



3-2021

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Recommended Citation

Bobley, L. & Best, R. (2021, March). Teacher Preparation during COVID-19: A Shift from Face-to- Face to Remote Field Experiences and Student Teaching. *INTED2021, 15th Annual International Technology, Education and Development Conference*. IATED Academy, Spain.

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TEACHER PREPARATION DURING COVID-19: A SHIFT FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO REMOTE FIELD EXPERIENCES AND STUDENT TEACHING

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Abstract

The onset of COVID-19 brought education to a halt: schools closed and teaching and learning as we know it moved from face-to-face to remote. With no direct access to mentor teachers or to children, teacher education programs were forced to ensure candidates had authentic learning experiences. On a global scale, schools of education were required to rethink teacher preparation and explore innovative approaches. Teacher educators at the school and university level (clinical faculty and mentor teachers) had to interact with student teachers differently. One of the major problems that surfaced was that the field and practice-based courses were not initially designed to be facilitated in an online or remote format. Furthermore, faculty and teacher candidates typically engaged in the work of teaching and learning within school buildings where they had access to children. These problems prompted the academic leadership and faculty in one graduate school of education in the Northeastern United States to engage in deep inquiry and chronicle their lived experiences to produce a qualitative ethnographic self-study. The major questions driving their work were: (1) *How to find remote placements for candidates to engage in clinically rich experiences in special education settings for Practicum or student teaching?* (2) *How to develop alternate assignments for candidates to meet course and state certification requirements?* (3) *How to prepare clinical faculty to facilitate remote learning experiences?* Data collection and quality assurance initiatives included a critical review of the following: quantitative course evaluation data, qualitative student feedback and reflections, clinical faculty observations, outcomes assessment, and reflexive practice data. An analysis of findings revealed the following themes: existing dissonance between methods and field-based curriculum, competing philosophies among stakeholders about what constitutes authentic teaching experiences, and the impact of faculty collaboration and learning communities. Field supervisors indicated that for candidates to be successful they need more face-to-face time and direct interactions to engage in coaching conversations. Additionally, supervisors believed that academic leadership needed to revisit sequencing and scaffolding of opportunities for teaching practice throughout the education preparation program. Doing so would allow for additional touch points to monitor progress as candidates develop competencies and translate theory introduced in foundational courses to the field. This study is significant as its ethnographic nature allows faculty and academic leadership to engage in program evaluation and collaborate closer with school-based practitioners to reframe teacher preparation in the era of COVID. Implications exist for ongoing collaboration and teacher educator professional development in a new format. The ensuing results of additional research can inform curriculum redesign and teaching practice on a wider scale.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, student teaching, remote teaching and learning, professional development, teacher-as-designer, organizational resiliency, teacher education, COVID education.

1 INTRODUCTION

At its peak, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unprecedented situation with nearly 1.5 billion children in 164 countries affected by closed and partially closed schools [22]. When the pandemic reached its all-time high in the United States, most states either mandated or recommended that schools remain closed through the end of 2020. Approximately 50 million students in 131,000 public and private Pre-kindergarten to Grade 12 were out of school [9], [24]. Several state Education Departments allowed teacher education programs to submit proposals on how candidates would meet requirements for certification through alternative means [18].

The ability to practice new understandings and strategies and to reflect on and refine these ideas and skills is a core component for the development of effective practice for novice teachers [3] [6] [8] [11] [17]. Anecdotal evidence from teacher candidates and survey results related to clinical practice reveal that novice teachers believe that student teaching is a critical element that leads to success in the

classroom [14]. Consequently, student teaching is considered an essential part of a teacher's program of study. Within the United States new teachers need to secure state credentials or certifications as evidenced by their passing specified tests prior to entering the classroom. One widely used test directly assesses candidates' teaching performance as they are evaluated on their ability to plan, instruct and assess children in a classroom. In March 2020, when brick-and-mortar P-12 schools closed, teacher candidates lost access to children and to schools. The ensuing impact of schools closing presented fewer opportunities for candidates to engage in typical field-based experiences. As the teacher education programs were shifting courses to accommodate candidates who were homebound, academic leadership and faculty at one graduate school of education in the northeastern USA examined the viability of the field and practice-based teacher education course design for online or remote delivery. The overarching goal was to create authentic learning experiences in line with new state COVID-19 guidelines for universities to facilitate teacher preparation programs.

