

Social Media to the Rescue: PK-12 Teachers' Mental Health during a Pandemic

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Abstract The purpose of this study is to research how K-12 teachers are using social media for advice, teaching activities, and support. Researchers reviewed the disaster-response plans of four of America's largest school districts for background, then after receiving IRB approval and permission from the group administrator, researchers reviewed posts from the public Facebook group, "K12 Learning Possibilities in Pandemic Times," with dates spanning March 14 through April 13, 2020. Posts were hand-copied from the platform and entered into an Excel worksheet, totaling 738 posts. Descriptive coding was then applied to the sharing and requesting posts to identify and assess the topic each post addressed. Conclusions are that K-12 districts could add links to disaster plans providing teachers with social-media encouragement, activities, and strategies that are practical and sustainable during protracted stay-at-home formats. Strategies and protocols for school counselors and related support personnel could also include social media for implementing and receiving peer-to-peer strategies and emotional support. Districts that plan to employ online learning could include social media resources to provide teachers and students in need with peer-to-peer interaction. Also, disaster planning should specify social-media strategies to mitigate the stress-effects of extended isolation.

Keywords: Facebook, COVID-19, K-12 teacher support, evolutionary mismatch, disaster-response plans, distance education

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1. Introduction

As educators across America were thrust into distance teaching because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new public group emerged on Facebook, entitled "K12 Learning Possibilities in Pandemic Times." As of May 20, 2020, over 18,000 teachers, administrators, councilors, and higher education faculty joined this group to support each other. In the first month of this crisis, March 14th through April 13th, there were 738 posts with over 20% of them being from educators asking for help. This paper examines how teachers supported each other during the first month of distance learning so that peer-support formats might grow and administrators might better prepare disaster responses to provide the emotional and professional support teachers need during periods of sustained isolation.

2. The Need for Support

Evolutionary biologists have a theory known as "Evolutionary Mismatch," also called "Evolutionary

Trap". What the theory states is that, during periods of rapid circumstantial change, the evolutionary development we've adapted to over previous generations may impede our ability to keep up psychologically with sudden changes in our environment [1]. Worse yet, our evolutionary development may be so maladapted to what we need for our new situation that it inclines us to do inappropriate things [2]. This applies to teaching now because, at a time when teachers need to be around each other most, we're forced to stay away from each other. Social media satisfies that need while still keeping us safe from contagions.

Understandably, prior to 2020, PK-12 school systems did not consider how to handle a long-term, world-altering crisis. Global social distancing and work-from-home mandates left many teachers, regardless of experience, seeking alternative support and non-traditional resources [3]. Social media provided both by being an interactive way for teachers to share their experiences [4], and has been utilized by educators to find ideas and resources for their classes [5]. Research has revealed that this is important because extended periods of isolation are associated with both mental and physical maladies alike [6].

3. Historical Preparation for Emergencies in K-12 Schools

For background, we reviewed the pre-COVID-19 disaster-response plans of four of America’s largest school districts (New York City, Los Angeles Unified, City of Chicago, and Miami-Dade County) and compared them to recommendations relating to mental health in the workplace from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [7]. At school facilities, emergency response plans focused on educators providing student safety during immediate, short-term threats, like fire, chemical spills, natural disasters, or acts of human violence [8,9,10,11,12]. This leaves a massive gap in industry knowledge regarding disaster preparedness and what resources and information teachers need to not only keep providing sustainable virtual instruction, but also to remain physically and mentally healthy.

4. Methods

After receiving IRB approval and permission from the group administer, posts from the public Facebook group, “K12 Learning Possibilities in Pandemic Times,” with dates spanning March 14 through April 13, 2020, were hand-copied from the platform and entered into an Excel worksheet, totaling 738 posts. Hand-copying was done to ensure that no personal data of the group’s participants was inadvertently collected, including names. Posts were then removed from consideration if they were obvious advertisements (e.g., posted by a representative of a product), or were not related to education (e.g., reminders to participate in the current census), leaving 610 posts for further analysis. These posts we then classified according to their primary purpose: Requesting (educators asking a question, n = 155), sharing (educators sharing unsolicited ideas, n = 417), and supporting (educators sharing a message of encouragement or humor, n = 38).

