

## Experiences of Teachers While Teaching at Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the experiences of teachers as they transitioned to teaching online. The researchers investigated the experiences of 81 teachers of grades 4-12 in South Texas while teaching at home during the pandemic. An online survey using a 3-point scale, posed questions to teachers about their experiences with administrative support, technical difficulties, communications capabilities, and personal wellbeing under pandemic protocols. Findings showed that teachers experienced a lack of administrative support and reported deteriorating wellbeing conditions. Daily contact with students and colleagues and weekly contact with parents was reported. Decreased social time was experienced by teachers as were increased stress and frustration levels. Most respondents observed different online learning capabilities among students from different social backgrounds. We conclude that teaching from home offers additional stress factors for teachers which- if this type of teaching needs to be equally effective to classroom teaching- will require guidance, administrative encouragement, and assistance in maintaining stable levels of wellbeing. Future research may consider the impact of such support mechanisms on teacher effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Teaching during pandemic; Remote teaching; Teacher wellbeing.

## 1. Introduction

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has continued to spread across the world at a startling pace. The impact of the pandemic resulted to dramatic changes such as society, economy and education (Minhyun *et al.*, 2021). The sudden closure of schools has produced many challenges among schools and school districts. A crucial challenge has caused teachers along with students to adapt and transition to an online learning format. This change has impacted both the physical and mental health of teacher educators. Educational systems were unprepared for the challenges presented by moving to remote learning. As countries shut down, the financial and social emotional stress from the lack of necessities and ability to work coupled with fear of contracting the virus overwhelmed communities. With a sudden and abrupt change, the mental health of educators and students has suffered: stress, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, fear, and many other factors contributed to mental health decline. The following sections of this article include literature on the impact on education and the perspectives of teachers, methodology used in the study, results and findings, discussion, and conclusion and recommendations.

### 1.1. Impact on Education Systems

Educational systems throughout the world were negatively impacted by COVID-19. In response to the spread of the virus, sudden school closures caused students to suffer academically; the disparity in the ability to access remote learning became evident with students from lower socio-economic status lacking in access to Broadband access and devices (Patrick *et al.*, 2021). Rural communities in particular struggled with remote learning as reported by the American Community Survey (ACS) (Amarko and Willyard, 2020). In 2019, 73% of students in rural communities had broadband services at home compared with 85% of suburban students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). In a 2020 report, students reported educational problems such as lack of time, quality lessons, face to face instruction, and experience with remote learning (Hebebcı *et al.*, 2020). Students also struggled with social-

emotional issues and fear for their general health and welfare as the virus spread globally. The loss of the regular school setting caused stress, anxiety, depression, hostility, and sensitivity to personal interactions (Achterberg *et al.*, 2021).

The response to COVID-19 disrupted the normal functions of school. School systems in the United States were not prepared to handle school shutdowns. Public school district staff, parents, and teachers were concerned about their abilities to provide students with effective educational experiences through distance learning (Dorn *et al.*, 2020; Hipolito-Delgado *et al.*, 2021). Students adapted to remote learning utilizing online platforms such as Canvas, Google Classroom, Google Meet, WebX, and Zoom. Transitioning to remote learning with limited Broadband access and devices proved to be one of the biggest challenges faced by students and educators. Parents reported a significant increase in anxiety, depression, hostility, and interpersonal sensitivity as they facilitated learning from home (Achterberg *et al.*, 2021). Students reported declines in emotional wellbeing and increased feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Bertling *et al.*, 2020; Bishop, 2021). Guardians and parents expressed concerns regarding the amount and quality of schoolwork and instruction as students struggled to adapt to remote learning (Bailey and Shaw, 2020). Additionally, students with specific learning disabilities faced greater learning gaps as remote learning did not meet their needs the way it had before the pandemic. Educational systems were unprepared for the challenges presented by moving to remote learning.

