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A Comparative Analysis of Black American Student Experiences and International Student Experiences During the Initial Months of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic created an indelible mark on K-12 education — specifically, high school students transitioning to college and career. The global scope of this pandemic presented an opportunity to compare how high school cultures across the world adapted to the emergency. Further, news reports highlighted how communities of color were more susceptible to the pandemic.

To better understand how the Black student experience in middle America compared to that of other students from the global community in responding to pandemic-related educational disruption, I used Krippendorff's content analysis procedures (2018) and a phenomenological interview process to gather and analyze data from 17 Black American high school students and 35 teachers. The central research question was: What are the experiences of Black students in middle America regarding educational disruption when compared to the experiences of high school students in other countries?

The findings revealed that globally both students and teachers were primarily concerned with educational quality, teacher preparedness and substandard Internet service. Findings from twelve other countries confirmed that diminished Internet access and teacher unpreparedness were essential problems. However, Finnish districts which relied on government support seamlessly progressed through the interruptions in March 2020.

Keywords: Black high school students, international high school students, resilience, qualitative content analysis, Covid -19

Background: How the United States coped with Covid-19

In mid-March 2020, society worldwide experienced abrupt lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders in order to curtail the spread of Covid-19. This acute respiratory syndrome infected over 28.5 million Americans and killed over half a million people at the time of this writing (World Health Organization, 2021), with over a million Americans now dead from the virus (2023). Given the rapid spread of Covid-19 infections, 107 countries mandated national school shutdowns to minimize the impact (Viner et al., 2020)

During the pandemic, the American public received contradictory messages on how to progress through their day-to-day lives. At the onset of the pandemic, the government told communities that masks were inconsequential, only later to advise people to wear double masks to stop the virus's spread. Similarly, the public was originally told that young people could not catch the virus, yet such statements were soon contradicted by reports of youngsters dying from Covid-19.

As a result of conflicting information and uncoordinated national efforts, K–12 school systems across America were subjected to mercurial advice on how to continue educational delivery. This affected at least 55.1 million students in over 124,000 schools (Education Week, 2020). Faced with the most severe pandemic in over a century and a cacophony of mixed messages, students struggled to adjust socioemotionally, as some educational systems were wrought with inconsistent messages (National Academy of Science, 2020; Zimmerman & Anderson, 2011).

In March of 2020, when the first Covid-19 cases started to emerge in the United States, Americans were led to believe that virus was equally likely to affect everyone. However, as the pandemic continued, American society witnessed social inequities along gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (Blundell et al., 2020).

By June 2020, Blacks, who are only 13% of the United States population, constituted 26% of positive Covid-19 cases, 31% of hospitalizations, and 23% of virus-related deaths (CDC, 2020; Dowling & Kelly 2020; NCHS, 2020). Moreover, jobs that were most vulnerable to the pandemic, except those in the medical field, were held frequently by people of color who worked in front-line service positions with the public (Tamin et al., 2021). People of color are also more likely to reside in highly populated areas, limiting the potential for social distancing (Rosenburg et al., 2020). In addition, school districts serving students of color had insufficient resources and older buildings with substandard ventilation (Nam, 2020; Von Braun, 2020). Though American society may have initially cast the Covid-19 virus as an equal opportunity plight, as with many harmful manifestations, disenfranchised people of color actually suffered disproportionately through their extreme vulnerability (Gaynor, 2020; Music, 2020).

Background: How other nations coped with Covid-19

Researchers are just starting to examine the cataclysmic impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic on educational delivery. At the time of this writing, March 2021, K–20 educational institutions were struggling with student enrollment, public health calamities, and inconsistent educational delivery. The United States was just beginning its vaccine distribution with hopes to return to normalcy by the fall of 2021.

Early studies published by institutional scholars that examined educational disruption in their respective countries have provided additional data for how school systems adapted. For example, Debbarma and Durai's 2021 study involving 175 students from northeastern India confirmed that ineffectual Internet access and mediocre teacher-student interaction hindered student learning.

The pandemic also caused mental stress, as students (especially those from low-income communities) worried about their future; this dynamic was particularly acute for low-income students (Debbarma & Durai, 2021).

