teaching model, she felt “like I have more of a connection with my students now.” The affordances for personal communication between teacher and student were suddenly more available than ever before, and for some students, this seems to have been an adaptive and inclusive addition to teaching practice.

Increased Levels of Learning About, and Use of Technology

The shift to remote learning has fostered an increase in the breadth and depth of technology use in schools. Twenty-four excerpts from ten interviews indicated such an increase as a positive outcome. Descriptions of such shifts included a transition away from paper-based assignments, increased usage of flipped instruction, greater dependence on learning management systems, creative technology-based ways of learning about nature, introduction of virtual field trips, increased student access to computers or tablets, and more widespread usage of instructionally related apps.

Some interviewees expressed the opinion that using more technology would be permanent and represented a paradigm shift within their school.

I actually think we've discovered that a paradigm shift is going to occur in education where not everybody is going to be a traditional in-person anymore. It's doable to have kids learn, meet the standards and master the standards even virtually. I mean they've done it in colleges for years. So, I think if most schools and school districts are paying attention and looking at data, they're going to see that, yeah, we would love to still have kids in person. But there needs to still be options, probably for kids that learn better online because some do.

A middle school librarian was thrilled to discover that she could now virtually engage with students in classrooms in another building, even when it was not her day to visit that building. In her words, “I pop into their classes and like, speak once a week and just do some book talks and stuff.” and found that the increased frequency of contact encouraged students to engage with books in the library at a higher rate than in the past. She also noted that, as a COVID protocol, students were checking out their own books. This freed her time when students were in the library, allowing her to interact more with students to discover their interests and then be able to recommend books that were more engaging to young readers.

In one notable case, a student took their agriculture teacher, along with the entire class, on a quick student-led field trip to the pasture to view a newborn dairy calf. The teacher reported “...we got to see his little dairy cow laying on the ground. He tried to get her up. She wouldn't get up. It wasn't time to milk. But yeah, I saw all kinds of stuff. It was awesome.” Previously, agriculture teachers in this farming community would drive to individual students' homes to see students' projects or animals, but suddenly, not only could the teacher use technology to see what was happening on a remote farm, but the entire class could join in.

Collaborating with Colleagues

Many interviewees reported forging new collaborations with colleagues. A sense of “we are all in this together” pervaded faculty culture. Interviews revealed that teachers seemed more open to change and exemplified more adaptability. One interviewee described it as teachers being “more willing to ask for help” and be more “vulnerable”. Teachers were more willing to try new ideas.

In the absence of students in the school, descriptions emerged of groups of teachers reorganizing and upgrading their office areas, bringing in coffee makers and hand soaps into shared workspaces, and becoming more collaborative. They even added a punching bag for communal use in the hallway! In the words of one:

Yeah, I was thinking we're all perpetually slap happy from COVID. I don't know. I guess a number of things, it's partly really, just the time and freedom. Normally when all the students are in the building as a high school teacher, there's almost no break from student contact time and even lunches. We may be late to lunch and leave early from lunch. Um, and so that that's been a silver lining actually there with remote learning, as a high school teacher, um, to have just a little more time to have more control over ending a class early, and that's given us more flexibility to connect with each other.

As increased collaboration became more of a shared norm, one interviewee was especially appreciative of co-workers because, “we’ve had to problem-solve like never before” and “each person brings their own niche of knowledge” to pass on. Calling the level of change “seismic” a participant told us, “This expects more or different of each of us.... We have to be able to lean on each other.” and added that, for her, this level of collaborative interdependence had been one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching during COVID-19. Teachers found themselves bonded by their sincere desire to do everything in their power to provide for students by modulating, adapting, and differentiating instruction, and “embracing change, and embracing process improvement.”

Student Self-discovery and Mental Health

Many students experienced a year of increased isolation during the pandemic. While mostly seen in a negative light, it is worth noting that for some students, this became a powerful time of reflection and self-discovery. Without many of the pre-pandemic, traditional, external pressures of school tasks, for some students there has been time for introspection. A language arts teacher interviewed for this study revealed just such a response of reflection by one of her students.

