

# T-CARE

## SPECIAL EDITION

### Teachers Connecting to Advance Retention and Empowerment

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In the Spring of 2020, T-CARE offered its first special edition, one with the theme of *Teaching, Learning, and Working in a Remote Environment*. In my editorial, I shared that “Many wrote in and, based on the responses, we created a new section for this issue only: Reflections in the Time of COVID-19.” How devastating to realize that, almost two years later, we are not reflecting on a time gone by, but reflecting on a trauma we are still experiencing. This is our third special issue in fact, following one on *Equity, Access, and Social Justice* in Fall 2020. Dealing with our own traumas and special circumstances, the CTL did not publish a T-CARE issue earlier in 2021. This, the only issue in 2021, has the theme of *If I Had Known Then...*

Many of us may wish we could turn back the clock, giving our younger selves helpful insight and timely strategies to get us through the dark days. Interestingly, you will find as you read the reflective articles included in this special issue, that the theme of connection, community, and relationships are the most pervasive. Mindfulness, self-care, self-forgiveness, and grace towards others are topics that come up repeatedly. None of our authors wishes they could tell themselves how to create a better virtual Zoom background, about a great app they discovered, or how to best their own scores on a videogame. In fact, a couple of our authors even state that they would not in fact use our imaginative time machine to indulge in “If I had known then” fantasies; they believe that it has been the challenge itself that has led to growth, change, and lesson learning. The last article by Grace Lochner expresses her experiences as a student with a disability and how distance learning leveled the playing field for her; I found her reflections particularly powerful for us as educators.

What do I personally wish I had known back in March of 2020? *I wish I had known...* that my son would be ok without attending even a single day of his 11<sup>th</sup> grade, that I’d have plenty of toilet paper, that not everyone manages working at home the same way and to be considerate of that fact when communicating, that I wouldn’t get to see family for quite a while, and that I should buy building materials for my addition before the supply chain implodes. Oh, and I wish I had known to celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday early because otherwise it would be a complete dud. Most of all though, I echo most of the authors in wishing I could tell my pre-pandemic self that “It’ll be rough, but it’ll be ok. Stay connected to friends and colleagues. Engage in self-care and be kind to yourself and others. Take one day at a time.”

Here’s to hoping there won’t be a need for more pandemic-related special issues. Take care of your students, your families, and yourselves.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Wendy W. Murawski".

Wendy W. Murawski, Ph.D.  
Executive Director and Eisner Endowed Chair  
Center for Teaching & Learning, CSUN



## TEACHER TALK

### PRACTICE RELENTLESS SELF-FORGIVENESS & EXTEND GRACE TO THOSE AROUND YOU

At the height of the pandemic, I was a junior high special education teacher with five subjects, two grade levels, two cohorts of incredibly bright, curious students, and a smattering of involved, attentive, concerned families. As much as I shared in the worlds' collective grief and trauma as we watched tragedy after tragedy unfold in spectacular fashion around us (and, for many of us, within our own households and communities), I established a commitment to *stay in the weeds* with my students. Ultimately, that meant getting back to the basics and staying there as much as possible. Each of these strategies and frameworks are included to help other educators maintain forward momentum without getting bogged down or overwhelmed by minutiae.

- **Practice relentless self-forgiveness and extend grace to those around you**—I am my own worst critic. I agonize that I am not doing enough. Having friends and colleagues around to remind me that I need to extend the same grace to myself that I give to others has been key to my own balance and happiness.
- **Prioritize partnerships & collaboration** - Partner with parents - even in secondary grades! The pandemic obliterated any semblance of control most of us thought we had, and families, particularly those with children with accessibility needs, were left scrambling to find ways to support their children as the supports and structures they'd depended on essentially dissolved overnight.
- **Utilize support providers** to build and maintain classroom cohesion. Occupational Therapists and Speech Language Pathologists can provide engaging, supportive whole class push-in lessons in person and online. The talented Occupational Therapist who worked with my students led whole class paint, drawing, and origami lessons (following YouTube tutorials), while our Speech Pathologist conducted engaging Social Skills lessons.
- **Use tech introductions** - In IEP meetings, allow participants to join with their cameras off, and encourage each member to rename themselves with their name, their role at the meeting, and their relationship with the student.

