

Perceptions of COVID-19 pandemic impact on the student teaching experience

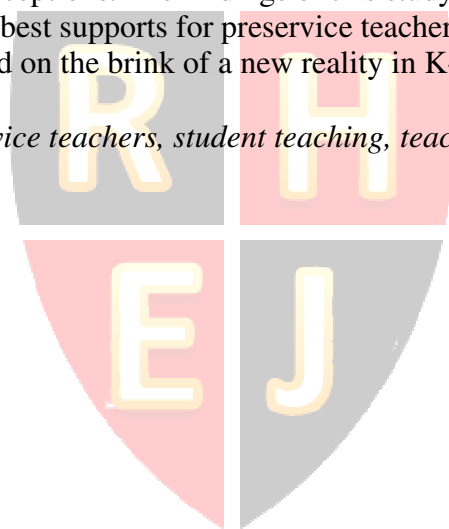
Daniella G. Varela
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Mike F. Desiderio
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 forced a rapid and significant shift in education at all levels, but in the K-12 setting, tested the capacity and adaptability of current teachers and challenged the readiness of student teachers. Related school closures effectively terminated what research finds as the most crucial part of the teacher preparation experience: student teaching. This study implemented survey research using open-ended questions to allow student teachers to tell their own story about their experiences and perceptions. The findings of this study serve to inform educator preparation programs as to the best supports for preservice teachers during a crisis scenario in training experiences system and on the brink of a new reality in K-12 education.

Keywords: *COVID-19, preservice teachers, student teaching, teacher preparation*



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic originated as a health concern late in the fall 2019. As the number of cases grew and migrated across the world, it became a global health crisis early in 2020. In response, in March 2020, schools all across the state of Texas initiated closures; this at a time when student teachers were engaged in student teaching. This field practicum is regarded as the most crucial part of the teacher preparation experience (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Liu, 2012; Smith & Rayfield, 2017; Varela, Kupczynski, & Mundy 2019).

In Texas, aspiring teachers are required to complete extensive training in no less than 300 clock hours pertinent to professional and ethical conduct, detection of mental health and learning disability, strong classroom management skills, reading instruction and Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) alignment, effective lesson design, social and emotional learning, effective parent communication, learner engagement, etc. (Tex. Adm. Code, §228.35). Prior to the student teaching placement, the capstone clinical experience, teacher candidates are required to complete at least 30 clock hours of observation, 15 hours of which may be completed electronically such as watching videos. Standards specify that these field observations should be in an authentic, accredited school setting, supervised by a content certified teacher, and requires teacher candidates to reflect on their experiences. Current standards for student teaching in Texas call for a minimum of 14 weeks of full-day classroom experience or 24 weeks of half-days. The student teaching experiences is defined as practice teaching supervised by educator preparation programs. (Tex. Adm. Code, §228.2). Educator preparation programs work with partner school districts to place student teachers in a classroom assignment which matches the grade level(s) and subject area(s) of the certificate sought. In a standard placement, the student teacher begins as a shadow of the cooperating/mentor teacher and gradually assumes complete responsibility of the class.

When schools were mandated to close, student teachers were only about nine weeks into their practical experience. At this point a logical question to ask is: What impact did Texas school closures have on student teachers during the spring 2020 semester? Current research to understand the impact of school closures on student teachers and the vital student teaching experience is limited. Thus, this study implemented survey research using open-ended questions to allow student teachers enrolled in a South Texas university to tell their own story about their experiences during the Spring 2020 semester. The findings of this study are important to develop an understanding of the impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic on our student teachers. Further, the results of this study will impact our future teachings about the unusual circumstances and strategies that may or may not be used in the future for K-12 education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research abounds as to the disconnect between the teacher preparation experience and the realities of the classroom (Barrett Kutcy & Schulz, 2006, Samek, Kim, Cason, Caskey, Greene & Musser, 2010, Collier & Hebert, 2004, Britt, 1997). Labeling the traditional and largely theoretical teacher preparation experience as a controlled environment, researchers attribute the disconnect to the failure of teacher preparation programs to provide practical experiences that are best representative of what can be expected in the classroom setting (Melnick & Meister, 2008; Farr & Griffin, 1973; Gullickson, 1986; Fletcher, 2013; Panesar,

2010) especially as it relates to knowledge of what to expect in the first few weeks and skills in assessment and evaluation (Beck, Kosnik & Roswell, 2007).