## 1.2. Perspective of Educators

Educational systems were unprepared for the challenges presented by moving to remote learning. From the perspective of educators, lockdown dramatically increased work-related stress due to the abrupt change from regular learning to remote learning. Teachers were faced with finding and keeping students online and engaged, provide hard copies of lessons to students who did not have devices and/or Broadband access, take attendance, and provide discipline all while delivering differentiated high-quality lessons with neither experience nor a framework to teach via remote learning.

The pandemic exacerbated the normal challenges, barriers, and hardships experienced by educators. Adapting to provide classes online in record time caused teachers stress (Besser *et al.*, 2020). Teachers also reported an increased workload and accompanying symptoms of stress such as sleep disturbance, depression, and anxiety (Ozamiz-Etxebarria *et al.*, 2021). Teachers who were trained to deliver face to face instruction, struggled with the transition to remote learning and keeping their students engaged. In addition to quickly learning how to troubleshoot internet connectivity among students without appropriate Broadband access while delivering instruction online instruction, teachers were also tasked with providing social service resources to their students and families (Gross and Opalka, 2020; Hamilton *et al.*, 2020; Malkus *et al.*, 2020).

Pandemic-induced remote learning revealed the importance of teacher-student relationship in the educational setting and the need to leverage resources in the community to support students and caregivers. Bishop (2021), found live video lessons to be more effective for student learning than pre-recorded videos in their study of middle schoolers in China. Bishop (2021), findings also underscored the centrality of human connection and noted that the live teacher-student relationship promoted communication and instant feedback, enabling teachers to “truly assume the role as a mentor and a companion”. Adding to the stress of remote learning, teachers, accustomed to working collaboratively, discovered that connecting with co-workers and school personnel was difficult during the quarantine period. Overall, quarantine and isolation during the pandemic had adverse consequences with regards to mental health, forming connections, and communication in students, families and educators alike. Given the importance of the transition to teaching at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers examined the experiences of teachers as they work to adjust to these sudden changes.

This study intends to offer a more in-depth understanding of how teachers in rural US school districts adapted to the sudden change in teaching environment, addressing technical, motivational, and overall health conditions after one-year of COVID-19 restrictions.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Instrument and Data Collection

With the focus on a rural education environment, an online survey (SurveyMonkey) was developed to measure experiences teaching via remote applications (computer and iPad) during the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 30-question survey covered domains of administrative support, technical difficulties, communications capabilities, personal wellbeing, cultural differences, and individual preparedness. Questions were selected from a national databank (TNTP, 2021), adapted to meet the COVID-19 crisis situation, and designed around a three-point ordinal scale. The questions were evaluated by two practitioners working in the region for face validity. IRB approval for the study was received as well as concurrence of school leadership at the district level. Forty-two school districts in South Texas were approached and invited to participate in the initial round of surveys which were distributed in the middle of 2021.

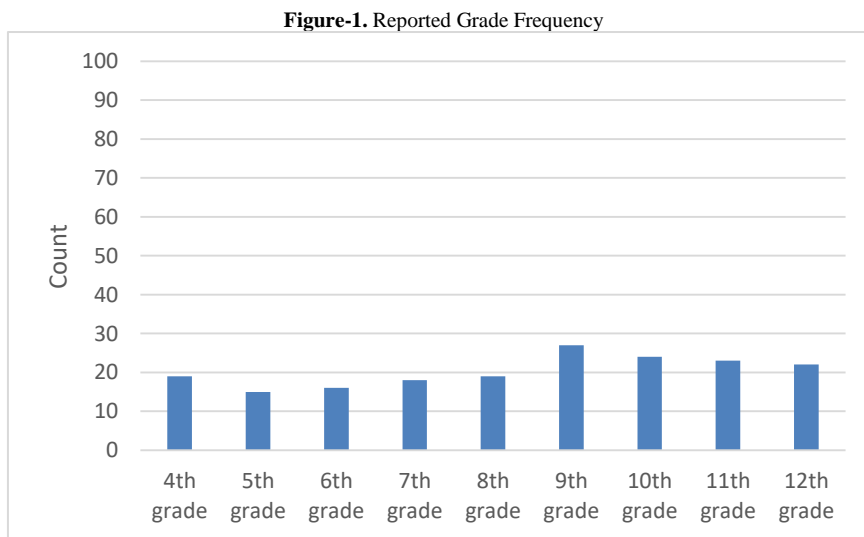
### 2.2. Population and Sample

The targeted population for the current study included teachers working in 13 counties of South Texas, US. South Texas is diverse, yet unique. Social vulnerability indices of counties included ranged from 58.6 (Nueces County) to 83.1 (Brooks County), indicating a higher social vulnerability compared to the state average score of 42.8 (Federal Emergency Management Administration, 2021).

