Lessons Learned During the Pandemic:
Towards a New Era of Teaching

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STATEMENT

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) is committed to developing innovative educational programs and professional services that are grounded in evidence and efficacy. We collaborate with school districts and third-party research organizations to conduct research that provides information to help improve educational outcomes for students, teachers, and leaders at the classroom, school, and district levels. We believe strongly in a mixed-methods approach to our research, an approach that provides meaningful and contextualized information and results.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes to many facets of our lives, but one of the areas significantly changed by the virus was our educational system. At the start of the pandemic, school buildings closed down and students were learning online from home, while educators and administrators quickly adapted to and began shaping a new era of teaching. While some districts remained fully remote for the 2020-2021 school year, others went back to socially distanced in-person classrooms or hybrid-learning environments with some students attending school remotely and others in person. Regardless of the form teaching took, all educators faced an unprecedented level of disruption and change in their teaching lives while also navigating the effects of a global pandemic in their personal lives.

We set out to research the impact these drastic changes had on teachers. We wanted to understand how teachers coped during the pandemic and how these experiences will alter the future of teaching. Given the myriad of changes educators, districts, and students experienced during the pandemic, our research focused on better understanding the social and emotional experiences of teachers as well as how their use of technology evolved throughout the pandemic.

In the spring of 2021, we conducted 90-minute online interviews with 12 teachers across the US. Within this sample, teachers represented different grade levels, subjects, socio-economic backgrounds, urbanicity, and tenures. We also included diverse teaching models— some were fully in person, others fully remote, while a third group of teachers fell into a hybrid model. We had interviewed and observed these same teachers in an ethnography study conducted in 2018, which allowed us to see how the pandemic altered their teaching methods, emotional states, and uses of technology.

Based on the Educator Confidence Report (HMH & YouGov, 2021) that polled 1,282 educators nationwide, large-scale results reinforced what we learned through this teacher ethnography study; teachers spent the majority of their time learning and implementing new online instructional methodologies (53%) and paid increased attention to students' social and emotional needs (49%). In addition, educator's confidence index was down from previous years, and when asked about how they felt about the state of the teaching profession today, 62% of the educators responded negatively, signifying the challenges of teaching through this pandemic year.

Our research found four key themes as listed below:

1. Changes in the Meaning of Challenges and Successes for Teachers: Teachers faced unforeseen challenges during the pandemic, which reoriented their goals to be more focused on social and emotional well-being.

2. Increased Technology Use and Its Impact on Equity: With some important nuances, the pandemic leveled the playing field when it came to technology uses and education. It also increased student access to technology as districts provided devices and hotspots. However, the pandemic also accentuated the disparities in tech access based on socio-economic communities and lack of instructional support for students with special needs and multilingual learners.

3. Impact of Increased Technology Use on Productivity, Instruction, Communication, and Data: With the increase in technology use and access, teachers are working to redefine their instructional approaches. As teachers work to plan future lessons with their new tech skills, new needs are emerging for innovative technologies.

4. Importance of Social and Emotional Learning: As teachers and students were socially distanced and handled challenging life circumstances caused by the pandemic, teachers were physically and emotionally impacted. Even the most tenured teachers experienced novel challenges. As a result of these challenges, educators shifted how they see and define the success of their students and themselves. They developed new perspectives on teaching that will likely forever alter approaches to teaching.

THE CHANGES IN THE MEANING OF CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES FOR TEACHERS

Challenges

2018 PERSPECTIVE

In our 2018 research, teachers identified three leading challenges that made teaching harder, more emotionally draining and anxiety producing:

Lack of time: Teachers didn't have enough time in the day to get everything they wanted done. Many had to take work home to complete before/after the school day.

Student behavioral issues: Behavioral issues made teaching more difficult for teachers and distracted students from learning.

Conversations with students' families: Reaching out to families to talk about behavioral or performance issues was taxing for teachers who often felt like they weren't supported enough.

2021 PERSPECTIVE

The 2020–2021 academic year presented a new set of challenges for teachers. While they continued to struggle with lack of time, they also had to deal with loneliness, isolation, and finding new ways to connect with students.

Lack of time: Teachers put in extra time to learn new technologies, find online resources, and convert paper materials to digital. Professional development opportunities often didn't provide ample support, and teachers were left to train themselves to ensure they would be ready for virtual teaching.

Connecting with students: Teachers know that hands-on activities, reading students' body language, and physically demonstrating lessons make teaching more impactful. Without these tools of in-person interaction, teachers felt less effective. Teachers had to find ways to build connections with students over video lessons and while socially distancing themselves from six feet apart.