- **Keep things simple & focused** - Select 3-5 platforms and applications and use them strategically. Make the goal to introduce only the platforms that are most relevant, engaging, and universally applicable for your subjects and students. Explicitly teach and reinforce time management skills as students need them now more than ever when managing working at home and school. Leverage technology to make content accessible and remove barriers. This includes streamlining access using predictable routines, structures, and formats.
- **Get involved and stay involved** so you have a seat at the table. At the onset of the pandemic, district level decisions were being made at breakneck speed. As a stakeholder, I sought to wrangle myself onto problem solving committees so that I could participate in advocating for my own interests, and those of my students and their families.
- **Set boundaries** - The job of the distance learning teacher seems never ending because the boundaries between work and home are permanently blurred. Accordingly, find ways to streamline the workload, explicitly teach systems and procedures to students, and show deliberation by sharing your boundaries with your families so everyone knows and understands what to expect. This also helps model for students a moderately improved work life balance.

Ultimately, we are educators, not wizards or oracles. What we know to be true, good, and timeless in education continues to be true, good, and timeless, even during a crisis. *What I wish I knew* in March 2020 was that we already know what to do.

Amy Gaines, M.A., is a Program Specialist with the William S. Hart Union High School District with over 20 years of experience in the field of education.



## ADMIN CORNER

### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

What I didn't know in Winter of 2020 when I accepted a new school administrative position moving from Utah to New Jersey, leaving the school I had worked at for 21 years, was what was lurking right around the corner, a global pandemic that would change almost every aspect of daily life with long-lasting ramifications into the future. I took for granted stability, friendship, connection, and the social capital built over those two decades of work. All of these things seemed easy, simple, and so ordinary. To be honest, I don't even think I thought much about them. Needless to say, moving across the country for a job during a pandemic is not recommended. Arriving in a new state with no connection to extended family, friends, or a new school community proved a hardship for which I was not mentally prepared. Nonetheless, the excitement of the job pulled on me. My ambition for success, my desire to uphold and promote the well-being of the teachers, administrators, and staff under my care, and my commitment to serving the students and families within my new school community anchored me through one of the toughest years of my career.

Through this experience, I learned what I value most: **community**. Community, a hallmark of great schools, is at its core a culture of belonging, demonstrated daily through positive, supportive, interpersonal, bidirectional relationships among teachers, staff, administration, parents, and students alike. Individuals who find themselves in communities of belonging, find spaces where expressions of personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences are welcomed, acknowledged, and understood. Seemingly diverse individuals can unite under that which is common. Creating a school community of belonging rooted in trusting relationships is intentional... and it is challenging! It is a pursuit with no set endpoint; there are constant undulations. Decades of research show that school communities characterized by supportive relationships provide an environment rich for academic growth, school engagement, altruistic and ethical actions, and the development of social and emotional competencies.

In a year full of unknowns, building relationships from the ground up gave me fresh perspective into what it takes to create truly exceptional school communities. Pierson once said, "How powerful would our world be if we had kids who were not afraid to take risks, who were not afraid to think, and who had a champion? Every child deserves a champion; an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connections, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be" (2013). This is the type of community I value. What power would Pierson's words hold if we also extended these aspirations to faculty and staff, to parents, to board members, to all school constituents?

When thinking about school community, the student immediately comes to mind. Rarely do we turn our attention to how we foster and create belongingness among the adults working within those hallowed halls. However, through this year and a half of learning in a brand new school, re-establishing who I am as an educator, and gaining perspective on the importance of connection, what I know to be true more than ever is that all members within the school community, regardless of role, crave connection and need community.

*If I had known* in March of 2020 what I know now, I still would have made the big, bold career move I did. However, I would have understood better the fragility of our humanity, the importance of caring for one another, and the great responsibility school leaders hold to create intentional communities of belonging for all members within the school's ecosystem, including themselves.

Pierson, R. (2013, May). Every kid needs a champion [Video]. TED Conference.  
[https://bit.ly/RPierson\\_Champion](https://bit.ly/RPierson_Champion)



**Kara A. Loftin, Ph.D.**, has worked in education for 23 years and serves as the Head of School at The Craig School in Mountain Lakes, NJ.



## EDUCATION EXCHANGE

### USING CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic marked the last year I was a classroom teacher. In 2020, I decided to leave the classroom and become a teacher coach. The position required me to support 20 special education teachers across multiple schools throughout my school district.

Being a coach was full of new challenges, especially learning how to coach effectively during a pandemic. I helped teachers with creating adaptive online assignments and setting up virtual conferencing with students and their families. Despite the effort, there were still a lot of students who were missing instruction and disengaged. The majority of our district is composed of students and families of color, who experienced disproportionate educational, social, and health care inequities and trauma.

Our educators needed more than just technical tools and resources. If I were to do this all over again, I would have spent more time and energy on things that support teachers, students, and families differently. I would emphasize the importance of creating purposeful connections and relationships with students and their families, because strong relationships can be a protective factor when experiencing trauma.

