**Navigating the Pandemic in Dual Education Roles:**

**A Combined K–12 & Higher Education Perspective**

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts in the lives of American students and educators. Educators faced an upheaval and adjustment to a "new normal" as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, involving extensive use of technology and remote learning. During the pandemic, I was employed as both a sixth grade English language arts teacher in rural New England and a remote adjunct instructor for a higher education institution with over 30,000 students. These positions were starkly different in their academic scope, population demographics, and response to the country-wide shut down, yet the students faced many of the same obstacles as they progressed in their education. The COVID-19 pandemic caused teachers and staff to rally together to support students, brought to light great gaps in the education of the children in the K–12 school system, and necessitated shifts in educational platforms and curriculum to ensure the health and safety of our students and educators. With all of the lost classroom time, something more damaging was present as well: the loss of social and emotional readiness for learning. With proper social supports integrated into the education system at all levels moving forward, students may begin to regain their motivation and success in academia and in life outside of school.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, higher education, K–12 education, social/emotional support, teaching

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts in nearly every sector of our lives. As educators, we often had a front row seat to the chaos and challenges that families

went through over the past two years. I have had the privilege of viewing the pandemic through multiple educational perspectives during this time period: as a parent of a student navigating learning during a country-wide shutdown, a doctoral student, a 6th grade English language arts teacher in rural New England, and a remote adjunct instructor for a university with over 30,000 students.

As a parent, I faced issues regarding balancing my professional work and supporting a child with high educational needs in her first and second grade curriculum. As a 6th grade teacher, I spent countless hours building and adapting a curriculum that could be delivered in both remote synchronous and asynchronous environments with little hands-on support from staff. Even when students returned to physical classrooms, physical distancing mandates were still in place in the district and administrators encouraged teachers to avoid shared physical materials, making previous hands-on lessons more difficult. As a doctoral student, I was part of a small and tightly-knit cohort, which provided a lot of social and emotional support through the doctoral process. When our program went fully remote, we missed out on the casual social aspects that we had grown to appreciate within our cohort, making our work feel less collaborative and, at times, more daunting. My role as a student at this time helped me to empathize with the children and adults I was teaching. I recognized the difficulties in working on academics from home, where distractions were rampant and space was limited. I also recognized the fatigue students faced in using computers for all of their schoolwork. My participation in each of these roles helped me to be a more understanding and creative educator as I faced the pandemic alongside my students.

## Addressing a Pandemic in an Educational Setting

Educators faced an upheaval and adjustment to a "new normal" as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. My roles as a mother, doctoral student, sixth grade teacher, and adjunct university instructor were starkly different in their academic scope, population demographics, and response to the country-wide shut down.

**K–12**

No one was prepared, whether parents or educators, for the United States to shut down its schools in March of 2020 in response to the growing COVID-19 transmission concerns. Initially, our school district shut down for just a week or two with no instruction given to students during that time. The thought was that the schools would be able to reopen relatively quickly. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Our district extended the shutdown two more times before "calling it quits" for the year. Teachers had an opportunity for a one-week mad dash of pulling together curriculum and creating packets and Google Classrooms to deliver lessons for the remainder of the year.

Our school district had established a reopening plan prior to the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year with charts regarding thresholds for when students would be sent remote versus stay in-person for their education based on school and community transmission rates of the virus. This plan in itself caused a great deal of tension in the school and larger community. The year was throttled with a haphazard in-person, remote, in-person, remote, etc. schedule that made student transitions and teacher planning difficult and disrupted. Additionally, the district hired and/or reassigned educators to work in fully remote positions spanning multiple grade levels to educate the students whose families wanted them to stay in remote instruction full-time.

With a new reopening plan in place for the 2021-2022 school year, the school district, under supervision from the state of New Hampshire, elected to not offer remote instruction through district staff. Instead, students were given the option to come to school in person while wearing masks full-time or parents and their students could homeschool traditionally or by using a remote platform, such as Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS), which some families elected to do. During peaks in COVID-19 cases in the area, students remained learning in-person. The reopening plan included verbiage that specified when students and staff would be required to wear masks, how far apart desks had to be in the classrooms, etc. The school

board revisited this plan several times, and, upon the return from February break, the district went "mask optional" for all students and staff at all times.

