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Abstract

In “Will Schools Change Forever,” Waite and Arnett contend our educational system, and our society as a whole, have been confronted with two pandemics, COVID-19 and systemic racism (2020). Both of these pandemics have exacerbated challenges schools must address and have exposed chronic inequities in educational systems. Our inquiry is case study of 23 novice teachers who graduated from our urban institution and their perception of how the pandemics impacted the development of their students, their own professional trajectory, and their future instruction. Semi-structured interviews focused on educators’ approaches to instruction across 12-18 months of the pandemic. Data were analyzed using NVivo through open coding. Results indicated novice teachers’ initial teaching experiences were disrupted by both Covid-19 and the social unrest during this time period. The challenges they faced reflected their focus as culturally responsive educators who were working to meet the needs of the learners in the urban schools where they were employed. The stories they shared related their challenges (a) in engaging students, and (b) in making connections to students and building a sense of community in the virtual environment. Eventually, however, these educators were able to transition to effectiveness as student-centered educators (a) by embracing the digital environment, and (b) by providing supports for student success. Drawing on their experiences and perceptions, our participants also offered advice on reimagining education and classrooms of the future for the new normal.

Introduction

In their paper, “Will Schools Change Forever,” Waite and Arnett contend our educational system, and our society as a whole, have been confronted with two pandemics, COVID-19 and systemic racism (2020). Both of these pandemics have exacerbated challenges schools must address and have exposed chronic inequities in educational systems. Fullan (2020) asserts prior to the pandemic educational systems were in a state of stagnation, and as frustration mounted during the disruption caused by the pandemic, opportunities emerged for education to become an agent of change for both individual and social development. The notion of whether the pandemics can help to make education more equitable has been linked to whether educational systems worked to address socio-economic inequalities in the early stages of the pandemic; the degree to which vision and leadership for the moving schools

forward in the post-pandemic world is school-based; and the extent to which schools and children are supported to become more self-directed in learning (Sahlberg, 2021). Regardless of the form education takes in the future, it is clear that a return to “normal” will not occur, change is inevitable (Fullan, 2020; Waite & Arnett, 2020).

Research on the nature teaching, learning, and development during the pandemic and beyond is just in its infancy. NPDL, Microsoft, and UNESCO took stock in an early collaborative report in the spring of 2020 and identified three stages of responding to changes brought about by the pandemic: disruption, transition, and re-imagining (Fullan, 2020; NPDL, Microsoft, & UNESCO, 2020). Case studies of novice teachers in Utah schools (Mecham, et al. 2021) document the disruptions and anxieties caused during this time, noting teachers felt overwhelmed, uncertain, and unsupported. Adaptability and use of technology were keys to the novices’ success in making instruction suitable to student needs but access to resources and parental collaboration were also critical to the learning process. Concerns in relation to students with specialized learning needs have also been raised, with personalized learning models and structures designed to deliver individualized support underscored as crucial to keeping students engaged and learning (McKittrick & Tuchman, 2020; Sahlberg, 2021). Additionally, in a survey of 37 states (Yoder et al., 2020), 67% of the states identified social emotional learning (SEL) as one of the top priorities. Finally, some teachers who self-identified as successful in using culturally responsive instruction in face to face situations, have noted that they struggled in using culturally responsive pedagogy in a virtual environment when schools closed during the pandemic (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022). Educators’ problems were exacerbated when their urban students had access issues or were inconsistent in attending, and they lacked experience in creating authentic collaborative opportunities online.

Teacher education programs are in a precarious position of preparing preservice teachers for an educational environment that has yet to emerge. Adaptations to programs, including fostering interconnectedness, restorative practices, and self-care, were made during the disruptive closing of schools and the move to virtual learning environments (Geary, 2020; Mayer & Zollman, 2021; Navarro, 2020), but significant questions remain about how teacher preparation programs may need to change to meet the needs of future educators. Previously, we explored graduates’ experiences during the spring 2020 closing of schools for the purpose of program improvement (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022). None of our graduates indicated that their programs had explicitly prepared them for online instruction, although a number of our completers drew on technology-based practices and culturally responsive approaches they used in their programs and in their face-to-face instruction to enhance their virtual lessons. All of the teachers noted an increase in communication with parents during the pandemic, but many expressed difficulties in providing scaffolding or in reading cues visually to understand students’ struggles. Our findings also illustrated how school leadership can remove or create barriers for equitable virtual learning for students in urban contexts. While some pedagogical practices learned in preparation programs proved beneficial, educators were lacking in knowledge and expertise related specifically to virtual instruction and the criticality and trauma-informed instructional practices needed during the upheavals being experienced.

Looking to the future of post-pandemic K-12 classrooms, the nature and focus of instruction and the knowledge and skills needed by teachers entering that environment is evolving. Our study is an effort to better understand the needs and contextual experiences our future candidates will encounter and the preparation they will need. In this

inquiry, we conducted a case study of the 2020-2021 pandemic teaching experiences of novice teachers who graduated from our programs. The purpose of our study was (a) to describe novice teachers’ classroom experiences during the 2020-2021 school year; and (b) to explore novice teachers’ re-imagining of future instruction and the “new normal” in education.

Method

Participants were 23 graduates of an urban research institution who had completed teacher preparation programs within the previous two years. The participants had accepted positions in one of seven districts or a charter school in the metropolitan area surrounding the university. Table 1 provides demographic data on the participants and descriptions of their teaching positions.