How could we have focused on creating connections and building relationships during a pandemic? Culturally sustaining practices work to integrate the linguistic and cultural diversity of our students (Paris & Alim, 2017). One specific culturally sustaining practice is to create “discretionary spaces” for students. *Discretionary Spaces* are the day-to-day decisions that teachers make about the interactions they have with students. Although there are so many things out of our control, we can control the interactions we have with our students and create spaces for safety, learning, and trust.

Another strategy I’d recommend are “*Trust Generators*”. Trust Generators are daily practices that impact students on a brain-based level (Hammond, 2015). All of the practices offered here can be done in a virtual, in-person, or hybrid format.

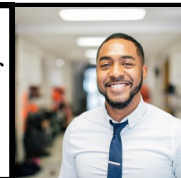
- **Familiarity-** Activities that include positive affirmations and a collaborative approach to setting daily classroom goals, such as a morning meeting, can help build personal regard and strong connections between students and teachers.
- **Selective vulnerability-** People respect and connect with others who share their vulnerable moments. Our students need to know that we make mistakes too.
- **Similarity of Interests-** Individuals create bonds with others who share similar likes, dislikes, hobbies, and so forth. This common affinity allows a point of connection beyond any obvious racial, class, or linguistic differences. Find similarities with your students.
- **Concern-** Showing concern for those issues and events important to someone else is an important social-emotional skill. Sharing personal challenges you have encountered and teaching self-regulation strategies can give students tools to cope with their own challenges.
- **Competence-** People tend to trust others who demonstrate they have the skill and knowledge, as well as the will, to help and support them. By keeping a focus on learning and development, teachers are able to help maintain students’ trust and confidence in the teacher-student relationship.

*If I knew then* what I know now, I would spend more time preparing teachers to nurture authentic relationships with students by using culturally sustaining practices like integrating Discretionary Spaces and Trust Generators into their instruction. While strong relationships certainly don’t solve all problems, they do set up students to be more resilient in a world where anything (even a pandemic!) can happen. The strong relationships that we build can help heal and protect us from trauma.

Alim, H.S., & Paris, D. (2017). What is culturally sustaining pedagogy and why does it matter. In D Paris & H.S. Alim (Eds.), *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world* (pp. 1-21). Teachers College Press.

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

**Martin O. Odima Jr., M.Ed.**, currently works at Saint Paul (MN) Public Schools Office of Specialized Services as a teacher coach and has worked in special education for 9 years.



## PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

## QUARANTINING WITH YOUR KIDS

Having been an educator for many years, I assumed I could handle my five children learning from home. When the pandemic forced the kids away from their school environments, I soon discovered I was wrong. I had to adapt to teaching virtually while having my children at home with me. Here are some tips I would have given myself and other parents back in early 2020 to save some stress and time as we transitioned into the new “normal.”

**Big kids need a workspace:** Having a dedicated workspace is vital for older children who attend virtual school. Set up a small desk and chair in an area that can be utilized exclusively for learning. Be sure to include any materials they may need throughout the day, including headphones, writing supplies, and textbooks. When possible, avoid placing them in common areas such as the dining room where other siblings or simple household tasks distract them. When the children go back to school, these spaces can continue to be used for homework and studying.

**Don't buy a classroom:** One of the difficulties of having preschool children learning from home is having limited time to teach them explicitly. It can be difficult balancing working from home, supporting the older children with school, and a never-ending pile of laundry and household duties. Do not make the mistake of believing it is necessary to purchase a classroom worth of materials. While toys and activities are required for independent play, most of the instruction for the little ones can be done via naturalistic teaching (e.g., take them to the kitchen or outside).

**Embrace naturalistic teaching:** What helped maintain my sanity was utilizing a form of naturalistic teaching I call multifunctional activities. It involves completing mandatory chores and duties around the house with your child while finding the teachable moments. There are many opportunities to incorporate this concept throughout your day. For example, if the

goal was to teach a young child to count, breakfast is the perfect time to target the skill. Have the child count the number of eggs as caregiver and child make breakfast together. As they master counting the eggs, scaffold in new learning opportunities such as skip counting, addition, subtraction, and science, all while completing a mandatory task. This strategy could also apply to functions like laundry, where the children could work on color sorting, measuring, and pouring (with support, of course). Using this strategy, children learn developmentally appropriate skills and life skills, spend time with their caregiver, and complete those must-do tasks.

**Know that it gets better:** None of us were prepared for life to change so significantly. It can be challenging to see the light at the end of the tunnel when the news is full of heart wrenching reports. As parents and caregivers, it is especially concerning as we are uncertain about what the future will look like for our children. Even though we may never go back to “normal,” know that life does get better. Our children are resilient, and they will become the architects of the new normal.