In June 2020, Okebukola et al. reflected on a UNESCO report indicating that 165 countries had issued lockdown orders in response to Covid-19, affecting 516 million students. The African research team focused on gathering data pertaining to five African countries — Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Burundi, and Morocco — to reveal that poor participation rates (about 35%) interfered with student learning. They also found that teachers were actively advocating for interactive online classes, but they struggled to deliver them successfully due to constant interruptions by students. However, secondary school students were more committed because they were motivated to solidify their university placement.

Niemi's and Kousa's (2020) study couched in a subsidized Finnish educational system examined the experiences of nine to fifteen teachers and 56 to 72 students. They framed their research with the Finnish principle that all children have a right to equal educational opportunity. Consequently, their government invests in high-quality education nationwide. When the pandemic spread to northern Europe, the Finnish teachers were given two to three days to adopt online delivery. However, the Finnish teachers were prepared as they had previous experience with online educational delivery and communication.

The respondents conducted synchronous class meetings and were required to maintain attendance throughout each 75-minute class meeting. Further, the school system mandated that those teachers keep a constant presence throughout their class meetings (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Though the Finnish study respondents reported minor technical problems, students complained of the increased workload and noted that they were confined to the computer for over eight hours a day.

A New Zealand quantitative study of 60 schools and 1,975 students also established that students preferred face-to-face learning and retained more subject matter through in-person class meetings (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Yates et al., 2020). The New Zealand students enjoyed the YouTube and teacher-made videos which enhanced visual learning from home. Notably, students used videos to progress independently, paused the video to reflect, and rewound the video to reconfirm the concepts.

Students' preference for self-paced education resurfaced when they considered their ability to spend more time on favorite subjects; additionally, the self-paced component also allowed students to develop their strategies and spend more time on complex concepts (Yates et al., 2020).

The previous studies from Finland, India, Africa, Italy, and New Zealand focused on student learning and teaching experiences. Adding to Covid-19 related research, a Chinese-led study in Guangdong Province pursued an alternative approach by examining 493 junior high school students and 532 high school students who adapted to the new educational delivery. The authors argued that teenagers required more social interaction as part of their development (Zhang et al. 2020). Because teenagers depend on peer interaction and experience natural hormonal changes, they are more vulnerable to depression during isolation (Zhang et al., 2020). However, those students who reported a higher level of resilience also reported lower levels of depression and anxiety during the lockdown.

Contributing to the body of research, Giannopoulou et al. (2021) examined stress and anxiety among 442 Greek high school students, who noted that they were anxious about exams and university placement even before the pandemic; worries increased significantly after the lockdown. The researchers also uncovered the fact that suicidal ideation among these students increased during the pandemic (Giannopoulou et al., 2021).

These initial international studies offer concrete insight into teenage student behaviors during the pandemic. The studies reflect class, resource availability, teacher practices, mental health issues, and student behaviors. Compared to these countries with more homogenous populations, the United States embodies diversity within all these demographic elements about class, race, gender, and access differences.

The lasting impact of educational disruption

Merolla's (2013) work echoes a speech from Barack Obama when he was a member of the United States Senate, to wit, social and economic justice emerge through education.

Studies have shown that communities of color have diminished access to technology, resource-rich networks, and health care (Ford et al., 2008; Lin, 2000). Spenner et al. (2004) and Zhang and Smith (2011) found that the achievement gap in the first semester of college is largely predetermined by academic achievement in high school. In general, the Black students in this sample were increasingly vulnerable to lost educational content because of the pandemic.

Unlike their white counterparts, Black students transitioning to college have underdeveloped social networks to ease the high school-to-college transition and are more reliant on financial aid (Zhang & Smith, 2011). Research found that Black students who have established close relationships with their parents, high school teachers, and guidance counselors experience smoother transitions (ASCA, 2003).

These relationships fortify Black students' resolve to connect with college professors, resulting in higher grades (Fischer, 2007; Hurtado, 2007; Zhang & Smith, 2011).

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Black students experienced reduced interactions with teachers and counsellors. While secondary education institutions scrambled to convert to online learning abruptly, students' critical personal connections were jeopardized during the pandemic.

Black students are poised to face increased difficulty transitioning successfully to college as they lack social networks analogous to their white counterparts. Black households, which excessively rely on low-paid service jobs, will thus have to rely on financial aid and part-time work for their college-bound students.

