

School personnel perceptions of working conditions during a pandemic: A mixed methods study

Carianne Bernadowski¹, Nena Hisle²

¹Robert Morris University, Pittsburgh, USA

²Pittsburgh Public Schools, Pittsburgh, USA

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study explored whether school staff (teachers, principals, vice-principals, paraprofessionals, school counselors, and school social workers) experienced any challenges while working in a school setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from an online survey instrument and follow-up semi-structured interviews. A total of 207 educational staff from 30 different states in the U.S. completed the online questionnaire, and ten volunteered to be interviewed. The results revealed the challenges educational school staff experienced during the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 2020-present. The major challenges faced by staff relative to students was poor attendance and student mental health. Personal challenges experienced by the staff included concerns about contacting COVID-19 and infecting family members. A thematic analysis of the data led to the identification of four main themes: i) Blurred lines between home and school; ii) Mental health challenges should guide educational reform; iii) Obstacles to learning; and iv) Lack of support from home. These findings serve to begin a larger conversation about the needs of students and school personnel during a global pandemic.

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Corresponding Author:

Carianne Bernadowski
Robert Morris University
Pittsburgh, USA
Email: bernadowski@rmu.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had an international impact as businesses, governmental offices, and schools rapidly closed in an effort to decrease the spread of the virus. Sangeeta and Tandon [1] report that 1,725 billion learners were affected due to the closure of the schools, and in particular, the school closures in the U.S. affected nearly 55.1 million students in approximately 124,000 public and private schools, which led to K-12 schools embarking upon the largest online learning experience in history [2]. Institutions of learning at all levels had to reconceptualize “traditional pedagogy and modalities relative to teaching content” [3] while teachers and students quickly learned to navigate a variation of synchronous, asynchronous and hybrid modalities with little to no training. This swift transition to online teaching and learning was of paramount necessity to keep children and school personnel safe. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the ability of teachers to be agile, flexible, and the variability of their skillset was at the center of media attention. Many called teachers “heroes” as they made what many thought to be impossible a reality. But as time wore on and the pandemic continued, teachers began to feel attacked, ridiculed and often underappreciated for fighting for their rights as professionals. In particular, educators faced a myriad of challenges both personal and professional that are still permeating the profession today [4]. This led to many teachers leaving the profession for other opportunities.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher attrition was a concern among educational leaders. In 2014, The U.S. Department of Education reported an ongoing national teacher shortage that has existed for several years [5]. Teacher turnover is a national concern as more and more educational professionals are experiencing burnout in their profession and attrition has both academic and financial consequences for schools [6]. Often teachers leave the profession due to low salaries, problematic working conditions, unsupportive administration, and insufficient pathways to promotion compared to their professional counterparts [7], [8]. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals [9], 8% of teachers leave the profession annually, and more than 50% quit teaching before reaching retirement.

The teacher shortage is compounded by fewer college students interested in the education profession. Nearly every state in the U.S. has experienced shockingly low enrollment rates in teacher preparation programs. In a 2016 the National Survey of College Freshmen, the number of students who declared education as a major had reached its lowest point in 45 years, and, in 2018, there were 33% less students enrolled in teacher preparation programs than in 2010. In particular, Pennsylvania reported a dramatic decrease in initial teacher certifications. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), the number of Instructional I and II certificates dropped 67% between 2010 and 2019 [10].

School personnel working conditions has led to the mass exodus from the profession. During the COVID-19 pandemic the move from in-person learning to remote learning exacerbated teaching and learning challenges in unprecedented ways leaving educators to scramble to re-create their teaching plans [11] in an already tenuous environment of working conditions for teachers. Previous research points to a mismatch between teachers' background and those of their students [12], [13], which leads many educators to feel ill-equipped to handle the diverse environments in which they often teach. This can lead to feelings of vulnerability in these settings [14]. Moreover, issues such as inadequate resources and time [15], subpar facilities [16], poor leadership [17], and/or lack of effective professional development and mentoring opportunities [18] and the added stress of the COVID-19 pandemic may have forced some educators to reconsider staying in the classroom.