*If I knew then* what I know now, I'd say breathe, be easy on yourself, and just continue doing your best. Laugh often. And most of all, enjoy this time with your children. The most beautiful part of quarantine is spending more time with our children.

Enjoy. Every. Moment.

I am a horrible  
homeschool  
teacher. My child  
has been at recess  
since 9:30am. 🧑‍🎓



**Ashley Grays, M.Ed.**, has been in education for over 12 years and is currently a Ph.D. Scholar at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida in Exceptional Student Education.

## SELF-CARE SPOTLIGHT

### INTEGRATING TEACHER AND STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Step into any school and you'll hear story after story about how teachers support their students academically, behaviorally, and in their mental health. Teachers provide Social Emotional Learning (SEL), counseling, and endless hugs – but *if we had known then* what we do now, it would be that we need to do a better job equipping future teachers with the skills and tools to care for their own mental health needs. They would then be able to share those skills with their students. COVID-19 revealed that we, as teacher educators, need to reexamine what and how we prepare future teachers. We need to support their development of content and pedagogy, but also their skills in stress management and self-care.

Teachers are the superheroes of our time, selflessly putting others first in most instances. However, we also know that most teachers are stressed, tired, scared, and coping with their own pandemic challenges. As teacher educators, we wish we had integrated more mental health strategies into our own courses for our teachers, which they in turn could use with their students. Here are some of the strategies that are now integrating into our coursework:

- **Box Breathing** - Used by the US Marines, this is a simple breath practice meant to control the stress response and allow the body to relax. Simply inhale for a count of four, hold the breath for four, exhale for four, and hold for four. This exercise should be done for ten cycles, reminding ourselves that we are safe in this moment.
- **Intense Action & Release** - The stress cycle begins due to a perceived threat, which today can include any number of things such as a news item, a presentation to be made, or a memory. While these stress increases are not inherently harmful to us, they can become harmful if the stress cycle is not completed. We can complete the cycle by engaging in some type of intense physical stimulus to signal to our body that it can relax, to include running in place, tensing and squeezing our muscles, shaking out our limbs, or even yelling out loud.

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation & Body Scanning** - Progressive muscle relaxation is a common mindfulness practice involving the conscious tensing and releasing of muscle groups in the body. The basic practice starts with the feet - tensing, squeezing, and holding the muscles for about 5-10 seconds. Next, release the muscles and focus on the feeling of relaxation. Repeat the action if desired before moving on to calf muscles, thighs, hips, and so on. Note which areas of the body may be holding tension or need more care; this information can be used as an early indicator of stress in the future!
- **Alternative Modes of Instruction** - With the transition to online learning, many teachers and students had to learn to navigate an educational system beyond the traditional classroom. Thinking back to what we know now, we have learned the importance of these alternate modes of learning. We have found that if we switch up the lesson delivery, such as through podcasting, we can encourage students to listen and learn while doing yoga, going for a walk, or utilizing others forms of self-care.
- **Apps for Guided Mindfulness** - Thanks to an increase in awareness of the importance of mental health, there are a number of new apps for phones and devices that help facilitate many of the practices mentioned above. While some are free, many are paid subscriptions but offer educator discounts – so be sure to check! Some highly used apps include Headspace, Calm, and Ten Percent Happier. They include daily practices and courses that build over time. Mindfulness, while simple, is not easy. But if you stick with it, you will begin to notice your ability to relax on command during the day.



**Tal Slemrod, Ph.D.**, has 15 years of experience in education and is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at California State University, Chico.

**Shannon Slemrod, LPCC, NCC**, is a Mental Health Counselor in the WellCat Counseling Center, at CSU, Chico with 13 years in mental health and education.





# T-CARE

## STUDENTS' STANDPOINT

### OUR COLLEGE PANDEMIC STORY

**Allie:** I was a college freshman in March 2020. We were leaving for Spring Break on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. So on the night of March 12<sup>th</sup>, we all went downtown to the restaurants. Our parents started sending messages to stay in our dorms and come home right after class on Friday instead of going to Spring Break. We began hearing rumors, but figured that this disease was something that would be taken care of. We were pretty light-hearted, just talking about how mad we were that our Spring Break plans were all cancelled.

**If I had known** that we weren't going to come back to a regular school year (and still haven't), honestly I probably would have gone out that whole week. I also probably would have gone to class that last Thursday and said a real "Goodbye" to my professors. I wouldn't really have a chance to interact with them again for a year and a half.