Learning to teach involves observing effective teaching, so in thinking about how the local school of education went about redesigning the curriculum to address the shift from face to face to remote student teaching, the faculty designers [11] located teacher training videos for candidates to review and analyze. The students were asked to use those videos to identify and analyze instances of teachers using high leverage practices. Additionally, to help student teachers enhance their learning, the clinical faculty had to facilitate learning experiences to help the student teachers make connections and thoroughly explore the relationship between theory and practice [6], [14], [25], [17]. For example, one activity that allowed faculty and teacher candidates to simulate teaching in the classroom was engaging in mini lessons. This microteaching required the candidate to focus on one or two instructional strategies while using technology (Google Suite or Zoom Conferencing) to video record themselves teaching in a remote setting to their peers who role played as children in the respective age groups.

The student teachers also practiced teaching whole lessons while incorporating relevant educational technological tools (audio books, EdPuzzle, Padlet, Nearpod, PearDeck, Flipgrid, Quizlet, Jam board) again recording themselves, with peers as the audience. These simulated recorded teaching experiences in front of an audience gave student teachers an opportunity to review, analyze and self-reflect on their own practice. Further, not only could they receive feedback from their supervisors, but they also received feedback from colleagues in their class.

2 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study assumed an ethnographic self-study/action research approach [21]. The researchers sought to examine what was happening in the field following schools closing. In line with the intent of the ethnographic research, as described by Creswell [4] [5], the goal was "to obtain a holistic picture of the subject of study with emphasis on portraying the everyday experiences of individuals by observing them interviewing them, and the relevant others" (p. 200) [4].

In this context, the subject of study was the fieldwork component of teacher preparation programs shifting from face-to-face learning environments to online or remote experiences. Thus, the researchers examined the everyday experiences through the lens of the clinical faculty or university supervisors, the student teachers, the children, and the administrators with whom they were interacting.

Three questions guided the research study:

- 1 How can we find remote placements for candidates to engage in clinically rich experiences in special education settings for Practicum or student teaching?
- 2 How can we develop alternate assignments for candidates to meet course and state certification requirements?
- 3 How can we prepare clinical faculty to facilitate remote learning experiences?

Data was gathered from multiple sources including archival documents (midpoint and end of semester course evaluations, practicum observations, and student teacher reflections) and field notes. In line with ongoing program evaluation procedures, a purposive sample [11] of approximately 45 clinical faculty were asked to complete an anonymous online questionnaire via Qualtrics. Data analysis was concurrent with data collection and in line with qualitative research design. The research used an inductive approach. Cross analysis of the multiple sources allowed for triangulation and produced patterns and themes that informed the study's findings.

3 RESULTS

The findings from the current ethnographic self-study complement the reporting made by others who have chronicled experiences in teacher education since schools closing in March 2020 [1], [2], [7], [8], [9] [10], [11], [12], [13], [15], [16], [18], [23]. An analysis of findings revealed the following themes: existing dissonance between methods and field-based curriculum, competing philosophies among stakeholders about what constitutes authentic teaching experiences, and the positive impact of faculty collaboration and learning communities.

Archival data were examined, and document analyses conducted [20] during the Spring 2020, Summer 2020 and Fall 2020 semesters. At the local level, the authors reviewed and analyzed midpoint and end of semester course evaluations, candidate written reflections (submitted via the [CANVAS](#) learning management system), along with clinical faculty survey data. The clinical faculty survey respondents (n=39) included full time faculty (23%), adjunct faculty assigned to teach one course in addition to a field based or clinical course (18%) and field supervisors or clinical faculty who mentored student teachers and facilitated learning for clinical courses (59%) only.

Sixty-eight percent of those clinical educators who responded worked for over two years at the institution. This means that they worked as a field supervisor pre-COVID and during COVID, giving them a solid basis from which to compare the pre-COVID courses with the work candidates were currently required to complete. There was an 87% response rate to the survey, which would be considered significant.