Finally, teacher burnout became a much-discussed topic during the pandemic. News media outlets bombarded the public with images and videos of teachers leaving the classrooms in mass. The media blamed the pandemic but research over the past twenty years illustrates a growing trend that teachers were experiencing long-term occupational stress [19], [20]. Burnout, both emotional [20] and physical [21], puts immense pressure on teachers' motivation, performance, and job satisfaction. Researchers [22] posit that teachers' satisfaction with their jobs impacts retention which leads to burnout and eventually departure from the profession. Compounded by other factors such as isolation in the classroom, emotional exhaustion [23], and student behaviors [24], the pandemic may have magnified these issues. This paper highlights the myriad of personal and professional challenges teachers and staff faced and offers suggestions as schools move through a global pandemic.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of the study was to examine the personal and professional challenges teachers and other school professionals faced while working during a global pandemic. The researcher implemented a QUAN-QUAL descriptive mixed methods study involving descriptive survey research and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The target population for the survey portion of the study consisted of school personnel who worked directly with children in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative portion of the study focused on voluntary participants from the sample of survey respondents. Two research questions, in particular, were explored: i) What professional challenges did school professionals face during the COVID-19 pandemic?; and ii) What personal challenges did school professional face during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.1. Questionnaire respondents

The survey instrument was created using Question Pro and consisted of eight demographic questions, eight select-all-that-apply items, seven multiple-choice items, and four open-ended questions. The target population was K-12 educational professionals (teachers, school counselors, school social workers, vice-principals, principals, and paraprofessionals), working in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. To recruit participants, the researchers sent email invitations and also posted the survey link on k-12 educational professional Facebook groups and LinkedIn.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit school personnel who were employed in public or private schools, and then snowball sampling was utilized. While there is no guarantee that using social media and Listserv platforms and snowball sampling ensures all the respondents were school personnel, there is also little reason to believe individuals not employed in a school would be interested in completing the survey. Ultimately, 302 respondents started the questionnaire and 207 completed it from 30 states in the U.S. (69%

completion rate). Of these, 87% (n=180) identified as female and 13% identified as male (n=27). Most participants (42%; n=87) were between the ages of 45 and 54 years old, 34% were 55 years and older (n=23). The remaining 13% were between 18 and 34 (n=27). Seventy nine percent (n=161) of participants identified as White, 14% (n=29) identified as Black, and 10% identified as Other (n=10 biracial, n=4 Asian, n=3 Hispanic/Latin-X). The majority (61%; n=126) reported they were employed as teachers, 14% (n=29) reported they were school counselors, 14% (n=29) identified as social workers, 9% (n=19) classified their jobs as paraprofessionals and 2% (n=4) were administrators. These professionals reported that 92% (n=191) worked in a public school and 8% (n=16) worked in a private school. Respondents ranged in years working in education. Forty two percent (n=86) have been working in education for 20 years or more, 22% (n=45) for 15-19 years, 22% (n=45) for 10-14 years, and 14% (n=10) have worked in education for less than ten years.

2.2. Interview participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants who volunteered. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to discuss their perceptions of working during a pandemic. Eight of the ten participants identified as white female teachers, one participant identified as an African American teacher, and one participant identified as a white male administrator.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Quantitative results

Tables 1-2 show results from all respondents to the questionnaire items. For all items, number of respondents (n) and percentages (%) are presented. Counts, percentages, medians, means, standard deviations, and sample sizes of respondents are provided for each questionnaire item. To provide context respondents were first asked what challenges they believed students faced while teaching throughout the pandemic. Respondents were asked to choose all that apply. Table 1 indicates that only two respondents (.10%) report no perceptions of student challenges while the remaining respondents reported multiple challenges. Multiple answers were permitted and a total of 1,985 responses were recorded to this question SD=4.272; M=9.059.