**Nick:** I was a high school senior in March 2020. We were mad, too, because a lot of us had Senior Spring Break plans. **If I had known** then what would happen, I would have insisted that we go traveling during the Winter Break. I still haven't seen my family in Greece and it's been almost 2 years since we were supposed to go. We are talking about Greece this coming summer, but I doubt if it's going to happen.

**Allie:** I think the worst of it has been not getting a chance to have groups of kids to do stuff with. I had joined a sorority and we had a fall of parties and activities. Since then, I've had a small group I've done stuff with, but the fun of a big group just hasn't happened. We've started going to football games again, but we stay with our small group.

**Nick:** I think there's been a lot of pressure on friend groups. I hang out with the same small group I started hanging out with the summer of COVID, even though we went to different colleges. There were no parties, no Welcome activities, and really no face-to-face classes last year and I really haven't gotten to know that many more people besides the people I came in knowing.

**Allie:** So far as classes go, I ended up doing fine in online classes. Part of that is because my family all got on a schedule, but some friends of mine failed a lot of classes. The professors have been really supportive overall, but I really think that some of my learning has been impacted because we haven't had a chance to ask questions or because assignments were really easy.

**Nick:** I did ok in online classes, too. But a couple of my friends have gotten really depressed and stressed out and are close to dropping or failing out. There has really been a group who stepped up and made it work, and those who couldn't.

**Allie:** This whole thing feels like it's been a Grownup Pandemic and a parallel Kid Pandemic. The grownups are worried about masks and getting sick, while we have been worried about friendships and our futures. We wear masks around professors and adults because we don't want them to get sick, but they don't seem to be as upset about the same things that we are.

**Nick:** My friends are the only way I have gotten through this. There has been tons of support offered to us, but it feels weird. Like, how are you supposed to ask for help about dealing with the future when no one knows what the future holds? I'm not sure what we're supposed to learn in college, and it feels like the grownups don't know either.

**Annalia (Allie) Lynch** is a 20 year old junior at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia.

**Nick Lynch** is a 19 year old sophomore at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia.



## ADMIN CORNER

### LEARNING FROM THE CHALLENGES

What I wish I knew before the pandemic began? Where does one even begin with such a statement? *I wish I knew...* that life would irrevocably change and whatever we felt on that day, as the world began to slow its spin on its axis, would alter all that we thought we knew - about education, sustainability of systems, site administration, and district level responsibilities. I wish I knew the impact this small, still perplexing virus would do in the way of halting life as we had come to know it.

I wish that I had known that, although we were feverishly putting together communications intended to instill a sense of confidence that we would somehow weather the oncoming storm together, we were, in actuality, all terrified. Terrified for our families, our own lives, and the comfort of our mistakenly misinformed view that we had, in some way, become a society that no longer needed to be fearful of viruses. Scientists were the ones committed to keeping the plagues of old away from us, while we were the ones charged with educating the future generation to meet these types of challenges years down the road.

As we packed our belongings on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and said our goodbyes to the office folk, there was almost a type of holiday-like giddiness. Like somehow we were given an extra break from all that we do day in and day out. Though we thought of our goodbyes as a temporary hiatus into the unknown, we were actually heading into a time of profound loss, insecurity, and deep, addling fear. The kind of fear that most, if not all, of our generation have never known. Little did we know that, as we viewed the district office in our rearview mirror, we would only rejoin one another as a war-torn band of refugees eighteen months later. Some of us would return having experienced the ravage of the virus themselves, others would be hardened by misinformation and divide, and still others would be crippled by the loss of those they loved.

Throughout that time, while living in the eye of the hurricane, we were charged with reforming our education system. Mind you, I am an educator who began her career in 1988 with an ancient Apple computer that I had to learn to “code” (which, I might add, I did terribly). Yet I was now tasked with inspiring a new generation of tech-savvy millennials to utilize a Zoom room and assemble a Google Classroom, both of which required that I use the internet to investigate what the terms even meant. If you are thinking I am kidding, I implore you to search the history on my computer. Terrified, I made every attempt to simplify the now over-used adage that we were “building the plane while flying it.” There we were - over the sea and unabashedly unsure if the vehicle we were in the process of building would even land, or, if it did, if such a landing would be soft and gentle, or one of great turbulence and fear? As we are still not yet out of the woods, that answer remains unknown.

So what do I wish I knew in March of 2020? Not more, not less, because in that statement is the promise of innovation, genius, and unmet expectations. Here we find ourselves in the abyss of what we knew, what we thought we knew, and what we have yet to discover. What I am sure of is that it requires a level of humility that I don’t know that I would have uncovered had I not been challenged in the way that March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 challenged me. And, for that, I am changed, and grateful.

