

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

6-29-2022

Teacher Flexibility and the New Normal

Sheila Mulder

Dordt University, sheila.mulder@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mulder, S. (2022). Teacher Flexibility and the New Normal. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1403

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Teacher Flexibility and the New Normal

Abstract

"The pandemic revealed the strong need for caring for the whole person and implementing informed teaching practices and principles."

Posting about adapting to change in education from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/teacher-flexibility-and-the-new-normal/>

Keywords

In All Things, teachers, adaptability, effective teaching, mental health, students, COVID-19 pandemic

Disciplines

Christianity | Education

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

Teacher Flexibility and the New Normal

Sheila Mulder

June 29, 2022

One of the best pieces of advice I can give to new teachers is the need to be flexible. A flexible disposition has always been essential in an effective teacher. Teachers adjust, shift, and change practices and ideas to do what is best for students. Enter the month of March 2020, and flexibility mounted to a new level, where teachers were asked to pivot and transform traditional education beyond anyone's imagination. In one weekend, schools were closed, kids were sent home for remote learning, and teachers were asked to persevere in a way that seemed nearly impossible.

The first change happened when teachers took their face-to-face class and, in a week, transformed it into a remote-learning class—whether that meant creating packets or using an online platform.

Teachers felt immense responsibility to meet each student's mental needs by continuing their learning while also caring for their spiritual, social, and emotional well-being. Teachers quickly learned Zoom, video lecturing, and collaboration tools (breakout rooms came to save the day) while making daily phone calls or answering emails to help individual students and families while, on top of all of this, trying to balance their other roles—as parent, spouse, church member, friend.

Along came the 2020-2021 school year, with new and more challenges for educators, as well as the phrase, 'The plan to return to normal.'

Everyone was hopeful and hungry for normal. But return to normal couldn't look the same. Desks needed to be separate from each other, masks were required, students couldn't work side by side in small groups, and no shared supplies (including devices). The need to be flexible remained as teachers instructed for remote and face-to-face learning.

It's been two full school years. Has normal come back? Maybe the old 'normal' shouldn't be the new normal? When something as traumatic as a pandemic happens, it is easy to throw out everything associated with it, but instead of scrapping all of it, let's reflect on some of the positive changes that contribute to the new normal.

Community and socio-emotional health

Before the pandemic, teachers were already focusing on building a classroom community, creating positive relationships, and meeting the social and emotional needs of their students. The pandemic affected everyone in different ways, but there were some amounts of trauma that everyone experienced. Research has shown that children and adolescents experienced higher rates of depression and anxiety during and after the shutdown and social isolation.¹ The pandemic revealed the strong need for caring for the whole person and implementing informed teaching practices and principles. This change has gained considerable momentum in schools post-Covid-19 and is a positive change to create a new normal.

The new normal focuses on equipping educators with trauma practices. These practices include creating safe, predictable classroom environments, incorporating socio-emotional skills into lesson plans and throughout the day, giving students choice and agency, and establishing de-escalation tactics and environments to promote healthy, positive student behavior. As Christian teachers aiming to teach Christianly, these practices align well with honoring students as image-bearers of God and teaching the whole child. A positive change for the new normal.

Instructional Design

Before Covid-19, schools were focusing on curriculum development and instructional design. Schools were implementing professional learning communities, common formative assessments, and differentiation. While these were important goals and ideas, the pandemic widened the achievement gap in students, so they became essential. According to MAP NWEA, student achievement lagged in post-pandemic growth. High achievers seemed to be on target with growth goals pre-pandemic and low achievers seems to lag pre-pandemic norms—specifically in math.² A positive change emerged to underscore the need to re-look and re-imagine curriculum and instruction design so all students can learn.

The new normal builds a curriculum that is obtainable for all students regardless of their entry-level. One important instructional strategy that emerged was daily check-in with students, which could be accomplished through a daily question, one-on-one conferences, writing pieces, audio/visual, and morning meetings. Another important instructional strategy aimed at providing choice and student agency in their work, creating opportunities to dive deeper into their learning and allowing for a higher level of differentiation to make learning meaningful for all. A third strategy that became critical was designing the instruction around the deeper, essential question, designing instruction that utilized collaborative learning, and a workshop model allowing students to do real work. For Christian teachers, this is a positive change in the new normal. We get the opportunity to serve and build disciples that are doing deeper learning in God's world.

Assessment

Assessment can be a powerful tool to help both teachers and students know specific strengths and weaknesses in their understanding. Assessment should help the teacher design meaningful instruction to meet the needs of individuals, and it should create ownership for the student in

their learning journey. In the middle of the pandemic, states paused standardized assessment, but in the return to normal, testing was emphasized and the nationwide learning loss became a focus for government, schools, teachers, parents, and students. So, is more assessment the answer to help the learning loss?

My hope for the new normal and worthwhile change is meaningful use of assessment in which the focus is on quality rather than quantity. Assessment should drive instruction to create meaningful learning and encourage student growth. There is power in using formative assessments so both teachers and students understand their strengths and weaknesses in the various standards and skills. Teachers can use that data to create mini-lessons, centers, authentic assessments, or skill groups to address the strengths and weaknesses. There is power around authentic assessment that challenges students to dive deeper in their knowledge and understanding of the content. There is power in setting *smart* goals—within schools, among teachers, and with individual students to keep a sharp focus and path in the learning journey. Quality assessment can be a powerful tool to transform student learning. Knowing and understanding our student’s strengths and weaknesses to help them learn and reach their potential is a positive change in our new normal.

Flexibility is not always comfortable. Stretching is not always comfortable. In the middle of the stretching, educators desperately desired ‘normal’. ‘Return to normal’ seemed like the right path to take after Covid-19, but that would mean abandoning the growth and stretching skills. The flexibility of teachers provided meaningful and worthwhile lessons that can contribute and create a beautiful, restorative, new normal in our classrooms.

-
1. Sullivan, A. A. (2021, July 9). How the covid-19 pandemic underscores the need for trauma-informed care. Behavioral Health News. Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://behavioralhealthnews.org/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-underscores-the-need-for-trauma-informed-care/>
 2. Kuhfeld, M., & Lewis, K. (2022, January 13). Technical appendix for: Learning during COVID-19: An update on student achievement and growth at the start of the 2021-22 school year. NWEA. Retrieved May 12, 2022, from <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/technical-appendix-for-learning-during-covid-19%e2%80%afan-update-on-student%e2%80%afachievement%e2%80%afand-growth%e2%80%afat-the-start-of-the-2021-22-school-year/>