Loneliness and Isolation: Without being able to have meaningful conversations before and after classes with students, talk to other teachers during the day or check in with administrators in the building, teachers expressed that they felt isolated. Social interactions bring teachers joy, satisfaction, and support and often factor into why they joined the teaching profession to begin with. Even those educators who were back in the classroom struggled with the loss of connection brought on by social distancing throughout the day. Teachers compensated while at home with group texts or weekly social zooms with other teachers, but still felt a significant emotional loss from the isolation.

> " Switching over to using more technology took up so much more time and energy. "
>
> Christina, 2021

> " Before there were days in the classroom when the students would be off the walls. Talking about what happened that day... now, we can't mandate cameras be on and students don't talk. Buy in is easier in person because of the body language aspect of it. If I see a student is slumped and their head is down, and I can see them, I can tell if I will be able to reach them or not. Now there is no way of knowing. "
>
> Michael, 2021

> " I'm lonely and isolated, removed from my team and co-workers, and I believe that that is what gets you through teaching. I'm at a low point. It isn't the same without having face-to-face support from admin and teachers. "
>
> Lisa, 2021

Successes

2018 PERSPECTIVE

Just as the pandemic brought on new challenges for teachers, it also altered how they defined and measured success. In our 2018 research, teachers identified success according to:

- Student performance on assessments

- Former students, who had graduated, returning with stories of success and appreciation

- Recognition from parents/families, other teachers, and district administrators

2021 PERSPECTIVE

The pandemic prevented many of these measures of success and reoriented teachers' days. As a result, three new forms of success emerged:

Small Wins: Teachers now consider small daily wins, like connecting with a hard-to-reach student or a lesson going well, a success.

Empathy: Teachers have a new understanding of the importance of empathy for their students and also for themselves. Teachers are more mindful of the struggles students may be having at home and, as a result, are more patient with students. Teachers have also struggled with balancing working from home, caring for others, and being more patient with themselves during the pandemic.

Connections: Teachers have a new appreciation for interactions with students, families, and co-workers. While teachers have always known how important interacting with others is for their job satisfaction, they have a completely new understanding for how much social interactions contribute to their personal satisfaction at work and success at their job.

> " Before success was 'are they increasing scores on MAP assessments and progress?' Now it is about getting through this and my students being OK. "
>
> Brad, 2021

> " Before I was strict. Now, I'm thinking more about compassion and the emotional side of things. I've put standards aside and have more empathy for students. "
>
> Renee, 2021

> " I used to go into other teacher's classrooms during my break. You'd pick up on things they do well and try them... Now, interactions are just more surface... it puts a little rain cloud over the situation. "
>
> Alvin, 2021

THE IMPACT OF NEW CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES ON THE CLASSROOM OF THE FUTURE

The challenges of 2020-2021 reset the perspectives of teachers. The classroom of the future may be more focused on student well-being, empathy, and a deeper appreciation for small wins and social interactions.

INCREASED TECHNOLOGY USE AND ITS IMPACT ON EQUITY

The pandemic encouraged all teachers to use technology in new ways and advance their technology skills. Districts also had to implement new technology resources into their teaching methods to ensure that all students were able to access the curricular materials in ways they hadn't previously. Districts purchased and sent home tablets or computers and WIFI hotspots for students.

However, the pandemic further heightened disparities in districts based on socio-economic standing. Depending on the socio-economic status of the district, some students were able to get devices and WIFI access in their homes sooner than others. This inequality gave educators the added burden of needing to provide technical support while teaching a lesson. In addition, they worked to support students who had frequent WIFI issues or had multiple students with only one device in the home.

Those districts that could afford to purchase 1:1 devices for students and offer more technology-related professional development for teachers had an easier transition to the virtual classroom. In contrast, other districts struggled for months to get students adequate devices and WIFI hotspots. While the pandemic did increase technology skills for teachers and students throughout the US, given different starting points and access issues, those under-connected students continued to experience disadvantages.

There are important nuances that influenced technology use for teachers and students and, in turn, impacted equity in the delivery of education. First, varied family involvement made it more difficult for teachers to ensure equal participation from students. Families with a caregiver who was able to stay home and support learners tended to have different experiences than those students with less available family support or a dedicated and quiet place in the home to attend class. Furthermore, teachers faced additional difficulty supporting students with special needs and multilingual learners. Teachers had fewer digital resources in place to meet the needs of these students and struggled to secure additional support.

