Reconsidering the Call to Teach: K-12 Teacher Responses to Schools' Addressing a Global Health Disruption

DeJuanna Parker
dejuanna.parker@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep

Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, Online and Distance Education Commons, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons

Reconsidering the Call to Teach: K-12 Teacher Responses to Schools' Addressing a Global Health Disruption

DeJuanna M. Parker, Ph.D.

Abstract

This qualitative study explored K-12 teacher experiences with school responses to the pandemic that prompted instructors to reconsider the call to teach. Two theories provided a lens through which to view the problem. The Theory of Purpose was applied to analyzing instructors' original decision to teach. Fortigenesis Theory undergirded the exploration of teacher responses to physical and emotional challenges. Three themes emerged as a result of data analysis: Discontent and Disdain for Post-Pandemic Teaching Practices, Emotional Distance Created by Physical Distance, and Administrative Priorities and Teacher Wellbeing.

Keywords: Teaching during Pandemic; Instructional Changes; Teacher Self-care; Expanded Teacher Roles; Teacher Motivation

Introduction

In Reimagining the Call to Teach, Hansen (2021) describes teaching as a calling with the purpose to train and support the next generation of learners and community citizens. However, the onset of the global pandemic prompted educators to reconsider the calling to the profession. Teachers are leaving the profession, reorienting instructional delivery, and stressing about the health of school environments. As such, instructors across the nation are expressing general unhappiness with the state of teaching (Ferren, 2021). The pandemic and responses to it affected education in a multiplicity of ways. School closed in the Spring semester of 2020, but the Fall reopening was chaotic (Gorey, 2020). Instructional delivery changed from face-to-face to remote platforms. The shift required teachers to learn ways to reimagine familiar lessons using unfamiliar technology, on which many were not trained (Gorey, 2020). Administrators tasked instructors to learn new methods, while continuing to maintain connections with students, families, and colleagues (Malkus and Christensen, 2020). Many educators expressed feelings of stress, depression, and fatigue. These and other associated conditions gave rise to both novice and experienced educators rethinking the original purpose in joining the ranks of the teaching profession and whether to remain (Zamarro, Camp, Fuchsman, and McGee, 2021; Malkus & Christensen, 2020; Ingersoll, 2001).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how shifts in the educational landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced instructors to reconsider the call to teach.

Problem

Even before the onset of the current public health crisis, teachers in the K-12 system left the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll and Smith, 2003). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many school systems closed their doors and ceased in-person instruction (Ferren, 2021). To continue the work of education, school divisions converted to distance learning, which

exacerbated already existing challenges. These included long work hours, multiple course lesson planning, grading models, testing, access to adequate resources, and lack of administrative support (Walker, 2018). This made it necessary for teachers to learn ways to deliver instruction on new, unfamiliar platforms. Schools implemented new policies and practices that added to teachers' workload. As a result of implemented changes, many educators are reconsidering their original purpose and are exploring retention decisions (Zamarro, Fuchsman, & McGee, 2021). Teachers leaving the profession affect the learning process and success of students, and coupled with other effects of the pandemic, would disrupt the education enterprise further (Curriculum Associates, 2021).

Review of Literature

The 2020-2021 academic year was unlike any other in education. Recent literature supports the many anecdotal accounts of repercussions sparked by the global health crisis. After the "pandemic year" when schools closed and adopted remote learning, health concerns, work-life balance, and mental well-being became priorities among teachers when returning to hybrid and in-person instruction (Ferren, 2021). Additionally, new policies regarding grading, testing, student privileges, discipline, and expanded roles contributed to teachers' added duties (Zamarro, Camp, Fuchsman, and McGee, 2021). Moreover, educators' have elevated levels of stress (Walker, 2018). As a result, teachers are questioning the "call to teach" (Parker, 2016). This raises concern about potential increases in teacher turnover and future teacher shortages (Zamarro, Camp, Fuchsman, and McGee, 2021). While retention presented a challenge for many years, the pandemic worsened this troublesome context.

Teacher Well-being on Global and National Scales

Several studies from researchers in China and Spain focusing on the pandemic assert that psychological factors associated with closing and reopening schools affect teachers adversely. Lily et al (2020) found the crisis has caused teachers to suffer from anxiety, depression, divorce, and even domestic violence. While these issues are not intrinsic to schools, the presence of troubling circumstances may contribute to instructors' abilities to teach effectively. Other studies conducted during the pandemic determined anxiety was higher among female and older educators compared to male and younger teachers, and psychological support is necessary (Li et al, 2020; Zhou and Yao, 2020). Additionally, researchers in Spain concluded teachers have heavier-than-usual workloads, psychosomatic problems, and exhaustion as a result of school changes during the pandemic (Prado-Gascó et al., 2020; Walker, 2018).