And self-discovery. I mean, I had a student...she's going to Illinois to play volleyball and she committed as a sophomore. And in her essay, she wrote about how she confronted this question of ‘who am I apart from basketball’. And, um, here's a student who said ‘the turmoil that was 2020 shaped me into someone I don't recognize, but it's been a pleasure getting to know her.’ ... and, and just the statements of students finding themselves. And it's just, it's really powerful. And it is relevant because we ... we teach human beings, so they bring all of this into the classroom.

Another teacher found her students used writing assignments, “in a way that I think is extremely relevant to our classrooms, a number of students who wrote about having the time and space, it was all about time and freedom, ... to address mental health issues.”

Reflecting

In reflecting over lessons learned while teaching during a pandemic, a participant told us, ... I don't want my kids to come to school and hate it. I want them to get the most that they can out of it ... So, the only way I'm going to be able to do that is to get out of my comfort zone in my little box area down here and go talk to other people so we could make this happen.

Shifting the conversation became paramount, to “really talk about what education will look like post-COVID.” Noting that “we are making leaps forward” a technology coordinator said, “I don’t want to go back to what it was before COVID, to be very honest with you. I do not want to go back.” Teachers seem to recognize that,

...we are at a precipice, to understand how to remove barriers for children of all levels of need, of learning, and access to information. Ways to engage with information that allows children to have choice in that and ways for students to express themselves... And we are getting so close to that.

In acknowledging the catalytic role of a pandemic, we heard, “Sometimes change is hard and uncomfortable, but we need something sometimes to think it's going to change the face of education right.... I believe that education is going to be stronger for it.” Reduced time in classrooms meant teachers might make fewer assumptions about students based on behavior and instead, “kind of just focus on their academic pursuits.” Overall, many participants talked about COVID-19 and the educational implications it engendered as a time and space for reflection, reframing, and rethinking about the true mission of education.

Implications

In her 2020 TED talk, Jacqueline Novogratz speaks of the moral imagination required of those who seek to facilitate change. This process asks that all of us, “begin to see each other and to understand that it is in our work that are planted the seeds of ... collective transformation (para 16). The interview data collected and analyzed as a part of this study can help to identify themes of exceptional educational practices by finding the best of what occurred during the COVID-19 school closures. In uncovering the inherent strengths that emerged during the extraordinary circumstances created by this global pandemic, we feel we have also uncovered some best practices that can inform future growth, in what might be characterized as an opportunity for collective transformation within the education profession. In this crucible of disruption, we find a defining moment, one that hopefully will not occur again for a very long time, that can allow us to question the status-quo and inspire new and more equitable educational dispositions, whether teaching is occurring in-person or remotely. Reflecting on the conversations from this data may help education professionals to conceptualize the services they provide on a broader and more inclusive continuum, one that is built around empathy, equity, and compassion. This raises the possibility of a more transparent version of education, one that addresses the deep inequities in schools and meets all students with both what they need, and what they are most passionate about. In the words of one teacher, “It’s almost like a reimagined way to learn. It’s the perfect time for students to be heard and find their voice. Can you imagine the impact we could have on education in the matter of a few years?” (Shorman & Ritter, 2020, para 12). Insights may inform Pre-K-12 teaching practices for current education professionals, education preparation programs, and/or education policy.

If appreciative inquiry serves to focus research questions on the appreciative, provocative, and collaborative, and phenomenology asks that we seek to understand a particular life experience, then this research has combined these methodologies in order to uncover and celebrate the growth that is inevitable and inherent in the change process. By combining both phenomenology and appreciative inquiry, research interviews encouraged education professionals to tell real-life stories of the practices and principles that allowed them to transform an unrecognizable educational landscape into opportunities for growth, change, equity, and/or insight.

Transformation is indeed possible in the troubling times the education profession has faced throughout much of 2020 and into 2021. In asking powerful questions that encourage educators to tell their stories of success, we have offered the opportunity to engage in reflective and generative conversations that can explore catalytic experiences. These wide-ranging interviews highlight the innovative and resilient spirit of educators and continue to raise thought-provoking questions about the forward movement of the profession post-pandemic. It is our hope that the conversations presented here will help to surface underlying assumptions in the world of

professional education, in service of creating compelling new possibilities and paradigms for increasing accessibility, equity, and inclusiveness in a post-pandemic world. In uncovering the strengths inherent in our educational community that emerged under the extraordinary circumstances created by social distancing policies made necessary by a global pandemic, we hope we have also found some best practices to inform future growth.

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