THE IMPACT OF INCREASED TECHNOLOGY USE ON PRODUCTIVITY, INSTRUCTION, COMMUNICATION, AND DATA

As was also seen in our 2018 research, teachers use technology to support four main objectives: Productivity, Instruction, Communication, and Data. The transformation of technology use due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had the greatest impact primarily on two areas: Productivity and Instruction.
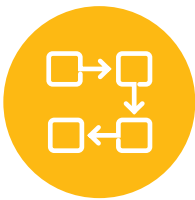
PRODUCTIVITY

attendance, grading, creating lessons

INSTRUCTION

using tech as a teaching technique

COMMUNICATION

with teachers, administrators, students, and families

DATA

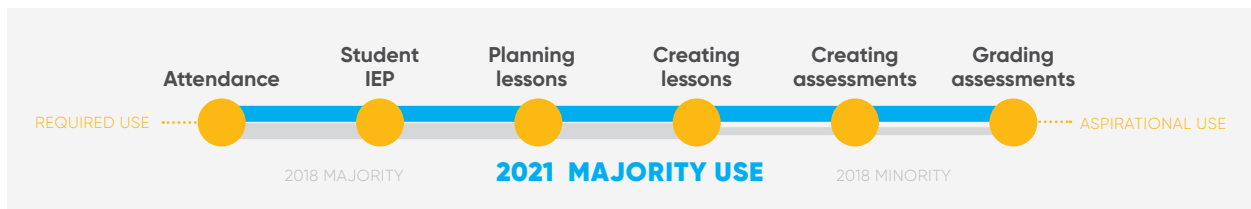collection, storage, analysis, and application

PRODUCTIVITY

attendance, grading, creating lessons

Productivity, which encompasses tasks such as keeping attendance, grading, creating lessons, and writing reports, transitioned to all digital as teachers moved their offices and classrooms to their homes. Even for those teachers who returned to in-person teaching, digital resources continued to be used to ensure social distancing. Teachers first had to learn how to create digital versions of their paper resources and then had to transfer all those resources into a digital format. However, this shift eventually saved teachers' time and increased their ease of implementation—and will likely continue to do so in the classroom of the future.

> " It is so time consuming to create Google Forms, but it is worth it because it makes things easier to grade in the end. "
>
> Katie, 2021

Attendance	Student IEP	Planning lessons	Creating lessons	Creating assessments	Grading assessments
REQUIRED USE					ASPIRATIONAL USE

2018 MAJORITY **2021 MAJORITY USE** 2018 MINORITY

INSTRUCTION

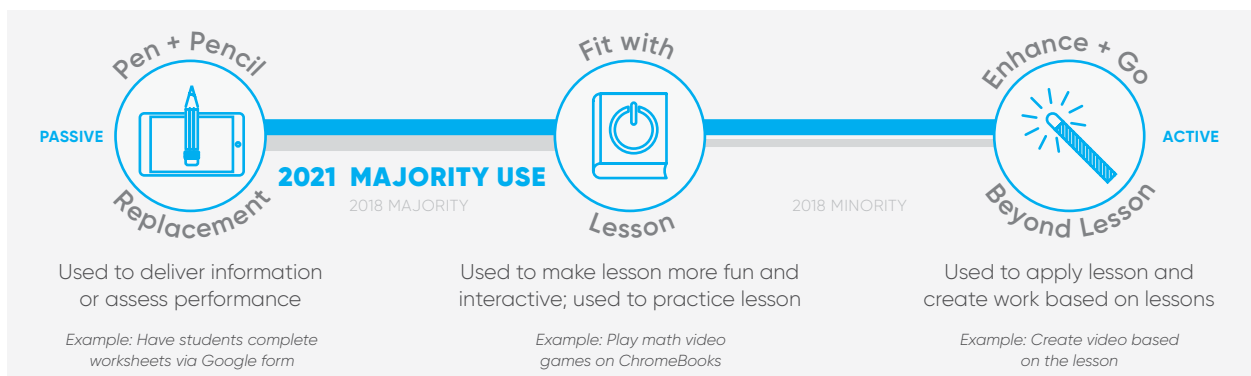### using technology as a teaching technique

The learning environment changed from in-person instruction to completely remote learning and then, for some, a mix of in-person and remote instruction. Teachers used technology for instruction (YouTube videos, games, virtual modules) more than ever because they needed something to replace interactive in-person lessons and keep students engaged. Finding these resources took time and energy for teachers, but they discovered new tools to support learning that they may not have otherwise found without this urgent need. Teachers expanded their toolboxes, reached students in new and different ways, and thought more creatively. While technology is being used to enhance and go beyond the lesson to an unprecedented level, teachers are still figuring out the optimal use of these resources.

