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Effects of COVID-19 on Classroom Behavior of Elementary School Students

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Senior Capstone

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Abstract

The purpose of this capstone project is to inform parents, current and future educators about the harms that COVID-19 has brought into the classroom after the period of isolation. During this period, families were forced to stay indoors for their safety. Parents had to juggle between their jobs, their children, and themselves. All of these were going on while a child should be focusing on learning in the classroom. Through extensive literature review and interviews with elementary school teachers, the result finding indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic is the cause of student behaviors in the classroom that have affected many educators' decision whether they still want to remain in their teaching career or not.

Introduction and Background

"The Year The Earth Stood Still" is what most people call it. In 2020, the world was shaken with the realization that a disease called coronavirus was going to change people's lives forever. The harsh reality of the coronavirus (COVID) was that it did not discriminate. It causes a harsh respiratory infection that is shown in forms of cough, fever, fatigue, loss of taste and smell, and more. Unfortunately, it took the lives of many humans and even certain types of animals. Because of the steadily increasing death rate, the world shut down and those who could, moved their business online. While some knew how to quickly adapt to life during isolation caused by the pandemic, it was not as easy for most. Specifically, in the education world, teachers, other members of administration, and students had to figure out how to continue with lessons, while taking into consideration the harsh times one might be facing in their personal lives.

When the pandemic first moved everyone online, I was a freshman in college. It was mid-March and so many other colleges had already made the decision to send students home for a longer spring break than expected. Everyone around me on the California State University Monterey Bay campus was curious as to when we would get the email stating that we were stopping all classes and starting our spring break. The day we got that email, I remember hearing cheering outside of my dorm room and, at the time, I wanted to cheer with them. Little did I, or the world for that matter, know just how inappropriate it was to be cheering. The break was very much needed, especially for burnt out college students, but it was the beginning of a scary and unforeseeable period of isolation and darkness.

For college students, the transition to online classes after the break was rough, but luckily, most professors and school administration were very understanding of the stressful times and allowed students to communicate with professors if needed about anything that might be too

much. I believe that this made the transition easier, because we are all adults and are able to be truthful and understanding with one another. However, the same cannot be said for young children who have not had the lifelong schooling as we have. Elementary school is the time where the development of one's physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities are focused on. The most basic way to describe elementary school is to say that it is where children learn basic academic knowledge (for example: the reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and advance their social skills. This is where they are introduced to other people their age in a wide setting and they learn how to be nice to others, share toys, behave in the classroom, talk to their peers and teachers. But how do you teach these basic human skills to someone through a screen? The short answer is that you can't. In my research, I study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on elementary school students' behavior in the classroom. This includes all stated above and the aftermath of the isolation of each student.

The primary question I wish to propose to begin my research is: How has COVID-19 affected the behavior of elementary school students in the classrooms? Within this there are many parts. The primary question opens doors for me to do research on the COVID-19 pandemic, elementary school student behavior, and how the changing of times impacts the classroom as a whole. Related questions include: What is COVID-19? How has it evolved and impacted the U.S.? What does research say about the effects of COVID-19 on the behavior of elementary school students in the classrooms? How has COVID-19 changed the behavior of students according to in-service teachers? Given the change of student behavior as a consequence of COVID-19, how has it changed the teaching and learning in the classrooms? As previously stated, the online learning that came with COVID-19 was not expected to be dealt

with correctly. It took a lot of time and patience from both educators and students. However, the patience of students wears thin and that is where the misbehavior was born from.