Table 1. Description of Participant Demographics and Teaching Positions

ID	Content and Grade Level	Gender	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity
ID 120	Special Education (4 th grade)	Female	Black
ID 203	Special Education (9 th grade math)	Male	African American
ID 204	Language Arts (8 th grade)	Female	White
ID 205	Language Arts (6 th grade)	Female	African American
ID 206	History (11 th grade)	Male	African American
ID 207	English (10 th grade)	Male	White
ID 209	Geometry (9 th grade)	Male	White
ID 211	Art (High school)	Female	White, Non-Hispanic
ID 212	Elementary (4 th grade)	Female	African American
ID 304	Elementary (5 th grade)	Female	Asian
ID 305	Special Education (3-5 th grade)	Female	Black
ID 311	Middle Grades Science (8 th grade)	Female	Multiracial
ID 312	Mathematics (8 th grade)	Female	White
ID 313	History (High School)	Female	African American
ID 406	Social Studies (6 th grade)	Female	
ID 407	Mathematics (Middle grades)	Male	African American
ID 601	ESOL (High School)	Male	White
ID 602	ESOL (Elementary)	Female	Black
ID 702	Music, Reading (Middle grades)	Female	White
ID 704	Math, Science (5 th grade)	Female	African
ID 801	Social Studies (Middle grades)	Female	White
ID 902	Music, Drama (6 th grade)	Female	Southeast Asian
ID 903	Social Studies (Middle grades)	Female	African American

Semi-structured, individual phone interviews of 30 – 45 minutes were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in

Otter.ai. Participants described their approaches to instruction across the months of the pandemic, instances where they impacted or failed to impact their students' learning and development, their perceptions of their students and their own development across the year and their visions for the 'new normal' to come in the following year. Data transcripts were analyzed using NVivo through open coding and axial coding following a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Results

Our novice teachers were interviewed after completing the school year 2020-2021, a time of unprecedented change in education and in society. Drawing on the three stages of responding to changes brought about by the pandemic, we address the *disruptions* the novice teachers experienced as they began their careers, their *transition* to effectiveness as educators, and they ways in which they are *re-imagining* education in the future (NPDL, Microsoft, & UNESCO, 2020) (see Figure 1).

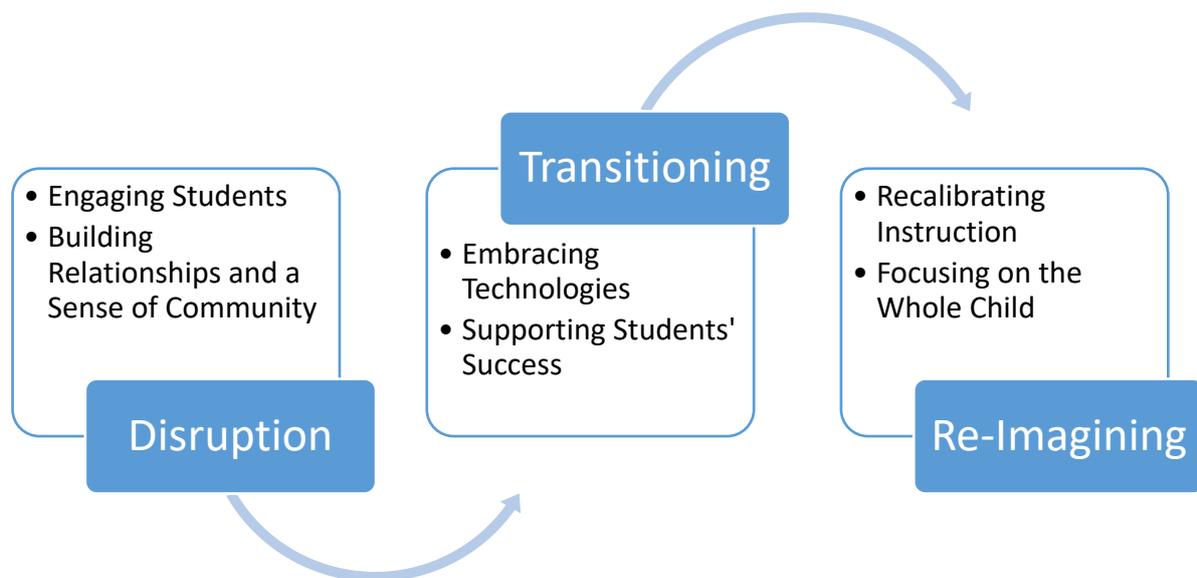


Figure 1. Experiences of Novice Teachers During the Pandemic

In the sections that follow, we begin by describing specific tensions these novice teachers faced during this unprecedented time period. Next, we will share how they made a transition to their new teaching environment and began to effectively support their learners. Finally, we outline our graduates' reflections on how their experiences might inform our university and the field of education as they re-imagine schools and the preparation of future teachers for a profession in the midst of change.

The Challenges of Beginning a Career During the Pandemic and Amidst Social Unrest

Almost all of these new teachers began the school year virtually, and as the pandemic wore on, most of the school districts moved to concurrent instruction where families could decide whether students would attend virtually or in person. For our graduates, who were just beginning their careers, and who had little or no preparation to teach

virtually, this was a daunting experience. As one participant noted, “It was a whirlwind. Nothing like anything I could have expected” (ID 204). A geometry teacher explained his system’s approach,

We were one of the first school districts to open up to students, to in person teaching this year. So we had an email early it was in September or early September, we offered the option to go for students to come in person. And we probably had about 30% of students come back into class and in person, and the remainder stayed online, in particular my classes. I had...one class was like half of them were in person. And ...the other two [classes had] about a third...which eventually kind of dwindled. At the end of the year [in] one class we had two students in person by the end of the year so. So, a lot of it was done virtually, and...in general, we were teaching to both. Both the in- person students and the students at the same time. (ID 209)

Within this context, teachers grappled with challenges of beginning teaching in the midst of unexpected and novel difficulties. A middle-grades teacher (ID 311) explained,

We started out as full virtual for like a month. And then we transitioned into hybrid learning, where I had to teach my in-person students, as well as my virtual digital students like concurrent teaching basically what it was. It was exhausting. It was very hard, very stressful. It was exhausting. I did have, you know, a really good time with the kids that did participate, and the kids that did come back to school. But it was, it was really hard not only for me but I could tell it was really hard for them. (ID 311)

Teachers were caught off guard not only by unexpected teaching formats but also by having to help students process events going on in their lives and in society. From stress brought on by the pandemic to social unrest experienced at the national and local levels, these new teachers found themselves needing to address not just their students’ academic development but also staying “socially conscious and socially aware of what’s going on around them” (ID 206). One African-American educator, who described herself as an abolitionist teacher, reflected on the mental health of equity-oriented teachers during this time saying,

There was no time for us to really be..., we couldn't mourn during the pandemic. We had to always be on. We have to always be teaching. And, so, it was very difficult to deal with that, and to watch other teachers deal with that and to watch other teachers, maybe lose like a parent. ...Watching students whose parents, family members..., and really, just still having to be at work, having your poker face, and continuing to deal with this as a frontline worker yet not getting paid for it. It was rather difficult.... I will also say just doing this equity work was indeed come at expense to a lot of teachers. [The district administrators] say they want equity, this is a new buzz word that has just been sprawled everywhere. Yet, when we get to the nitty gritty... a lot of these teachers are getting blacklisted. A lot of these teachers are getting fired, and I've seen this firsthand. A lot of teachers having to work, walk away from their contract because they had immune compromises, where they couldn't be in the classroom anymore and [the district] gave them no other options. And, so, this is stuff that we've seen throughout the trajectory of this whole 2020-2021 school year.

