

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

A Year in the Life of a Veteran Teacher: Insights from the Pandemic Robbie Murphy, Teacher

In May, 2020 Emma Goldberg wrote in the New York Times: “Teachers find themselves at the heart of the national crisis—responsible not just for children’s education and well-being, but also for essential childcare as parents struggle to get back to work” (Goldberg, 2020). The pandemic of 2020-21 has shone a light on the many roles and relationships that make up the educational ecosystem in America. Newspaper headlines about schools, from March 2020 to the present day, have revealed an undulating emotional landscape as parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers, many with overlapping roles, grapple with the personal and systemic impacts of the crisis. Within a context of urgent need and fear, these stakeholders share a commitment to the education and to the physical-emotional well-being of students. But they also hold different views on how to cope, with their own needs, fears and priorities varying over time. For me, a veteran teacher of young children, this public debate about the essential work of elementary schools points, more than ever, to the importance of understanding the complex work of teachers.

In the first nine months of the crisis, teachers have been both beloved and maligned. In the earliest days, they were applauded as “heroes,” capable of pivoting to remote learning and maintaining classroom community. Parents, new to the role of teacher, gained appreciation for what it takes to engage children in learning, understanding in new ways the patience, content knowledge and ingenuity it takes to work effectively with young people. But as time went on, the negative impact of school-at-home on some children and their parents increased. The push to re-open schools emphasized the teacher’s role as an “essential worker,” and educators—concerned about safety—were criticized for an “unwillingness” to return to the classroom.

As a 65-year-old second-grade independent-school teacher, living in a rural community with limited access to internet, I have one story to tell. But my own story resonates, I know, with those experienced by thousands of teachers across the country and the globe. This document of my own evolving perspective during the pandemic points, I contend, to a broader question about schooling: What is essential about the teaching work of an elementary school educator? The essay tracks the trajectory of my own experience, starting from the first days of the shutdown, through the summer, and into the fall of 2021, when I made the painful decision to retire rather than accept the health risks of returning to my school. Along the way I offer excerpts from my own journals and correspondence during this period as well as headlines from the New York Times, tracing the ways in which my own evolving feelings and experiences played out in the country at large.

March 2020

“Teachers’ Herculean Task: Moving 1.1 Million Children to Online School”

On March 29, 2020, this New York Times headline underscored the sudden dilemma faced by teachers across the United States. In the article, journalist David Chen described the reality of teachers scrounging through closets, garages and attics to assemble teaching materials and create a semblance of a classroom from their dining room tables and bedrooms. Despite the makeshift resources, there remained an expectation to deliver meaningful instruction. He wrote:

[T]he city’s 75,000 teachers’ are faced with a challenge unlike anything else in their careers: holding the attention of students from ages three to 18, educating them in accordance with guidelines, and providing them a patina of normalcy despite not having any of the control of a classroom setting. (Chen, 2020)

Teachers were being asked to pivot overnight to online teaching. Indeed, the word “pivot” was ubiquitous throughout the early days of the health crisis. Our lives were retooled with masks and hand sanitizer and plexiglass, restructured as we waited in lines to enter grocery stores with one-way aisles or chose to get curbside pick-up. Professional and personal lives merged as many found themselves setting up their workplace at home, sometimes combining extended family units, and often juggling multiple needs that literally stretched the bandwidth of their internet access. Many essential workers continued going to work, confounded and endangered by a lack of personal protective equipment.

Prior to this pivot, on the morning of March 13th, having scrambled to assemble “take-home” work expected to last our students two weeks, my class of second graders finished up an inquiry unit in engineering, “What makes sturdy towers?”. Students worked head-to-head, shoulder-to-shoulder, manipulating shared materials to create a tower that could withstand the “wind” created by a fan positioned in the classroom.

Ten days later, on March 23, I opened my first Zoom class and felt, after 30 years, like a first-year, unseasoned teacher, my heart pounding. Several days later, I wrote in my journal:

At first, distance learning felt remote. Standing at my desk, alone in a room, even if it is a comfortable room with familiar belongings, it felt strange talking out loud to those boxes on the screen. But they were talking back, and they were still the children I had known in a different rectangle, a classroom.

Like their former selves, these children wiggled, but they also hung upside down, met from bunk beds, back seats of cars, closely examined their wiggly or newly arriving teeth, appeared in front of the Golden Gate bridge or an aurora borealis. Some were underwater with sharks. And yet, they showed up every single morning ready to connect.

It was often hard to understand their “presence” and yet they were present.

