

## **Impact of Covid-19 on Teacher Resiliency in Mississippi: A Preliminary Study**

**Mary Ann Parker, PhD**

**Instructor**

Department of Writing and Rhetoric  
University of Mississippi

**Peggy F. Hopper, PhD**

**Professor of Secondary English Education**

Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education  
Mississippi State University  
Mississippi State, MS

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### **Abstract**

Preliminary research explores how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected teacher resiliency in the state of Mississippi. Researchers utilized in-depth, one on one interviews and open ended surveys to examine educational trends resulting from conversations with educational colleagues. Seven Mississippi educator participants included K-12 elementary, middle, and high school teachers as well as a higher education instructor, associate professor, and professor. Question topics ranged from teacher voice, changes in instructional delivery mode, training for virtual teaching, and public and administrative expectations. Researchers discovered themes of teacher training, teacher input, and sustainability. Data derived from the research has the potential to inform how to develop teacher resiliency and decrease teacher attrition in extreme times of change.

*Keywords:* Covid-19, resiliency, attrition, education

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As the effects of Covid-19 have made the reopening of American K-12 schools uncertain, high ranking government officials have purported that keeping schools closed would have devastating results not only to our children's overall well-being but also our nation's economy. Throughout these discussions, schools have been touted as a crucial component of a functioning society. According to recent governmental information, failing to reopen schools and hold K-12 classes in person may harm children long-term and hurt the American economy (The White House, 2021).

In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have noted the importance of schools to the community at large. Schools provide safe spaces for students, jobs for staff and faculty, and a place for children to be while allowing parents to work. The CDC has also asserted children most at risk for harm due to school closures includes low-income children,

minority children, and children with disabilities (2021).

However, despite the public discussion of the vital roles schools play in American society, professional educators have found ongoing issues regarding the lack of teacher voice and autonomy have not improved with this discussion. Although the hallmark of effective school leadership styles leading to decreased teacher attrition rests in allowing teacher autonomy and voice in school decisions, the current Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted lack of teacher influence on school practices and policies in American K-12 school systems.

Unfortunately, despite public discourse concerning the importance of teachers and in-person learning, many reopening plans have been drafted with little influence from the most crucial component to student learning—teachers. This study explored Mississippi K-16 teachers' experiences of teaching during the first two school years of the Covid-19 pandemic (2019-20 and 2020-21) with found themes of resiliency including educator expectations, longevity, overall curriculum concerns with regard to mode of delivery and training (or lack of training), and teacher input in decision making.

### **Covid-19 Challenges**

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Spring 2020 and 2020-2021 academic terms brought many new challenges to educators worldwide. One major concern affecting all levels of education has been the sudden and ongoing loss of instructional time. For perspective, in Mississippi, state law traditionally mandates K-12 schools operate 180 days per academic year while higher education semesters generally last about fifteen weeks. As such, educators design their courses based on these allotted time frames.

However, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the K-12 State Board of Education (SBE) and the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) acknowledged the 2020-2021 school year would call for an alteration in the look of a normal year and mandated districts to “use their authority and flexibility to meet their individual needs and be responsive to their communities” (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d., para. 2). In addition, Mississippi's Governor, Tate Reeves, issued an executive order delaying the start of secondary schools in eight of Mississippi's eight-two counties. For this reason, the SBE voted to allow districts in these delayed counties up to ten waived school days, essentially reducing the number of mandated days from 180 to 170. Also, required daily instructional hours decreased from 5.5 to 4 (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). As a result, students and educators began the school year with drastically decreased instructional time. This deficit called for educators to redesign assignments to meet the demands of an already packed curriculum.

Similarly, institutions of higher education adjusted their 2020-2021 academic calendars due to Covid-19 with some semesters shrinking to as little as thirteen weeks. Faculty teaching at the collegiate level also went through the same curriculum adjustments, struggling to redesign courses intent on producing positive student learning outcomes in a much shorter amount of time. As a result, Hart- Division (2020) laments these measures left instructors “scrambling to salvage some of the value of our plans for student learning that did not anticipate a massive viral outbreak” (para. 2).