As our graduates began teaching, the challenges they faced reflected their focus as culturally-responsive educators who were working to meet the needs of the learners in the urban schools where they were employed. The stories they shared with us related the difficulties (a) of engaging students during the pandemic, and (b) of making connections to and building a sense of community during these extraordinary times.

Engaging Students

As mentioned previously, the vast majority of the schools in our metropolitan area began the 2020-2021 school year in the virtual mode. A number of our teachers noted that although they initially had full participation at the beginning of the school year, attendance in the online environment quickly waned. A special education teacher noted, “a lot of students fell to the wayside because they got tired of the virtual life.” (ID 120) The diminishing engagement took various forms, for some they stopped turning on their cameras or participating online, others didn’t submit assignments or homework, and many stopped attending completely. A number of teachers described an increasing virtual fatigue and signs that their students became overwhelmed. An art teacher (ID 211) explained,

I think some of them, ... we were able to kind of keep them online for long enough to ask them what's going on. Some of them just seemed overwhelmed. It would start really small, where they would show up the first day, the next day, but they would show up for like a little bit and then leave early. ...I tried to offset this by doing attendance at the very end. of the lesson, you know, to keep them on verbally and keep them on and get them to respond to me verbally. As soon as they were like, why don't you just take attendance by looking at the participant list. And I told them because I want to make sure you're actually there. So, the thing was, it would start out small, they'd miss one class, or maybe they did pass the class. But then it would start out where they just missed all their classes. Because one day, they just didn't feel like waking up or they woke up too late and they were like, what's the point now? You know, and then before they know it, they when they do log in the next time, the teacher is going over something completely different, right? ...[It's] new? ... they're just completely overwhelmed. And then they stopped logging in. And that's when the phone calls happened. And they're too overwhelmed.

This novice educator explained when they came to school she could get them caught up. But she didn’t have that opportunity with the virtual kids, she continued, “Virtual kids, you know, when they got overwhelmed, they got overwhelmed, and they just stopped coming. And I think I think that was a big thing. It starts out small, but then they get overwhelmed, and they just don't see the point of hitting ‘sign into meeting’.” (ID 211)

The issue of students not turning on cameras for class instruction was a quandary for many of these new teachers. An elementary educator (ID 304) discussed the frustration of being unable to see her students saying,

It was really hard to...get the students to have their cameras on. ...We would say the expectation, but the same time, you know, I can't sit for 10 minutes to tell them to turn their camera on. So there were times where I had to just let go of the fight, and just move on. ... You can hear me, great, if you don't hear me

let me know. So that's just it was just a struggle. and over time I was like, I can't fight for so long, just for a camera on.

Other teachers were empathetic with students' decisions to not turn on cameras, but still chafed at the lack of engagement. An elementary teacher (ID 305) worried if she was doing enough for her students with special learning needs. She shared,

It took just some adjusting to just remember and remind myself, ...I can only teach the students that come, ...I definitely didn't take it as ...virtual like when they're absent or something, but something about the digital kids just being there or not participating was very like jarring. Especially the ones that tended to like 'blah, blah' but then didn't do anything. Because it was like, 'Are you here?' ... like if their camera wasn't on. That was a struggle too, you know. Of course, you want to respect students privacy and of course not every student is in a setting that they want to share to the whole class, but it's also like that I need you to participate in other ways. You know what you can't do is log on and have your camera up and not be in the chat and not speak verbally... Then I don't know if you're there - if you're doing anything.

Teachers also told of how their concerns increased across the course of the year as they observed the growing disengagement of their virtual students. A middle-grades teacher (ID 903) explained,

Virtually I've had kids who will just put me on mute. And their parents like come, (this only reason I know), because their parents would get on, "Miss XX, ZZZ has you on mute and he's using his computer to play the game in the background. I just wanted to let you know." And now he's going to have his camera - on like [typically] he would never turn the cameras on. I had one student who always had the camera on, one out of 100. ...Even he wasn't 100% attentive.

Teachers felt the lack of engagement had a dramatic effect on their students' academic performance. Teacher ID 903 went on, "I had maybe 104 kids. Eighty eight out of those 104 were failing. Because they stopped showing up to zoom classes. They were not turning in any work." By midterm, more and more of the school systems had begun to offer parents the option of sending children to school for face-to-face instruction or having their children remain virtual. This gave rise to the predominance of what was termed *concurrent* instruction across our metropolitan area. Teachers expressed concerns that when they were teaching students' concurrently, the students who were virtual were not getting the same level of instruction. These novice teachers felt they were unable to pick up on cues from the students who were online, and they struggled to motivate to monitor those students as effectively as those who returned to face-to-face instruction. The high-school art teacher (ID 211) explained,

I have noticed a huge difference. And there's, there's just nothing that could replace a teacher standing behind your back making you do work, for a [what happens in a] virtual setting. And I hate that that's true, because I was very, ...it was at the beginning that I was providing students with the same level of instruction. What I wasn't providing the students that were at home with, that I was providing the person with, was my physical proximity, surprisingly, [that] is a great motivator.

Some teachers thought that the key to the engagement of some students was for the students to have an in-person presence in the building, because the classroom was a much less distracting environment for learning. An ESOL teacher (ID 602) reflected on the change she saw in one English language learner when he came back to school:

I remember there was one student in second grade. We would see him playing, playing with his little brother. We seeing him on, you know, sitting on couch watching TV, like just random stuff. And then we had to go back in person. Totally different student, he will partly like while we were virtual, he never participated. He never would raise his hand, never wanted to answer anything. He just we just be like, Okay, I guess this is how he's learning. We get back in person. He's a totally different student. He's participating. He's answering questions. He's engaged. And it was just like, Wow, it was literally just his, his setting. That was all that was where he was is why he couldn't learn.