Table 1. Perceptions of student challenges

Item	N	%
I have not experienced any challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic	2	0.10%
Students disrespect/defiance toward you	112	5.64%
Students disrespect/defiance toward other adults	142	7.15%
Students physically fighting other students	115	5.79%
Students verbally arguing with you	109	5.49%
Students verbally arguing with one another	143	7.20%
Students not complying with your rules	119	5.99%
Poor student attendance	179	9.02%
Student learning loss	176	8.87%
Students refusal to follow school rules (unrelated to COVID-19 restrictions)	131	6.60%
Students refusal to follow COVID-19 protocols (social distancing, and wearing a mask)	133	6.70%
Students lack of interest in learning	163	8.21%
Students physically assaulting staff	65	3.27%
Students recording video on their phones (Fights)	74	3.73%
Students general disruptive behavior (in classrooms and other areas in the school)	144	7.25%
Students mental health (anxiety and depression)	178	8.97%
Total	1,985	100%
Mean: 9.059 Confidence interval @ 95%: [8.871-9.247] Standard deviation: 4.272 Standard error: 0.096		

Most notable and ranked the highest among school personnel responses was the occurrence of poor attendance during the pandemic n=179; 9.02% followed closely by the second highest, which was student mental health n=178; 8.97%. Finally, ranked third was students' lack of interest in learning 163; 8.21%. The biggest concern for school personnel during the pandemic was contacting COVID-19 at work n=194; 10.04% followed by concerns of bringing home COVID-19 to their family n=147; 9.91%. School personnel were equally concerned about the COVID-19 restrictions implemented in the school building and teaching students while they were in quarantine n=130; 8.76% respectively. Four respondents 0.27% noted they did not experience any challenges while working in a school during the pandemic.

Table 2. indicates the challenges school personnel faced relative to COVID-19 and the work place.

Item	N	%	
I have NOT experienced any challenges while working within my work setting during the COVID-19 Pandemic	4	0.27%	
Poor communication from your school district	115	7.75%	
Covid restrictions (wearing masks and social distancing)	130	8.76%	
Concerns about contracting COVID at work	149	10.04%	
Concerns about missing work due to COVID (either you or a family member contracting it)	125	8.42%	
Concerns about bringing COVID home to your family	147	9.91%	
Teaching students who are quarantining due to COVID	130	8.76%	
Receiving make-up work from students who are quarantining due to COVID	89	6.00%	
Concerns about poor school bus transportation for students	105	7.08%	
Issues with other staff	51	3.44%	
Inability to properly uphold mandated COVID restrictions	72	4.85%	
Ineffective/lack of mandated COVID restrictions	50	3.37%	
Poor communication from my school's nurse	24	1.62%	
Poor communication from your school administrator (principal/vice-principal)	51	3.44%	
School staff not adhering to district COVID-19 procedures (notifying staff and sending kids home)	58	3.91%	
My district's discipline policy	99	6.67%	
Poor communication from your school district leaders	85	5.73%	
Total	1,484	100%	
Mean: 8.168	Confidence Interval @ 95%: [7.931-8.404]	Standard deviation: 4.647	Standard error: 0.121

3.2. Qualitative findings

Findings from ten semi-structured interviews and the open-ended questionnaire responses produced four themes. They are: i) Blurred lines between home and school; ii) Mental health challenges should guide educational reform; iii) Obstacles to learning; and iv) Lack of support from home. The themes were developed from thematic analysis conducted with both sets of qualitative data. Overall, the qualitative and quantitative findings support the need for support systems for schools.

3.2.1. Blurred lines between home and school

Theme one, blurred lines between home and school, was apparent in the interviews. Participants n=9 reported often trying to do enough to “*stay afloat*,” “*stay one step ahead of students*,” and “*keep swimming*.” Participants reported feeling exhausted, anxiety ridden, and struggling in many areas of personal and professional life as home and work became one. Participant 6 reported, “*My biggest personal challenge was balance work-life balance. Putting down the computer and taking time for my family and myself. I can't draw the line in the sand and I know I have to do it. My health often suffers when I overwork. All work and no play*.” Moreover, Participant 2 stated “*working 24 hours a day because work was at home*.” Work-life balance was echoed in all responses. One open-ended respondent stated, “*The overall challenge that the world expects educators to work like we did pre-COVID. More work, still less pay and a mass teacher/staff exodus. We have no division between home and work anymore*.”