### **Research Purpose and Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to examine how educational policies and practices

instituted during the Covid-19 pandemic affected teacher resiliency in the state of Mississippi. For this purpose, researchers designed and utilized qualitative surveys and in-depth interviews. Researchers chose teachers grades K through 16 to assure inclusion of target populations that included elementary, middle, and high school teachers at the K-12 levels with many content areas represented. Similarly, at the higher education level, researchers chose faculty to represent instructional faculty, and assistant, associate, and full professors. Participants included veteran teachers who have taught a minimum of eight years.

Researchers designed the survey and interview questions after examining trends discussed among their colleagues in the teaching profession. All of the questions included in the survey and interview script were open ended to extract information beyond yes and no responses in order to further develop information concerning the trends and impacts felt from the challenges associated with teaching experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers selected participants from an extensive list of teachers known by the authors with 7 teachers selected to participate. A high return rate was evidenced with the surveys as well as the one-on-one interviews. As this is a concept paper for establishing baseline trends and attitudes that will lead to future research on impacts of factors related to teaching on resiliency, generalizations to larger populations should not be considered. However, conclusions from this study indicate that further research needs to be pursued.

The 12 research interview questions began with establishing age (over 18) for consent and years of teaching experience. Since the number of respondents was small, participants were occasionally asked to follow up when necessary to clarify answers. Because of these questions were originally scripted, but there was also a layer of follow up questions based on the respondent's reactions. Many of these questions did not result in quotes that were used in this document, so they are listed separately below.

Questions on the survey/interview script included the following concerning teacher voice in decision making for the 20-21 school year:

What do you wish educational decision makers would ask you right now about how COVID has impacted your classroom and your teaching abilities?

How would you describe your level of input concerning decision making for the 20-21 school year? Is this reflective of your input from previous years? Take me through times you were consulted about decision making for the 20-21 school year. What happened as a result of your input?

How have your educational responsibilities changed as a result of the pandemic?

As the literature supports K-16 educators experienced changes from traditional instructional delivery modes, researchers included the following questions to explore the amount of training in virtual and hybrid teaching:

How would you describe the amount of training you received for alterations to the 20-21 school year? Did the amount of training align with administrative expectations of your daily responsibilities? Parent and public expectations?

Because the researchers also wanted to examine ongoing attrition issues in the midst of

Covid-19, the following questions were included:

What are the largest contributors to teacher morale? How do these relate to COVID or do they?

What does it mean to you to be valued as an educator?

Throughout your time as an educator, has there been a time you have considered other career options? If so, explain the events leading to this consideration. If no, explain why. Have these considerations been increased because of COVID? Specifically, what requirements are most concerning to you?

What do you perceive is the largest contributor to teacher retention throughout the Covid-19 pandemic?

### **Training for Alternate Delivery Methods**

A primary concern for educators as a result of educational changes instituted during Covid-19 has been the alteration of instructional delivery methods. Spring 2020 saw an emergency shift to virtual instruction due to state-wide, in person school closures. However, as schools began reopening plans for the 20-21 academic year, the SBE allowed K-12 districts choice in mode of instruction allowing them to choose among traditional (face-to-face), online, or a hybrid blending remote and traditional learning (see <https://www.mde12.org>). Although educators needed flexibility in delivery options, these new options called for many teachers with little to no online teaching experience or training to teach at least a portion of their courses online. And like their K-12 colleagues, many higher education faculties found themselves teaching online for the first time in their careers without any previous significant training component.

Training for the change in instructional delivery was reported to be minimal, and most of this training was specific to the how-to of the platform used to put information online, not on how students learned online or the most effective way to transfer in class lessons to online lessons to foster learning or to support the teacher. There is also a marked difference in the training provided by K-12 and the training provided at the higher education level. The following quotes illustrate training for teachers at the university level:

The university provided a great deal of training on the spot and throughout the pandemic to support faculty to learn new teaching techniques and use technology to delivery instruction. I took advantage of training offered by . . . I also attended many webinars offered outside the university by various organizations and companies to support teachers and students.