> " Before the pandemic, it was hands-on activities and more modeling for the kids... Now, instruction is about finding more videos and more of those things that demonstrate everything. "
>
> Alvin, 2021

> " I felt good before the pandemic about my tech use and then I realized I'm not good – I didn't know how to teach over technology...We were totally unprepared and there was so much craziness. "
>
> Kena, 2021

Pen + Pencil Replacement   Fit with Lesson   Enhance + Go Beyond Lesson

PASSIVE   **2021 MAJORITY USE**   2018 MAJORITY   2018 MINORITY   ACTIVE

| Used to deliver information or assess performance	Used to make lesson more fun and interactive; used to practice lesson	Used to apply lesson and create work based on lessons
Example: Have students complete worksheets via Google form	*Example: Play math video games on ChromeBooks*	*Example: Create video based on the lesson*

COMMUNICATION

with teachers, administrators, students, and parents

Communication between teachers and families during the pandemic continued through similar methods using apps, emails, and, for some, texts. However, new modes of connecting with parents for in-person events such as all remote back-to-school night or virtual school book fairs took place. Teachers needed to rely more heavily on online collaborative settings with other teachers rather than being able to easily drop into a teacher's classroom during the lunch hour when at school. Due to social distancing within the classrooms, teachers needed to modify how they physically interacted with their students and developed creative alternatives to high-fives or hugs that were no longer possible. For remote learning environments, encouraging communication among the students was more difficult as the synchronous platforms only allowed one speaker at a time. Teachers expressed wanting more innovative methods of connecting students online for more project-based small group activities to enhance student learning.

> " I'm still using Dojo. It is easy to use and read it – you just respond and send. I'm using it more because parents aren't just dropping by anymore. Some parents call, but most do Dojo and parents have it on their phone already! "
>
> Marchala, 2021
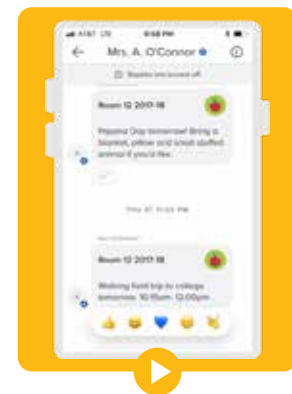
DATA

collection, storage, analysis, and application

Data and using technology to capture, organize, and analyze it declined during the pandemic as many districts deprioritized testing. Some teachers felt that the data collected while students were working remotely was less actionable as the scores may not be indicative of students' independent skill and knowledge. In addition, administrators and teachers put less emphasis on final outcome scores and provided students with more flexibility with testing and outcomes.

However, teachers anticipate that when the collection of performance and assessment data returns in the 2021-2022 academic year, future use of performance data will be enhanced by educators' new technology skills and platforms. The Educator Confidence Report showed that 73% of teachers acknowledge the benefit of online assessments (HMH & YouGov, 2021). Therefore, classrooms in the future will see a return of data-driven instruction that can help personalize teaching to accelerate students' learning in the coming year.

> " Before it was 'are they increasing scores on MAP assessment and progress?' It was all research based. 'Did my students meet my projected path?' my whole year. My principal and I look at that. Now, not to say I don't care but it isn't number one. There are bigger things at hand. "
>
> Brad, 2021

The pandemic dramatically changed teachers' technology knowledge and usage. While not always even across districts and learners, students also have a new foundation for technology and related skills. This increase in technology skills presents new opportunity to use technology at a higher level in education than ever before.

EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

In an era where teachers, students, and families are living in ever-changing, unpredictable, and oftentimes stressful situations through the pandemic, teachers expressed that the importance of high-stakes assessment outcomes were not a priority, but that instead, the positive well-being of students and teachers was their utmost concern. Knowing that effective learning cannot take place without attending to students' social and emotional needs, teachers needed to find creative ways and put in the extra mile to stay connected with students in remote learning environments while also acknowledging the limitations of the online learning environment when it comes to authentic relationship building.

Some teachers began each lesson with stories and fun props to keep the students engaged and connected to break up the monotony of online instruction. They provided opportunities for the students to mutually share their stories before diving into lessons. Some provided online small group opportunities or virtual office hours to reach students that needed additional instructional practice or attention when students became disengaged, thereby affecting their progress. Many wanted more innovative online methods of promoting more interactivity among students where students can work together on the same activity as opposed to individual practice work only.

The Education Confidence Report (ECR) (HMH & YouGov, 2021) supported these sentiments teachers expressed through the ethnography study. ECR findings showed that 58% of educators are concerned students will have increased social-emotional issues, and 56% of educators requested additional resources to support the social and emotional development of students within the classroom. Furthermore, 82% believe a well-crafted, fully integrated SEL program will make an impact. Therefore, classrooms of the future must consider the development of students' social and emotional needs that are integrated within their curricula that provides teachers the time and opportunity to address these essential issues within the course of their busy schedules.