Literature Review

The Coronavirus Pandemic

There has been a large amount of research regarding COVID-19, whether it be what happened during the period of isolation, who was affected more than others, or what the world has begun to look like after coming back to normalcy. However, little research has been done on what this looked like for schools and the long-term and short term effects it has had in the classroom. Coronavirus is known to be an infectious disease that is mainly spread through liquid particles from person to person (WHO). This includes sneezing, coughing, speaking, singing or breathing near other people where one of the parties is positive with COVID-19. The first known case in the United States was on January 20, 2020 and it caused a shift in everyone's lifestyle (CDC). Adults and children everywhere needed to adapt to staying home at all times, only going out when necessary, and wearing a mask when coming into contact with anyone not in their household. Some of the symptoms one might run into when testing positive for COVID-19 are fever, cough, loss of taste or smell, and tiredness. More serious symptoms include difficulty breathing, confusion, and chest pains (WHO). These are extremely similar to those of a normal cough or cold. The more serious symptoms have led to hospitalizations and even death. Unfortunately, because this virus was so new and killing people at an alarming rate, the knowledge and development of a vaccine or medication to help those with the disease was very limited and not accessible to everyone. There were tests that were made to test those that presented the common symptoms, but because they were so limited in quantity and it was still

very early in the stages of COVID, they were not given to just anyone. There were extensive steps one had to take in order to receive a test at a facility. Common problems when trying to take a test were appointments being all booked, having to pay for tests, transportation, lack of insurance, and more. In addition to there being complications when trying to be tested, there was never the reassurance of 100% accuracy with the results. The development of everything revolving COVID was just that, development. All of the testing and medications had not been able to go under the years of testing typically conducted with other diseases and viruses. However, it was the best that was able to be given to us because of the urgency behind preventing and curing COVID-19.

All of the stress this virus caused was largely why people advocated for wearing masks, social distancing, and staying home. As previously mentioned, businesses and schools were transitioned online. Schools began shutting down out of health concerns for the teachers and students interacting. "The parents of 87% of children say their child participated 'primarily on a computer, tablet, or similar device." (Henderson et al., 2021) Teachers had to compromise by not going into the classroom everyday and moved their everyday classes to an online format, typically using Zoom, a communication technology that allows for group meetings with the use of video. Students had to learn the ways of online learning and that did come with challenges involving not being in the classroom with the teacher and other students.

Online Learning

Online learning entailed the use of technology to have the most effective learning (under these circumstances). It did not require the students or teachers to be physically present in a classroom (Knopik et al., 2021). "Children are online at increasing frequency, for longer periods of time and at younger ages than ever before." states Beseler et al. (2023) In addition to lessons

being moved to an online setting, children are already using technology for their personal lives, so how does one expect a child to disassociate technology for fun with technology for school? In the remote classroom, there are pros and cons. While the world is ever changing and needing to adapt to the innovations technology has to offer, there is a need to tackle online learning correctly and effectively. Knopik et al. (2021) states that "clear rules, plans, programmes, or instructions are the basis for effective implementation of remote learning." And, unfortunately, the world was hit with the coronavirus completely out of the blue and teachers were not able to take the time to prepare themselves for the trials and tribulations that were ahead of them.

The interaction between teachers and students steadily decreased. (Henderson et al. 2021) Most teachers were keeping the daily classes as "normal" as possible, while others seemed to decrease screen time in order to avoid conflict in areas of disengagement. Rice and Ortiz (2021) discuss the different types of engagement that are challenged when taking part in educational media. "Sometimes, students have negative emotions in response to digital instructional materials about tragic events. Presenting content that consistently evokes negative emotions, like distress, impedes cognitive and behavioral engagement." It is the opinion of some that when you start to think negatively about something, the less and less you want to do it. The same can be said for those students who may have already had negative experiences/thoughts associated with learning or attending school. So the shift for most became more tedious and would eventually lead to behavioral problems in the online classroom. "It is inevitable that most teachers come across some sort of student misbehavior during online courses. Student misbehavior can threaten the effectiveness of online courses." (Baysal & Ocak, 2021) Just as misbehavior may cause a distraction of students in the classroom, the attention span of a student is being reduced to a

screen, where even the slightest odd movement may catch the attention of the whole class and take away from the teacher.