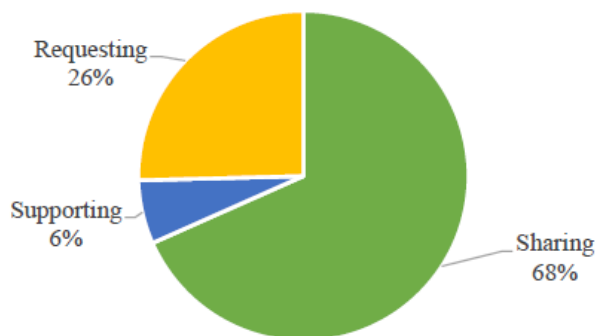


Figure 1. Types of posts concerning teaching during the start of the pandemic

Descriptive coding was then applied to the sharing and requesting posts to identify the topic each post addressed [13], resulting in the following codes:

- Activity: A low-technology or technology-free activity
- Assessment: Assessing student learning in a distance learning environment

- Classroom management: Managing students during online teaching
- Family support: Helping the families of students
- Grading: Quarter or year-end grading policies or practicing in a distance learning environment
- Home schooling: Managing one’s own children’s learning
- Online teaching: Practices for teaching online
- PD: Online professional development opportunities
- Professional issue: Other professional duties of teachers
- Resource: Online or technological resources
- Student support: Helping students
- Teaching: Teaching strategies other than online instruction
- Tech support: Using technology
- Tutoring: Distance tutoring
- Video: Online videos suitable for instruction (e.g., YouTube)

Posts were also identified by subject and/or grade level where indicated. There were 297 posts that identified a specific subject area and 265 that identified a specific grade or grade level. Figure 2 and 3 show the breakdown for each.

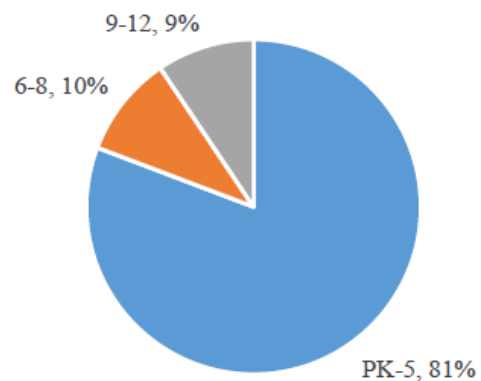


Figure 2. Percentage of posts by grade level

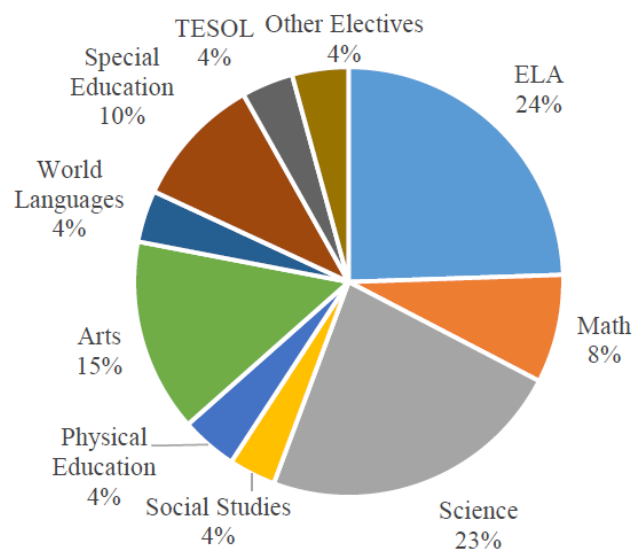


Figure 3. Percentage of posts by subject

Although the majority of adults aged 18 to 64 use Facebook [14], it is not the only social media platform

used by educators, and the public group used for this study is not the only Facebook group for educators. This public group was chosen for this study because it began in February, 2020, just before schools began switching to distance learning in response to the pandemic, and because it only addressed educators' responses and needs during the pandemic.

5. Findings

5.1. Educators Requesting Help

Of the 155 requesting posts, 91 of them specified a grade or grade level. Most were for grades PK through 5 ($n = 57$), followed by high school ($n = 19$) and middle school ($n = 15$). Sixty-six specified a subject area, primarily concerning ELA ($n = 16$), special education ($n = 12$), the arts ($n = 11$), or math ($n = 10$), with one post addressing both ELA and math. The other subjects represented in this category were science ($n = 7$), social studies ($n = 4$), TESOL ($n = 2$), coding or keyboarding ($n = 2$), and world languages ($n = 1$).