**Higher Education**

I began working in higher education mid-pandemic in October 2020. This was a unique role as an adjunct instructor teaching 5-week courses back-to-back all year long. Due to the remote nature of my institution, the pandemic had very different impacts than it did in the K–12 sector in which I was working. In this setting, students were not expected to meet for classes and work was done asynchronously. However, their education was still impacted by the ramifications of the pandemic (e.g., lost jobs, sick family members, quarantining). For in-person colleges, like the one my younger sister was attending for her undergraduate studies in sustainable agriculture and food systems, education was more directly impacted. Science majors, like my sister, were especially impacted by changes that included smaller class groupings, different timing of courses, lab classes being put online (less effectively), constant COVID-19 testing to keep on-campus privileges and wearing masks and PCP to lab classes that were held in-person.

I finished my doctor of education program during the pandemic as well, which led to postponement and reduction of graduation festivities, residency sessions being moved into virtual formats, and an online dissertation defense. This showed me how, even within higher education, each school had to individually navigate what they could do to meet the needs of their students while keeping them safe.

## Teaching in a Pandemic

Working in both the K–12 and higher education environments during the pandemic helped me to recognize similarities and differences between these populations. I recognized that despite the difference in ages and experiences of my students, using technology for educational purposes remained an obstacle for many students, ranging from how to upload assignments to how to format academic assignments. While the demands on students at home

were starkly different for sixth graders versus adults in college, they all faced challenges in prioritizing time and minimizing distractions when working from their homes (some of which were not equipped for academic work with proper space and/or technology). These challenges, and others, were exacerbated by changes to the academic routine based on decisions of the school board and/or public health officials.

**K–12 Teaching**

When COVID-19 was first introduced as a crisis in the United States and the initial shutdowns began, it was overwhelming to our rural education system. At that time, I was on maternity leave from my work as a school counselor at a K–5 elementary school in New Hampshire, but my eldest daughter was in first grade at my school. We were faced with the social and emotional impacts of the initial shutdown, just like everyone else, largely due to the fact that we did not leave our house, even to see close family members, for a month and a half. My daughter's school supplies and lunches were delivered to our door with no contact. Eventually, the district organized the school using Google Classroom, which facilitated some online work but much of it was asynchronous, and I supplemented school learning with direct teaching of my own child at home (a luxury many non-educators and working parents could not accomplish with their children).

With the pandemic still going strong in late August of 2020, staffing became a huge issue in my district. By providing students and families with the option of remote learning, our already skeletal staff was broken down into those who would be providing remote education versus those who would be providing in-person education. The pandemic and the additional classes for online learning caused the district to have numerous teaching positions to be unfilled. At that time, I was 38 weeks pregnant and had another baby at home. That was when I found out, with a week to go before school (teachers were already back in training for the new year) the sixth grade team was lacking two of their four core teachers (and there were no applicants). I jokingly told my mother, who was one of the remaining sixth grade teachers, that I

would come teach English for them, if they did not mind me taking a few weeks off to have a baby. I was hired within 3 days, with administration knowing that I could have a baby at any time.

I ended up teaching for 2 weeks before giving birth (even going to work the day that I went into labor) and taking 6 short weeks off with my baby before returning. The district continued to face a severe substitute and staffing shortage, causing me to spend my time at home during my unpaid maternity leave writing and adapting my lesson plans, grading assignments, and occasionally redirecting children who were off task in their online classroom. The administration was never able to find a long-term substitute for my classroom, meaning the students were faced with a revolving door of different faces attempting to deliver instruction during an already tumultuous time in society.