More families of color experienced deaths from Covid-19. In turn, they have faced the economic strain of paying for a funeral and perhaps losing a breadwinner; these families struggled with the significant emotional loss when a family member dies. Such emotional and economic distractions, subject matter content loss, and jeopardized social connections with adults all created additional barriers for Black students after the pandemic.

However, the resulting hindrances probably are not as acute for white students (Lin, 2000). Consequently, Black students will be more subjected to the stress associated with acclimating to a new collegiate environment while accruing large financial debt (Tran et al., 2018).

The residual impact from these economic disparities can directly hurt Black students' achievement and their sense of belonging on a college campus (Nguyen & Herron, 2020). A student without the financial burdens and with resource-rich social networks, and who tends to be white, learns about undergraduate research opportunities and internships. These opportunities propel students to career attainment and graduate school. Students with fewer resources tend to be of color and spend more time 'getting their hustle on' to pay for the college experience while their planning for life after college is deferred.

Overall, the domino effect of weakened social networks, financial burdens, and subsequent loss of academic opportunities have long put Black students with reduced socioeconomic advantages at an increased risk of slipping down the college and graduate school achievement ladder.

Arguably, colleges and universities of all types that champion diversity should have prepared for the challenges that Black students would face in enhancing their social networks and staying financially viable through college after Covid-19.

The past 20 years have increasingly proven a global interconnectedness and the necessity for graduates to be competitive on the international stage. Black students with diminished resources reasonably will be working within a pandemic-related educational environment. Consequently, a comparable analysis can highlight how some of these most vulnerable American students operated then, and are operating now, in comparison to international students.

Theoretical frame: educational resilience and grit

Duckworth and Gross (2014) posit that success comes from willpower and grit. Stated another way, achieving a goal means one must deter the impulse to seek instant or momentary gratification and instead remain focused on the long-term goal. During the pandemic, students would need such willpower and grit to stay engaged independently in online class delivery instead of drifting off to sleep, leaving for chat rooms, or playing video games.

Resilience, defined as “an individual’s ability to bounce back or recover from stress” (Smith et al. 2008, p. 194; Zhang et al., 2020), is about mentally thriving through adversity, but not about resisting illness, nor about adapting to or accepting an unfavorable context. Educationally resilient students can persevere through adversities arising in their personal lives or surroundings to still perform well academically (Beddoe et al., 2013; McDermid et al., 2016; Rosen et al., 2019; Wayman, 2002). Specifically, “educational resilience” is defined as ‘the heightened likelihood of academic success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences’ (Rosen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 1994, p. 46; Wayman 2002, p.168).

Moreover, Rosen et al. (2019), Low et al. (2019), and McAllister and McKinnon (2009), all note that students who have positive academic self-esteem, the ability to adapt to change, positive outlooks, and responsiveness exhibit more educational resiliency. Student commitment and the ability to complete their objectives on time incorporate significant elements of academic resilience (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Rosen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 1994; Wayman, 2002).

The environmental elements that support resiliency include students having strong social networks of friends and solidified goals after high school (Rosen et al., 2019; Wayman, 2002). Social networks with peers and adults contribute to student coping abilities during and after adversity or traumatic interruptions (Beddoe et al., 2013; Jackson, 2007; Low et al. 2019). These tenets of educational resiliency originate with Wang et al. (1997), who claimed that the classroom experience, the home environment, and the school environment contribute to resiliency and fortify a student through unexpected educational challenges.

The American School Counselor Association's Mindsets and Behaviors Inventory (2003) was developed to define critical elements that allow high school student development so as to prepare for college and career after graduation. Like the previously mentioned factors needed for resilience, the ASCA model identifies self-confidence, students' belief in their abilities, learning strategies, self-management skills, and adept social skills with adults (ASCA, 2003). As Hollis (2017) summarized, students who have positive relationships with adults in the high school educational space then develop a more socially mature sense of belonging. In turn, these students make better decisions that enhance their academic success.

From another vantage point, Duckworth and Quinn (2009) and Rosen (2019) asserted that educational resilience coincides with grit, determination, and commitment to strive through adversity and still achieve intended educational goals. Duckworth et al. (2007) and Bowman et al. (2015) similarly noted that students with grit capitalize on strong work ethics and determination and can sustain such focus over time. Analogously, resilience is one of the most reliable predictors of students' capacity to actualize long-term goals (Fernández-Martín et al., 2020; Sheldon et al., 2015).