Yes, I did receive great amount of training through live sessions and recordings by ITS (Instructional Technology Services) and Distance Education Department.

In contrast, respondents from K-12 answered the question of training received this way:

Training was minimal. We were told the platform we were going to use; we had a handful of teachers - maybe three or four - that went to the district training on that platform, and then they came back to the school and met with us in groups on the platform to help us get started. But most of what the teachers have learned about the online platform has been self-taught. And that was very frustrating for all of us because the teachers that were being trained still had their own responsibilities of their classes and their students and so having the time to dedicate to teaching others just wasn't there, so it was very frustrating.

Training was extremely rushed, vague, impersonal, and there was a repeated expectation that gaps in training were to be filled by teachers exploring new software and new platforms on their own— and quote unquote playing with it and figuring it out. Which in any other discipline does not count as training, and if you are expected to figure things out that have never been used before, in many industries, that would qualify you for overtime pay if you are an employee that has to clock in each morning when you arrive like teachers in my district do.

I would say our training was not existent. It was more training by being thrown into ... I think we learned as much as we could learn as far as the “how-to’s” ...but it became more of an issue of we weren't trained to teach virtually. We were trained... on the system that we were using, but once we went live, it became an issue. Not so much what buttons to push but truly how to teach a class online.

The harsh reality is teachers at all instructional levels were tasked with altering their curriculums to effectively teach all objectives and standards within reduced time constraints while learning new methods of instructional delivery. Adding to K-12 teachers' stress levels, Betsy DeVos informed K-12 district leaders throughout the U.S. that although federal testing was waived for the 2019-2020 school year, end of term state testing requirements would remain in place for 2020-2021 (Turner, 2020, para 2). Therefore, all students in grades 3 through 8 and specific secondary courses, despite learning delivery mode, were required to take the 20-21 end of term assessments.

### **A Resilient Approach for Retention**

Mississippi is no stranger to disasters. Hurricane Katrina hit the coast of Mississippi in 2005. Katrina has repeatedly been named the worst disaster in U.S. history, so the storm's impact on Mississippi cannot be overstated. Although a weather-related event and not a health-related event, similarities between the impact of Katrina and the impact of the Covid-19 virus on education in the state are already apparent. Loss of life and family incomes, the greater impact on minorities, and the disruption of normal academics are just a few of the commonalities between both disasters that have affected students and their teachers. Teachers during both disasters dealt with psychologically stressed students while dealing with their own personal traumas (Ward & Shelley, 2008).

Teachers are often seen as the “glue” during these times, binding students to their academic studies and becoming a front-line defense against isolation although teachers often had no direct training on how to accomplish this (Baum et al., 2009). Reports from principals

concerning teachers at Katrina impacted schools in Mississippi included increased absenteeism, irritability, and burnout. Loss of teachers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina has been well documented; it remains to be seen how many teachers are lost in the state after the virus has been contained. One state, New York, is already reporting that teacher retirement due to Covid-19 factors is up twenty percent (Fearnow, 2020). And as with Hurricane Katrina, there has been a recurrent cry for a return to normalcy in education.

The following comment from a high school educator illustrated this recurring theme of normalcy due to unsustainable expectations:

. . . But I don't know long term if this is- is it a sustainable working environment? I think if you told me we had a year of this, I could definitely, I could hang in there, but if we're looking at long term—and just thinking that we don't know what once we go back to a traditional schooling environment whenever that will be we're not sure what that will look like and what parts of this new education will carry over. And so... if we can go back to normal, I'll go back to being my happy self, but I don't know if it's sustainable long term with the way it is now.

Sustainability concerns also are reflected in the following comment from an elementary teacher:

Just the demands of the workload and not having the planning time to get everything done has made it very stressful. And just the fact that it seems that this is going to be a long-term issue. And for me, I don't feel like I can do that long term and maintain my mental health positivity. So, it has affected me in that way.