The assumption for parents to become more involved with their childrens' education was explicitly present. The transition to an online classroom was going to be a difficult one, but there was hope that parents would interact more with their children because of the uncertainty that came with attending school online. "In most cases (especially with younger children and students with special educational needs) a significant increase in the time devoted by parents to participate in their children's education was expected." (Knopik et al., 2021) Teachers already have expectations of parents to play a part in their childrens' education outside of the classroom, at home. When home becomes the classroom, how do you differentiate the two? Well, with the forced move to online learning, Knopik et al. (2021) states that there are two key dimensions of parental involvement: communication and home learning. A parent should be motivating their child to engage in the learning through the online format. Even if it is not ideal for any parties involved, it is what had to happen to keep everyone safe. When a parent is not motivating their child, they become discouraged and distance themselves from engaging with their teacher and their peers online.

For some the misbehavior that was displayed in the classroom almost disappeared when they started attending school online. Fleming (2020) through Clemente and Chatmon (2022) tell the story of a boy who was known to be a class clown, constantly bringing distraction into the classroom and diverting the attention of his classmates away from the teacher. However, once placed online, he was able to stray away from that lifestyle and shift his focus towards his classwork. When the teachers were discussing what they think might have changed, it was stated that they think it had largely to do with the fact that he was able to center his focus on what was

in front of him (i.e. his schoolwork, his teacher), rather than thinking of his peers and the distraction a classroom might have caused him. Some teachers even see the use of technology as a plus when it comes to teaching. It is a way to engage students. "Computer viewing helps keep students engaged and encourages higher levels of involvement, since many of them are digital natives. PowerPoints encourage a higher level of involvement particularly when they are interactive." (Clemente & Chatmon, 2022) So, while the situation was not ideal, there are clear pros and cons to the different ways educators decided to go about it.

Behavior Returning to the Classroom

For most, the return to the classroom happened over a year after the initial transition to online. In August of 2021, students began the school year back in the classroom, with limitations of course. With the stress of the childrens' wellbeing, there were many parents skeptical about the return. There were heavy debates on topics like wearing masks, vaccinations, and keeping the childrens' best interest at heart. Hughes (2021) states, "Parents must weave through an array of differing rules and circumstances as they consider the right path for their children". However, the return to in-person instruction needed to happen. After the proper precautions were thought of, it was time to place them into effect when students came back to school.

There were different things being said about what was missing while being online. Students were not able to have access to things that a school may provide for them. School is one of the only places for students to get attention on issues they may be having and there are resources available to help students with their mental health (Correa & Nikki, 2021). The change caused them to miss out on seeing school counselors when they might have been needing them the most. "A lack of adequate support for children's mental health can lead to attention difficulties, behavioral concerns, and lower academic achievement." (Naff et al., 2022) In

addition, the online learning setting causes stress that children in elementary school are too young to be experiencing. There was also the decline in learning experiences with the high risk of students falling behind in different subjects. "Pre-pandemic inequities and subsequent educational gaps placed many vulnerable students at risk of falling further behind academically during the COVID-19 pandemic." (Klosky et al., 2022)

The differences in the classroom setting did not go unnoticed. After spending over a year at home, without the normal activities of seeing friends, interacting with teachers, and being outdoors with other people, it should come as no surprise that students were feeling and acting differently. Especially when it comes to their behavior in the classroom. Student misbehavior in the classroom is not always going to be talking while the teacher is talking, it is going to include so many other things. "They can take on several different forms including fighting, bullying, talking back to teachers, vandalizing school property, stealing, using or distributing illegal substances, as well as a number of other behaviors that disrupt overall positive flow of classroom and school activities." (Baysal & Ocak, 2021) Misbehavior in general can have some pretty negative impacts in the classroom. Not only can it stop students from learning and educators from teaching, but it can also lead to issues with time management and disconnection with factors contributing to their development. When students are in their first years of education, they are at the stages in their life where they are learning everyday social skills and figuring out who they are and who they wish to be.