Some turned video on and off, many changed their screen names to things like “I am getting a hamster tomorrow” or “Ms. Vanilla” or “Almost a third grader.”

With all these new identities, we still keep up the daily rituals of morning meeting. The helper chooses a greeting, often a favorite such as “ood-gay, orning-may,” and then I would “mute all,” hold up a popsicle stick with the name of a student to my camera, and one-by-one I would “unmute” children as they greeted each other by name. They did this, sometimes still hanging upside down, but they participated in this familiar process of being together, being heard, being seen.

...I am definitely not a “digital native,” and I find myself adopting teaching methods far outside my comfort zone. Based on conversations with some colleagues, I am not alone in this steep learning curve... For every minute of “teaching” I do, I spend exponentially more time figuring out how to use my instructional tools. This can make me feel “slow.” It deepens my empathy for students who struggle...digging myself out of that hole is a daily task...

Living in a rural community with outdated DSL lines, requires me to drive around finding hotspots so I can upload my “mini lessons” in twenty minutes, instead of the 4 hours and 30 minutes my computer indicates will be necessary. I am humbled and exhausted.

My goal as a teacher is to communicate to my students: you still have a community, there is some consistency in your life, and I will help you find a way to continue learning; and to communicate to their parents: here is a structure and some broad expectations for seven and eight year-olds who are JUST gaining independent learning skills. I am not only trying to meet my students’ needs, but feel that interfacing with parents, for this age group, is an essential part of supporting my students. Through surveys and phone calls to parents, I attempt to offer guidance about expectations, strategies for helping children tune into meetings and for working independently, fielding any suggestions of better ways to improve social connections from parents anxious to increase their children’s connection to peers ... as well as offering alternatives to those who are concerned by the number of screen hours their children are now consuming.

I don’t always know how or what to ask for to improve my situation, and I feel self-conscious about how much I needed to ask for. I am just trying to keep my head above water. Of course, all of this is happening in the context of monitoring loved ones, including one of my dearest friends who is struggling in an ICU to fight this virus. It’s a heartache.

Like many of my colleagues in those days, I tried to prioritize my students’ social-emotional health by re-establishing a sense of continuity and the presence of community by anchoring the day with the same structures and familiar routines of our morning meetings. With the collaboration of my teaching colleague, Maggie Bittel, we found meaningful ways to create new shared learning experiences, most notably starting each daily Zoom meeting by viewing the Cornell live-cam on a birdfeeder, in the Sapsucker Woods of upstate New York. Our curiosity about these birds led to a five-week research project on backyard birds. We adapted

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our non-fiction reading and writing units, and our “all-about” books became a Seesaw slideshow in which we demonstrated our skills paraphrasing informational texts and effectively using non-fiction text features. We found resources that met the developmental needs of our students, and we used new pedagogical methods to support their learning. As professional educators, we were able to rethink and translate the work of the classroom to a virtual setting for students and their parents.

In my school, many parents expressed appreciation. Most families found a way to get their children online every day. Some families were able to sustain minimal connection as they balanced jobs and/or multiple homes. Some children thrived (“I love school at home. I can ride my bike and then I can write better!”). A few parents shared new insights into their children’s attentional vulnerabilities. Other children and their families struggled to cope with the remote-ness of online learning, and some were not satisfied with the content being offered. Letter-writing (the kind with handwriting and postage stamps) was one way we continued to build writing skills and stay connected. One student wrote: “Dear Ms. Murphy, ... I am doing my work and I’m crying while I’m writing this letter to you cause I miss you [and] all my friends.” Holding children emotionally and academically to the end of the 2020-21 school year was no small task, and some parents, it seemed, were coming to understand the complexity of that work.

Our pivot worked well enough in the short term. But how, I wondered, could we sustain this over time, when we knew the huge importance of hands-on “head-to-head, shoulder-to-shoulder” experiences that characterize in-person learning at my school? It was very difficult to imagine.

April 2020

On April 28, 2020, a New York Times headline asserted “Frazzled Parents are Learning a Difficult Lesson: Teaching is Hard.” (Harris, 2020). Indeed, it now seemed that parents were gaining insight into the full complexity of what teachers do to sustain children’s engagement in learning. Parents had to negotiate the power struggles of wearing two hats as both teacher and parent while continuing their own work. “With teachers relegated to computer screens, parents have to play teacher’s aide, hall monitor, counselor and cafeteria worker—all while trying to do their own jobs under extraordinary circumstances.” Some of these parents were also teachers attempting to support the needs of their own families while sustaining both students and their parents in the remote learning environment.