Thus, the student teaching experience is crucial in that it serves as the first true independent intersection between preparation and practice (Reeves, 2017). Gray (2019) found evidence to support the valuable impact of the student teaching experience as first-year teachers reported reflecting on this experience to develop effective classroom management systems. It is during student teaching that pre-service teachers are provided the opportunity of a transformative experience discovering their teaching identity through reflective practice of content knowledge and pedagogical proficiency and delivery (Smith & Rayfield, 2017; Aglazor, 2017). With that, cooperating or host teachers have a tremendous responsibility bestowed upon them as the most direct influence to the student teacher during the assigned experience (Frank, 2018). In fact, the student teaching experiences of preservice teachers, like professional development for in-service teachers contribute to positive self-efficacy and leadership development (McKim & Velez, 2017). Student teachers also rely on the student teaching experience as an opportunity to develop strong networks for job placement potential (Krieg, Theobald, & Goldhaber, 2016). School closures interrupted those experiences. Research points to significant impacts of school closures on social and economic climates, and the social and emotional well-being of schoolchildren (Gostin & Wiley, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) outlines school closures as one effort to either prevent or mitigate pandemics (Cauchemez, Ferguson, Wachtel, Tegnell, Saour, Duncan, & Nicoll, 2009). In the United States, influenza pandemic-related school closures were largely intermittent and locally determined (Cauchemez, Kerkhove, Archer, Cetron, Cowling, Grove & Oshitani, 2014; Wong, Shi, Gao, Zheteyeva, Lane, Copeland, Hendricks, McMurray, Sliger, Rainey, & Uzicanin, 2014) in 2009 as response to increasing cases of H1N1 influenza (Klaiman, Kraemer, & Soto, 2011). In 1918, in an effort to slow the spread of the Spanish Flu, widespread and long-term school closures were mandated although the timing and duration varied by cities (Cauchemez, et al., 2009). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, the state of Texas closed all schools-- 1227 school districts serving the state's 5.1 million schoolchildren ("Enrollment Trends", 2020). Teachers were also impacted as school closures required a swift transition to online instruction, a skill many were not prepared for especially with such short notice and such little training if any at all (Kaden, 2020; Ferdig, Baumgartner, Hartshorne, Kaplan-Rakowski, & Mouza, 2020).

The pandemic also affected the higher education system as institutions all across the nation closed campuses with most transferring instruction to online delivery (Sahu, 2020). Enrolled at Texas colleges and universities are over 21,000 students pursuing degrees with teacher certification ("2019 Title II Reports", 2020) whose training and preparation both requires and relies on access to immersive experiences in realistic classroom settings (Varela, Kupczynski, & Mundy, 2019). Thus, school closures meant those immersive experiences were no longer accessible. Educator preparation programs are now tasked with a new and necessary approach to teacher training, one which incorporates measured proficiency in what is expected to be a blended learning model (online and face-to-face) for K-12 education, and how to best serve a growing number of online learners (Kaden, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid and significant shift in education at all levels; but in the K-12 setting, tested the capacity and adaptability of current teachers and challenged the readiness of student teachers. There is a gap in current literature to reveal what direct impact school closures have on pre-service teachers whose culminating clinical experience was cut short and in some cases terminated.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study utilized an online survey consisting of nine (9) open-ended questions intended to encourage reflection of the student teaching experience during the Spring 2020 semester, which correlated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The major hypothesis for this study is that the student teaching experience was significantly changed for all student teachers during the spring 2020 semester. Upon consent, each participant was directed to the online survey where anonymous responses could be provided.

