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## **Middle School Teachers Making Sense of Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Sarah A. Phillips

### **Abstract**

Middle school teachers are working to create an environment suitable for distance learning by promoting consistency of instruction for middle-level students during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This qualitative research inquiry used a phenomenological approach to study how nine middle school teachers made sense of education, amid an interruption of normal instruction during the pandemic. The theory of transformative learning supported this research inquiry from which four themes emerged: (1) forced readjustment with teacher-student interaction and quality education, (2) consistency using a virtual platform, (3) middle school teachers' methods, and (4) middle school teachers' instructional practices. The researcher recommends the following COVID-19-related topics for further inquiry: (1) understanding the challenges that impacted middle school teachers, (2) exploring disparities impacting the community in the area of technology readiness and other resources, (3) examining student accountability, and (4) discovering student achievement amid the pandemic.

*Key Words:* Middle School Teachers, COVID-19, Teacher-Student Relationship, Teacher Practices, Transformative Learning

Elementary school and high school education remained consistent in the United States, during which the academic space of middle grades experienced waves of reform that created a perplexing landscape of middle grade schools (Senechal & Stringer, 2014). Middle grade schools comprise intermediate, junior high, and secondary schools (Senechal & Stringer, 2014). Relatively, middle schools involve grades 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8 (McEwin & Greene, 2011). The Middle School Movement suggested that middle level students should be educated in a manner that accommodates the requirements of young adolescents (Schaefer, et al., 2016). In support of the movement, middle schools recognized the best methods and features in middle school teaching (Association of Middle School Level Education [AMSLE], 2020). The middle school model also required all middle-level schools to administer specific organizational designs to support a more individualized educational framework and student-centered learning environment for this significant and smaller learning community (Beane, 1997; George & Alexander, 2003; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

DiCicco et al. (2016) advanced the notion that middle school teachers express their roles as educators by developing young minds toward lifelong learning, as well as facilitating learning in the classroom. Although teaching middle grades is demanding, frustrating, exciting, and rewarding due to students' diverse range of individual needs, educators acquire the skills to instill knowledge and convey the content, which proves that the modes of delivery have many factors (Daniels, 2017). Edwards (2015) elaborated further about the ideal aspect of middle grades providing students the opportunity to benefit from learning, by actively demonstrating engagement and encouraging curiosity and comprehension throughout instruction.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative inquiry is supported by the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). Transformative learning progressed into “a composite explanation of how learners define, confirm, and reformulate the meaning of their experience” (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). Transformative learning includes critical self-reflection, which results in the act of reforming, to allow a more discriminating, broad, and integrated perception of one's experience (Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (2000) suggested that transformative learning follows some variation of significant stages: (1) a disorienting dilemma; (2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; (3) a critical assessment of assumptions; (4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; (5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; (6) planning a course of action; (7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; (8) provisional testing of new roles; (9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and (10) a reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by a new perspective. According to Mezirow (1978), learners may experience multiple phases of the process. Furthermore, the stages of an individual's transformation may not take place in a sequence of the transformative learning levels.

The transformative learning model associated with the teaching profession highlights the holistic aspect of being a teacher: (1) learning, (2) teaching, and (3) contenting (Zhu & Li, 2019). The view of learning being professional includes teachers' knowledge, designing, and assessing students' learning (Zhu & Li, 2019). Teachers encounter learning experiences characterized by phases of transformative learning (Curren & Murray, 2008). The concept of transformative learning aimed attention toward building understanding, learning expectations, viewpoints, and feelings of individuals (Boyd, 1991; Brookfield, 1986; Carter, 2002; Clark, 1993; Cranton, 1994, 1996; Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996). Teaching approach, evaluation, and performance underscore teaching as

a profession and are the factors influencing teachers' and students' association (Zhu, 2017, p. 61, as cited in Zhu & Li, 2019). Additionally, the redesign of lesson content, or contenting, reinforces student learning is a professional function of teaching (Zhu & Li, 2019).

### **Problem Background**

The absence of an established educational plan for instruction amid the COVID-19 pandemic has caused educators and students across the United States to face sweeping, unprecedented changes in teaching and learning (Hamilton et. al., 2020). With the closing of school buildings and classrooms, today's educators are facing new and dynamic instructional challenges. Together, educators are reaching across boundaries, sharing resources, and seeking distance learning teaching methods that work well for both students and teachers. Teachers are working to create an environment suitable for distance learning and remain consistent with instruction. Teachers are accomplishing this by analyzing and harnessing the appropriate resources to assist with learning methodologies that are more suitable for middle-level students (Brandon, 2020).