#### Pandemic as portal

*"As a school leader, am I going to use this as an opportunity to really listen, or are we going to do what we always did?"*

School leader



**Joanna White, M.A.**, has been in education for 35 years and is the Director of Special Education with the William S. Hart Union High School District in Santa Clarita, California.



# T-CARE

## EDUCATION EXCHANGE

### MORE THAN A SELF-CARE SUNDAY

The COVID-19 pandemic generated one of the greatest disruptions in educational history (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). There has been a rise in anxiety in the past year, placing mental health at the forefront of health issues for educators. As doctoral students in education, we need to acknowledge the state of our own mental health before we begin to serve the students and families in our communities. The purpose of this article is to self-reflect on lessons learned during the pandemic and provide self-care tips to educators.

#### Personal Reflections: *If I Had Known Then...*

##### **Danica: Refocusing**

Once I got into the ebbs and flows of the pandemic, my mind immediately shifted to being productive. I felt I could allot this extra time to accomplish all the New Year goals that I shamefully tucked away by February. However, as time progressed and days turned into weeks of what I considered being “unproductivity,” I realized this unexpected detour, COVID-19, was needed as an opportunity for me to refocus on myself.

##### **Tahnee: Disconnect to Reconnect**

I felt the need to stay connected throughout the pandemic. The use of technology was great, but it created a new “pandemic”-Zoom fatigue. I wish I would’ve allowed myself to disconnect from technology and enjoy the slow pace of life instead of panicking to maintain the old way of life.

##### **Fanica: Happiness Over Everything**

I found myself wanting to be a people pleaser instead of focusing on myself. I kept putting myself last, which resulted in stress and misery. One day I attended a seminar where the presenters talked about happiness and self-care. I was tasked with making a list of ten self-care activities and doing one thing every day for 30 minutes.

##### **Prioritizing Self-Care**

While we know prioritizing self-care leads to a healthier and better version of ourselves, practicing these strategies may not be as easy as they seem. As educators, our careers revolve around putting the needs of the students first. Unfortunately, sometimes this thinking generalizes into our personal lives and causes us to forget how to fill our own cup. Difficulty creating new habits, lack of time, and unrealistic expectations are common barriers to self-care.

Creating proactive strategies to combat those barriers will play a massive role in making self-care part of your weekly routine. While guilt may sink in as we begin to find the ability to make time for ourselves, we can remind ourselves that even if we are behind in grading, we still deserve a break. Additionally, scheduling recurring self-care time is a great way to begin implementing a routine. Similarly, you can make a personal reinforcement system for yourself. Once you complete a specific task, reward yourself with a prize. Above all else, take the first step; you can gradually build from there.

#### Self-Care Strategies

Strategy	Description
Connect with Others Socially	Social connection is the experience of feeling connected with others.
Practice Gratitude	You can rewire your brain to make it easier to be grateful. Practice makes perfect.
Movement	Any type of movement would be helpful, even as simple as walking.
Journaling	Anxiety can be overwhelming because there’s not enough room to hold it. Use a journal to brain dump your thoughts.
Mindfulness	Mindfulness can be summed up in two simple steps. Be mindful of your breath in the moment and focusing on something nonjudgmentally.

If nothing else, this pandemic has taught us the importance of our health. So, while participating in a Self-Care Sunday is a great start, we suggest prioritizing at least 10-30 minutes daily for yourself. The goal is to find time to rejuvenate your mind, body, and soul as often as possible.

Reimers, F. M., & Schleicher, A. (2020). *A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020* [PDF]. OECD. <https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/>

**Danica Moise, BCBA, Tahnee Wilder, M.S. CCC-SLP, and Fanica Young, Ed.D.** are all PhD scholars in Exceptional Education at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. They have 7 years, 12 years, and 5 years respectively working in the field of education.



# TEACHER TALK

## TRANSITIONING BACK TO SCHOOL POST-COVID

During COVID-19, teachers taught virtually. Most districts in the rural mountains of North Carolina used Zoom<sup>®</sup> to provide continued instruction. A major concern that impacted rural secondary schools (and likely most schools and grades) has been students' behavior upon return to the classroom. It may be that the pandemic caused chronic stress and trauma to students just starting out in secondary school, or it could be that this time away from school coincided with a time period (adolescence) already known to generate difficulty with processing emotion and social responses (Minkos & Gelbar, 2020). Regardless of the reason, *if I had known* in early 2020 what I know now as a secondary special education teacher who has taught through a pandemic, I would give myself and my colleagues strategies to help students with their behavior as they transition back to school.