Sample

As central to naturalistic inquiry, purposive sampling was used in this study. In order to understand the experiences of student teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers identified a group of sixty-nine (69) student teachers in active classroom placements during the Spring 2020 semester, thus during the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures.

Data Analysis

Participant responses were studied to determine emergent themes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the concept of a dependability audit as a means of establishing reliability in qualitative research. To achieve this, researchers must examine the process of the inquiry including an assessment of how the data was collected, how the data was kept, and the accuracy of the data. For this study, data was collected from student teacher participants via an online open-ended survey. Responses were downloaded and stored on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to permit researcher evaluation and analysis. Because respondents were not required to provide identifying information on the survey, responses remained anonymous.

A technique used to establish credibility in qualitative research is peer debriefing. This process requires that the researcher solicit a peer review of the data and data analysis to eliminate bias and to test the emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In an effort to ensure internal validity of data analysis, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing. Once student responses were unitized, the researchers exchanged analysis summaries and themes identified.

RESULTS

Participants

The participants in this survey study were student teachers attending a South Texas University during the Spring 2020 semester, and therefore also during the COVID-19 pandemic which forced school closures across the state of Texas. From an identified total of 69 student teachers, 33 responded to survey questions, resulting in a 48% response rate of the group surveyed. Participating student teachers were assigned to K-12 classrooms in school districts across the South Texas region in various combinations of grade levels and subject areas including elementary generalist, middle and high school subject specific, physical education and music education.

Findings

Question # 1: Describe your experience as a student teacher, both prior to and now during the COVID-19 pandemic and related school district closure.

Student teacher responses to Question #1 detailed a sense of frustration and concern. Student teachers reported feelings of uncertainty about how school closures would impact their completion of teacher training and subsequent eligibility for teacher certification.

- *First off it is a lot of worrying not only to see if we are going to be given the chance to graduate*
- *Due to COVID-19 I was not able to complete my student teaching in the classroom. I feel that I missed out on my learning experiences. I wonder whether I will be as well prepared as other previous student teachers.*

Some respondents also expressed frustration with their inability to support cooperating teachers and placement school districts with the transition to online teaching, an experience they believed would be beneficial to their overall training and skill set going forward.

- *I wanted to help the school but was advised not to for the safety of others and myself.*
- *As a student teacher I have been limited in what I am able to do because of the schools being closed*
- *The teacher didn't let me help as much as I would like and she would say she would help me stay involve but that didn't happen.*

However, students teachers also indicated a sense of appreciation for this experience; especially those who were permitted to stay engaged with their teaching activities during school closures and the transition to online teaching.

- *I feel as though I have been doing a lot with the school district that I was placed in and have learned so much through this pandemic about becoming a teacher.*
- *As much as I hated school closing, I am glad I saw it firsthand. What I have learned throughout this experience will impact how I teach and how I prep my school year. I have said it several times, I would hate to be a first year teacher going through this tough time, I am really grateful that I was able to see how my teacher handled different situations throughout.*
- *I am glad that I get to experience this. Remote learning is not something that is usually used for elementary, we have the opportunity to see how teachers and the district deal with disasters like these.*
- *It has definitely been hectic, but a great first hand at seeing all the extra work and team effort going into this to make sure our students are successful.*

Question #2: What have you personally experienced and observed as a pre-service teacher in this challenging time?

Student teachers reported several observations during COVID-19 related school closures. Respondents cited a better understanding of student inequities brought to the forefront in the transition to online teaching.

- *I observed that times are changing and at the moment most schools and families have the resources to improve and enhance student learning with technology.*

- *students are only communicating through computers and it is difficult for some students who have accommodations.*
- *Too many people are having family members lose their jobs and are relying on school provided lunches to make sure they are eating that night. So my cooperating teacher and I make it our priority to make sure all-in-all that our students are okay*

Student teachers also observed the value of parental involvement.