Similarly, an upper-elementary teacher (ID 704) noted,

Yes, definitely. Because you know, when they were virtually there there's so many distractions. It was, it was really hard for, I know some of my students I would you tell them to unmute so they can answer a question you could hear the background, hear how loud it was even not just, I mean you have the parents who were. That didn't seem to care that their kids were at school and were loud but then you also had kids with siblings, so you're hearing other teachers and it's like you're saying they're hearing all this. How are they concentrating?

For some learners, however, the return to being in-school was less than successful. A high-school chorus teacher (ID 902) shared how one student who returned to face-to-face instruction in March was unable to acclimate to the classroom. She explained,

... He was no longer muted [like he had been when he was virtual], so he would just blurt out constantly. He ...would like roll his eyes and sigh. When I would say, "It's time to stand up", he wouldn't follow directions because he hadn't been doing it all along and there was no consequence. ...The other kids, they might be chatty, but they're going to stand, they're going to sit, they're going to put their... feet hip width apart and all that kind of stuff. And he just, just wouldn't do it. ...He didn't quite understand that it was a class, and he would talk and I would tell him, "We're singing now, please stop talking." And after class, he said, "I know you teachers like to do this but I really hate it when people talk over me." ...He had just spent so much time at home, that he, it is like he had [forgotten] how to behave in a classroom.

As this teacher observed, whether students were virtual or in person, there was a clear need to establish routines for effective learning and to build relationships of respect and trust in order to engage students effectively. In the following section, we learn from our novice teachers about their efforts to make connections and build a sense of community during the pandemic.

Making Connections and Building Community

Across our teacher preparation programs, we emphasize the importance of being culturally responsive and the need to establish a classroom community built on trusting relationships (Bhatnagar, et al, 2016). As our graduates began their 2020-2021 year of teaching, one of the first difficulties they encountered was being able to make connections with their students. A middle-grades science teacher (ID 311) explained,

I feel like it's a lot easier to make those [culturally responsive] connections with your kids because you see them every single day, it's easier to kind of understand their backgrounds and understand and hear about different circumstances that they're in and be able to tune your relationship to respect those things. Right, whereas virtual like, I feel that I know, I knew my in-person students really, really well because I saw them every single day and I got to speak with them. But, there are a lot of kids that I had on digital learning who I don't know, and honestly don't really even know what they look like because they never showed their face. ... I feel like I was kind of robbed of... like you were such a great kid, and I'm really sad that you were not in my classroom this year and I'm really kind of mad that we had this year that we had and that you weren't here to share that with us.

Some teachers felt limited in the extent to which they were able to understand their students' culture and draw on that knowledge in their instructional approaches while at the same time they recognized a need to respect everybody's home and the circumstances under which the students were having to learn. They struggled over not pressuring students to share while also wanting to consider their students' experiences. A middle-grades social studies teacher (ID 801) discussed the tensions she felt:

It's just like not knowing some of these students what they're going through and not being able to have any time [to connect]. You're talking to students that that are learning digitally, not knowing what's going on at home, and not really wanting to ask either, because you don't know where the parents are. And, you know, just not knowing what is going on at their house and being able to build that relationship. And that was a huge struggle this year.

In some cases, teachers were unable to build relationships because their students did not attend virtual classes. This was the case for the teacher in one middle-grade mathematics classroom, where students seemed to simply give up during the year.

I have other students that just, you know, who were pretty much non-existent. But whether or not they attended class sometimes or, or when they were there, they were very disengaged. I think, you know if the kids showed up and tried, I think this year, okay, it went pretty well, but there's probably about a quarter of my kids to, at some point in the year just kind of gave up. They either stopped attending or if they were coming were very unresponsive. (ID 312).

Thinking back on the experience, this teacher focused on the challenge the school faced in connecting to these students. She stressed, “So that I think is where the challenge lies, identifying those kids and maybe why they [gave up] and then pulling them back into school, making it interesting for them and maybe giving them hope again... I think it's a really tough year for a lot of them (ID 312).” A social studies teacher in a similar situation felt the virtual beginning to the school year limited relationship building that could have set the stage for students’ success. She shared,

When we did start, all of our kids did start digitally. So not being able to start in the classroom and in person. And all of that was, I mean, that first week, those first few weeks are just so important. And not being able to do that was hard. And then on top of that, there were several students too, I mean, a lot of students, who just didn't hop on. They may have not had, they didn't have the resources to see online, or get the phone call that they could come to the school to get their device. And so they just missed like a whole term of material, which was hard. And then on top of that, they missed, you know, since March of last year, they missed a lot of that. So, a lot of it was playing catch up with what they didn't get through last year. And that, I mean, it really put us behind. So, feeling rushed was a huge hindrance, but also just not [being able to] build a relationship...that is my thing with them. I just feel like I wasn't [able to build a relationship and] that is like the key to student success in my classroom. I feel like [I was not] able to do that with all of my students as much as I would like to. (ID 801)

Other teachers underscored the role that systemic injustice played in students’ opportunities to learn within the virtual environment. Limited access to technology jeopardized students’ engagement in the classroom community and this was most evident in homes with less financial resources. In some homes, multiple siblings shared one computer and in other cases teachers reported students relied on a cell phone to access class materials. Describing the year as unsuccessful in a lot of respects, middle-grades teacher ID 801 noted that some parents didn’t have transportation to get to school to check out devices, and the school lacked resources or support for a lot of family and children. A teacher from a different school system critiqued her district’s capacity to really understand why equity work was so important saying,

I teach at a Title one school now. And so, realizing that, most of my students were working off their cell phones. They didn't have a viable Chromebook, and if they're given a Chromebook, the Chromebooks were sometimes broken. It created like a big barrier. So, it was like firsthand experience of what the digital divide really can do and how damaging it can be to students’ learning. (ID 313)

Unfortunately, even when schools opened for students to be able to return to in-person learning, the challenges of building a sense of community and strong relationships persisted. The high-school geometry teacher (ID 209) discussed the transition as students began to return to campus.

But particularly difficult was when we transitioned from 100% remote to in person. If students hadn't... they had been remote for the end of the prior year. And for, you know, the first month or two months, I don't know, six weeks. So they didn't - hadn't met each other and interacted and haven't had to be in a

classroom, right? And understand, you know, we didn't get to build the same classroom norms. Sure. So, which was another thing, of course, taken from [our teacher preparation institution] is that stuff's important. And that's something we didn't get to do... Eventually we got there but we kind of had to get there the hard way. Especially it's [hard when] attendance was tough, especially second semester. ... I was getting probably half of the students who were supposed to be in...It was more of that classroom management I guess but it impacted learning...I knew I wasn't getting through to even those who were there.

