

Pandemic + Teaching = Stress

Stacie Hanewich, MEd

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Stacie Hanewich at shanewich_gps@nec.edu.

Abstract

Teachers around the world have had to struggle with maintaining their family and personal issues during the pandemic while also attempting to assist their students and their families. In this article, I share part of my experiences as a teacher who has dealt with remaining positive and hopeful amid the worldwide pandemic. I work with special education students and have worked hard to make sure my students and I were safe in our work in school from March 2020 to the present. Because I was focused on the stress of the adults around me (and my own stress), I was somewhat surprised, though I should not have been, that my students were affected negatively by the stress caused by the pandemic. When I realized what was happening to my students' emotions, I changed how I was teaching and working with them. I tried to make learning more fun and engaging and less stressful for my students. I used the resources I had and other resources I found online. I was pleasantly surprised with how effective my efforts were for my students. Together we made the best of our times together, and I learned that, despite all the obstacles presented by the pandemic, my students could prosper.

Keywords: teaching in a pandemic, stress and learning, emotional well-being, student-centered teaching and learning

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March of 2020 seemed to be going exactly like it always had for me as a special education teacher. I was knee deep in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System Alternate Portfolios, cursing the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for making these a requirement. I had started testing a student for his reevaluation, my students were going stir crazy, and we were counting down the days until April vacation. To be quite honest, I paid little attention to the news. I did not know much about “coronavirus,” as it was being called. Just that it was overseas, and I felt terrible it was happening.

March rolled on, and rumblings in school began about the virus. Teachers started talking about a possible 2-week shutdown of schools to deep clean and kill any possible trace of the virus, which seemed to be making its way to the United States. On the morning of Friday, March 13, 2020, I vividly remember being in the front office, sitting on the table with the printer, talking to the administrative assistant and assistant principal. They began to speculate about an impending shut down. I sat there in disbelief. I clearly had not paid enough attention to the news.

A few hours later, the superintendent sent an email to staff, letting us know before the public was notified that he, along with superintendents of the surrounding districts, had decided to shut down the school for 2 weeks. He described the cleaning that would take place and was confident 2 weeks would be enough to fight off the virus. He instructed us to gather anything we needed to teach for that period of time as we would not be allowed back in the building. Chaos ensued. We all went door to door making sure fellow staff members had checked their emails, and we gathered everything we thought we could possibly use to prepare. We all joked that we were excited for a mini vacation, not knowing exactly what was about to come.

Our district quickly set up accounts for Google Meets to begin the endeavor of virtual learning. For most, this was no problem. For a teacher of intellectually impaired students in Grades K–4 who were all doing different things, it was no easy task. I spent hours the 1st week preparing activities for my students to do at home and attempted online learning. I held individual meets for each student and an afternoon meet for the entire class. My paraprofessionals helped. They read stories or created activities at home. It seemed to be going okay. As the 2 weeks began to end, it became clearer online teaching and learning may not be a temporary event.

We all know what happened next. The world was turned upside down. There was turmoil and chaos everywhere one turned. We were all in a perpetual state of anxiety, wondering whether we and our loved ones would be safe and whether our basic needs could be met with the many shortages the pandemic brought. But the show had to go on, and students still had to learn. Just because the world seemed to stop, education did not. Teachers worked harder and longer than they ever had before as they attempted to meet the challenges of teaching in the pandemic.

As a special education teacher, extra paperwork is a given. This was especially true during the pandemic. The district created “COVID Learning Plans” that outlined the plan for each child and how the teacher/service providers planned to meet IEP needs and goals. We were also asked to keep a log of every communication that took place with parents and students. The central office wanted to know the duration, what we did, and what we worked on.

I was not prepared to teach remotely for as long as I did, so naturally I did not bring home nearly enough to do. I discovered online resources, like Boom Learning, and supplemented with weekly purchases from Amazon. Time passed, and remote learning continued to be a struggle for my students. It was difficult to get them to attend to the tasks during the meets. It was even more

difficult to control their negative behaviors, especially because their parents had to sit with them for all the meets. I also had a student with no access to internet. I called her every week, said hello, and told her I missed her. She had zero schooling from March until we returned to school in fall of 2020. The 2-week vacation we thought we had turned out to be much more stressful.

I continued teaching remotely until the end of the 2019–2020 school year, had a short break, and then continued remote learning with my students during summer school. It felt like Groundhog Day. As summer began to end, more anxiety began. Would we return to school like normal? Would we stay remote?