Most posts ($n = 86$) asked for ideas to use with students, with the majority of these seeking online resources ($n = 50$) such as apps or websites that teach specific content, video meeting or editing tools, online book repositories, or tools to make their professional duties easier in an online environment. For example:

"Any great middle school science/stem/steam apps or games out there?"

"I'm struggling to deliver content to my students with disabilities through video meetings without violating confidentiality or IEPs...I am looking for a platform that allows the students to see me and me to see them all, but not necessarily have them see each other."

"What are resources for middle schoolers to read books online?"

The remaining posts seeking ideas requested activities students could do with little or no technology ($n = 34$). Nineteen of these were requesting academic activities, such as writing or research projects, science lessons for young learners, alternatives to worksheets, and life skills for students with special needs. Four explained why they could not include technology: One because of a district mandate, one because their students did not have devices, but the other two posts described their students:

"65% of my kiddos live on the reservation and do not have access to internet. Some of them live 2-4 hours outside of town."

"I work with middle school students with intellectual disabilities functioning at the pre-K or K level, most of whom are nonverbal and cannot access their iPads independently (besides to watch preferred YouTube videos of course!!)."

The other sixteen activity requests addressed supporting their students, including handling stress (e.g., "Does anyone have any easy, FUN activities that might help students de-stress a little? I am specifically asking for high school students."), celebrating milestones (e.g., "Middle and High School Principals - what ideas are your teams thinking about for graduation?"), and maintaining a sense of community (e.g., "Has anyone done any fun

community building activities with their class (or staff!) over Zoom?"). Two asked for online videos appropriate for elementary-grade students.

Thirty-seven posts asked for teaching assistance. Twelve sought help with professional duties, such as taking attendance, holding extra help hours, progress monitoring, involving paraprofessionals, scheduling, and keeping administration informed of work accomplished. Examples include:

"I have been told that I need to continue to progress monitor my caseload of 200+ students from home weekly. Anyone have suggestions? Are there any online programs that I can use to help me accomplish this without having to make 217 phone calls/video calls a week?"

"What types of schedules or formats have worked for other sped teachers? Are you scheduling like an open resource time for students to drop in or meeting with all your students 1:1 to support gen ed assignments? How are you handling small group instruction minutes?"

Ten posts sought advice for teaching online; four were concerned with teaching very young students online, three seeking general advice, and three on how to teach their elective courses online. The remaining posts concerned helping individual students without technology ($n = 7$; e.g., "I teach in [state] and they just announced today that we will be finishing the school year digitally. I had a family message me concerned. She only has a cell phone and no internet."), online classroom management ($n = 4$; e.g., "Looking for a ZOOM norms or expectations chart or graphic that is kid friendly."), how to help one's own children while also teaching online ($n = 3$; e.g., "Teachers with toddlers, what are you doing for childcare while teaching remotely?"), assessment and grading advice ($n = 3$), and finding online professional development opportunities ($n = 1$).

Teachers seeking technical support only comprised twenty-six of the requesting posts. Most were teachers asking how perform a specific task with an online resource ($n = 16$), such as posting assignments and quizzes, enabling or disabling certain features in the platform, and getting a platform to better emulate classroom instruction. Three of the posts asked how to "lock" a video meeting before the teacher arrives and after the teacher ends the session so students cannot communicate with each other unsupervised. The remaining posts asked for advice on what video platform to use ($n = 2$), if others were having difficulties with a particular platform ($n = 2$), ensuring student privacy ($n = 1$), cross-platform compatibility ($n = 1$), and helping students use a specific platform ($n = 1$).

5.2. Educators Sharing Ideas

Of the 417 sharing posts, only 175 specified a grade level, with 157 for grades PK-5, ten for grades 6 - 8, and eight for grades 9-12. A subject area was specified in 217 posts, primarily for science ($n = 58$), ELA ($n = 54$), and the arts ($n = 30$). Other subjects represented were special education ($n = 18$), math ($n = 13$), physical education ($n = 12$), world languages ($n = 10$), TESOL ($n = 9$), electives other than the arts ($n = 7$), and social studies ($n = 6$).