Many of stories our graduates told described the limitations they faced in both their virtual and in-person classroom environments. The majority felt restricted in their attempts to create deep, trusting relationships online and they worried about how inequitable access to technology restricted their students' opportunities to learn. In the next section, we illustrate how novice teachers transitioned to effectiveness in this difficult environment and the factors which they felt helped them to be effective at impacting their students' learning and development.

What Helped Novice Teachers Transition to Effective Instruction?

Despite the challenges they faced, the graduates from our urban-centered teacher education programs were able to relate stories of success. As they reflected on these experiences, we were particularly interested in learning what our participants felt had helped them to become effective. These novice teachers identified two primary factors that led to their success, (a) embracing digital environments and (b) providing supports for students' success.

Embracing Digital Environments

While many of our graduates commented they had learned to teach with technology as part of their program, none came out of our programs having been prepared to teach in a fully online modality. One of the factors which eventually led to their being able to be successful, was an ability to explore, reflect on and embrace the digital environment. A high-school special education teacher (ID 203) explained his growth saying,

I learned so much about technology, everything on the computer. ...So, you have a virtual folder. And this, man, it was so much easier to organize a virtual folder. I have all my notes, laid out. I can post it. They have access to it, you know, they can use it for study routines. So, I think I grew as an educator and learned how to be more organized.

For many of the teachers, their technological growth was a result of self-study and online resources. They spent extensive amounts of time in preparation for teaching and in trying to build a more extensive foundation in platforms and applications they could use virtually. An elementary-school teacher (ID 212) thought back to her efforts to prepare to be in the classroom saying,

This summer, coming into the past year, I did a lot of trainings, I spent hours just looking for things, trying to figure out ways to help my teaching and my students online, because I knew that coming back into the 2021 school year, we would be coming into, we would be completely virtual, and then switching to hybrid. So, I really spent a lot of time in learning, [in] development and just playing around with my computer and looking for resources that will just help me and my students.

As teachers began experimenting with new tools, becoming comfortable with a trial and error approach helped them identify effective practices that worked. Feeling supported for experimenting with new ideas gave new teachers confidence in their attempts. As the elementary teacher above began to utilize the new approaches in the classroom she was grateful for the reactions she received from her administration and her students. She explained, “[Trying new technologies] was, it was all about trying to get creative, and figure it out. And I’m very, very thankful for my principal and my students, because when I wanted to try something new to try and improve it, they’re like, okay, whatever you want to do, if you feel like it’s going to work, do it.” For some, the new approaches proved to be useful not only for the virtual environment for something they wanted to use when they returned to the classroom as well. A high-school English teacher discovered the benefits of a digital notebook for his classes. He shared,

[I’ve] got to keep [using the digital notebook] even if we’re in person, because I really did like the student engagement that I got back and how much they tried and really wanted to understand the material...It was going hand in hand with the lessons that we had to teach them. So that see, and that that was really, that was really nice.

Some teachers used technology such as online quizzes or games to gather immediate feedback on what their students were understanding or needing. Others teachers emphasized how, over time, they learned to explicitly request their students’ feedback to understand which approaches seem to be most helpful. Teachers were aware they had to be sensitive to students’ needs in the online environment and be ready to adjust or adapt as necessary. Thinking about the high school students in his history class, one educator (ID 206) shared,

I think being online, ... we started noticing a lot of kids, decreased with student engagement because of being bored and after a while they really force you, not to just go with the lesson, like from last year. You have to make sure that you are creating or adjusting different lessons, even though you may have by the framework of the lesson, you still have to make sure that you are thinking about this student in front of you and thinking about how can I make this...for the students that connect with the lesson.

As teachers gathered a repertoire of teaching tools, and increasing amounts of feedback from their trial and error attempts, they were able to make informed decisions on how to best structure lessons that engaged but did not overwhelm students. For some, this meant establishing predictable routines with tools that were comfortable and familiar for both the teacher and student. The high-school English teacher (ID 207) explained his approach,

It started with the warm up, and you know, kind of tried to build interest and or build engagement and Nearpod gave us a really good tool for that and, and that I could assess in real time. Before moving on, right? So I would put simple questions in the Nearpod. And because the students were not forced to, you know, kind of process too much. It was just a quick hit, you know to be true false or you know just one or two questions, just to ensure their understanding before we could move on.

At times, to be effective at embracing the digital environment meant our novice teachers also had to be advocates for their students. This meant being proactive in trouble shooting how to find and make tools accessible to their learners who did not have access to the technology they needed to learn. A high-school teacher of a graphic design class (ID 211) explained his/her efforts. Although his class was entirely digital, students at home could not download the software program because they were not allowed to download anything onto their school device. The school system's solution was to insist student come to campus so an administrator could type in the password but the teacher argued against that solution because the students would be immunocompromised and they should be allowed to be fully virtual. As an alternative, the graphic-design teacher found programs online that he and his students could use. He explained,

...one of them I found was, was great because it was, it was created as a sort of design collaborative program. So if the students create an account with it, and then they share that account with me, I can actually go into the program while they're in it, and move stuff around and physically shows, you know, like how, maybe if a student was in person, and I wouldn't be drawing over their drawing to show them where they made their mistakes. In this case, it was a virtual setting where I can collaborate virtually. So this, this helps a lot of my students understand very technical things, things where if I just sat there, and I'm like, Okay, so now you want to double click on the mouse, then rotated 45 degrees, verbally say no to them. It's very confusing. And you know, versus be literally going into the program with all of them watching, all their tiny little mouse's move around and do the exact same thing turning into the correct maneuvers. I was like, "Okay, there we go. Yes! you guys."

In summary, transitioning to successful instruction in the pandemic involved these teachers embracing the digital environment. At times this meant seeing their work through the perspective of the students' experiences and advocating for them when necessary. This student-centered lens was also evident in the second factor which helped our novice teachers transition to effectiveness: providing supports for student success.