Stateside, a recent study indicated during lockdown, teachers suffered tension from having to adapt to delivering instruction in an online environment due to the suddenness of changes and the rapid pace of the learning curve (Besser et al., 2020). A previous study found that using technology to facilitate working from home may create feelings of tension and exhaustion, as well as decreased job satisfaction (Cuervo et al., 2018). In the time of school closures, technology was the only tool available to teachers. When schools reopened, the same

stress that was present during lockdowns persisted, and may have resulted in increased instances of sick leave, absenteeism, and poor work performance (Walker, 2018).

Technology and Instructional Shifts during the Pandemic

Gorey (2020) posits school districts worldwide desisted from face-to-face teaching and learning. Distance learning became the norm and consequently resulted in major disruptions for teachers, students, and parents alike. Transitioning to the remote context so rapidly was tenuous at best (Gorey, 2020). A study conducted by Ferren (2021) supports Gorey (2020) as findings indicate shifting to online environments involved teachers rethinking lesson plans and objectives to fit a new, and mostly unfamiliar, format. Teachers reconfigured entire curriculums to be able to teach online, as many lessons requiring hands-on activities would lose the element of the instructor being there to guide students (Ferren, 2021). Instructors realized Time spent on lessons extended as students take longer than usual to absorb content (Gorey, 2020). Platforms being used for online instruction are not configured to allow individua and group instruction at the same time (Ferren, 2021)

Additional disruptions occurred as one study asserts the abrupt shift to remote teaching challenged instructors by requiring new routines and the use of new digital tools for communication purposes (Turchi, Bondar and Aguilar,2020). The physical school building did not orient students and teachers to time because no bells rang and no one was lined up at the door before dismissal. Teachers also reconsidered requiring student engagement, as many instructors witnessed students logging out of class early, not logging on at all, and not activating video cameras in order for the teacher to see them (Turchi, Bondar and Aguilar,2020). While teaching in an online environment was a success for some, many educators continue to face challenges that effect teaching effectiveness and, by extension, student success.

School District Factors Related to Retention

Addressing concerns related to school responses to the pandemic on the macro and micro levels, the COVID-19 crisis placed a heavy burden on the teacher workforce and increased turnover in some states. Some concerns center on school or district health and safety protocols implemented as a result of the pandemic. Schools closed, but when they reopened, no consistent federal policy guided school safety efforts. Some states ordered mask-wearing, while others did not. Even local districts disagreed on which safety measures to implement. Some teachers followed CDC guidelines and were vaccinated, others did not. This lack of agreement resulted in most school districts adopting hybrid teaching, and this model exacerbated teacher stress (Hansen, 2021; Walker, 2018). Instructors acquired additional responsibilities such as guiding students through difficult emotions and connecting them with services, administrative tasks, as well as working longer hours because of the asynchronous nature of instruction (Malkus & Christensen, 2020).

Additionally, during the pandemic, teachers became less certain that they would work in the education profession, especially in the classroom, until retirement. Liana, et al (2020) conducted an international survey that returned findings indicating teachers' thinking about remaining in the profession post-pandemic. In 2020, 74% of teachers reported that they expected

to work as a teacher until retirement, while 9% said they did not expect to remain. 16% did not know. In contrast, in March 2021, 69% of teachers reported they expected to work as a teacher until retirement, while 9% reported they did not expect to remain, and 22% said they did not know, which is an increase of six percentage points.

Research Questions

1. How have teacher attitudes about the profession changed since the pandemic?

2. How have teachers altered their approach to caring for learners during pandemic conditions?

3 What recommendations can be offered to administration to address teacher wellbeing and retention?

Theoretical Framework

Purpose Theory (Metz, 2013) was the overriding theory utilized in this study. The theory addresses meaning in life according to a salient form of supernaturalism: the view that meaning in life is constituted by fulfilling purpose. Extant research suggests that many teachers see teaching as a "calling" from which life purpose is realized (Parker, 2016). As such, Purpose Theory was the appropriate lens to view the phenomenon.