The sharing posts were mostly educators sharing online resources (n = 111), activities for students (n = 110), and videos (n = 105). Primarily, the online resources shared were links to free websites or add-on tools teachers could use for distance learning (n = 72). Twenty-four of the online resources shared were teachers spreading the word as subscription education technology sites began waiving fees to help teachers during the emergency, such as, "Brain pop is free right now with the school closures. Let your other teacher friends know!!!" and "Mackin is providing thousands of free multi-copy ebooks to schools interested in giving students an option for using digital content. ... This is NOT a sales promotion. It is simply Mackin's way of getting resources to students and educators who need it during this quarantine crisis." The remaining fifteen online resources posts were teachers sharing things they created, such as games that could be done virtually.

Fifty-five of the activities shared were "printables" teachers could share with students, such as worksheets and paper games, and forty-three were physical things students could do on their own or with their family, such as having a family spirit week, creating a COVID-19 time capsule, arts and crafts ideas, and activities to stay physically active. The remaining twelve activity posts included writing prompts, event notifications (e.g., "REMINDER: Submissions to the CoBuild19 Roller Coaster Challenge are due by 11:59 PM PT on April 6. Please consider taking part and sharing with others."), and activities to maintain a sense of community with one's students (e.g., "In an effort to continue to build community with my students, we met up on the computer for lunch and ate together. They really enjoyed just being together and chatting.").

Most of the links to videos that educators shared addressed topics one would do in a normal classroom: Thirty-four of these were instructional videos, such as math or science lessons, nineteen were links to videos of someone reading a book aloud, fourteen were for videos showing how to do something in art or a physical activity, and four were offered as options for virtual field trips. Nineteen addressed some type of support, like videos on supporting students with disabilities during the sudden change (e.g., a link to a video on dyslexia), professionalism and distance learning (e.g., "...this video was recommended. One part is about sharing information about students. Just a good reminder for all when using video chat to keep students safe and their personal information safe."), and how schools celebrated graduation (e.g., "Our Superintendent and High School principal made this for our senior class. Our community loves it!"). Fifteen posts were to videos that provided help with teaching online (e.g., "11 little tips for better video chat").

5.3. Posts Offering Support

Interspersed among the sharing and requesting posts were thirty-eight messages of support. Most were from other educators reminding each other, "We're ALL in this together!!" These posts let members know that there is a difference between online teaching and emergency distance learning, that compassion is more important than

content, or tips for supporting their own mental health. The majority of these posts were "short and sweet" messages, sometimes with comforting photos, but one gave a more comprehensive viewpoint:

"I can remember the anxiety, confusion, and irritability over curriculum, grades, and testing in 2005. Hurricane Katrina taught the teachers on the Gulf Coast that an interrupted year is not the end of the world. It's okay if you don't get to cover all of the content. It's okay if your grades are inflated because you can't test as normal. It's okay if your students are not able to complete the coursework as assigned. We worried that missing part of the year would have lasting effects, but it didn't. Our Katrina kids are doctors, lawyers, teachers, hairdressers, business owners, nurses, engineers, journalists, you name it they are doing it. Don't sweat what is probably ultimately insignificant, but embrace the opportunity to stay connected with your students in order to build relationships and to reinforce a sense of normalcy for them."

A few of the posts were jokes, and while there were some that poked fun at parents experiencing what their teachers experienced, others were laughing at their own "new normal." Photos of animals close to camera lenses followed with the caption, "What we look like teaching," songs humorously expressing their reaction to distance learning, and cartoon characters struggling with some task helped educators express some of the stress or concerns they felt with the sudden shift in teaching.

The remaining supportive posts were messages asking about or stating their district had just shifted to distance learning and reminders that our students are watching our reactions to learn how they should act. However, one message of support was from a parent comparing the work this online group was doing to what was happening in their district:

"I just want to tell all of you teachers how amazing you are! The district that I work for assigned one teacher per grade level to put together a small packet of work to last the students a month, and that is it. Pick up your packet, and we will contact you again in a month. Zero personal or even group engagement of any kind from any of their teachers. If you are stuck you can email the assigned grade level teacher for help, even if that is a teacher you have never met. We parents are completely on our own. It is really sad for the kids. Thank you to all of you who are working so hard every day to make sure learning continues, and to maintain a relationship with our kids."

6. Conclusion

Social media is a dynamic platform for teachers to share and enhance peer support [4]. It is therefore unsurprising that many educators turned to social media to help each other navigate this sudden shift to distance education, especially when their districts lacked plans for emotional support during long-term school closures [10] [12]. The public Facebook group, "K12 Learning Possibilities in Pandemic Times," was only one of several groups on various social media platforms available for educators.