The survey distribution area covered Texas Education Agency Region 2. In Region 2, 67% of students are economically disadvantaged. In terms of race and ethnicity, 75% are Hispanic, 20% White, and 2% African American. Students designated as needing special education, comprise 11% of Region 2 students. Annually there is a 2% drop-out rate among school aged students (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Demographic information collected from teachers was limited to gender, ZIP code, and year of birth. Age was determined from the year of birth.

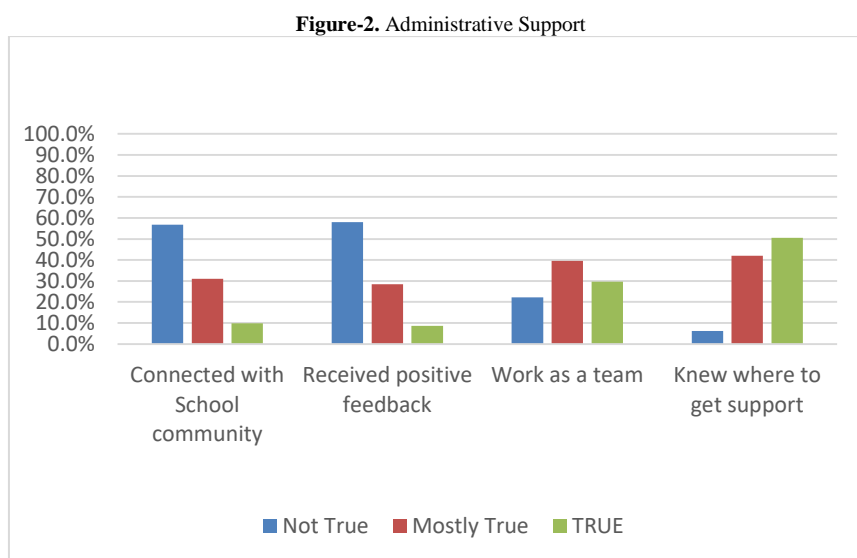
### 3. Results

A total of 81 schoolteacher responses were included in the analysis. Participants reported teaching one or more grade level. Grades taught leaned towards higher grade levels as can be noted in Figure 1, Reported Grade Frequency.



#### 3.1. Administrative Support

Fifty-eight percent of the teachers indicated a lack of positive feedback on their efforts to teach from home (See Figure 2). In addition, 57% indicated that they did not feel connected to the school community while 69% felt they were still working as a team; and 93% indicated that they knew who to touch base with in case they needed advice. As far as touching base regularly with their supervisor, 83% indicated to be in touch with their administrator once a week or more, while 65% indicated to be in touch daily with their colleagues. Yet, 36% stated that their immediate supervisor did not check in with them on a regular basis.