Thus, students who have focused self-discipline and unwavering perseverance obtain more substantial academic outcomes, sometimes even regardless of their cognitive abilities (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Hagger & Hamilton, 2019).

Throughout the Covid-19 educational interruption, high school students needed to utilize resilience and grit to achieve their long-term academic goals. With inconsistent school-openings, closings, openings again, and the abrupt necessities for school districts to adopt online learning, students were left in an unstable academic environment and strained interactions with teachers who were also distraught in the online environment. More so than previous generations of students advancing through higher school, students subjected to educational disruption because of Covid-19 plausibly needed to rely on adult relationships that they had cultivated before the pandemic.

Nature of the study

Krippendorff (2018), a communications scholar, advocates using qualitative content analysis to convert subjective materials such as diaries, journal articles, television transcriptions, and photographs into themes. According to Krippendorff (2018), researchers can use open-ended survey questions to uncover themes embedded in such participants' responses.

Therefore, Krippendorff's methods were adopted in this study in order to analyze high school teachers' comments and Black high school students' interview transcripts and thus, to identify themes regarding educational disruption during the pandemic.

The documents used in this analysis included open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts from 17 Black students and 35 teachers, resulting in 145 single-spaced pages of information for analysis.

Krippendorff's process to recruit a sample was coupled with a phenomenological interview procedure to interview the students (Hollis, 2017). Then, the process included Krippendorff's data reduction to identify recurring components from articles, comments, and interviews. After respondents' repetitive ideas were identified, open coding was used (Creswell, 2014). The researcher coded data and determined emergent themes before conducting the literature review to engage in an unbiased approach. Before performing the literature review, the rationale to code the data first was to allow the data and results to speak for themselves instead of the previously mentioned international studies affecting the data analysis.

Research environment

A qualitative content analysis method was used to examine Black high school student pandemic high school experiences in the Laurel Highlands of Pennsylvania. The Laurel Highlands area is located 50 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 2000, poverty affected 9.4% of population, with subsequent increases of 3.6% annually (Spencer & Myer, 2007).

Based on the United States Census data, 75.4% of the population is white and 15.4% is Black. The median income for the area is \$24,561, with 38.4% of the population below the poverty line. In 2019, 33.1% of households did not have broadband or Internet subscription, and only 11.8% of residents held a bachelor's degree or higher (US Census, 2019).

Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding Laurel Highlands community survives in a struggling economy analogous to that of other middle American towns which lost significant industrial productivity over the past three decades.

Arguably, the Laurel Highlands research data from this middle America community offer a viable comparison to experiences to the experiences documented in several articles about the international student experience.

Data collection

The data collection yielded a range of documents from three sources used in a qualitative content analysis. The central research question for this study was: What are the experiences of Black students in middle America regarding educational disruption when compared to the experiences of high school students in other countries?

The study had two distinct phases, one phase with students and a second phase with teachers.

Phase 1: With students

The analyses spanned the period from March 2020 through September 2020, while the respective high schools were closed in response to the pandemic. With assistance from the African American Heritage Society of Cambria County, 17 Black students from the Greater Johnstown Area were recruited for this study during mid-August 2020.

Reaching this sample was challenging because their emails were not available. A hard copy of the survey was sent via postal service, along with a child consent form for parental permission and a self-addressed stamped envelope for the families to return the information to the researcher. Once student surveys and child consent forms were returned to the researcher, student interviews were scheduled for late September 2020. Students who completed the survey and the interview earned \$50.

The students at the time of the interview were aged 14 to 19. Eight girls and nine boys participated, with grade point averages ranging from 2.5 to 3.8. Sixteen of the seventeen students qualified for free lunch. Twelve of the students were on the college track curriculum.

Phase 2: With teachers

The second phase of the research included surveying teachers from seven school districts in the Laurel Highlands. In mid-November 2020, teacher emails were collected from school district websites and were used to send a link to the SurveyMonkey open-ended question survey. Teachers received two more email reminders to complete the survey in mid-December 2020 and mid-January 2021.

After providing their demographic information, participants were presented with seven open-ended questions.