Fortigenesis (Antonovsky, 1972) is the secondary theory used in this study. The theory refers to a process of developing strengths during times of challenge, struggle, and suffering. Subjective well-being, searching for meaning, and flourishing are elements inherent in developing fortitude. The global public health crisis presented teachers with a context relevant to this theory.

Research Design and Methodology

Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research methodology, was used to explore teachers' ideations about leaving the profession amid pandemic-related changes within the school environment. This method allows the researcher to record the experiences of an individual or small group through oral and/or written accounts, revealing the perspective of that study participant.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher used an online questionnaire to collect relevant narrative data to inform the study. Five participants responded to the qualitative questionnaire. Contributors have a range of teaching experience from eight to twenty-five years at the middle school and high school levels. The questionnaire consisted of two objective questions and five open ended questions. Questions were developed to elicit responses from educators who have considered or are considering whether to remain in the teaching profession. Participants were encouraged to provide a detailed narrative for greater opportunities to provide thick and rich descriptions of experiences. Consequently, preliminary responses afforded the researcher opportunity to conduct

follow-up interviews with willing participants. The researcher provided a link to the Google Forms questionnaire in an email sent to participants' personal email addresses. The open-ended questions were as follows:

- IQ 5: Since the onset of the pandemic, how have policies or practices implemented by your school influenced your pedagogy?
- IQ 6: Since the onset of the pandemic, how have policies or practices implemented by your school influenced your attitude toward the teaching profession?
- IQ7: Since you are reconsidering continuing in the profession, what policies and /or practices would you implement in your school in order to retain teachers in the profession?
- IQ 8: How have environmental conditions in your school (since the pandemic) changed the way you care for students?
- IQ 9: How have current environmental conditions in your school influenced your mental and physical health and self-care practices?

Qualitative Sampling

Purposeful sampling was the technique used to recruit contributors for this study. Qualitative researchers apply this method when a need exists for a small number of participants who can provide information-rich data based on experience with the topic being explored (Patton, 1990).

The researcher required participants who have at least five years of experience in K-12 education as a teacher. The five-year requirement allowed the respondents to share experiences in pre- and post-pandemic school culture. Contributors also had ideations of abandoning the call to teach and considering leaving the profession. Five K-12 instructors responded to the Call for Participants through email using Google Forms. The table below provides an overview of study participants.

Table 1: Participant Description

Participant Description

Participant Number	Years of Teaching Experience	**Gender**	Subject Matter	Grade Level
P1	25	Female	English	High School
P2	10	Female	ELA/Reading, Writing, Social Studies	Middle School
P3	22	Female	Language Arts, Special Education	Middle School

P4	8	Male	Social Studies	Middle School
P5	10 years	Female	Exceptional Education, Business Technology	High School

Findings

Qualitative analysis of narrative data involves the use of various coding approaches. Open coding and narrative analysis allowed three themes to emerge from the study. The three emerging themes align with research questions as well as theories undergirding this study. Thematic outcomes are illustrated in the table below. A discussion of themes follows.

Table 2

Thematic Outcomes

	Theme Description	Related Interview Question(s)	Related RQs
Theme 1	Discontent and Disdain for Post-Pandemic Teaching Practices	IQ 5, IQ 6, IQ 9	How have teacher attitudes about the profession changed since the pandemic?
Theme 2	Emotional Distance Created by Physical Distance	IQ 8	How have teachers altered their approach to caring for learners during pandemic conditions?
Theme 3	Administrative Priorities and Teacher Wellbeing	IQ 7, IQ 9	What recommendations can be offered to administration to address teacher wellbeing and retention?

Results and Discussion

Answering the Call to Teach

The researcher included a question to ascertain understanding of participants' motivation to enter the teaching profession. The responses to the question "Why did you become a teacher?" are summarized below.

Some respondents entered the profession because of a desire for younger generations to have access to a better learning experience than they had while in school. Participant 1 shared, "When I became an engaged learner as an undergraduate, I wondered a lot about why I had never felt engaged until I got to college. I wanted to engage kids in their learning earlier than it happened for me."

For other participants, teaching represents stability and a reliable routine that grounds their lives. Participant 2 chose teaching because of enjoyment and convenience, stating "I decided, when I became a single mom to two, to go into the field of education. It afforded me a matching schedule to my own children and a way to combine all aspects of other jobs I loved.