The clinical faculty were frank in sharing observations about the curriculum as well as in making comparisons about some of the challenges and opportunities resulting after schools closed. When asked, "For which activities/assignments/assessments have your candidates experienced the most struggle and why, one respondent shared the following:

Based on the level of support needed by candidates thus far, the HLP Implementation assignment and the Three Lesson Learning Segment have been the most challenging for candidates. With regard to the HLP Implementation video assignment, students faced technical challenges the first time around and before they were familiar with [YuJa](#) (which is a great asset!). The posting deadlines for the various parts of the assignments in the various locations was also a challenge in the beginning but has improved somewhat. This assignment is good preparation for the full Lesson Simulations. Candidates needed to review and discuss the Three Lesson Learning Segment at least two three weeks prior to its due date at a topic specific meeting, due to the nature and extent of the assignment. Some were unfamiliar with the edTPA style and others recognized it, but still benefited from a review of the Framework and its components in relation to the Observation Process. Lesson Segments are being submitted this week, so I will have an opportunity to discuss them with candidates in preparation for their formal observations and use that Info going forward. The recently posted Overview videos are a good support for candidates as an introduction and a reference for assignments. They can be used as a component of a topic specific meeting led by the Field Supervisor to be followed by an opportunity for a Q&A session, so that candidates are able to get clarification as needed. Individual support of candidates will still need to be ongoing.

A sampling of quotes in response to the open-ended questions that prompted faculty to share their observations and make suggestions for continuous improvement are as follows:

Q13: How much time have you spent providing mentoring and supporting candidates during Fall 2020? If you served previously as a clinical faculty prior to Spring 2020, how did the time commitment compare?

The support needed for candidates enrolled in clinical experiences beginning in Spring 2020 and continuing through the summer and Fall, is considerably greater than it was prior. Before changes to the syllabus/course requirements were implemented due to the conditions caused by the pandemic, assignments followed similar formats. So, as students worked through the modules on assignments such as the Lesson Observation Logs, outcomes improved with practice and the response to feedback offered over time. The new assignments are varied in nature and scope and students can no longer move from one Module to another without planning ahead.

Q14: What additional supports or resources would you recommend to ensure candidates reach the level of mastery required to plan and teach independently at a developing or effective level (Danielson Domains 1 and 3)?

During these COVID 19 days, student teachers and their instructors need more models of excellence. We need to buy into a professional development program that gives access to varied simulated teaching experiences” (Clinical Faculty A, Fall 2020)

Since they are not in schools, many of my students have not really seen how the curriculum of instruction develops over the course of time. Some do not yet understand how a lesson should be constructed. They are not able to see the true professional responsibilities that are required in classrooms. This is the problem of Covid 19” (Clinical Faculty B, Fall 2020).

Some students seem to have had little or no prior exposure to, or experience in, using the High Leverage Practices (HLP) for Special Education and/or need additional experience with using the Danielson Framework in an analytical and reflective manner. Perhaps these resources can be integrated earlier in the program, explored and applied in depth, and carried through candidate’s coursework, so that by the time they are enrolled in clinical experiences, they may use the practices more effectively. (Clinical Faculty C, Fall 2020)

In terms of professional development opportunities, one positive change that program chairpersons made was to institute a weekly Professional Learning Community (PLC) for clinical faculty. This dialogic approach to professional development regularly provided rich anecdotal data to the program and simultaneously helped clinical faculty share experiences in the field. In these meetings, the supervisors came to greater understandings of what was expected and how to better negotiate course expectations when schools were closed and during the intermittent reopenings for in person classes. They also relayed teacher candidates’ feelings about the rigor of the assignments. One faculty member stated, “The weekly meetings are very helpful, and when I can get to them, I enjoy them very much. I think we should continue this next semester or even after the pandemic.” In line with this request, the PLCs are continuing during the current Spring 2021 semester.