All participating teachers (26 women and 9 men) were white, which is expected in the Laurel Highlands. Moreover, 23 teachers had taught for over 16 years, five teachers had served for 10–15 years, while seven had from one to six years of teaching experience. As shown in Table 2, a total of 16, 12, and 7 teachers taught in grades 11 and 12; 9 and 10; and 7 and 8, respectively.

Phase 3: International Studies

To compare the experience of middle American students to the experiences of students internationally, the researcher collected the research reported in articles from ProQuest and EBSCOhost. With the pandemic just taking hold in March 2020, only a few empirical studies had progressed to a final publication. Nonetheless, this researcher found primary studies representing twelve countries and student experiences in the beginning of the pandemic. The twelve countries are New Zealand, Iran, Indonesia, India, China, Finland, Greece, Burundi, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Phase 1 findings from students

In the following sections, themes that emerged from data analyses are presented in two phases, reflecting student and teacher perceptions, respectively. From Phase 1, students' six emergent themes were #1 adaptive learning strategies, #2 extracurricular activities, #3 educational quality, #4 parental involvement, #5 teacher interaction, and #6 resilience.

Student Theme 1: adaptive learning strategies

The seventeen students who took part in this study were primarily self-starters who stayed committed to their work. Some admitted to sleeping in until 8:00 am or having to close the bedroom door to avoid siblings. Only one student used a smartphone to access online classes during the spring of 2020, while other students had their personal laptops. However, most students had friends who used computers in the library to study and access the Internet.

Student Theme 1 comments

“I set my deadlines before the deadline in school. If something were due Friday, I would mark it down as due Thursday.”

“I had to learn to manage things online, [I] usually got teacher feedback in an hour.”

“MUST be self-disciplined to do this . . .”

“Color coding the work helped me stay organized . . .”

Student Theme 2: cancelled extracurricular activities

Students' cultural and social activities were canceled, except for football, a staple of western Pennsylvania. Older students were worried about missing another school dance season, the prom, senior week, and commencement. Others were concerned that SATs were rescheduled. They were also disappointed by the prospect of relying on virtual campus tours when considering college choice.

Student Theme 2 comments

"Lots of kids dropped band; we didn't get to recruit in the middle school like last year."

"Virtual homecoming doesn't make sense . . . what will happen with prom?"

"Softball and Key Club were canceled. I was disappointed."

"The art festival was canceled. Not seeing people was hard."

Student Theme 3: educational quality

Students were aware that online delivery changed the quality of their education, especially in subjects that they already found challenging. Nonetheless, they stayed committed. Students also mentioned that they missed their teachers when the two-week novelty of being home dissipated.

Student Theme 3 comments

"There is definitely less quality, especially with my math course."

"Teachers had a hard time, too; they were thrown in just like us."

"I think we plateaued in our learning. I just want to get back."

"I got a packet of assignments in the mail; THAT was really hard to complete."

Student Theme 4: parental involvement

Students also commented on their parents' involvement with the abrupt adjustment to online learning. With over half of the sample reporting that they were college-bound, they appreciated parental guidance.

Student Theme 4 comments

"My mom stayed on me to get my work done."

"Mom works in the school, so I got updates about what was going on."

"I feel bad for the kids who don't have parents helping them."

Student Theme 5: teacher interaction

As students adjusted to online learning, they had to modify how they interacted with teachers.

Many commented that, during the first two weeks of the interruption, no one had any guidance. After two weeks, many students received homework packets while teachers were creating online classes.

Student Theme 5 comments

“On average, it took about an hour to get my questions answered.”

“Sometimes I could get on Google Meet if I had questions.”

“We had to email the teacher, then she would get back to us.”

“I only had access to my teacher on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

Student Theme 6: resilience

The participating students, while frustrated, still accepted the pandemic interruption as a short-term problem rather than a life-long issue. Overall, the pandemic did not change their aspirations for college or career. This finding indicates that they were mentally resilient in thinking about education after the pandemic.

Student Theme 6 comments

“This won’t last forever.”

“Don’t get too frustrated; I just take it day by day.”

“Don’t let the pandemic stop you.”

“Students should take this seriously, even from home.”

“Make the best of it and enjoy more time with family.”

Phase 2 findings from teachers

For Phase 2, a total of 35 teachers from seven Laurel Highlands school districts were recruited to ascertain their perceptions about educational delivery during the pandemic.