By late April we had noticed a decided shift in stamina from all participants in this new classroom experience. There is a natural change occurring most years as the school year winds down, but in the spring of 2020, a new kind of weariness was noticeable. Every weekend, Maggie and I tweaked the schedule, trying to meet children’s academic, social and emotional needs. We added more individual and group instructional times. We provided “hang out” times for kids to draw and chat together with no academic agenda. Always aware of our own and parental concerns about the amount of screen time for young children, we tried to strike a balance of meeting the full range of needs without asking these young children to spend excessive amounts of time online. Some of our tweaks were welcome, but some parents, seeking steadiness and routine, found the ongoing adjustments a challenge.

The uptick in parent communications was both understandable and frankly burdensome. These emails might be about technology challenges or an inability to access resources; some parents wrote seeking support for how to provide help and feedback to their second grader—a very different dynamic coming from a parent rather than a teacher. Arriving at all hours of day and night, parents reported that things were feeling harder with children having more meltdowns and becoming increasingly resistant. In response to a parent seeking clarification on an assignment’s expectations, I wrote: “The idea is to try another draft [of the drawing]. If it feels hard, and she doesn’t want to start over, that’s fine. Not knowing how this is received at home makes it a bit hard to guide you. In school, we do two or three distinct drafts...but you are the best judge of what she can take on presently.” For the remote learning partnership to work, it was a necessity to offer coaching like this to our new “teaching assistants”—the children’s parents.

Some of the outreach was to families who were steadily withdrawing from the process altogether. For a variety of reasons—internet stability, multiple homes with two working parents, and dissatisfaction with either the content, or the amount of screen time—some children had a decreasing presence in Zoom school. We learned how to use a new platform “Seesaw” so students could more easily receive assignments and upload work. While some children responded enthusiastically and often, others shared next to nothing. One parent wrote, “I understood [Seesaw] was for submitting work, which I’m not interested in doing at this point...we may decide to bow out of this whole thing.” Sustaining a strong connection and a group identity through the end of the school year required a commitment to dealing with these new developments between teachers and parents, and re-charging the classroom batteries almost daily.

July 2020

By July, a headline in the New York Times (Jogee, 2020) focused on the tension between parental frustration and the health and safety of students and teachers: “How to Reopen the Economy Without Killing Teachers and Parents? This and other articles considered the acute tensions between the dire need for childcare so parents could return to work, the mental health of children isolated from their peers, and the legitimate healthcare concerns of staff and faculty.

For the educators in my school, gratitude for the relative success of the spring pivot to online teaching soon shifted to anxiety about effective, sustainable and safe practices for educating children in the fall. All stakeholders recognized the impact of isolation on children’s social and emotional health and shared concerns about their academic progress. They also saw the economic consequences of parents working (or no longer working) from home as well as the financial impact on an independent school as some families opted out of remote learning. Already a range of perspectives emerged on the risk factors for children and teachers, though everyone recognized a need to make accommodations for classroom safety.

Like so many communities across the country, strategies varied from school to school and from family to family. Throughout the summer, some schools worked to establish outdoor spaces. Other schools chose to anticipate fully remote instruction for the fall. My school anticipated a hybrid model and prepared for fully remote learning. Some parents had resources

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to create pods, putting up a tent and hiring a teacher, while others opted for home-schooling. There were clearly no one-size-fits-all answers to address the range of academic, social and safety concerns and beliefs.

Initially, thoughts of a fall re-opening meant envisioning and outfitting “safe” classrooms. As I attempted to anticipate my new socially distanced classroom, I made these reflections:

In June our teaching staff was asked to order supplies for a fluid, still unknown scenario. They suggested it it could involve fewer children at a time with staggered schedules. It might be a full group each day or it might be with them six-feet apart or three-feet apart. Masks would need to be mandatory and no student will be permitted to share materials. So... no shared community spaces—the morning meeting rug is gone, no classroom library or peace corner with finger mazes, pillows and listening center to support self-regulation.

Outfitting this new separate-but-together classroom is rushed. Without knowing exactly what teaching (and, please, some learning) might look like, we have to envision a “safe” place. Children will each have a yoga mat, and a plastic “surf” desk, and a plastic tub for holding their individual supplies for math, writing and science. Plastic because it can be disinfected more easily. This quick abandonment of natural materials in the service of “safety” seems to undo years’ worth of teaching and learning about the role of plastic in our world.