3.2.2. Mental health challenges should guide educational reform

All n=10 participants mentioned their own mental health, as well as students' mental health, was in jeopardy during the pandemic. Social isolation and lack of motivation was revealed as culprits for both teachers and students. Participant 3 stated, “*Well in middle school there are always social issues but the social media is the real issue. Too much time on Snapchat or TikTok and not interacting with humans. They are consumed with what each other are doing at every minute of every day. It affects motivation and mental health. I know it become worse during the COVID shutdown*.” Likewise, Participant 8 said, “*It is important that districts understand that everyone in the building is struggling mentally and the money should be spent on fixing those issues first and foremost*.” That sentiment was heard from other participants such as “*use COVID money for mental health improvement in schools*” and “*we all need help and nobody is helping or maybe they don't know how*.” An open-ended response on the questionnaire stated, “*Unmet student needs is at the center of the issue more so than any years previous to the pandemic- such as mental health support, but also food insecurity, isolation and lack of support or supervision while students were at home and parents were working*.” Another stated, “*Higher number of undiagnosed mental health issues and families unwilling to work with teachers to get services. No supports from district*.” These opinions were heard throughout the interviews.

3.2.3. Obstacles to learning

All participants n=10 mentioned obstacles to learning which included inequity and access to technology and internet service, behavior issues, and learning loss. Participant 10 stated, “*The kids hit each other, say mean things to each other. They are downright mean to each other and the adults in the*

building. Following directions is the hardest thing for them right now and I don't know why." Likewise, Participant 4 stated "With my case load, behaviors are often an issue. I don't think the behaviors are different but they are more often I would say. I have to do a lot of redirection this year, but it could be related to them not having to sit in a chair at home or playing on their phones while online. For the most part, my kids are learning all over again how to act in school. I have to remind them the difference between home and school language a lot." This sentiment was apparent throughout the interviews by all participants. An open-ended response on the questionnaire stated, "District and state leaders are acting as if this is a 'normal' year, business as usual when in fact it is NOT! The pressures to show student growth and high academic performance is like no other time in my 24 years in education! It's heartbreaking." Another stated, "Students are apathetic about learning because they have been passed to the next grade for the last 2 years without doing any of the work and they think that will continue. There is no discipline for anything and there is no support from admin." The obstacles of learning served as one of the many frustrations apparent in the interviews.

3.2.4. Lack of support from home

A theme that was prevalent during the interviews was the frustration of school personnel in the level of support from parents/caregivers. Nine participants mentioned that there was little to no support and/or communication during this time. "Parents were overwhelmed, I understand, but we needed help and continue to need help to deal with behaviors in the building," stated P3. Often considered an essential and important element of education at all levels, many emphasized their frustration with the lack of communication between home and school. A strong home-school connection is a staple of effective teaching and student achievement. P7 expressed their frustration, "I was struggling, the kids were struggling, and the parents were struggling. We have to be a team and I feel like I am swimming against the current every day." Throughout the interviews, school personnel were quick to acknowledge that parents were "doing their best to stay afloat" but they also reinforced the notion that schools, in particular teachers, needed the support from students' homes.

4. DISCUSSION

Questionnaire data provide some insight about school personnel's perceptions about teaching during a pandemic and the time period since then. Open-ended responses and in-depth interviews provided additional insight about these areas, and data suggested that personal obstacles and barriers for both teachers and students often stands in the way of learning in schools. Mental health concerns, student learning loss, and lack of work-life balance were significant issues. Further, interview data allowed topics to be explored more in-depth, and concerns and frustrations became apparent.