Providing Supports for Student Success

Analysis of our data revealed our participants' effectiveness during the pandemic was also related to their ability to build a network of support to bolster students' success. One way this was evident was in the increased communication with parents and forming a partnership with them in the teaching of content. An elementary teacher (ID 212) explained,

So, any of the sites that I use, parents would just be able to log into the students' account, and they'll be able to see the grade that their child made. If they turned it in, if it was late, they were able to see due date, all of that. So, they were even able to see on certain, certain ones, how long it took their child to complete the work, and any errors or where the child struggle.

Teachers became adapt at a range of communication strategies and used these daily to share information about everything that was happening in the classroom or in the school. Communication became particularly important as the year progressed, students experienced virtual fatigue, and teachers became concerned over the extent to which students' learning might not match up to typical expectations for a year's growth in their school system. One XXX teacher noted that by January, her students had shown approximately a month's development since the beginning of the year although by the end of the year they had achieved a total of 7 months growth (ID XXX). As concerns mounted, an elementary math teacher (ID 304) explained her school's attempt to draw in parental support in order to help students build skills they were missing,

So, we called the parents a lot more, because we know this the lack of foundational skills, and we wanted to communicate with the parents and let them know, like, these are fifth-grade standards but these are the foundational skills that students need to work on at home such as multiplication math facts, adding and subtracting numbers.

In some schools, supporting students' success meant networking not only with parents, but also with other school professionals. As one high-school art teacher (ID 211) clarified,

We [the team of teachers] developed a very good sort of system. ... It was where we just email each other...I'll just put them all in a big group message, well, then, "Hey, what's up with this kid?" ... So we will consolidate information, that's figured out. Okay... this is kind of like a red flag. We need to figure something out together.

In one situation, when the team of teachers recognized the student had stopped engaging, the school social worker was also brought on board to help connect with the parents. She remembered,

So I have this one student who, for I think two months, was a no show, he didn't show up to any of his virtual classes, when we looked up his analytics, you don't see his log in's. He barely logged in, he logged in maybe once or twice, but we've never actually seen him in any of our courses. We got extremely concerned, we ended up getting the social worker, the school social worker involved, and she ended up paying the student a visit at home. According to the social worker, there wasn't any particular reason preventing him from logging into school, to his virtual classes. So, we didn't know exactly why, or why he wasn't logging into his classes he just wasn't. (ID 211)

Eventually, the outreach seemed to have made a difference and it was the art teacher's decision to focus on understanding and supporting the student that brought about a successful outcome.

And then about halfway through the semester, all of a sudden, the student just walks into my class. And I first was surprised because I don't know who this person is. But then, you know, I've put two and two together, is supposed to be the student that has never logged in online, and [he's] coming in person. Now, part of me wanted to yell at him. If you're in school for two months [and you don't come to class.] It's really crazy. But ... I just realized, I took some deep breaths. And I just thought, "It must be very stressful to come to school this late in the semester." And he said, "Yes."

This teacher's willingness to meet the student where he was made a huge difference. Gradually, he was able to get back on track.

And little by little, I started to get to know the student a little bit better. He just at home, he just can't get himself to walk into class. It's just he had a horrible..., you know, it's not exactly an environment that encourages him to log into class every day. So, coming to class every day was much better for him. So we fairly slowly somehow managed to catch up. And then when I when I noticed that he was working really fast. And some of my projects, I even gave him a little extra time to work on stuff for his other classes because I knew that he needed to do other stuff, too, because it's probably not just my class that he was super behind on. And so together, me and his other teachers, we managed to get him to pass almost every single one of his classes. And it was great. And he learned that he needs to come to school. He's just one of those students that needs to be physically in school to get engaged better. You know, he was a smart kid, he - there was nothing, there's, there's no sort of [learning problem] he was very, sort of typical. And it was just a matter of getting to school for him. That was it. (ID 211)

In addition to networking with parents and other school professionals to understand the students and meet their academic needs, teachers also supported students by helping them to process what was going on in their world. With the tensions of Covid-19, isolation from their peers, and stress of social unrest, students were faced with extraordinary stress. Teachers' accounts of their experiences described their attempts to help students' process and understand what was happening in their world. A middle-grades language arts teacher (ID 205) explained,

Unfortunately, there were a lot of different types of events that was taking place throughout the whole course of this year, so we use all of those events to actually use as a lesson... which had kids actually engaged so they were learning about the stuff that was going on in their community. They learned about what's going on in the world. And, you know, bringing it to the classroom so that they know that they are important.

Similarly, a high-school history teacher (ID 206) related a specific time he had to break from his regularly scheduled lesson, to provide discussion time.

We have to make sure that we are really socially conscious and socially aware of what's going on around them. So I have a lesson plan. I'm pretty sure I was about to teach something like the Monroe Doctrine. And it was around the time was the Capitol Hill and, boy, I had to I had to really think about... will I

proceed with this lesson that I have already planned? or will I ask my students, how do they feel about what happened? You know, was it right? Was it wrong? You know present a lesson that I didn't even really plan, it was more, "Let's talk about the current event. Let's talk. Let's talk about what's going on in society." Because this is a social studies class, so we can kind of, you know, dive in and digest this whole incident and see how can we improve as, you know, citizens of America, you know. So that was pretty cool, being that it was something that caught us off guard, but we as educators, we had to have that conversation.

In summary, teachers transitioned to effectiveness during the pandemic by finding ways to support their students' success. Increasing home/school communication and drawing on support from counselors, social workers, and other teachers helped to provide scaffolding for students who disengaged and experienced virtual fatigue. Teachers who centered their focus on meeting the students where they were and on providing avenues for the students to process what was going on around them, reported a sense of accomplishment in scaffolding their students' overall development.

Looking Behind and Ahead: Re-imagining Education in the New Normal

Reflecting on their experiences and thinking about the future, our participants shared their personal insights regarding how education should be re-imagined. Some worried about the gaps that would persist because of the pandemic, while others expressed hope that things wouldn't necessarily return to the past, rather they would be able to draw on the skills gained, the sense of autonomy some experienced to make learning meaningful, and the holistic lens they used to create a new normal. Specifically, two themes emerged in their visions, (a) the need to recalibrate instruction, and (b) the need to focus on not only academics but on the whole child.

Recalibrating Instruction

In thinking about the future, participants expressed a need to ensure instruction is calibrated on individual learners' performance rather than as a one-size fits all approach addressing grade-level standards. The teachers recognized the uneven progress made during the pandemic and the need to adapt accordingly. An elementary teacher (ID 212) explained,

The only thing that's going to come back to normal is having students in the classroom and not having to do hybrid teaching. But as far as everything else, it's not going to be normal, because we have got learning gaps to fill. We have to remediate with students who have missed a lot of things coming into fourth grade or coming into a new grade in general. So, the it's just going to be a lot going on the upcoming year.

