



Pandemic and Classroom Change: The view from within

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Abstract

Most educators will tell you that some degree of change naturally accompanies education whether the change is preparing for a new textbook or changing grade levels. This type of pandemic change was a sudden and final change. It was the abrupt ending of a school year months too soon which was a different level of change for educators. Ebbeck and Chan (2011, as cited in Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003) wrote, "Change is an ever-present entity and necessity for growth and to meet existing and future demands" (p. 43). The futility of school change is legendary; it is an enormous and intricate task (Evans, 2001). In order to grow and develop, the positive forces must be used to our advantage and the negative forces must be blunted (Fullan, 1993). Educational change happens in small amounts at times and in very large waves at other times. The amount of change thrust upon education from the pandemic was an avalanche.

Keywords: Educators, Future demands, Online method, Google classroom, Classroom instruction

Spring 2020, the coronavirus pandemic changed how millions around the globe received education. This change occurred in a matter of weeks. Third grade teacher, Janice, described what happened last spring: "We went on spring break with the plan to return and during that week our school system closed."

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Three teachers allowed some insight into their journeys from last March 2020, up until today, Fall 2020. Janice teaches in a self-contained third grade classroom in a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school in a city setting, and she has been teaching for five years. Wilson teaches in a rural pre-kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school. Wilson teaches departmentalized math, science, and history. He has been teaching for 1 ½ years so the pandemic occurred during his first year of teaching. Savannah is a third-grade teacher in a rural pre-kindergarten through sixth grade elementary school. Savannah has been teaching for almost two years and she teaches in a self-contained third grade classroom.

Janice shared how quickly the changes happened due to the pandemic in spring 2020. She explained, "we went on spring break with the plan to return. It was during that week my school system decided not to return to in-person learning." Janice explained that teachers were given time to go into their classrooms and gather items they needed in order to teach online successfully. She credits already having used an online learning platform with her students as helping her have a familiar online method for making and receiving assignments. Janice shared that they were encouraged to gather assessment grades but "live" online teaching was not a priority due to the lack of personal student devices at home. She was able to hold optional online intervention meetings for students. Janice shared that she was thankful that by the time her school shut down, her grade level standards had been covered in class. She shared that the last nine weeks are usually a review of standards and preparation for standardized testing which her state opted out of due to the education situation brought about by the pandemic. Janice shared that she felt prepared due to already using Google classroom. Teaching from her home with a young son at home, due to his school closing, was quite a challenge. She credits the support of her administration as an important part of her success when instructing on line. The most difficult part is still described by Janice as the lack of student devices at home. Janice's school was totally virtual for the first nine weeks. She is now back in her third-grade classroom

and teaching a blended group. This means Janice has half of her classroom in person each day and the other half is tuning in virtually during the same hours, 8-3. They even take the same breaks as the in-person students for lunch, recess, specials (music, art, etc.), and breaks. Her virtual students are still battling the lack of devices so that continues to be a difficult part of teaching online. Janice spent summer in professional development with her administrators diligently preparing for the unknown in classroom instruction.

Wilson shared that as school closed for in person instruction, he was able to use online apps and websites to support on line lessons and engagement for students. He also shared the importance of having weekly zoom meetings with his class that were pre-scheduled at set times. These meetings were set for both morning and evening to allow for more parent involvement if needed. Wilson also stated the importance of the spring shut down coming after fourth grade standards had been covered in his classroom. He felt that not having to introduce new material certainly helped ease some of the angst of the quick move to online learning. Wilson shared that even though at the time no one knew what was coming, the spring move to online learning was a good practice run for the fall when they wound up being virtual for the first nine weeks of the school year. Summer was definitely spent attending professional development learning to use a variety of virtual platforms for instruction. After the first nine weeks of the fall being totally virtual, Wilson now has students back in his classroom using Zoom only for those that become ill or need to miss school for extended periods of time. He credits support of administration, fellow teachers, parents, and students for helping make the move to virtual instruction as smooth as possible.

Savannah describes last spring as, “we closed on March 13th and started virtual school on April 6th and we were told we would use Google classroom for assignments.” She shared her determination to learn Google Classroom and other learning apps as she sorted through the emotions of moving to online teaching so quickly. Savannah mentioned she did not feel prepared due to really having no way to be prepared for such an abrupt development in education. She shared being concerned about the students and their learning and trying to make sure that she was not making assignments simply to keep students busy. Savannah was honest about using some of the summer to help regain her footing amidst the chaos of the pandemic. She described using the summer to calm nerves and prepare for the next school year no matter what that might bring her way. Savannah, was asked by the administration at her school to become a virtual third grade teacher serving her school as well as another neighbouring school. She is doing that and learning a great deal. The communication is not always easy but she feels that partnering with other virtual teachers has definitely been the most helpful step so far. The accountability for online learning and motivation of students continue to be on-going challenges for Savannah and other virtual teachers.

Janice, Wilson, and Savannah are willing and able to tackle the change brought on by the pandemic. Their ability to jump in and dig deeper to get the job done is definitely a testament to their undying commitment to educating the students in their classrooms. They all mentioned the support of those around them, especially administrators, and professional development as a major force in their ability to face these changes. This type of distinction is present with any organization as they deal with change, and there are three basic levels of commitment to change: make it happen, help it happen, and let it happen (Evans, 2001). Professional development decisions are most successful when studied in relation to the commitment of those facing the change. This once again reiterates Bloom’s (2005) research showing the teachers’ degree of receptiveness to change is significantly affected by their perception of their administrator’s support. Evans (2001) reminds us, people seek authentic leaders who inspire them to trust and confidence, someone worth following into the uncertainties of change (p. 185). The pandemic has certainly caused a time of uncertainty and change within education. The leadership of administrators and the commitment of teachers is the key to delivering education in this time of pandemic and change.

Works Citation

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