### **Methodology**

The researcher selected a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to address this research inquiry about middle school teachers. Qualitative researchers posited that this approach strengthens the concept that realism within a context is authentic and socially positioned (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). Creswell (2013) expressed that phenomenologists' investigations describe the commonality among all participants as they experience a phenomenon.

The researcher used purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to analyze teachers at the middle school level to engage in the study. Purposive sampling situates the researcher to choose cases that are comprehensive and intense with information (Patton, 2002). Nine middle school teachers from across the United States participated in the study: seven public schoolteachers in the Mid-Atlantic region, one charter schoolteacher in the Mid-Atlantic region, and one magnet schoolteacher in the Southwestern region. Limitations in qualitative studies involve issues of validity and reliability (Simon & Goes, 2013). Limitations of the study included the willingness of the participants to complete the questionnaire and to share intimate classroom occurrences.

The researcher administered an online questionnaire to the participants. The questionnaire included open-ended questions about class instruction, the continuity of teaching, instructional strategies, and pedagogical approaches.

The researcher used the narrative analysis of Survey Monkey to analyze results. In axial coding, the researcher further evaluates concepts and categories generated through the open coding process. The researcher also reviews the text to verify that concepts and categories accurately signify the interview responses to discover the associations of subjects and categories (Patton, 2015).

## **Results**

Four themes emerged from the examination of responses from nine middle school teachers: (1) forced readjustment with teacher-student interaction and quality of education, (2) consistency using a virtual platform, (3) middle school teachers' methods, and (4) middle school teachers' instructional practices.

### **Forced Readjustment with Teacher-Student Interaction and Quality Education**

One open-ended question from the questionnaire addressed the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting instruction and the learning environment, and nine middle school teachers shared their concerns. One middle school teacher confirmed, "personally, the pandemic has greatly affected both my instruction and learning environment in adverse ways. I now find it exponentially more difficult to motivate students solely through a computer screen with no access to any face-to-face interaction. As a middle school educator, the social and emotional growth of my students is immensely important, but due to the pandemic, that area of their development is being compromised." Another respondent asserted, "COVID-19 has greatly affected learning. It has made it difficult to gauge student involvement as well as their ability to understand the new material being presented." Another teacher expressed that adjusting to COVID-19 required "long hours of preparation, shorter class time, shorter direct instruction time, and virtual classrooms." All participants noted that face-to-face instruction was something their students needed, but the immediate shift to distance learning prevented such measures.

### **Consistency Using a Virtual Platform**

Continuity of teaching and learning consisted of the continuation of education for varying grade levels, age levels, skill levels, and access and functional needs, including incorporating varying tools, technologies, formats, and approaches to distance learning (Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools [REMS] Technical Assistance [TA] Center, 2020). All teachers noted they used a virtual platform for instruction, routine meetings, and parent contact. One teacher participating in the inquiry acclaimed, "I conduct Zoom (meetings), and I share my screen and continue to reinforce skills to the students who can participate/join.

I also have *Remind* [a two-way communication product that engages with students and parents] for parent and student communication.” Continuity among the middle school teachers not only existed in a distance learning classroom but occurred with scheduled meetings and professional development to provide teaching and learning tools. One teacher participant stated, “we have been mandated to attend three weekly meetings: team, departmental, and faculty. We have also been required to maintain daily interaction with students and parents.” Another respondent stated, “I have increased my virtual learning knowledge to facilitate better conversations and learning modules. It has also increased my level of interaction and communication with parents.” Another educator declared, “weekly Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) and team meetings to frame what we are teaching, using digital learning platforms (synchronous and asynchronous),” helped to maintain instructional continuity and consistency during the pandemic.

### **Middle School Teachers’ Methods**

The open-ended question about the most successful instructional strategies to achieve student outcomes revealed multiple approaches used by middle school teacher participants. One teacher participant explained, “the most successful instructional strategy for achieving student outcome for me would be independent study. I prefer this strategy mostly because within my classroom, it fosters the development of individual student initiative, self-reliance, and self-improvement within each of my students.” Another educator elaborated, “I use graphic organizers, technology, differentiated instruction, vocabulary, summarizing, brainstorming, literature response, writing process, reading to check understanding, reflection, discussion questions, and use essential questions as successful instructional tools.”

