Teachers' changing concerns during COVID-19,
and the importance of time in education research

Jose Eos Trinidad

Departments of Sociology and Comparative Human Development, The University of Chicago
Institute for the Science and Art of Learning and Teaching, Ateneo de Manila University

Version: 26 January 2022 (Preprint)

Author Note

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9986-8683>

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jose Eos Trinidad, 5551 S Kimbark Avenue, Unit 1, Chicago IL 60637. Email: jtrinidad@uchicago.edu

Abstract

How have teachers' concerns changed during the course of COVID-19? Using three survey waves of a national sample of US teachers (Spring2020 - Winter2021), we found increased concerns regarding teacher burnout, student disengagement, and learning loss as well as decreased concerns regarding home responsibilities and job security. We suggest opportunities for investigating predictors, consequences, and viable solutions to these concerns, as well as propose that education studies during COVID-19 be divided into four periods according to the main societal and educational concerns in a given period. More broadly, we highlight theoretical and practical implications of this temporal attention in education.

Keywords: COVID-19, US education, teacher burnout, student engagement, school needs and strategies, temporality

Teachers' changing concerns during COVID-19,
and the importance of time in education research

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has disrupted education, and researchers have been investigating its consequences on students, teachers, and school systems (Duckworth et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021). Many of these studies are at one time point, looking at the impact at the start of the pandemic, or at some point during the 2020-2021 school year. While critical, such studies may suggest that COVID-19's impact is singular and uniform. However, we argue that educational concerns changed widely during the course of the pandemic, given shifting social contexts and school debates. Because of these changing concerns, researchers have to identify the general context of their study and we suggest four time periods during the pandemic as conceptual markers of educational shifts. We see this research as part of a larger push to regard the importance of time and context in often "timeless" studies of education.

Method

This research uses the RAND Corporation's COVID-19 Distance Learning Survey that leverages a nationally representative sample of teachers in the United States (RAND American Educator Panel, 2021). They were surveyed during the start of the pandemic in April 2020 ($n=1,000$), after the start of the new school year in October 2020 ($n=1,082$), and a year on to the pandemic during March 2021 ($n=1,045$). This research provides critical descriptive statistics regarding the shifts in teachers' concerns throughout the pandemic's first year. We investigate nine variables, with six of these measured across the three surveys and one measured only during the last time point. Variables were either in a four-point (1=not a concern, 4=major concern) or six-point (1=no need, 6=very major need) Likert scale. Aside from providing weighted means that use analytic weights for national representativeness, we also present the percentage of

teachers who say that the concern was a major or very major one (4 in the four-point scale; 5 or 6 in the six-point scale). We then performed analyses of variance and chi-square to determine whether the estimates for the three survey waves were statistically significantly different from each other.

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics of these changes. In winter 2021, more than half of US teachers were concerned about burnout (51.08%), student disengagement (54.33%), and students' learning loss (52.93%). These have shifted over time since only about a quarter of teachers felt burnt out during the pandemic's start (25.73%), and only a third in autumn 2020 felt they needed strategies to help engage students (32.10%) and help them catch up (32.42%).

There were, however, decreased concerns as well. First, home responsibilities to care for children and loved ones had peaked in autumn 2020 with 43.04% of teachers noting this was a major concern. This was reduced to 28.22% in winter 2021. Second, concerns about job security peaked in autumn 2020 at 18.75% but reduced to 7.46% in winter 2021.

Finally, some concerns have remained consistent with around 20 to 25% of teachers noting they were major concerns. These include social-emotional learning, curriculum adaptation, and access to high-speed internet. One emergent concern—only measured during winter 2021—was the teachers' need for strategies to address trauma, with 34% of teachers saying this was a major need.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a lot of changes and led to a lot of concerns in education. Given these problems that need practical solutions, researchers need to know what the

most pressing concerns are in a given period, and how these are contingent on specific times and contexts. Our study provides three important insights.

First, the most pressing school problems one year into the pandemic have been teacher burnout, student disengagement, and learning loss (see also Dorn et al., 2020). Our research points to the need to focus on these three core concerns, given that educators and administrators may become overwhelmed with the many needs of different educational stakeholders. While we do not suggest foregoing other school concerns, we do suggest that considerable research and resources be used to understand and address burnout, disengagement, and learning loss. For example, Pressley (2021) investigated how different forms of anxieties predicted teacher burnout during COVID-19. In addition to understanding predictors, researchers should also focus on how these problems are consequential for student outcomes, and what personal and organizational solutions alleviate these concerns.