A middle-grades social-studies teacher (ID 801) envisioned a student-centered approach where the focus and pace of instruction is guided by student performance and student feedback. She drew on what she learned to do during the pandemic, explaining,

Every time that they had questions about content that they didn't understand, being able to get on their level and reteach, and rethink, and reiterate how I went to go about it in a way that just makes so much more sense to them, instead of just rushing through the content... I mean, we got behind with COVID. We got behind on material. So, this year, it was super hard to go through it super-fast. And, so, there were several times that I kind of rushed through without really making sure that they comprehended the information. And when they realized that they could kind of like, talk to me about it. And tell me, please go back, please slow down, you know, that that was really good for the both of us, the students and myself.

One middle-grades teacher of science (ID 311) mulled over the need to address academic gaps while also conforming to her school system expectations saying,

So I think that there will be a lot of changes and ...maybe some setbacks. Like there's going to be a lot of kids who come in with, like, a lot of gaps...so having to adapt for that will be a change. But then it'll be interesting to see, especially in my district like what they expect in terms of testing, or in terms of the standards we teach... and whether they take into account the gaps that these kids are going to have when they come back and when they move on.

Like this middle-high grades educator, a number of the teachers realized that to be able to be guided by students' need, as they had during the pandemic, would necessitate a relaxing of some of the strict pacing and regimentation typically found in their school systems curriculum and testing cycle. They had experienced some relaxing of those structures during the pandemic and found advantages in the freedom they gained as teachers. A high-school history teacher (ID 313) commented on how she was able to be more culturally responsive as a result of the loosening of the standardized teaching practices,

I will say that we, because we didn't have the [end of the year assessments], we didn't have the [school system] tests... I still taught the [state] standard, but I was able to be a little bit more relaxed in the sense of being able to teach what I wanted to teach, and that made sense. Sure. And, so, it was easier to still interweave that culturally responsive pedagogy into the classroom. And, so, I think it was easier this year. Typically, we have, like [name] county is very notorious for every teacher having to have the same quiz, every teacher has to have the same lesson plan, every teacher has to have the same test, and this year it wasn't like that.

In addition to envisioning an academic curriculum that was more student-centered, the teachers also recognized a need to support the whole child not just their academic development. In the next section we will examine that emphasis.

Focusing on the Whole Child

Teachers also re-imagined education by recommending and advocating education assume an extended focus

beyond the traditional academic content. They recognized the vital role the school would need to play in helping students to re-socialize with peers and re-orient themselves to schools and their place in the world. One high-school teacher (ID 206) described what he called, “a whole child approach with social emotional learning, wrapped down with academics, I think it goes hand in hand when you think about impacting learning.” His school had already begun to recognize the needs students would be bringing with them beyond the content of the classroom subjects. He related plans that were already underway at his school system to rethink the focus of the school day. He explained,

A lot of students won't be able to cope or adapt to coming back to the classroom -so how are we going to adjust? A few different things. I do know that we're trying something new. We have kind of like shortened our class periods because of the pandemic. We are like on the 90-minute period system but we decreased them down to seventy minutes. And included, like a second period where there's like a “Power Hour”. We're helping students with social emotional learning. We're helping them with, you know, resumes, college applications. So, I think that that's going to help.

Many of the teachers reflected on the need to help scaffold students' interactions and behaviors when they return to school, after having been out of the routine for almost a year and a half. As a high-school teacher (ID 207) said, “I guess I would focus on community building and communication building and getting students to express themselves.” An elementary teacher (ID 304) discussed having opportunities for students to express their emotions and to re-learn how to socialize with others. She felt the need to help them unpack their reactions and consider ways to respond to situations before they happen. She explained,

I don't want to be there to always tell them like this is how you should handle it. It's to build a rapport with the students, to have them think about, what will they do when this situation happens? or like, what do you do when you feel this way and how should you react? Are you going to just scream at a person? No, we're not going to do that. And also having them to be accepting of themselves.

The teachers expressed empathy toward their students, and recognized that the classroom needed to be a risk-free place where students felt supported, safe, and comfortable. Thinking about her role in making students feel at ease, the high school art teacher (ID 211) explained,

I'm very encouraging. And I try to make sure I developed a good rapport with my students. And I make sure that they're, they're comfortable in the classroom, and that they're comfortable speaking with me, and I tried to make it so that there's, there's not too much stress, I'm not freaking them out. Because, you know, they're, they can't do something perfectly. So that's what I try to do.

In summary, teachers recognized the need for education in the new normal to ensure that educators teach to where students are. They wanted to create safe spaces for students to share and to reduce their students' fear of failure. These novice teachers were sensitive to the need for education to provide opportunities for students to develop both socially and emotionally, as well as academically.

Discussion

In August 2020, Antonio Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, warned how the disruptions caused by Covid19 could exacerbate the inequalities that exist in educational systems, because the very children who need school more than others, would be unable to go to school and would have limited supports for their learning outside of the classroom (UNESCO, 2020). The experiences of our novice teachers mirrored this concern as they faced challenges brought on by this disruption. Their stories of students' virtual fatigue, intermittent attendance, reduced interaction and motivation, and lack of access due to educational inequalities mirror reports of the how the pandemic disrupted education and students' learning across the United States and internationally (An, et al., 2021; Erdogan & Yazici, 2022; Sahlberg, 2020). Like educators across the globe, these novice teachers also struggled to be respectful of students' home life, culture, and the trauma students might be experiencing and their own desire to engage with their students online, to observe learners' reactions to lessons, and to support students and their families (Teng & Wu, 2021).