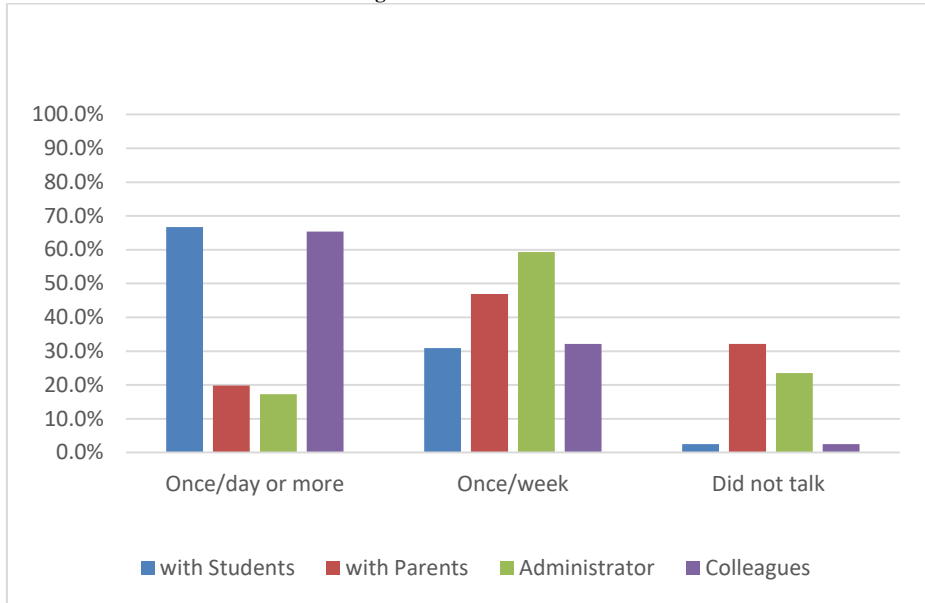
#### 3.2. Technology

Despite the fact that many of the respondents worked in rural or semi-rural regions of Texas, a lack of technology did not appear a barrier: 24% indicated to have good internet connectivity while 47% reported this to be mostly true and 30% indicated the opposite. Likewise, 83% of teachers did not feel that their computer or tablet was a barrier to their teaching capabilities- 52% reported this to be mostly true; while 16% indicated this to be not true. In regard to connecting with students, 59% of teachers indicated that having good internet to communicate with students was not a barrier; 32% indicated this to be mostly true; while 5% indicated internet connectivity to be a deterrent to interacting with students.

### 3.3. Student Communications and Preparedness

Of the respondents, 67% indicated to be in contact with their students once a day or more, while 31% indicated to touch base with students once a week as can be noted in Figure 3, Communications. Forty-seven percent (47%) of teacher respondents indicated to be in contact with parents once a week and less than one in five reported daily parent contact. Sixty-four (64%) of teachers reported parental support for student remote teaching as true or mostly true with only one third of respondents indicating that this was not true. Only 14% reported to be comfortable to advise students and parents on any social needs, 23% indicated this to be mostly true, while 37% indicated not to be comfortable in those situations.

Figure-3. Communications



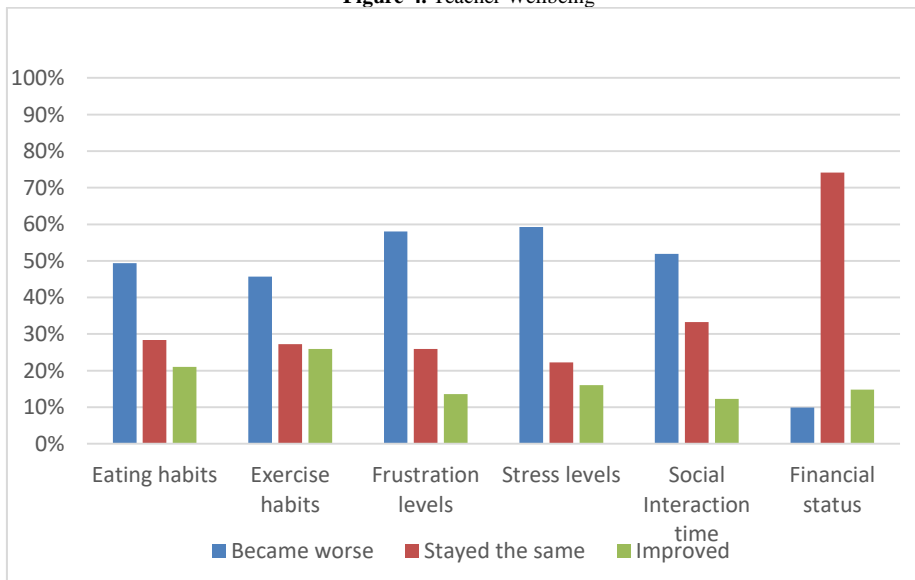
### 3.4. Cultural Differences

Addressed in a single question, the majority of respondents noted cultural differences in remote learning capabilities: 34% indicated this to be mostly true, while 38% indicated this to be true. Furthermore, 28% of teacher considered the statement that students had other responsibilities that conflicted with schoolwork as true, while 40% considered this somewhat true.