When I returned to work in late October, the pandemic concerns were still rampant. Our district had a detailed reopening plan set forth by the school board and based on the guidance of health officials. This plan included a matrix that determined when we would be doing in-person versus remote instruction based on the number of active COVID-19 cases in the community and within the school. At times, our community made great progress, such as when community members banded together to make and distribute masks to all of our students. At other times, our reopening plan caused additional stress for students, teachers, and parents/guardians with constant transitions between remote and in-person learning, inconsistent curriculum delivery within grade levels due to lack of communication between the remote and in-person teachers, and transiency between students electing to work remotely versus in person (and limitations on this transiency, such as not being allowed to change one's option until the quarter marks). The teachers also heard many comments about students wanting to "go remote," which some teachers interpreted as a way to disengage from learning. The tracking of education for students and ensuring they were participating in their academics was complicated with all of the different options available.

Another part of our reopening plan was a mask mandate. This caused a lot of tension in our community, eventually resulting in threats of lawsuits and picketing outside of our school. Students struggled to wear masks appropriately, sometimes resulting in suspensions after repeated offenses. When the 2021–2022 school year began, the reopening plan was adjusted to include no option to go remote at all, and masks were required based on another decision matrix based on community spread and transmission at school. Mask wearing became a politicized debate at school board meetings, with the mandate eventually being dropped at the end of February 2022.

Our district made an effort to physically distance students from one another, with desks in traditional rows rather than more collaborative formations as they had been in the past. This physical distancing disrupted typical types of teaching and learning, as science labs could no longer be done in small groups and partnerships and peer editing of English papers were often done by sharing documents on a computer rather than sitting together. Teachers and administrators made a large effort to call this "physical" distancing rather than "social" distancing in hopes that it would be less damaging socially to our students.

Despite all of our efforts with masks, remote instruction, physical distancing, and more, there was a great deal of inconsistency and discomfort across the district with the new methods. The school district received grants from the federal government at this time for various purposes, such as adding a privacy fence between the elementary school and a neighboring business, re-turfing the athletic fields, expanding our technical education center, and installing a book vending machine. These grants, though, did not combat educator fatigue. Our district saw extreme turnover at the end of each year, oftentimes with teachers choosing to leave the profession entirely. Additionally, many teachers and staff members broke their contracts and quit their jobs mid-year, something that I had never experienced in K–12 education in the past. These growing concerns only exacerbated the impacts of staffing shortages and not being able to meet the needs of our students.

**Higher Education Teaching**

The format of teaching and learning did not change for me as a remote adjunct instructor for a popular online university. Students still enrolled in courses, and I continued to teach in asynchronous formats online. However, there were noticeable differences in the motivations and barriers that my higher education students faced as they tried to complete their work. For example, in the past, students typically would reach out ahead of time if they planned to be late on an assignment or had confusion on a task. The pandemic caused students, many of whom are non-traditional students with jobs and families outside of their schooling commitments, to face additional hardships. Oftentimes a student would "disappear" from class for a week and later reach out to report that they had tested positive for COVID-19 and wanted to make up their work. Other times they were faced with the death of family members and/or friends due to the virus, impacting their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Luckily my institution offers many support services to students for both academic and mental health concerns, leading to faculty making referrals for members of their classes who were unable to complete their work in a timely fashion or who were otherwise struggling.

During the pandemic, I also became part of a new faculty initiative called the "Power of One," which allowed me to offer additional support to vulnerable students. This initiative allowed more flexibility for students to turn in work late or take an "incomplete" for a course and finish later. As an instructor, this initiative helped me to grow deeper connections with my students through frequent check-ins and communications which helped me to develop rapport with and trust from my students. I believe this program was a major influence on many of my students' ability to persist with all that was going on in the outside world.

## What the Pandemic Taught Me

As a member of both the K–12 and higher education worlds during the COVID-19 pandemic, I learned many things about emergency responses in schools and about myself as an educator. These discoveries included needing more access to education, building

transferable technology skills for students, working collaboratively within and outside of education to improve students' learning opportunities, and maintaining a positive mindset despite obstacles.