Which means: our core fall curriculum, centered on a service-learning project as the school recyclers, is no longer viable. We cannot collect recyclable containers and keep a running tally throughout the year. We cannot visit the Springfield Materials Recycling Facility to see where all the recycling goes. We will not be able go to the Smith College Museum of Art to see how artists repurpose materials.

Assembling an end-of-year slide show for the last day of remote learning in May brings tears to my eyes as I look at all the partnerships and small groups, hand-clapping and lap-sitting moments that characterize a second-grade classroom. “This just can’t happen next year,” I thought. How do you create a community in this new configuration of children as islands?

In the summer, administrators and the technology teacher at our school crafted extensive professional development, and teachers worked to learn these new tools to enhance student engagement in the remote setting for the coming school year. But the bottom line of getting children back into the classroom moved the conversation to safety. Assurances of safety—such as providing protective equipment, testing, agreed upon reliable metrics for monitoring air quality, and addressing the needs of high-risk individuals—requires reliable data. Data-driven decision-making assumes data that has been sufficiently tested (i.e., repeated trials). Because of both the political climate and this novel situation, confidence in decisions was undermined by the fluid and emergent nature of data. Differing interpretations, perhaps based on different data sources, created tension among stakeholders and amplified fears. Across the country, teacher fears were scrutinized and perceived as an unwillingness to support the dire need to

return children to school buildings.

Seeking a voice in the decision-making process about how to safely return in the fall, a large group of teachers at my school shared our concerns and offered a vision to our administrative team. Attempting to acknowledge the many constituencies and pressures they needed to respond to, we wanted to share our perspective on what a return to school might look like. Specifically, we wondered about the social-emotional impact of learning under the required social-distance guidelines, the financial costs of the adaptations, and the adequacies of building infrastructure. We described the range of personal circumstances faced by staff members that would make in-person teaching either too high of a risk or stress on family systems. We recognized our roles as caretakers enabling parents to return to work, but felt concern about responding to pressures too soon and encouraged seeking outdoor solutions and building on the successes of our early remote learning strategies.

September 2020

After hundreds of thousands of deaths in the U.S., the New York Times headlined its Opinion Page “For Teachers and Parents, a School Season of Fear and Anxiety” [September 1, 2020] summarizing a range of perspectives about returning to school. The arguments were clearly drawn: First, teachers are childcare workers, which makes their work essential. The presence of children in a safe school building every day allows parents to work. Second, classrooms have to be safe for teachers and students. How are these two realities reconciled? In our small school, we had some parents eager to have students back in the building, and others who clearly would not allow their children to return to an in-person model. The same was true for teachers. Getting the safety measure right was paramount. Administrators valiantly tried to respond to all stakeholders, but clearly that was not possible.

At a staff meeting over the summer, a colleague had referenced the death of an Arizona teacher after she returned to school and contracted Covid-19. Though we were offered statistics suggesting that rates of transmission in schools are low, I remember saying, “I know the risks are low, but I don’t want to be that data point.”

Throughout the fall, I taught remotely from my classroom space to access high-speed internet at my school, due to the ongoing challenges of inadequate service in my rural home community. Using these outdated DSL lines placed additional pressures on daily workloads and efficiencies that had already grown exponentially to meet the demands of teaching remotely. The pandemic opened my eyes to the realities of the digital divide in our country. For many rural Americans and low-income families, inequitable access to technology is a significant issue which directly impacts learning.

With my school’s intention to proceed with hybrid instruction, I no longer had an option for safely working in the school building. Within the limited timeframe given for making a decision, I was not able to get assurance of a safe alternative work environment that provided the necessary internet access. I could not responsibly remain teaching increasing the risk for myself and my 75-year-old husband, as well as my son and his family who had joined our “pod” (covid-safe familial bubble). Continuing full-time teaching from our limited bandwidth was not a viable option.

On September 29, a headline article in the New York Times by Eliza Shapiro reinforced a

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final, personal decision: “A Beloved Teacher Died From the Virus. Now Her School Confronts Reopening.” Reluctantly, I decided to leave the classroom after 31 years in a profession that I value deeply. In a resignation letter to my school community, I wrote:

Teaching is one of the greatest joys in my life. Spending my time exploring ideas, learning alongside and supporting children in the classroom, fills my spirit. Never, in my 31 years as an educator, could I imagine leaving a class mid-way through a school year, but I find myself having to make that decision as the safest choice for me and my family. There are times when we are presented with “choices,” in which none of the options feels like something one wants to choose. Such is the case for me presently. I truly regret that this decision disrupts children’s second-grade experience, particularly with all that they are presently navigating.