### 3.5. Teacher Wellbeing While Working From Home

Consistently, responses indicated a deterioration of personal wellness while interacting from home: 49% of respondents indicated that their eating habits had worsened; 58% indicated increased frustration levels; while 59% reported a worsening of their stress levels. Figure 4 illustrates these percentages for Teacher Wellbeing. With 82% of respondents indicating that their class preparation time had increased, 52% indicated that their time to interact socially had worsened. Different from other affected population segments, 74% reported an unchanged financial status during this period.

Figure-4. Teacher Wellbeing



## 4. Discussion

Though limited to descriptive quantitative analysis based on survey data, this study supports previously reported findings on the sudden change in learning environment experienced by teachers. Lockdown conditions increased stress (Besser *et al.*, 2020) of teachers. The feeling of not receiving positive feedback and the perception of not being connected to the school community further added to stress and frustration as reported by the majority of teachers. Researchers report that these were already existing conditions aggravated by the pandemic (Johnson *et al.*, 2005). Increased preparation times and daily contact with students and colleagues along with a reduction in social time reported by the teachers added to their stress and frustration. Collectively, a situation in which teachers were in duress and isolation was the picture painted about the environment when teachers were teaching from home. Most teachers reported an unchanged financial picture. This in contrast to other segments of this population who experienced layoffs in the service and hospitality industries as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

This survey only touched on socio-cultural differences among students. However, the responses support data reported by Kemper Patrick *et al.* (2021) with one-third of respondents indicating that socio-cultural difference impacted the learning capabilities to be true, another one-third stating this to be mostly true. A contributing factor may be that the U.S. Census Bureau (2021) Household Pulse survey shows that in Texas 71% of Black and 72% of Hispanic population reported difficulty in paying household expenditures versus 40% of White households. The report further notes that younger adults report higher incidences of anxiety and depression.

Consistently, respondents indicated a worsening of their wellbeing. These findings are in line with other reported studies. Findings show that teachers' pandemic coping capabilities are dependent on their ability to manage student behavior. Given that we report a deterioration of eating habits, exercise, and social contact; and, associated increased stress and frustration levels, understanding these interrelated responses might assist teachers in the future in their awareness, preparation, and reaction to challenging teaching environments. Therefore, recommended is further analysis of associations between and among these variables and qualitative research which would explore responses from the voices of teachers.

## 5. Conclusions

The findings within this study showed that teachers experienced a lack of administrative support and reported deteriorating wellbeing conditions. Daily contact with students and colleagues, and weekly contact with parents was reported. Decreased social time was experienced by teachers as were increased stress and frustration levels. Most teacher respondents observed different online learning capabilities among students from different social backgrounds. These findings support the existing research to date and offer a more granular view among specific areas of need.

## Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

Frustration and stress experienced from teachers due to the transition to online teaching may be alleviated with more time to prepare and positive feedback from supervisors and colleagues. The researchers of this study recommend teacher supervisors check-in with teachers working at home so that positive feedback be sought and given. Positive feedback costs nothing except time but may benefit teachers to continue doing their best in precarious circumstances such as a pandemic. Increased preparation time for teachers costs real money but may be well-worth the investment to retain teachers who care about the quality of learning.

Based on the findings of this study, future research is recommended in determining opportunities to address cultural differences of student challenges. A qualitative research approach will be beneficial in hearing the voice of the teachers over time to learn more about these differences. Recommended for practice is the provision of an online wellness program for teachers given the reported deteriorating health status of teachers when teaching from home. Incentives for goal setting could be included, as costs to replace teachers are likely greater than the cost of such wellness programs. Additionally, an offering around telehealth and tele-counseling should be considered for teachers who may experience mental health related concerns.

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