**Even When We Think We Have Access; We Need More Access**

It seems like everyone today has access to the internet in their homes. I learned that this was not the case for many of my sixth grade students. When the schools shut down, some students went completely off the grid, and we did not see them for months on end. With the drastic increase in families choosing to homeschool, it was hard to track down where some of our students were (and often we did not know if they were supposed to be in class or not). When our schools went remote, for the students who did not have access to their lessons through technology at home, it took many, many months for my K–12 district to set up an in-person learning space that students could access.

**We Need to Build More Transferable Technology Skills Into Our Curriculum**

When I was in elementary and middle school not that long ago, we took keyboarding classes in which we learned about proper placement of our hands on the keys, how to type without looking, etc. The students in my district are no longer having this direct instruction. Instead, typing games are used as a warm-up for some classes or as an "extra" assignment to do (by choice) when they finish a task early. There is a lack of direct keyboarding instruction that is negatively impacting the efficiency in which our students can communicate their ideas when working remotely. Perhaps because there are so many families with computers at home today, or maybe because we are so used to texting at this point, the emphasis on keyboarding skills has dwindled in schools. Without having the background knowledge of how to use word processing software, students are at a disadvantage when submitting assignments, not because they do not know the content, but because they do not know how to format it. Playing video games using a computer system is not the same as typing a report or creating a PowerPoint presentation. As educators and community members, we should not equate these very diverse

sets of computer skills. Instead, we should reintegrate direct instruction of word processing programs and keyboarding skills back into our curriculums, if we anticipate continued use of these modalities in the future.

**Teaching Cannot Be Done in a Silo**

There are so many parts to education that must be addressed collaboratively, so bringing together multiple agencies and resources to support our students is essential. No one comes to school just to be focused on school, despite their age. Many students are carrying with them the baggage of their family dynamics, income level, food security (or insecurity), health, hygiene, and much more. I believe educators must remind ourselves of our early psychology courses in which we learned of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Gardner's multiple intelligences theories and address the bottom tiers of this pyramid, both physiological and safety needs, before we can expect students to critically think about the content in our courses. Educators can do this by validating how our students feel and what they are going through. Schools can reach out to connect families with resources to help them find housing, jobs, food, etc. Classroom teachers must not forget that school is typically a place of consistency for our students. When students lose that small piece of consistency, it can be even harder for them to stay "afloat" in life.

**We Can Do Our Work With Good Intentions**

It is important to understand that schools and educators cannot please all of the people, all of the time. As a people pleaser, it was difficult for me to accept this concept. The pandemic brought a lot of strife to my community. It seemed that the town split in half, and people had to pick a side. Much of this conflict trickled into our schools with picketing out front, mandates, school board tension, and much more. As an educator, I had to learn to accept that not everyone was going to be happy with how the classes worked or the decisions of the school board. Regardless, I needed to continue teaching my students in the best way I knew how,

through rigorous, engaging curriculum. Perseverance is a skill that the pandemic has instilled in many of my colleagues and me.

## Final Thoughts

Teaching during a pandemic was difficult. It caused teachers and staff to rally together to support children. It showed great gaps in the education of the children in the K–12 school systems as well. With all of the lost classroom time, something more damaging was present as well: the loss of social readiness. The sixth graders that entered my classroom in 2021 were significantly less emotionally regulated and mature than the students who had entered my classroom the year before. Many students appeared less resilient, more resistant to help, and had greater expectations that their work should be easy or done for them. These were the ramifications of missed time to explore with one another socially over the past two and a half years. Not only were writing and reading skills weaker than in years past, many students were less ready to be in sixth grade in general. Catching these students up over the next several years might be a long and arduous process that will need to start in kindergarten, so that we may raise our expectations for these students again.

As a previous school counselor with a current passion for improving access and persistence of students at all levels, I believe the integration of a variety of social supports (instrumental, informational, emotional, and appraisal supports) will improve the outcomes for students. I believe this must be accompanied by a holistic approach to support students in regaining their drive to work hard for their goals. As educators, high expectations and support should be given to students, encouraging students to rise to the occasion to progress in their learning and in their lives.