> " Before the pandemic, it was hands-on, dancing, singing, being silly. Now, I wear a mask and a shield and when you are talking it is from a distance and then you go back to the computer... I try to tell them little stories or dress up in costumes or show them my dog. "
>
> Marchala, 2021

> " I've had to find more interactive ways to get them engaged. Before, I just used what the district had... I wish there were more interactive websites where they could play together. There aren't many like that. "
>
> Kena, 2021

> " Be patient is a new thing I learned. "
>
> Marchala, 2021

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Improvements in Technology

While the 2021-2022 school year may continue to evolve with the pandemic, there are certain areas of support that teachers will need as they navigate the classroom of the future.

PRODUCTIVITY

1 All-in-One Platform: Teachers need more all-in-one technology platform options to make the use of technology for workflow and productivity seamless. Currently, teachers have to spend time entering countless passwords and opening and navigating between multiple sites – increasing the time they spend using technology and causing additional frustrations. More all-in-one options that enable teachers to connect attendance, grading, and lesson planning would better support teachers in using technology.

2 Gradebook Integration: Students are taking assessments and completing assignments online, often through different platforms and websites that then require teachers to collect grades and manually enter them into a centralized gradebook. Teachers want more sites and resources to link with online gradebooks.

INSTRUCTION

3 Integrated Digital and In-Person Lessons: When it comes to instruction, educators need to integrate their new online resources with their previous in-person resources and lessons. More support, suggestions, time, and tools for seamlessly integrating activities best conducted in person and those completed more efficiently online would deliver a more impactful learning experience.

4 Packaged Options from Educational Companies: Teachers want more packaged options from trusted sources like education companies instead of relying on resources like YouTube which has inconsistencies in quality and content. Teachers spend numerous hours outside of class time finding and vetting online resources. They requested packaged options which they know are on grade level, meet standards, and that their students will enjoy.

5 Tools that Allow for More Synchronous Teaching: Teachers in the hybrid model struggle to deliver the same quality of information to those at home as those in school. Teachers want more tools so they can focus on instructing those in-person while not ignoring the needs of online students. Teachers don't want to feel they have to juggle two "classes" at once.

SUPPORTS FOR DIFFERENT LEARNERS

To ensure a more equitable teaching experience regardless of district SES, subject, or parental/family involvement, future tools must also consider:

6 Kid-Friendly User Design: Digital tools and platforms that are more kid-intuitive to help students who may not have caregiver or family support, particularly for the login experience.

7 Additional support for students with special needs and multilingual learners, plus more tools that allow teachers to easily communicate students' needs with parents/families—either in their native language or with respect to students' individual developmental progress.

COMMUNICATION

8 Innovative Interactions: Teachers want more tools that feel like a classroom—not just a website to post resources and links. They want more innovative digital collaboration tools like virtual white boards that mirror the in-person environment.

DATA

9 Data for Progress Monitoring: Now that students are doing more work online, teachers see an opportunity for additional tools that may track their work and progress and alert teachers so they can be more effective in intervening when students are falling behind.

10 Proctoring Assessments: With students testing on computers at home and at school more regularly, educators want tools to help ensure students aren't using unapproved outside sources or websites during testing.

A Focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Technological changes aside, attending to students' and teachers' social and emotional needs has become paramount to establishing environments that nurture students' success.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

11 SEL Instruction and Resources: Teachers have a new appreciation for small wins that define a successful day and have greater empathy for what students and families are experiencing. Teachers are looking for teaching tools and explicit instruction on attending to and nurturing students' well-being.

12 Relationship Building: Teachers have a new perspective on the importance of interactions and relationships with students, families, coworkers, and administrators and will want time and opportunity to invest in these relationships as more students return to the classroom and distancing eases. Professional development opportunities should also factor in this need for deeper and more frequent interactions between teachers so they can better support one another.

CONCLUSION

The rise of technology in teaching and the emotional stressors of the pandemic will have lasting effects. As teachers head back to classrooms, they hope that new technology skills will make productivity tasks less burdensome. New perspectives on empathy and success, combined with new technology resources, will enable instruction to be even more diversified in approach. The pandemic has brought a new era of teaching and, with it, new needs to be solved for when it comes to supporting productivity, instruction, communication, and data. These new needs must be addressed to maximize the effectiveness of technology and ensure success for educators and learners in the classroom of the future.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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