Other instructional strategies used by participants include: (1) providing students with clear expectations and clear instructions, in addition to direct instruction, (2) monitoring and providing instant feedback on posted assignments in Google Classroom, (3) using interactive programs provided by Pearson, (4) modeling and conferencing with students, (5) creating learning modules for self-paced instruction, (6) using cloze reading, (7) holding virtual breakout sessions, and (8) and conducting self-assessments in the form of games such as Kahoot. Overall, the multiple strategies used in a distance learning environment addressed the loss of face-to-face instruction and served as tools to support the students during remote learning.

### **Middle School Teachers' Instructional Practices**

Teacher influence is one of many practices that impact student achievement (Hattie, 2003). Teachers were queried about how the experience of shifting from face-to-face instruction to online instruction affected their pedagogical approach. Some of the middle school teachers remarked how the teaching approach caused limitations. One teacher expressed, “shifting from face-to-face to online instruction has greatly affected my teaching approach. I am the hands-on type of teacher who relies on building relationships with my students to get optimal effort from each one. With the shift, I had to learn how to find more time to build a relationship with students as well as building their knowledge of the content. I found it was more difficult to keep students' attention as opposed to being in a face-to-face classroom.”

Another teacher communicated, “it has limited my pedagogical approach to an extent because some students respond better to an in-person learning environment. The amount of personal teacher-student time has been eliminated since many students are home and distracted.” An additional teacher added, “the shift from face-to-face to online instruction has affected how succinctly and purposefully I need to be to reach the various levels of my students to ensure maintenance and progress while keeping them engaged.”

Other respondents shared how they were able to take advantage of technology. For example, “the shift from face-to-face to online instruction allowed more technology to assist with teaching and learning. I incorporate technology in my instruction always, but it allowed both the students and me to become more avid in a virtual world. We were able to be creative in the virtual world—learning, evolving, and being creative.”

A different teacher mentioned, “it affected my pedagogical approach greatly because 80% of my students' learning took place in the traditional classroom. Although my students have always received large volumes of homework and technology assignments, I was able to see mastery in class, but I was not confident during the pandemic of their mastery. I had to adjust my last unit, yet I am certain this would have been more effective if it were a traditional year.” The instant shift to distance learning showed limitations and gains, which allowed the teacher participants to take advantage of their technical skills to assist in guiding 21st-century learners.

### **Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

This study yielded findings that have implications for middle school educational practitioners. The immediate shift from direct learning to distance learning created an atmosphere of the unknown in education. Many teachers, including the participants in this study, were forced to adjust to a new normal and

how they interact with students. Teachers stressed that the quality of education was altered. Several educators expressed that the loss of face-to-face instruction interfered with teacher-student relationships, which are vital in an academic environment. The participants also expressed difficulty with teaching remotely because it was challenging to monitor students' understanding and involvement.

One of the focal points in education during a pandemic environment is a new appreciation for teaching and learning. Despite a rapid shift to distance education, instruction continued and educators' duties were adapted to a virtual platform. The middle school educators indicated that schedules were adjusted to fit the virtual platform, teacher meetings, class observations, and professional development, and that parent contact was conducted virtually.

Many teachers used constructive strategies during virtual instruction. While educating students during the pandemic, teachers' practices and strategies were critical in maintaining consistency and continuity. Teachers implemented research-based and traditional methods for student achievement and their pedagogical styles contributed to students academically, socially, and emotionally. The middle school teacher participants had diverse reactions in response to how the pandemic affected their styles of teaching. Some of the teachers took advantage of the opportunity and adapted their pedagogy along with technology. Others stressed the limitations with their teaching styles due to student response, feedback, and different levels of each child.

Recommendations for further study about middle school teachers include, (1) understanding the challenges that impacted teachers, (2) exploring disparities impacting the community in the area of technology readiness and other resources, (3) examining student accountability, and (4) discovering achievement amid the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

This study offered a qualitative inquiry about middle school teachers' outlook on education due to COVID-19. The study was conducted with educators in school districts in the mid-Atlantic and Southwestern regions of the United States. The findings highlight the limitations teachers encountered while adjusting to a different method of teacher-student interaction, providing a quality education, maintaining consistency using a virtual platform, and developing middle school teachers' methods and instructional practices.

The loss of face-to-face instruction interfered with teacher and student relationships. Middle school educators also stressed that schedules were adjusted to fit the virtual platform to continue with teacher meetings, class observations, professional development, and parent contact. Likewise, educators' practices and strategies were critical in maintaining consistency and continuity, in addition to

teachers' pedagogy adapting to the interruption of instruction. Overall, middle school teachers developed an educational environment that was conducive to learning during a pandemic.

### **About the Author**

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