Several teachers commented that the district did not include them in the planning for shifting abruptly to online educational delivery. One or two mentioned a pandemic team that was formed to address the immediate transition. Additionally, a few teachers commented on their physical and mental health, with one stating, “my mental health is the lowest ever.” A few teachers felt internal pressure to deliver the best education despite the pandemic-related obstacles.

These factors, however, did not emerge as salient themes, which included student learning, Internet access, educational quality/classroom feedback, training, and parental involvement.

Teacher Theme 1: student learning

Teachers noted that while reading comprehension may have improved appreciably, they also noted low participation rates and expressed their sharp disapproval of the pass/fail policy. Further, teachers who taught students with IEPs (Individual Educational Plans) confirmed that the pandemic destroyed compliance with these plans. However, a positive aspect was that juniors and seniors seemed to stay committed because they needed the course credits for graduation and college.

Teacher Theme 1 comments

“Student effort came to a halt with only 55% participation in my case.”

“Older students and dual-enrolled students were committed; they had their eye on the next step.”

“Many passed thanks to Covid.”

“Kids had too many distractions at home.”

“Shame to make classes pass/fail. Kids need to stay accountable.”

Teacher Theme 2: internet access

As stated in the demographics section, the Laurel Highlands area is experiencing a struggling economy. In turn, this suburban/rural community did not always have the income for expanded services such as high-speed Internet. In a society that did not invest heavily in Internet access, teachers felt that many students were just left behind.

Teacher Theme 2 comments

“Reliable Internet was a problem. We had several tech failures.”

“Limited tech access made us rely on paper copies.”

“The Internet access problem enabled lazy students to do nothing.”

“Biggest issue was access.”

Teacher Theme 3: educational quality/classroom feedback

Teachers commented that the face-to-face environment allows them to receive immediate feedback from students’ facial expressions. Students’ in-person expressions of success or confusion in real-time allow teachers to immediately gauge student learning and simultaneously adjust. Face-to-face feedback disappeared online. Teachers claimed the educational quality was compromised in the online environment, and many students were just left behind.

Teacher Theme 3 comments

“Many students gave up and are really far behind.”

“A whole generation of kids will be left behind. Students couldn’t keep up.”

“Test scores dropped; grades dropped. There was little quality work.”

“Students who were struggling before are now lost altogether, but high achievers continued on.”

Teacher Theme 4: training

Given the abrupt disruption to education during the pandemic, teachers were forced to immediately change from face-to-face teaching to online instruction, with no training. They commented that they had been thrown into the online environment with little to no support. As a result, teachers felt unprepared to continue.

Teacher Theme 4 comments

“This is the worst environment for me as a teacher.”

“Teachers were not trained, the learning suffered.”

“I had no online teaching experience; I was lost.”

“As the teacher, I was still learning too.”

Teacher Theme 5: parental involvement

The participating teachers were frustrated with lacking parental support and pressure from parents to give their children passing grades. They further noted that most parents were not familiar with online education and struggled to make sense of online learning systems. Just as with traditional educational settings, parental involvement was a key to student success.

Teacher Theme 5 comments

“Advanced students with committed families did well.”

“Need more accountability from home.”

“Parents just wanted teachers to pass the kids.”

“I think there should be mandatory training for parents with kids earning a 75% or less.”

Reflecting on student and teacher themes

While the Black students and the teachers in this study had different perspectives, they concurred in two respects. Both groups agreed that educational quality was compromised, and that parental support was necessary. Just as a few Black students commented that their parents kept them accountable during the interruption, the teachers also noted that parental involvement propelled students through the online environment. Similarly, as most of the students were high school students with grades above 2.5, they were more likely to be meta-cognitive about their educational experience and recognize a plateau in their learning.

Both teachers and students missed the face-to-face delivery because online education did not allow for immediate feedback through body language. Though both students and teachers adjusted to the sudden shift to online learning, they also confirmed that face-to-face instruction was far more effective for quality learning. Figure 1 below shows the six student themes and five teacher themes, indicating that both groups highlighted education quality and parental involvement.