The constant disruption in the proper flow of the classroom can have negative effects on a teacher as well. "They can undermine teachers' ability to establish and maintain effective learning experience. Moreover, they generally require a large amount of attention and time to overcome." (Baysal & Ocak, 2021) Educators have a constant desire to "fix" students'

misbehaviors and that can also delay the progression of lessons for the class as a whole. The list of misbehaviors of students can continue on and on, however, the research on what those misbehaviors look like now and what effects they have on a classroom is minimal.

Methods and Procedures

For this portion of my research paper, the population in which I decided to do study consisted of elementary school teachers in the Monterey County Area. In Monterey, I have been able to do service learning with a teacher who has taught me a lot about her experience in the classroom and was able to partake in lengthy discussion about what COVID did to her and her classroom environment. I mainly relied on her and the teachers I met to answer questions pertaining to my research topic. Because a key word in my title is "elementary school", that was one of the requirements to play a part in my research.

I had originally planned on asking my questions in an interview format. I had written out a list of questions I would like answered by these teachers so that we are able to engage in conversation about the topic and I could gain that information in a more personal way. The way I went about this was by emailing the teacher in which I have been in contact with for two years, and asking her to reach out to the teachers she knows at her school and teachers she knows on a personal level to meet with me.

Once it came time to do so, I had hit a couple of blocks in scheduling. It is a busy time of the year for everyone and this caused me to move my questions from that personal connection to an online one, using Google Forms. This format was a convenient one for myself and the teachers I had planned to interview so that my questions could get answered when they had time to sit down and focus. I created a survey using some of my originally planned questions and modified versions of the original questions to adapt to this new intake of research. The survey

consisted of seven (7) questions that allowed teachers to share as much information as they desired for the discussion of behavior in the classroom (See Appendix A).

With this survey, I was able to get straightforward answers to my primary and secondary research questions. While I wanted to ask questions that were not so direct with my research questions, it felt nearly impossible because I was not going to be given the time or space to partake in further discussion with my subjects. My primary question is "How has COVID-19 affected the behavior of elementary school students in the classrooms?", and I decided to ask almost all of my questions to benefit my research and save that one for second to last. One of the secondary questions that I slightly modified to put into my survey is, "How does student behavior affect teaching and learning in the classroom?" with the original being, "Given the change of student behavior as a consequence of COVID-19, how has it changed the teaching and learning in the classrooms?" Asking these questions so straightforwardly allowed me to get the best possible understanding of how the teachers feel about their experience with the two main factors in my topic: COVID and Behavioral Complications.

After reaching out to those who I thought would be willing to participate and have a place to possibly voice frustration with the pandemic, I received two responses. Unfortunately, time conflicts in my schedule, and the schedules of others, led to major setbacks in the gathering of my research. When I had the plan to interview teachers, I was aiming for one teacher per elementary grade level. Meaning having approximately five-to-six teachers to analyze and study. This would have helped with my goal of letting the educators discuss their answers further and exhibit how much this study relies on the feelings of those in the classroom. However, many of the teachers did not have a chance to respond to myself via email or the survey I had sent to them.

Results and Discussion

The results for this study will be presented in two portions. The first will encompass the first two questions in my survey (See Appendix A) and the second will entail the separating of the questions in the survey followed by a section with a description of the findings.

Questions 1 and 2: (See Appendix A)

The first two questions in my survey consisted of background information. Its purpose was to request the grade level in which each educator teaches at their elementary school, what their average class size is, and the amount of time they have been in the education field. Teacher 1 is a fifth grade teacher with an average classroom size of 30 students. They have been a teacher for 9 years. Teacher 2 is currently an art teacher, but has taught third grade for the past 17 years. They did not provide information regarding their average classroom size.