And a comment by faculty in a higher education institution illustrating the personal toll due to the lack of normalcy:

Students demanded more support than normal, and meeting their needs took much more time than normal. It has been exhausting, and the expectation is 24/7 response, which is not realistic at all.

The interview question asking if the participants had ever considered changing professions reflected more recent thoughts including teaching during difficult times:

There are a lot of teachers who know that some of these processes are not going to be able to sustain themselves very much longer, and they are scared to say anything because they will be viewed as weak or not a team player or what have you . . .

And finally, from a middle school teacher:

But a lot of the teachers I know don't feel that we do because what we have been able to produce at this point of the year has been done by coming in early and leaving late, working nights and weekends with no possibility of overtime or assistance in creating the resources that we are having to come up with on our own. It feels like there is a real disconnect between the people who feel that is acceptable and sustainable and the teachers who know that it is not.

Just as the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina caused teacher turnover, the additional challenges placed on educators due to the Covid-19 pandemic also have brought increased consideration to ongoing teacher attrition concerns. Even before disasters such as Katrina and Covid-19, researchers have long been concerned with the high levels of attrition in the profession as teacher turnover negatively affects the overall school environment and student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Pre-Covid-19, Yonezawa et al. (2011) note although numerous factors play a role in teacher attrition, teachers continue to leave the profession, “at alarmingly high rates causing a substantial loss of talent and energy and a significant loss of resources,” (p. 914). In fact, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) add that teachers leaving the profession accounts for ninety percent of annual U.S. teacher demand. They also claim that cutting the attrition rate in half could resolve the ongoing teacher shortage (p. 1).

The issue of teacher attrition has caused global alarm, not just alarm in the state of Mississippi. In the past couple of decades, a growing body of research has focused on how to build resilience in educators in the hopes of increasing teaching longevity (Capel et al., 2020, p. 9). And as Covid-19 has wreaked havoc on educational systems, causing already stressed educators to reconstruct their practice, a new body of research has emerged exploring resilient pedagogy. The pandemic has led to what Hart-Davidson (2020) terms a “watershed moment,” calling on educators to approach their class design with attention to resilience for the first time (para. 1).

One respondent who teaches at the high school level illustrated the *do I stay, or do I go* paradigm many teachers evidenced during the pandemic in this way:

. . . it’s kind of like me thinking we can get through one year of this; things will get better. We had a pretty big turnover at my school this year. If people aren’t happy, they leave. We teach in a district where you can transfer, or you can go to another district close by, and so I feel like the ones who stay want to be there. And so I’d say right now, it’s just the idea of this has to get better, so we’re going to hold out to see if it will.

### **Resilient Pedagogy**

Quintana (n.d., para.1) defines resilient teaching as “the ability to facilitate learning experiences that are designed to be adaptable to fluctuating conditions and disruption.” Gardiner (2020) adds in a blog post interview with Josh Eyster that resilient pedagogy is “a course design strategy that helps make your classes, assignments, and assessments as resistant to disruption as possible” (para. 2). This concept has emerged as educators are struggling to move their courses online while still maintaining the integrity of their course content: “It’s hard to transform my teaching when I can hardly manage to answer an email some days. Many of my students are in the same boat...I have to find a way to make it work, flexibly and compassionately” (Gardiner, 2020, para. 2). Gardiner (2020) also points out Covid-19 is not the only disruption educators face. Beyond the pandemic, disruptions may occur due to other emergencies such as inclement weather or other long-term student or instructor illnesses. A strong component of resilient pedagogy is the necessity to alleviate the need for emergency course redesign for any given situation (para.9).

### **Resilient Student-Teacher Relationships**

One way to build resilient resiliency is through student-teacher relationships. Research shows positive student-teacher relationships increase student engagement (Pandolpho, 2020, p. 13; Martin & Collie, 2019, p. 861). Many educators depend on these relationships to help students gain success in challenging times. However, as students have been enduring an isolating pandemic, many faculty are teaching online for the first time. Therefore, educators need support to navigate building relationships with students virtually. As one higher education participant related, “My perception has been changed. . . because the teachers have to work harder establishing relationships with students and taking care of students’ mental health besides what they are expected to do normally.” Or as one K-12 teacher said, “. . . I have a good relationship with students, and I do feel like I’m valued by them. And I would say that has changed a bit with all the changes this year.”