December 2020

Over the course of my nine months as a teacher during the pandemic, I witnessed teachers enlisting their professional knowledge about content, pedagogy and child development. They rose to the task of retooling themselves; figuring out what in the curriculum could be adapted into the remote world and what didn’t work at all; and designing new experiences that seemed a better fit for the new medium.

As I write these words, this story still unfolds. My school opened its doors to students and teachers, though parents were not allowed in the building. While I cannot speak first-hand about the experience of hybrid teaching, I know that it required yet another pivot as teachers sought best practices for this latest iteration of teaching and learning, while masked and simulcasting to remote learners. They did so without much time to prepare, continuing to think on their feet and working many hours behind the scenes to make it happen. They provided far more than the essential work of childcare. They continued the work of securing the foundation of academic, social and emotional learning for young children—even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Reflections

What have we learned from this year-long ordeal? We have learned that schools are not just buildings. Schools are expected to be places that do more than keep children safe from eight am to three pm. They are childcare centers in the fullest sense of those words. Taking care of our children requires nurturing their physical, academic, social and emotional well-being. Ideally, schools are places where children engage deeply in the world of ideas, places that nurture the next generation of thinkers, innovators, and caretakers. Skillful teachers are essential to creating schools that do all of these things.

There is a tendency, particularly in public debates, to compartmentalize the roles of elementary school teachers and to hold a reductionist view of what the work entails. Right now, “caretaker” in its most fundamental connotation is in the foreground. Parents need to return to work and legislators need to get the economy going. To do so, children need to be out of the home. Making schools a safe place for children and teachers is the priority. But, once in that building, the expectation is that school needs to be a safe place of teaching and learning.

As some parents learned early on in the pandemic, engaging children meaningfully in developmentally appropriate content requires pedagogical and content knowledge, a commitment to sustaining a learning community, and a deep sense of care for each child. School can be the secure base from which the work of teachers and students can flourish. Equally essential to the basic role of childcare provider is the professional work of teachers—work that allows children to develop their personal strengths and the skills of civil discourse by learning in community with others. Elementary school teachers guide children academically, socially and emotionally, creating the foundation for children to respect themselves, others and the environment. This foundational work, in my opinion, is essential for the flourishing of our communities.

What does it take to do all this? Teachers are expressing their fears and concerns about personal safety in an enclosed setting for prolonged hours. The “data” says it is safe, and enough teacher lives have been lost to the virus for educators to be legitimately afraid. Frustrated administrators under pressure from families and legislators to re-open may respond to teacher fears with statements such as “Feelings are not facts.” Some would say that this is the new reality, and the corona virus is a risk to be absorbed into the lives of teachers, just as they have absorbed the possibility of school shootings. Teaching in the context of fear is not new. In America, mass shootings in Columbine, Sandy Hook and Parkland each reinforced new classroom protocols for safety, including lockdown drills conducted by local law enforcement. Teachers have learned how to frame these intimidating practices so that children can see pro-active strategic rehearsals as one of the ways that communities take care of each other. (The irony is not lost that this care is necessitated by the profound disregard for human life). Elementary educators know how to create learning environments—even in the context of six-foot distancing, wearing masks, confinement-to-desks—and how to make these requirements as joyful and engaging as humanly possible. They know how to move the curriculum forward and lead rich discussions for all students—those who are physically present and those who choose to work remotely. Many teachers are resilient, caring and knowledgeable, and their first-person insights could provide essential insight to solving this and a range of educational issues.

A year into this pandemic, teachers are working from a place of exhaustion. The same misperception that associates teachers with dreamy hours, working eight am to three pm with summers off, perhaps frames a view that making effective pedagogical shifts from in-person to remote, from remote to hybrid, in a period of days, is a reasonable expectation and one done with minimal effort. It serves the entire education ecosystem well to put the complexity of this work into relief and to include the voices of these front-line workers at the decision-making table.

The pandemic offers us an opportunity to appreciate the profession of elementary-school teaching in all its complexity—work that requires ongoing training to sustain a breadth and depth of content knowledge and pedagogy; work that requires close attention to the social and emotional well-being of children and an understanding of the psychological and developmental needs of those children; work that requires personally facing the risks of working in a school building while supporting young people who are exposed to those same risks. Taking care of our children and nurturing their full potential is important and essential

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work. Doing that work well requires a societal shift that more deeply and publicly respects and supports the teaching profession.

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