Question 3: (See Appendix A)

When entering a classroom, students are typically told something similar to "remain silent and pay attention". However, the behavior of a student can determine how much the class actually gets done with the amount of time given for each lesson or subject. Teacher 1 states,

> "Student behavior can negatively or positively affect teaching and learning. For example, negative behaviors can make teaching and learning impossible. Positive behaviors can make teaching and learning run according to the pacing and lesson plan. Both positive and negative behaviors have a domino [effect] on student learning- it can cause students to completely stop learning or to take learning to deeper levels." (Teacher 1, personal communication, 2023)

Once the behavior of the class gets disrupted, it can turn into a whole chain reaction. A child will misbehave, possibly cause others to misbehave, delay a lesson from moving forward, thus

making the whole class fall behind. This can make it stressful for when a teacher really needs to get a point across or make sure every student in the room learns something very specific.

Question 4:

It is common knowledge that misbehavior in any setting is disruptive. The coronavirus pandemic did not invent misbehavior in the classroom, it was there to begin with. There were times that classes had good days and the overall behavior was good, but there were also days where classes might have been disruptive and disrespectful. As an education major, I am often told by others something along the lines of, "I could never." or "I do not have that kind of patience." Many people know that being a teacher requires a lot of calmness and patience because of the energy that comes with a classroom full of vibrant children that may come off as annoying to those who don't understand why people become teachers in the first place. People do not become teachers because of the pay. Despite the countless hours and dollars spent on pursuing this profession, teachers become teachers because of the non-monetary rewards that come with it. Teacher 2 answers this question by saying that the misbehavior in the classroom before the change was, "Very hard before COVID, but some kids made it all worth it." The reward is knowing that you may change a child's life and helping them find their way in the world.

Question #5

As previously stated, the change in students' behavior did not go unnoticed. Both teachers state that there were major issues when it came to paying attention in class for any reason. Some examples that were given were talking during lessons, not paying attention to instruction, and the lack of motivation getting in the way of completing tasks. Teacher 2 also mentioned that there are times where students are disrespectful and "fight anything that requires

effort." For most, it might be hard to see what was different between pre-COVID and now, because these are common classroom issues. However, these are all being seen more frequently since the return to the classroom. Teacher 1 states, "Many of these behaviors occurred pre-COVID but now it is most students rather than a select few." (Teacher 1, personal communication, 2023). They go on to say that during the period of online learning, students were not used to being held accountable for their actions or their school work and that they have brought that into the classroom. Students are now desiring rewards in return for getting basic tasks done, instead of doing it because it is the right thing to do. This can make things extremely difficult because the more rewards given, the more other students may want as well.

Question #6

While some difficulties in the classroom stem from student misbehavior, it is important to realize the effects it might play on the teachers. Any conversation with a teacher in which someone asks them if behavior has gotten worse since being back in the classroom, will result in the answer that it has gotten worse. The right question to ask is HOW the behavior has been affected. Teachers state that they have been finding themselves constantly repeating instructions even when there are written instructions for the students to follow. Whereas "normal" classroom behavior entails the learning together of the classroom norms by December, Teacher 1 states that there is a constant need to remind students of the rules even over halfway through the school year and it all boils down to listening problems (Teacher 1, personal communication, 2023). Teachers 2 mentions that 95% of the students have been worse off since returning to the classroom and that there has been the disability to persevere through challenges (Teacher 2, personal communication, 2023).

Question #7

The last question in my survey was optional for teachers to fill out. This was where I would have liked to stray away from the interview portion and open it up to letting the teachers explain anything else they might want to share about the challenges that came out of the previous years in isolation. Below are the main ideas of what else they wanted to express regarding the aftermath of the pandemic:

- "Students also seem to have been exposed to many inappropriate materials online that [are causing] a lot of issues in the classroom and on campus." (Teacher 1, personal communication, 2023)

- "More cussing and inappropriate language [than] we have ever seen." (Teacher 1, personal communication, 2023)

- "Students also seem to be more physically aggressive towards teachers, staff and other students. Lots of fighting and kicking/hitting teachers is [occurring]. As I said before we saw some of this before the pandemic and distance learning- but never on the level we are now. Now it is "regular business" and it has become a huge concern for teacher and student safety." (Teacher 1, personal communication, 2023)