For the most part, contributors reported choosing the profession because of an innate urge help others and to impact lives, in other words, the aspirational call to teach. This is demonstrated in the response from Participant 3. She iterated, "[I decided to teach] to have a lifelong and positive impact on the future of this world while sparking change across the system…" Others come into the profession for practical purposes and then find their purpose, as with Participant 4 who asserted, "I just wanted a job at first, but the more I worked in education, the more I saw that I was wired for the profession."

These results demonstrate that participants did not take the decision to teach lightly. Even when entering the profession haphazardly, growing into the role and finding fulfillment in the mission of teaching were priorities. The pandemic and schools' decisions regarding handling of the crisis appear to have obscured the mission and the call to teach.

Discontent and Disdain for Post-Pandemic Teaching Practices

In response to questions about pedagogy and attitudes toward teaching during the pandemic, participants did not focus on required changes; however, attitudinal evolution toward teaching and the education profession since the pandemic were the focus. A sense of dissatisfaction exists over how school districts have responded to the health crisis. Administrative implementation of practices that relegate authentic teaching and learning to a non-prioritized position demoralizes instructional staff. One participant shared, "practices and policies at this particular school have been worse than when it began in 2019." Another respondent noted, "There are way too many opportunities to sidestep, shortcut genuine learning…students are given "passes" and not required to learn, think, or apply knowledge." Yet another participant lamented "I loathe teaching the way that it is now." The last participant described in detail how district practices doused her trust in the profession, stating

> I no longer believe that schools are in the business of educating students. The way that we are allowing ubiquitous poor behaviors go, and the way we are implementing interventions to help kids pass on paper and get promoted even though their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills are worse than ever makes me feel like it's more important to generate pleasing aggregate data than to nurture individuals and foster productive, engaged, motivated citizens.

This theme reflects growing attitudes among teachers with many years of experience whose thinking about the profession has deteriorated to the point of considering leaving the field of education.

Emotional Distance Created by Physical Distance

Participants responded to a question focused on whether approaches to caring for learners changed as a result of schools' responses to the global pandemic. Face-to-face interaction

promoted teachers' proclivity to help students individually while performing seat work; students received encouragement and consolation from instructors. Zoom sessions replaced the personal learning environment and created distance between teachers and learners. This context is reflected in the responses given by study participants.

Participant 5 commented, "I don't touch them anymore. It used to be fine to put a hand on a shoulder to console a kid during a tough moment or to hug one of them when they accomplish something they were working towards." This respondent further commented, "It's hard to kneel down at a student's desk when they clearly don't want you within three feet." Teachers are not the only ones affected by policies adopted when schools reopened. While these protocols are in place for safety reasons, the human connection divide does not go unnoticed.

Participant 3 noted, "Of course, we are all cautious, but we are dealing with an unknown, so we are all scared and super cautious, because we don't want to contract COVID." On a more dire level, distance and policies have resulted in adverse attitudes regarding student care. Participant 4 stated, "I give a whole lot less craps if they learn or not...as sad as that sounds. I have become much more jaded and cynical I like a lot less people than I did before"

Situations such as these comprise part of the context causing instructors to reconsider the commitment to teach. Research literature supports the premise that teachers join the ranks of professional educators to help students and to impact the lives of next-generation learners. The current state of education influences in-service instructors in ways that teacher-student interaction occurs.

Administrative Priorities and Teacher Wellbeing

School administrators have the responsibility to address all building issues. The onset of the pandemic presented yet another challenge. Some administrators fail to understand, however, that attention needs to be paid to teachers. Feeling a lack of support from administration is another factor in teachers reconsidering the call to teach. The pandemic influenced the manner whereby administrators addressed the crisis. When asked about personal wellbeing, study participants described an array of physical and emotional ills. Some maladies are invisible, as demonstrated by Participant 5, who shared, "I feel as though I am walking on eggshells every day, and despite the school district saying they care about us, it is really hard at times to believe it when nothing is being implemented to support or protect us and our families" Participant 3 added, "My stress is at an all -time high. That has been a detriment to my mental health in that I'm frustrated all the time, which leads to spells of rage and depression. Moreover, respondents also shared physical outcomes brought on not only by the pandemic, but also by school administrators' handling of the crisis. Participant 2 described physical conditions of being "more ill more often", continuing with "I am on higher doses of anti-anxiety and anti-depression medications. [I have] MS flare-ups, sleeping problems, [and I] have had to see more specialists for more invasive issues." Notably, Participant 5 iterated

> While virtual learning is not ideal, most of us worked extremely hard to make our lessons, engaging and informative only to be met with parents and students who rarely bothered to show up or avail themselves to learning, opting to complain instead. So because of these factors, many great educators are choosing to protect themselves and their families instead opening the door for "warm bodies" as replacements

Teachers demonstrate fortitude in managing health conditions while delivering instruction in a rapidly transforming environment. Building leaders may need to take instructor wellbeing into account when implementing systematic and curricular changes. Study participants offered recommendations to improve ecological conditions at school that may also influence teacher retention. Participant 2 suggested "hiring more teachers to get class sizes down to 20."