As such, our research has several key findings. School personnel working conditions, specifically teachers, post pandemic should be at the forefront of school administration's agenda. It is imperative teachers, and other adults working in the school building, are treated with respect and dignity. Staff reported a concern that they would take COVID-19 home to family families, especially those immunocompromised. To ask staff to put their own health and the health of those they love was an enormous request. This had a ripple effect and potentially influenced the mental health of those working in schools and the children who attend those schools. Moreover, lack of work-life balance may have also impacted mental health. Working conditions include the sociological, political, and psychological features of the work environment [16] and this study revealed that working conditions diminished during the pandemic. School personnel want to feel appreciate in their workplace, yet the demands of returning to work amid a pandemic may have had the opposite effect.

Another key finding was teacher burnout that may have been brought on by a number of factors found in this study. In particular, the absence of work-life balance, safety concerns, mental health concerns, student behaviors, student attendance and concerns of illness may have pushed some teaching professionals to feel the effects of burnout to then consider leaving the profession. Teacher burnout has become evident as attrition rates have skyrocketed and reported teacher turnover to increase from 16% to upwards of 54% in 2022 due in large part to the pandemic and demands amid virtual and online teaching. The emotional demands took a toll on many experienced and veteran teachers. Moreover, the increase of blended and asynchronous learning formats in many districts may also contribute to the attrition of veteran teachers.

Finally, parental involvement is of utmost important in this study's findings. When parents and teachers have open lines of communication, children positively respond. Often children will value and respect education and understand the importance of working hard in school [24], [25] when education is valued in the home. The importance of working as a team (parents and schools) have academic and emotional benefits that extend beyond school walls, and as parental involvement increases so does student achievement

and behavior [26]. Post pandemic is an important time to consider how schools and families can better collaborate with schools to overcome issues related to the overall social and emotional wellbeing of all those who spend their days in school buildings.

Data from the semi-structured interviews also revealed the concern for school personnel's abilities to deal with children who faced trauma before and after the pandemic. Unfortunately, teachers often do not receive adequate training and report being ill-prepared to support children who are experiencing trauma [27], [28]. Moreover, training for educators is central to reduce the likelihood of life-threatening impacts of trauma on school children [29] and training is often lacking in professional development opportunities. These issues are often beyond schools' professional abilities.

5. CONCLUSION

At the center of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and other school staff were on the frontlines of first teaching children from afar and then welcoming them back into brick-and-mortar buildings. These transitions were difficult and often problematic. Once students returned to schools, many issues for adults and children become apparent and often reported in the news media. This study is one small piece of the puzzle and the fallout from this trying time in our history will reverberate for years to come. This is a starting point and provides a pathway to examine what all involved in schools needs now and in the future.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS



Carianne Bernadowski    holds the rank of University Professor at Robert Morris University. She is the coordinator of the Secondary English Teacher Certification Program and the Reading Specialist Program. She also serves as the Coordinator of the Peirce Center for Structured Reading Teacher Training, which specializes in training teachers to work with children with specific reading disabilities. Dr. Bernadowski teaches undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students in literacy and research methodology. She holds a Ph.D. from The University of Pittsburgh, a M.A. in Reading Education from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, and a B.A. in Journalism and Communications/Secondary Education from Point Park College. Dr. Bernadowski has written numerous peer reviewed journals and books, serves on various editorial boards and works as a consultant in early literacy and adolescent intervention and remediation. She can be contacted at email: bernadowski@rmu.edu.



Nena Hisle    has 35 years of experience working with inner-city and suburban youth across the city of Pittsburgh and vicinity. She has worked for Pittsburgh Public Schools for the past 25 years, spending 5 years as a middle school world cultures teacher, and 2 years as a high school counselor. The past 17 years have been spent working at the same middle school as a school counselor. Dr. Hisle earned her PhD in Instructional Management & Leadership from Robert Morris University in 2020 where she researched the impact of Racial Microaggressions on Black and White teachers working in an urban school district. In 2021, she started Eye on Equity Consulting, LLC, where she conducts diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings on topics such as: microaggressions, racial microaggressions, unconscious bias, racial trauma, & cultural competence for educators. She can be contacted at email: nhisle1@pghschools.org.