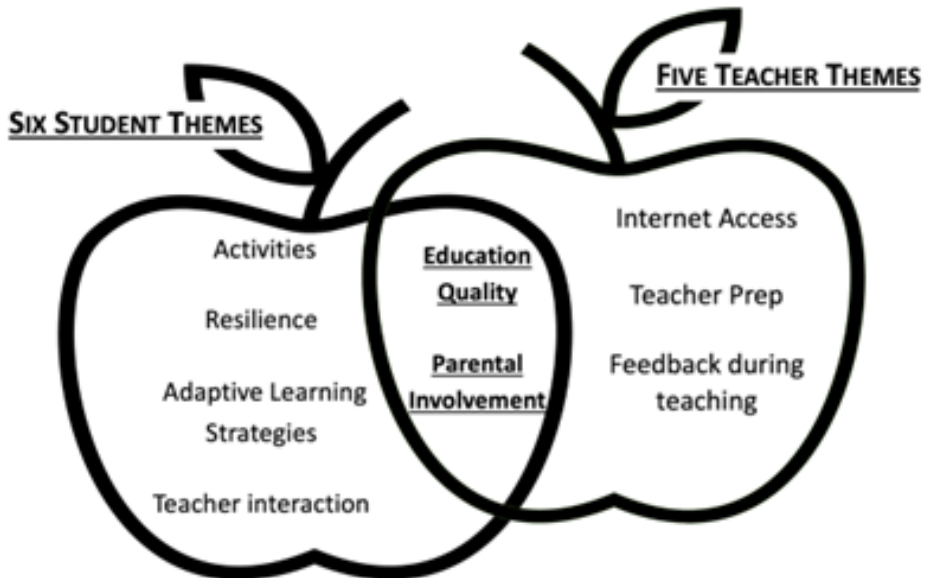


Figure 1: Comparative Venn Diagram of Student Themes and Teacher Themes Regarding Education in the Pandemic

Phase 3 findings from international research

The findings from 12 countries were congruent with the findings from the American sample.

A lack of technological infrastructure interfered with effective educational delivery. Teachers and students were disenchanted and dealt with anxiety because international systems were not prepared to engage in en masse online learning.

The salient themes from the international research included compromised Internet access, low student attendance, untrained teachers, and student and teacher anxiety. The analysis of international studies occurred after the “middle America” data analysis to avoid the themes from American students affecting the analysis of international studies.

Table 1
International Comparison of Covid-19 related education disruption

<i>Country</i>	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Findings</i>
Burundi, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal	faculty from 5 countries	Poor teacher motivation, Inconsistent electricity, Student absenteeism
China	532 students	Weak technological infrastructure, Coping and resilience helped students handle stress
Finland	258 students, 51 teachers	Government subsidizes instruction, Students had minimal technical issues, Smooth transition to online education
Greece	459 students	Depression and anxiety rates up substantially
India	175 students	Teachers not trained for online delivery, Weak Internet networks
Iran	5 teachers	Low Speed Internet access, Student don't have devices
Indonesia	105 students	Student w/ prior CS experience performed better, Majority did not have reliable Internet service, Majority did not have devices or webcam
United States	17 students, 36 teachers	Remained self-motivated with parental support, Students had at-home distraction, Teachers not trained/teacher depression
New Zealand	1975 students	Teachers used YouTube to help students Self-paced options online helped students review content

This global pandemic has confirmed the interconnectedness of global society. The problems facing the world remain consistent whether in terms of the global environmental crisis, human rights violations, or international poverty (Coscieme, et al., 2020; Hollis, 2017a, Li, 2021)

The data from the Black students in middle America are like the findings across the globe regarding the educational disruption. Students were left without reliable access to education, and often felt anxiety or stress. Teachers typically were thrown into online delivery with little notice and even less training. The result for American high school students and high school students around the world was the loss of valuable educational content needed for them to excel at the college level.

The global Covid-19 pandemic accentuated the role economic class and resources play in educational delivery. This study from middle America reveals findings that are consistent with those from countries across the globe. The salient problem is the lack of consistent Internet access and corresponding devices to insure uninterrupted class time.

In addition to the infrastructure issues, all the countries in the comparison, except for Finland, reported an inconsistent system to maintain education during the pandemic interruptions.

Resilience and grit that is ‘the ability to bounce back’ (Smith et al. 2008) were essential for these students to progress through the pandemic. Students will also need resilience as they continue to college because they are missing a substantial amount of content from their final high school years.

As noted in the resilience literature, this quality is not associated with student socioeconomic backgrounds (Bowman et al., 2015; Duckworth et al., 2007). Instead, it is a student’s personal commitment to success that cultivates resilience and grit.