Parents were eager to get their children back to school and asked me daily if I knew what might happen. Very late in the summer, we found out the “high needs” populations would return to school in a more normal manner than the rest of the district. So, in we went, 4 days a week until 12:00 p.m., and then the students went home, and we did a remote group in the afternoon. Talk about stress! We were petrified someone would get sick. To be honest, I was also a little angry. Why did I have to do in-person learning when nobody else had to? The stress was getting the best of me. I was cranky and at times short tempered with my students. They were struggling just as much as I was. We were self-contained, learning to tolerate hours at a time in masks, and getting used to how life in school now looked. I knew I needed to reassess and determine new ways to complete activities and teach my students in this new environment. We were all struggling, and I needed to take the first step to make things better.

Emotions and learning go hand in hand. Emotions play a large role in the classroom. As Sousa (2017) wrote, “Emotions drive attention, and attention drives acquisition of new learning” (p. 92). As teachers, now more than ever, it was extremely important to check in on students and their social emotional well-being. There were two important factors to consider in the

classroom—the first was the learning climate in the classroom, and the second was the connection between emotions and what students are learning. Sousa (2017) discussed the importance of students feeling safe in their learning environments and having connections with their teachers. In my classroom, I always make sure to let my students know our classroom is a safe space, and, if they feel upset or sad, they can talk to me about it. Sousa also wrote it is important to create activities with which students are emotionally connected. Teachers can create lessons involving more emotions by asking students to put themselves in the shoes of others. I had not considered the role emotions played in the classroom prior to COVID-19. My students were prone to emotional outbursts and noncompliant behavior, but the emotions I was seeing were different. I had been so worried about myself, my staff, and my family and friends that I never considered the eight students in the building and the two at home I saw every day.

The pandemic taught me a lot about emotions. Typically, when I think of emotions, I relate it to behavior. If a student is mad or sad, they may act out behaviorally. With the pandemic, I found students were getting emotional purely from stress. Students required more down time and more lessons that did not feel like work. With so much unknown and the stress from the pandemic, I did not want school to be another source of stress for them. With that in mind, I restructured lessons I had already created, dug into my arts and crafts bins, and ordered new educational games online. We started doing more movement activities, more song-driven ways to learn, and I was teaching to the whole brain (Sousa, 2017). We learned to count doing jumping jacks, learned colors by walking around the classroom looking for certain items, and learned sight words using song and dance. In an article published by the American Psychological Association, Semrud-Clikeman (2021) discussed the benefits of adding motor and auditory skills in the classroom. According to Semrud-Clikeman, pairing these skills together increases the

development of both pathways. This allows all students to access an activity at their level in their own way.

To my surprise, it worked. I had students reading for the first time ever, despite the immense stress the pandemic added to their day to day. It showed me how resilient my students were, and, despite everything, they could persevere. Making simple changes to improve the environment in which my students were learning made a world of difference. Their emotions changed. They seemed happier, more engaged, and more excited to come to school. I was excited for them! I started to hear constant laughter in the classroom. Things started to feel more normal.

The school year came to an end. There were many bumps along the way, but we made it! All teachers felt a sense of relief when the last students left on the final day. Although this school year (2021–2022) has not been a typical one, my students have been able to spend time in their general education classrooms, attend specialist classes, and have lunch and recess with their peers. This change has again created a shift in their emotions. They love being with their general education peers, and they have been better behaved because they have been allowed to go back. My students are exposed to positive peer role models and can see what the right thing is to do. My emotions are better as well. My room has returned to a more normal schedule than last year—not quite normal but getting there. I feel happier that my students are happier, which is making the environment a more positive one to be in.

Ideas to Consider

Teaching in a pandemic has been terrible. But, on the bright side, I did learn a few things. Going forward, I will pay more attention to my students and how they are feeling. This pandemic taught me that emotions and learning have such a heavy influence on one another. I also realize

that when I help my students with their stress, it has a positive effect on my stress. I will be sure to change the way I teach and the way I structure my classroom going forward. Here are some ideas to consider as teachers prepare for the next emergency:

1. Set up a process that takes into consideration the social and emotional health of students.
2. Help students support each other.
3. Ensure teacher social and emotional health is strong. We cannot help our students if we are weak. Teachers should consider developing a system to maintain our social and emotional health to help us be strong.
4. When teachers support the social and emotional health of our students and each other, we also help our social and emotional health in the process.
5. Helping students to be engaged actively in their learning is even more important during an emergency like the pandemic.
6. Teachers need to laugh with our students and with each other.
7. Special education students require interactions with their peers as much and maybe even more during remote learning.
8. Remember, we are stronger together than any one of us is alone.
9. Do not forget to tell the people you care about that you love them.
10. Most importantly, be safe and healthy.

References

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