- "Some kids whose parents stayed home and had logged on to great engaging teachers did fine. Some stayed on grade level and thrived because [there] were less behavior problems/distractions online because they were muted or didn't log on." (Teacher 2, personal communication, 2023)

- "Most of my kids that loved learning and had a parent at home did excellent. Others I never saw again that year and they never recovered now that they are back struggling causing problems." (Teacher 2, personal communication, 2023)

Problems and Limitations

The overall research of the effects the pandemic played on behavior in the classroom was easier to find than expected. As previously mentioned, my original plan was to conduct interviews, but that is where my problems were mainly found. The biggest problem I faced in this project was time restrictions. Teachers work so hard throughout the day that they find it difficult to continue doing work after the day is over. So, that led to minimal responses from teachers and only two responses to my survey.

A problem that came with my survey was the lack of responses. While I felt that the questions being turned into a survey made it easier for teachers to provide information, there were only two responses to my survey. However, I think that the two responses did a great job at displaying appropriate answers to my questions. Another problem I faced was not being able to encompass all of what they said and elaborate on it more. The reason for this is that my topic is very specific and does not take into account the mental health issues of the students and teachers.

Recommendations

At the time, no one knew what was going on nor what to do with themselves going forward. It was a time where teachers had to improvise tremendously with their students and the content covered in class. It is hoped that this study will work as a guide for if this shut down were to happen again. This way, teachers can learn from past experiences and know how to go forward with their class. It is also important for parents to make note of things said in this project because of the impact they have on their childrens' lives while engaging in online learning.

It should also show parents that teachers are very important people that help their children grow. Parents should understand the values of teaching their children to be respectful and independent so that when they arrive at school, they are socially and emotionally ready to

learn in the classroom. They should also inform their children how important it is to engage in early learning programs because doing so will help them out so much more in the future and keep them from falling behind.

Conclusion

For some, it is very difficult to remember what life was like before the pandemic. This feels especially difficult for teachers and students returning from the hardships they faced while attempting to continue school "normally" using an online setting. My primary question for this project was: How has COVID-19 affected the behavior of elementary school students in the classrooms? Within this there are many parts. The primary question opened doors for me to do research on the COVID-19 pandemic, elementary school student behavior, and how the changing of times has impacted the classroom as a whole. While the population for this project included adults who are very aware of what happened during this time for them, looking at these questions allowed them to take the time to reflect.

I was able to take apart the different things in my primary research question and analyze them through my research and surveys. The pandemic caused disruption in many people's lives and online learning made things stressful, complicated and altered people's mental health. Online learning was the only solution available to teachers and students given the circumstances, but the aftermath of it has been proven time and time again to be detrimental to the classroom environment. This research paper has opened my eyes to how serious the behavior of the students has been affected and led to other consequences including, fighting with teachers, falling back in academics, apathy towards lessons and instruction, and cursing and inappropriate language use.

Overall, there is now extensive research on the consequences that came out of online instruction and there is the ability to use this research as a preventative measure, should something like a transition online happen again. There are now ways that teachers can communicate with parents about what they need to help with reaching their students better. Teachers will hopefully know how to cope with their own classroom struggles and help one another communicate more effectively with their students in order to avoid misbehavior and promote following along during lessons better.

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Appendix A:

1. What grade do you teach and what is your average class size?

2. How long have you been an educator? (i.e. 4 years)

3. How does student behavior affect teaching and learning in the classroom?

4. How would you describe the behavior of your students before transitioning to online learning?

5. Have you noticed a difference in the student behavior since coming back from online learning? If so, what changes in behavior did you notice when returning to the classroom?

6. Overall, how has COVID-19 affected the behavior of your students in the classroom?

7. Is there anything you would like to add regarding student behavior changes from the COVID-19 pandemic?