Another proposal relates to class composition. "Shoving so many kids with IEPs into one "inclusive classroom" so that they can have a support facilitator that accommodates lessons for them is not inclusive, it's segregating them, but if we had more support staff, we could serve more kids without grouping them together, and putting more burden on the lead teacher." Participant 1 endorsed an idea that holding "less meetings that could just be handled via email" may increase efficiency.

Participant 2 offered mandatory vaccinations for both teachers and students as a way to engage in self-care. The respondent noted, "We are required to teach and be in the presence of unvaccinated individuals all day, hoping and praying that this will not be the day for a dreaded positive COVID test result." Finally, Participant 1 provided the most draconian recommendation, "Fire our administration. They are toxic and have not only destroyed the culture of my school but have supported those who have brought in too many unsolvable problems."

Recommendations Future Research

Teacher retention remains a critical area of education research. This study focused on teachers who are considering leaving the profession because of challenges presented by school responses to the pandemic. Recommendations for future research include the following:

1. A study on this same topic from the administrative perspective
2. A case study on instructors' challenges in higher education during the pandemic
3. A longitudinal study on K-12 teachers who consider leaving the profession but remain through the end of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Findings from this study support extant research on teacher challenges during the global health crisis. Research questions posed were addressed through the emergent themes that resulted from qualitative analysis of the collected data. Theoretical connections were demonstrated. Participant responses to the question "Why did you become a teacher?" described the depth of commitment to the profession, which supports the theory of purpose. Respondents discussed challenges faced while teaching during the pandemic, which provided validation of the fortigenesis theory. Overall, the challenges covered in this study reflect major factors regarding

dedicated and experienced instructors' reconsidering the decision to remain in education at such a critical time.

Salient lessons emerged from this study in terms of teacher perspectives. The pandemic forced school administrators to make hasty decisions regarding the manner which teaching, and learning would continue. School leaders required educators to contend with new policies, even when those policies and resulting practices did not promote effective teaching or authentic learning. The education industry is fraught with challenges that, at times, appear insurmountable. If education is to continue to exist at a satisfactory level, teachers' voices must become integral to the decision-making process. The work taking place in the classroom, whether the classroom is online or in person, is the lifeblood of those who choose to teach. Findings from this study described a distance between instructors and learners, as well as the state of instructors' physical and mental wellbeing. These conditions contribute to a growing disillusionment of the educator. Thus, the classroom instructor questions commitment to the profession. Teachers have valuable contributions to make toward improving the efficacy of schooling; education leaders would benefit from listening to these professionals.

References

Antonovsky, A. (1972). Breakdown: a needed fourth step in the conceptual armamentarium of modern medicine. Social Science and Medicine, 6, 537–544.

Curriculum Associates. (2021). Understanding Student Learning [Research Brief].

Ferren, M (2021). Remote learning and school reopenings: What worked and what didn't. Center for American Progress.

Gorey, J. (2020). Teaching in a pandemic: How educators are handling the sudden shift to distance learning. *Earthwatch*.

Hansen, D T. (2021). Reimagining the Call to Teach. Teachers College Press.

Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 499–534. doi:10.3102/00028312038003499

Ingersoll, R. & Smith, T. (2003). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. *Educational Leadership*, 60, 30-33

Malkus, N. and Christensen, C. (2020). School district responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: round 4, halfway through closures. *American Enterprise Institute*.

Patton, M. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Sage.

Turchi, L. B., Bondar, N. A., Aguilar, L. L. (2020). What really changed? Environments, instruction, and 21st century tools in emergency online English language arts teaching in United States schools during the first pandemic response. *Frontiers in Education*.

Walker, T. (2018). How many teachers are stressed? Maybe more than people think. *NEA Today.*

Zamarro, G., Camp, A., Fuchsman, D., and McGee, J. B. (Wednesday, September 8, 2021). How the pandemic has changed teachers' commitment to remaining in the classroom. *Brown Center Chalkboard.*