### Transition challenges and suggestions

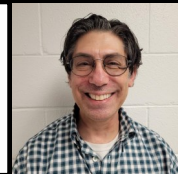
During COVID, classes took place electronically and it became common knowledge that every student would receive a passing grade. Given this information, many secondary school students stopped attending online class, especially when many were being left home alone for long periods of time and expected to make their own choices. Self-discipline and self-monitoring skills, already a common struggle for many of our students with disabilities, seemed to be completely lacking.

Coming back to the classroom has been jarring for those students who stopped attending and who spent the past 18 months with little internal, or even external, structures in place. The lack of face-to-face instruction also led to a group of students entering middle and high school unprepared, lacking the knowledge of the hierarchy, rules, regulations, and protocols of secondary school. This had an even more substantial impact on students with exceptionalities. This lack of transition time (elementary to middle; middle to high) resulted in increased behavioral issues when students returned to the classroom. Thus, if I could go back in time, I would provide our school and teachers with four strategies to assist with these challenging behaviors and transition.

1. Introduce the requirements of middle/high school and how the intricacies of the institution work, immediately as students return to school. This can be done through class discussions, which will allow student expression and attention from the teacher. Do not assume students will figure it out on their own.
2. Pair first-year students (e.g., 6th or 9th graders) with older students and allow them time to go over events or discuss any confusing circumstances the first-year student experienced. This also provides social connection and creates new possible friendships that students were not able to create during the lockdown.
3. Have students practice appropriate behavioral skills. For example, teach them that you prefer they not stand in doorways, when to say excuse me, and how to enter a classroom appropriately. While younger students may often be taught these skills, since students were away from school for a year or more, it would still behoove secondary students to get this instruction again. Teachers should not assume they will remember appropriate behaviors. In addition, students with disabilities may need repetition to gain automaticity.
4. Repeat the above. Have regular meetings and practice of desired skills. Students will need reminders and continued instruction, just as they do for their academic subjects.

Minkos, M. L., & Gelbar, N. W. (2020). Considerations for educators in supporting student learning in the midst of COVID-19. *Psychology in the Schools*, 58(2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22454>

Neal Lieberman, M.A., M.S., is a special education teacher at Madison High School in Marshall, NC. He's taught for 18 years.



## CARING CONNECTION

### THE COMPLEXITY OF THE MOMENT: THE EMOTIONAL TOLL AND FINDING MEANING

#### The Emotional Toll

The COVID-19 pandemic began alongside a time of racial reckoning—which combined highlight the complexity of this moment. Simultaneously, our country dealt with endless accounts of injustice and collective grief that forced us to navigate new territory without a map. You cannot talk about one issue without addressing the impact of the other. Over the past year and a half, it was not uncommon to feel emotionally flooded by repeated examples of painful inequities—from human injustice to the political divide; to endless accounts of dehumanization; the disproportionate amount of Black and Brown individuals who died from COVID-19; Black individuals murdered at the hands of law enforcement; peaceful protests where violence often erupted; nursing home residents dying alone; COVID-19 victims confined to hospitals without loved ones; record unemployment; food insecurity; the regret felt by those of us who lost loved ones during this time, because our time left was compromised. The emotional toll encompassed grief, fear, anger, stress, apathy, fatigue, acute and vicarious trauma, and the demands of tolerating endless uncertainty and isolation.

#### Soldiering On

For those of us fortunate to still have jobs, there was another layer of stress often invisible to others. We adopted the “I’ve got this” attitude, never appearing to skip a beat. Teaching our classes, learning new technology, meeting with students, attending countless Zoom meetings, re-designing curriculum to create a dynamic online learning experience, and creating new processes for working from home. We started our days the minute we woke up and often did not stop until well into the evening. We received a lot of encouragement for soldiering on and so we did; we took on more, we worked longer, breaks vanished, and we filled every moment working. The expectation to be always available became an unspoken norm, and one that we as soldiers seemed to abide by. Others relied on us and, as educators and helping professionals, we felt called to serve. We fell into a routine and a pace that became our exhausting lives.

#### Finding Meaning

Now put these two things together – overwhelming social factors that activated intense emotions, and unrelenting workloads - something had to change. It was a recipe for burnout (Cordes, 2021), where personal and professional factors were pushed to the limits. Three things helped us survive.