The pandemic and social issues during this time period also disrupted our participants' ability to establish the classroom atmosphere they felt would be most effective for learning. This challenge underscored the role teacher preparation played in shaping our graduates' experiences. Our graduates, most of whom were teaching in high-needs urban schools with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, spoke of their desire to build trusting relationships and to create a sense of community in their classrooms. Their attention to this emphasis reflects an attempt to apply the culturally responsive and social justice orientation guiding our program (Bhatnagar, et al., 2016). Research evidence supports the importance of teacher education focusing on meeting the needs of diverse learners, with such programs leading to better retention of educators in high-poverty urban schools (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). Unfortunately, the tension between this emphasis and their inability to feel effective in creating a community virtually, was also shaped to some extent by the fact that they had not, for the most part, been prepared to teach in an online format. Our participants expressed that although they had learned to use technology in their classrooms, the vast majority were ill-prepared for designing and implementing online instruction. International research on factors influencing technology adoption during the pandemic indicates that prior experience with learning management systems and virtual technology supports correlates with overall online teaching efficacy and with higher online teaching self-efficacy in areas of classroom management and student engagement (Dindar, et al., 2021; Dolighan & Owen, 2021).

The challenges faced by educators during the pandemic have led to recommendations for preparation programs and institutions to ensure teachers are prepared to teach using difference modalities and understand best practices for engaging students remotely (An, 2021; Le, et al., 2022). Our teachers' experiences during this time period of not only Covid19 but also of increased awareness of societal inequities and social unrest demands more focused attention on not simply online teaching strategies but specifically on how to be a culturally responsive and abolitionist teacher in a virtual environment. In past research focusing on online instruction, teachers who demonstrated effort to use culturally responsive instruction, showed an ethic of caring, effective online communication, and intentional use of instructional and curricular modifications to make education meaningful for students (Bhatnagar & Many, 2022; Lawrence, 2020) but researchers also underscored that significant effort

was needed from teachers to overcome inequitable resources across school districts (Bhatnagar & Many). Preparation in how to be advocates for social justice, regardless of the modality of instruction, is imperative for teachers to meet the types of challenges that teachers can encounter when entering the classroom.

One key to these novice educators' ability to transition to effectiveness was an open and proactive stance toward embracing digital technology and support from their administration and students to experiment with those new approaches to instruction. Although formal professional development played a role for some of these new teachers, more often it was the teachers' personal exploration and trial and error use of applications that led to their identification of new tools for engaging their learners. Their commitment to seeking out resources, critically reflecting on their own effectiveness and willingness to seek input from their students aided their development. Their reliance on self-directed, personalized learning underscores the importance (a) of providing on-demand access to virtual technology support and (b) of the autonomy of teachers to choose the induction support they need related on online teaching (Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Hall & Trespalacios, 2019). Teachers also found themselves most effective when they were networking with others to support students' success. Working collaboratively with teams of teachers, with other school personnel, and with parents was vital to their ability to be effective during the pandemic. Similar to the early pandemic experiences of novice teachers in Mecham, et al.'s study (2021) who experienced a profound improvement in their skills of communicating with families, our participants found themselves spending significantly more time on parental interaction in order to scaffold their students' learning. Similarly, teachers found that drawing on networks of educators to understand students' experiences and needs provided a way to break out of the overwhelming isolation, find possible solutions, and advocate for their students.

As these new teachers reflected on their initial experiences as educators, they turned their eyes to the future recognizing a need to reimagine education in a way that empowers educators to stay more closely attuned to the needs of individual learners. Teachers who experienced more autonomy during the pandemic related effective instructional conversations that helped students process real world events and engage in learning. Traditionally, high needs urban schools in the United States are structured on a lock step curriculum, with common instructional plans and assessments utilized across schools (Sleeter, 2012). Such approaches leave little room for students be self-directed in their learning, and therefore least likely to be equipped with skills to be effective at learning outside of the school environment. School personnel and students who are self-directed are better able to respond effectively in both normal and crisis situations (Sahlberg, 2021). In addition, teachers envisioned an expanded view of schools as a place for knowledge acquisition to encompass the social, cultural, health, and economic aspects of students' lives (Sahlberg). Situating the focus of schools on the *wholeness* of children and families breaks down traditional walls of the school house and recognizes the interconnectedness of education in the fabric of society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

*We will not go back to normal.
Normal never was. Our pre-corona
existence was not normal other than*

*we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion,
depletion, extraction...*

We should not long to return, my friends.

*We are being given the opportunity
to stitch a new garment.*

One that fits all of humanity and nature.

.... Sonya Renee Taylor (Poet, Author, Educator and Social Justice Advocate)

Sonya Renee Taylor penned and posted the poem above to Twitter in April 2020, providing a signpost for us, a time to turn a new page in society. In 2020, the majority of the participants in our study were looking ahead to being in their own classroom, little knowing just how challenging the initial year of their career as educators would be. The pandemic proceeded to expose the inequities that had previously existed in education but that many had ignored (Hampsten, 2021). Across the following year, they struggled with engaging students and building a sense of community; but, as they began to embrace the virtual environment and new technologies, they found ways to support student success. Their experiences led them to yearn for a future that is not a return to schools of yesteryear, or to the old *normal* but rather a new view of education. Their vision calls for recommendations that are systemic changes to how we structure the content and process of education for all students.

Fullen (2020) reflected at the onset of the pandemic that the global chaos we were experiencing would lead to a time of transition that would lead to the formation of a new system in education, one where education is an essential feature of both individual and social development. The beginning teachers in our study imagined a culturally responsive curriculum provided by a network of teachers and school personnel who partner with parents to advocate for the development and well-being of children. Several new initiatives hold promise for redesigning educational systems along this trajectory. Working globally, the “New Pedagogies for Deep Learning” partnership (Fullen, 2020; NPD 2020) focuses on (a) global competencies such as citizenship, character, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking, (b) on learning design aspects such as learning environments, leveraging digital technologies, partnerships, and pedagogical practices, and (c) system level components of school culture, regional or district levels, and state policies.

In the United States, Learning 2025, a National Commission on Student-Centered, Equity-Focused Education, was convened by the School Superintendents Association (AASA) and calls for a holistic redesign of the public school system by 2025. Their vision focuses on systemic redesign with (a) an emphasis on relationship-based culture that is whole learner focused, no learner marginalized, and future driven, (b) a social-emotional growth model, and (c) resources to ensure access of all children to learning tools (e.g. broadband as a public utility), multi-tiered system of community supports, high quality early learning for all children, and diverse educators who represent the communities that they serve. The comprehensive nature of these efforts to reimagine education are in direct accordance with the enormity of the task at hand if we are to build equitable public-school systems in the post-pandemic period that are part of the fabric of the new garment, the one that in Sonya Renee Taylor’s words “fits all of humanity and nature”.

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