However, even with grit and resilience as a critical factor for student success, this comparative analysis shows that regardless of race, gender, or country, feeble access and diminished resources result in stress, anxiety, and compromised educational experiences for both teachers and students.

The lessons from this comparative analysis highlight the need to keep teachers updated with the most recent technology aimed at educational delivery. Borrowing from the Finnish philosophy (Niemi & Kousa, 2020), if education were viewed as a Constitutional right, applying the equal protection philosophies of the 14th Amendment, all American students, regardless of race or class, would have viable access to education supported by local and state governments.

Further, the students in this study, who explained their frustrations, noted their successes during the Covid-19 interruption. Many of these students had parental support and maintained teacher interaction. Even in the absence of socializing with peers, productive interaction with adults seemed to help these students avoid spiraling into clinical depression. Teachers also need encouragement from their districts to remain mentally and physically strong during disastrous interruptions in any form.

While Covid-19 is the most historic interruption of the last century, the themes emerging from this study, and confirming similarities from school systems around the world, can help educators anticipate what elements help students persevere even through the most disruptive events. The resilience and grit demonstrated by this sample of students show a determination to achieve despite the global pandemic upheaval.

Replicating the needed educational interaction and maintaining consistent access to educational materials offers beneficial strategies in response to conditions precipitating educational disruption.

Recommendations

Extending from the emergent themes of the students and teachers and the findings representing twelve countries, the following recommendations are offered to prepare for potential interruptions to educational delivery regardless of the inciting problem. Developing opportunities for further engagement can boost student resilience and better prepare them for progression in their educational pathways. Based on the three phases of findings, the following recommendations are also applicable to international educational systems.

Recommendation 1: Ongoing training for teachers

Both students and teachers noted that teachers were not prepared to move to online delivery abruptly. A few teachers mentioned that they had never accessed a learning management platform such as Blackboard or Canvas before the pandemic. Whether an interruption is due to snow days or a disaster closing the school, teachers who are already trained are better positioned to help students and are better prepared to maintain their mental toughness.

Recommendation 2: Ongoing training for students

Adults often think of students as digital natives, as they believe that younger generations are familiar with the online environment. However, while students may be savvy about TikTok, Facebook, and online gaming, they may not understand how to access educational content through Blackboard, Canvas, or Google Meets.

Thus, school districts need to keep their teachers trained on up-to-date learning management systems. This training can be part of annual teacher professional development programs. Similarly, online training for students would prepare them for more effective use of the learning management platforms often required in college.

Recommendation 3: Peer leaders to foster more resilience and social interaction

Student respondents noted that they were stressed about the constant isolation during the lockdown. An ample body of evidence indicates that social interaction is needed for optimal teenager development. Therefore, stemming from the previous recommendation to host one afternoon a month online, school districts can choose peer leaders to assist teachers and students in interacting with peers online.

Recommendation 4: Parental ambassadors

Students and teachers who took part in this study felt that parental involvement was critical to supporting students through the pandemic.

Just as districts have Parent Teacher Organizations, districts can also have parental ambassadors to help students and other parents through the online education process. If parents cannot take on this role, districts can bring in graduate students with suitable educational backgrounds to fill such a position.

Recommendation 5: Summer intervention

Students and teachers are aware that educational attainment was compromised during the pandemic. Thus, high schools and colleges should provide summer interventions as part of the next three years of instruction following such an event, allowing students to gain content knowledge lost during the pandemic. These interventions would be particularly beneficial for bridging the knowledge gaps in foundation subjects such as math, physics, biology, and chemistry.

Conclusion

As of March 2021, only 26% of Americans had received a Covid-19 vaccine. Many schools remained closed but planned to reopen for face-to-face educational delivery in April of 2021. American communities were looking for operations to return to normal, with no masks, no social distancing, and no worries about the virus. However, high school juniors and seniors who lost the content knowledge and adult interaction required to make a smooth transition to college will need high schools and colleges to understand the long-term impact on these students' educational disruption.

The Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization have already identified several race-based disparities that became even more exaggerated during the pandemic lockdown. Hence, it is incumbent upon educators to recognize these disparities and develop services to cultivate student grit and resilience, particularly for disenfranchised students of color striving for recovery through the global Covid 19 disaster.

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