Second, educational issues during COVID-19 differ through time, which suggests that studies and interventions must be attentive to such variations. As of our writing, we propose four key periods during the pandemic (see Figure 1). The first is the initial shock of COVID-19 in spring 2020, marked by abrupt school closures. The second period between summer and autumn 2020 was marked by contentious debates, preparation, and implementation of different instructional modalities (e.g., in-person, hybrid, online). The third period between winter and spring 2021 was marked by the promise of vaccination and the clearer understanding of learning loss (Engzell et al., 2021). The fourth phase starting summer 2021 is one marked by preparations for the widescale resumption of in-person classes, even with the threat of the new Delta variant. Thus, we suggest that research on education during COVID-19 must specify which general

period they are investigating since the societal and educational contexts widely differed across these 18 months.

Third, education research must attend to temporal and contextual specificity. Critics are correct in pointing out the tendency in educational research to assume timelessness (Goodson & Walker, 2005), as if student traits, teacher practices, and organizational interventions during one time period will necessarily be as concerning or as effective at a different time period. In the case of COVID-19, we find that teachers' most pressing concerns were contingent on the public health situation and larger school organizational debates. For its implications in terms of research, we suggest that education researchers be clear about the time period and context where their studies happen (e.g., a high school mindfulness intervention in the midst of social unrest in country X). In terms of practice and policy, justification for changes and reforms should include an attention to the larger societal/historical context.

References

- Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime*. McKinsey & Company.
- Duckworth, A. L., Kautz, T., Defnet, A., Satlof-Bedrick, E., Talamas, S., Lira, B., & Steinberg, L. (2021). Students Attending School Remotely Suffer Socially, Emotionally, and Academically. *Educational Researcher*, *online first*, 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211031551>
- Engzell, P., Frey, A., & Verhagen, M. D. (2021). Learning loss due to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *118*(17).
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2022376118>

Goodson, I., & Walker, R. (2005). Putting Life into Educational Research. In R. R. Sherman & R. B. Webb (Eds.), *Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods*.

RoutledgeFalmer.

Pressley, T. (2021). Factors Contributing to Teacher Burnout During COVID-19. *Educational Researcher*, 50(5), 325–327. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211004138>

RAND American Educator Panel. (2021). *COVID-19 Distance Learning Survey*. Rand Corporation.

Table 1: Teachers' Concerns from Spring 2020 to Winter 2021

	Percentage			Mean			Min	Max
	Spring 2020	Autumn 2020	Winter 2021	Spring 2020	Autumn 2020	Winter 2021		
<i>Increased concerns</i>								
Teacher burnout	25.73	57.58	51.08	2.58	3.32	3.19	1	4
Student engagement strategies	44.63	32.10	54.33	4.08	3.67	4.39	1	6
Strategies for students to catch up		32.42	52.93		3.72	4.36	1	6
<i>Decreased concerns</i>								
Home responsibilities	35.23	43.04	28.22	2.71	2.93	2.48	1	4
Job security	13.12	18.75	7.46	1.97	2.24	1.62	1	4
<i>Consistent or emergent concerns</i>								
Social-emotional learning strategies	21.27	21.61	26.70	3.35	3.27	3.42	1	6
Curriculum adaptation	17.17	20.81	17.82	3.04	3.21	2.90	1	6
Access to high-speed internet	16.45	23.52		2.34	2.79		1	6
Strategies to address trauma			34.00			3.87	1	6
<i>N</i>	1000	1082	1045	1000	1082	1045		

Source: COVID-19 Distance Learning Survey, RAND American Educator Panels

Notes: The percentage includes teachers who said that the concern or need is major/very major (i.e., 4 in a 4-point scale, and 5 or 6 in a 6-point scale). The mean is a weighted average for how much teachers are concerned or need the specific variable. For the 4-point scale, 1=not a concern and 4=major concern. For the 6-point scale, 1=no need and 6=very major need. These descriptive statistics use the analytic weights to make it nationally representative of the United States. Chi-square analyses show significant differences in percentages in Spring 2020, Autumn 2020, and Winter 2021, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, analyses of variance show significant differences in means between the three time points, $p < 0.001$. Missing observations per variable were dropped, but these do not form more than two percent of the sample and are assumed missing at random.

Figure 1: Trajectory of changes during four periods of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US

Note: The photo showing the number of US COVID-19 cases from 2 March 2020 until 8 September 2021 came from the data dashboard of Google, publicly available through the search engine. The four periods are not meant to suggest clear discrete dates but provide helpful markers for how societal and educational changes were changing through the course of the pandemic.