One unique feature of this graduate educator preparation program is that most candidates work, take courses part-time, and head households. Because of the population of candidates, PLC discussions not only centered around specific assignments, but also focused on issues around the challenges that candidates were facing due to having to balance work, school, and the home. An equally important outcome of the PLCs is that supervisors voiced their opinions about what was working and what assignments and processes needed refinement, thus, clinical supervisors took more ownership of their courses as reflexive praxis drove course revisions. Field supervisors reported that the professional learning communities provided rich, beneficial faculty collaboration and new learning for them. In response to the question about faculty support initiatives, 74% of clinical faculty reported that they attended the weekly PLCs.

Many supervisors responded that the quality of assignments was effective or highly effective in helping candidates learn what they needed for the classroom. Despite some of the challenges identified in the survey, 97% percent of respondents reported that the assignments were useful, and the same percentage reported that candidates needed additional time to complete the new alternative assignments. They also believed that for candidates to be successful, they needed more face-to-face time and direct interactions to engage in coaching conversations. In addition, they realized that there were shifting roles and responsibilities so, for instance, our field supervisors alerted us that prior to schools closing the focus in our courses was on evaluation, whereas following schools closing there was more of a focus on collaboration. So, not only were clinical faculty collaborating with each other, but they were also collaborating with the school administrators, and even more so with their student teachers than they would have been Pre-pandemic.

Practicing teaching and receiving feedback from the clinical supervisor roughly simulated an authentic student teaching experience for candidates under the difficult circumstances of the pandemic. Adding peer review of the recorded lessons and mini lessons provided all candidates practice with giving and receiving constructive and positive feedback. It also undeniably added another dimension of interaction which served to build community and allowed candidates to consider multiple perspectives on their own and on their peers’ instruction and instructional decisions.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The response to the COVID-19 shift in teacher education described in the emerging literature is evidence of organizational resilience theory in action [26] and the demonstration of “teachers-as-designers” [11] shows the changing role of the teacher educator. Upon reflection, the clinical faculty recognized that since teaching and learning shifted to fully online, in addition to utilizing the learning management system and Zoom Video Conferencing technology to facilitate instruction, they are providing candidates more socio-emotional support than pre-COVID-19. They have also benefited from more support from academic leadership and from their colleagues, as evidenced by the weekly informal Professional Learning Community meetings and monthly professional development meetings. They shared resources and often buddied and consulted with each other to resolve problems of practice.

Upon revisiting the questions that guided the current inquiry into practice, one can conclude that the changes to the educative process that resulted due to the pandemic caused practitioners to reexamine the curriculum and approaches to preparing teachers. In partnership with local Departments of Education, colleges and universities managed to secure placements within virtual classrooms during Spring 2020, Summer 2020, and Fall 2020. However, the jury is still out as it relates to the impact the new teachers will have when they become fulltime teachers of record. It is important to remember that some of them partnered with cooperating teachers for whom the experience of teaching in the hybrid or fully online environment was also new. Therefore, this study has some implications from a program evaluation and continuous improvement perspective on a local, national, and international scale. There is a need to take a closer look at accreditation standards, criteria for teacher preparation, as well as existing teacher development frameworks, and rubrics for assessing teacher performance. Opportunities also exist to explore emerging technologies such as [GoReact](#), [Mursion](#), and Bug-in-Ear Coaching [25] that some schools of education have explored and utilized in an effort to create authentic student teaching experiences during the pandemic.

In terms of implications for additional research, there are several questions still to be addressed in terms of how schools of education move forward post pandemic. For example, some authors wonder about the fate of the “pedagogical innovations” and whether “an imagined classroom can ever replace learning in a real one.” They suggest tracking the student teachers to measure the long-term impact of their training on their teaching careers [11]. However, it is important to note the predictions of teacher shortages and declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs within the United States also have research implications [19]. Considering this trend, the impact of the shift in clinical practice to a virtual and remote environment on teacher retention would be an area to explore. Additionally, the authors would like to investigate clinical practices in education further by conducting a comparative analysis across universities on local and international levels. And third, they want to continue to design authentic learning experiences that would engage novice teachers to be the best teachers possible. Finally, the authors are very interested in collaborating with colleagues nationally and internationally to engage in further research on any of these topics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to all the university supervisors also known as clinical faculty who remain resilient and committed to collaborating with peers and educational leaders to ensure that the teacher candidates whom they serve are well prepared to teach post-pandemic.

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