Resilient pedagogy also addresses this need for a shift in mode of student-teacher interaction. Quintana (n.d., para.1) explains, “a dynamic learning context may require new forms of interactions between teachers, students, content, and tools. Resilient teaching necessitates the capacity to rethink the design of learning experiences based on a nuanced understanding of context.” Interactions between students and teachers may drastically differ when they only interact on a computer screen. The lack of student engagement when classes were forced to move to remote learning in Spring 2020 led to a focus on “identifying the activities and interactions that support meaningful learning and finding ways to make these work regardless of where the learning takes place” (Gardiner, 2020, para. 7).

Hart-Davidson (2020) notes many times teachers take for granted the many interactions that occur throughout their face-to-face courses, planning for content but not interactions. In a post pandemic world, educators must plan even more extensively for these interactions to take place virtually (para. 5-6). Providing teachers with the support to learn how to plan for these interactions is a vital component of adding resiliency.

### **Resilient Environment**

In order to support teachers in developing this crucial skill set, educational decision makers cannot just think of the teacher in isolation. Examination of the overall learning environment is a key element in developing teaching with resilience. Day et al. (2011) explain the vital role the school environment plays in fostering resiliency, noting education calls for resilience in educators and point out institutional environments have the ability to either create greater or lesser resilience in educators. Part of decision making that fosters a positive environment is through teacher input or voice. The following quote from a middle school teacher illustrates teachers had little input in many of the necessary decisions made during the pandemic and desire more of a voice in the decision making process:

. . . I wish that they would ask the educator’s opinion about anything because it seems like the students’ interest is a priority, which is understandable, and it seems as though the parents and the tax payers, constituent base in the district is an important focus for understandable reasons.



And the same teacher made the following comment later in the interview:

I think that I've been asked my opinion before big decisions were made on a one on one level much more in past school years than I have this year. And I'm not sure if that's rooted in a fear of being bombarded with too many conflicting opinions before decisions are made, or if that has something to do with my personal dynamic with my admin. I'm not really sure, but this year there's been a lot more of this is how it's going to be.

A high school teacher said the following indicating that during stressful times like the pandemic, teachers had less a voice:

In the past, I would say I felt like I had more input. . . But I do feel like the administrative level, I feel like we were asked our opinion but also maybe felt more comfortable to take our opinion on things. And even trivial things, but still there were definitely times our opinion was asked. This year, I don't feel like out input- I don't feel like we're being asked a thing.

Once again there was a discernible difference between these responses and the responses given by higher education faculty who barely commented on not having a voice in the changes needed to teach during the pandemic. Researchers can only speculate that the significant difference in the amount of training higher education faculty received made them feel more in control of their courses and promoted a greater feeling of having a voice as a result. In addition, higher education faculty reported having a voice in type of delivery mode, allowing faculty members to continue teaching in spite of health concerns as opposed to some K-12 teachers who had to retire due to only face-to-face instruction options.

### **Future Research**

Understandably, administrators are facing incredible challenges due to Covid-19 and are themselves striving to successfully lead their institutions amid great uncertainty. As evidenced by the emerging themes in this study, educational decision makers have the opportunity to increase areas of morale and in turn decrease attrition through adding components of support in teaching modality, teacher training, and teacher voice or input during extreme times of change. Further research into teachers' experiences during the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to clarify these emerging themes. Specifically, a proactive approach including building environmental and pedagogical resiliency may have long term positive effects on educator longevity and in turn student achievement. Importantly, teacher input on creating and implementing these support systems should be the nexus of the discussion.

As stated previously, the authors do not believe this preliminary study can be generalized due to the low number of participants. However, the information gathered leads them to believe these are areas need to be expanded in future research to better understand resilient teaching.

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