- First, and most important, we found community together. A safe place to share our emotional truths, we supported and validated each other; we offered each other sanctuary.
- Second, we set boundaries and employed various self-care strategies to create moments of balance. We did things that nourished other aspects of our lives, anything that was not work or screen related and brought contentment into the present moment. Looking back, we would say you cannot care for others if you do not care for yourself. We would tell ourselves this: rest. The work will be there, and it will be done; so, rest.
- Third, we thoughtfully engaged in advocacy work in support of justice and equity. We gathered in discussion, texted each other when news stories broke that echoed our collective pain, presented at conferences, developed projects, and attended events together. We were writing about history while living it. Most importantly, we found meaning from sharing our experiences and processing our emotional reactions. We have stayed committed, while recognizing the limits of our own health and well-being. It was in the *together* while apart that we cultivated a meaningful response both personally and professionally to this unprecedented time.

In conclusion, we would tell ourselves that even though the road ahead will be beyond challenging, it will take all of us together to get through the coming storm. While we are not yet *through* it, we are still standing, together.

Cordes, C.C., (2021). Burnout...Trauma...Both? Identifying and addressing needs during COVID-19 through informatics. *Families, Systems, & Health*, 39(1), 169–171. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fsh0000598>



**Deborah Buttitta, Psy.D., LMFT, Shyrea Minton, Ed.D., LPCC, and Dana Stone, Ph.D., LMFT** are all faculty in the Michael D. Eisner College of Education at California State University, Northridge. **Dr. Buttitta** is the Director of the Mitchell Family Counseling Clinic, **Dr. Minton** coordinates the MS in Counseling program, and **Dr. Stone** is fieldwork coordinator of the Marriage and Family Therapy program.



## STUDENTS' STANDPOINT

### HOW COVID LEVELED THE PLAYING FIELD

I am glad to have the opportunity to reflect on what the pandemic has been like as a student. What would I have changed had I known it was going to last so long and how did it affect my education? I am coming at this from a unique perspective as a sixteen-year-old high school student who has had to struggle my entire academic career, having been diagnosed with dyslexia in second grade. It has been a trying academic path with very low lows, but also the opportunity to meet some of the most fantastic people throughout my journey.

When the pandemic hit, we had to do these crazy work packets at home for the last marking period. That was all about checking boxes so everyone could get credit and move on. With the start of the new school year, there was a plan in place. Everyone went to Google classroom and my school went to block scheduling. For me, these were both a godsend. Though we actually started school "in school," our teachers had to utilize Google classroom so that if our county's COVID numbers went up at any point and we had to go remote, there would be no change in the platform and our classes would just meet through Zoom.

While many people struggled with this (Google classroom & block scheduling), it was the first time in my academic career that I finally had teachers really let me utilize all the technology tools available. When given assignments on Google, they were organized and all in one place. I could use my screen reader easily to review assignments. When I wanted to research a topic, no worries! I could use AI and research topics deeply. But more than anything, I did not sit in fear like I did in the classroom – of being called up and asked to read aloud or making a fool of myself by getting algebraic equation steps out of order when at the white board. All the fear was taken out of my education.

There was automatically extended time (something teachers hate on my 504 plan) but now everything was due at 11:59 and that 8 extra hours helped me each day.

Also, all of the sudden, there were do-overs allowed because teachers assumed everyone was struggling so they went above and beyond to make sure we would understand the content by providing private sessions or videos.

Who knew that there would be a day when the playing field was actually level? (That's what they said my 504 plan was supposed to do, but most teachers ignored it).

Here's what I do know for sure: when teachers lecture, it's boring; when teachers lecture over Zoom, it's no longer boring, but painful! I feel like the good teachers got better with the pandemic, and the bad teachers got worse... or maybe it just exposed them, because now instead of me sitting in the classroom vulnerable, *they* were on Zoom and vulnerable to their students. The pandemic era highlighted the classrooms that were bad: those with straight lecturing, no hands on or collaboration, and little regard for learning because it was more about how well teachers thought they were teaching, regardless of whether learning was occurring or not.

*If I could go back* before the pandemic, I would tell myself to be more of an advocate for my own learning.

When teachers say they don't have time or they have too many students to be able to provide my accommodations, it's just not true. When they had to figure it out for the pandemic, they did.

I would also tell my teachers that they really have to know it's ok to do education differently. Humor goes a long way in the classroom. They have to make it fun and interesting, because they are competing in the virtual world with students' other apps, such as Snapchat and Tiktok. When teachers were creative, they had us working with other students and doing projects and we actually learned a great deal. When teachers just lectured and had us take a 60 question test, our learning became about how we students could all could come together as problem solvers - trying to outsmart the teachers and their tests!



**Grace Lochner** is a 16 year old, 11th grade student and Captain of her Varsity soccer team at Jefferson High School in Shenandoah Junction, West Virginia.

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