- *I observed that times are changing and at the moment most schools and families have the resources to improve and enhance student learning with technology.*
- *students are only communicating through computers and it is difficult for some students who have accommodations.*
- *I observed that parents truly did not understand the difficulties of being a teacher until now*
- *Many parents have had to learn how to use the Zoom app and it is amazing to me to see just how much parents will do for their children.*

As a point of personal reflection in their own professional development, student teachers recognized the importance of technology proficiency and the determination necessary to positively impact the student learning experience.

- *some teachers need to be more tech savvy*
- *Things can be changed within an instant and you must be adaptable. You must be willing to do the most without over-working yourself.*
- *I am learned that I have to have lessons ready a week or two ahead just in case this occurs again and definitely have online resources that can be manageable for parents.*

Question #3: From your perspective, are the experiences the classroom teachers experiencing similar to yours?

Student teachers admitted that for the most part, their experience was largely similar to that of their cooperating teachers.

- *We have discussed this topic. He mentioned he has dealt with illness-related issues but nothing of this magnitude. He too is learning as I am learning and adapting together.*
- *My cooperating teacher and I are experiencing the same thing. We both had to learn this new way of teaching.*

To that end, student teachers did report a sense of awareness that there are aspects of this experience which weigh more heavily on the in-service teacher over that of their status as a teacher in training.

- *In a way it has been similar with the part of trying to figure everything out but I cannot relate to her because she has more on her shoulders and it all falls back on her.*
- *My cooperating teacher's experience is far more complicated than mine. While I only deal with stapling, labeling, and distributing the homework; she has to deal with confused parents, learning how to use Google Classroom, and figuring out her lesson plans to make them interactive to ensure student learning.*

Question #4: What challenges have you faced as a student teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Student teacher response indicated that there was an initially inability to access or be involved in preparation for online learning which proved a challenge in this experience.

- *As a student-teacher during the COVID-19, I have faced some challenges in which I wasn't allowed to help my cooperative teacher do homework packets for students. I called the campus principal and she suggested it was not recommended to help them because of the pandemic.*
- *For about two weeks I was unable to join class groups because my email is not part of the schools data base so it took their IT a few weeks to finally get it in the system. I missed out on the initial weeks of online learning.*
- *The only challenge I feel I have faced is not being able to be included in google classrooms since I'm not a teacher for the district. I feel that I would be able to help my mentor teacher even more if I had access.*

Student teachers also recognized that the brevity of the student teaching experience as a result of school closures and the seemingly haphazard and inconsistent opportunity to continue the experience online could create deficiency in their readiness for their own classrooms.

- *Not being able to put to use everything I have learned.*
- *Not getting the experience I need.*
- *My challenges range from missing precious learning time to fear of what the future holds for all of us.*
- *Are my students understanding anything we are teaching them right now?*
- *The most important challenge is finding a way to contribute to the student's learning experiences.*

Question #5: How are these challenges different than the ones you faced at the beginning of the semester?

Participants' responses to question #5 pointed to the differences between their experiences pre- and post- COVID-19 school closure. Student teachers reported concern that prior to the school closure, they were taking advantage of opportunities to professionally develop as an educator. However, after the school closures due to the pandemic those opportunities were no longer available.

- *The beginning of the semester I was more nervous about asserting my position and gaining the respect of my students. Now my biggest concern is not having access to students and work.*
- *I did not have as much guidance because my mentor teacher was not physically here to guide me.*
- *Having the chance to have face-to-face instruction, was able to explain how to solve the problems better. Now that schooling is done online, it makes it difficult to help each student individually*
- *My challenges at the beginning of the semester were dealing with student engagement, and now I don't have students to teach.*

- *These challenges are different, because I feel unaccomplished and it reflects on the job interviews I have had. I can't share my full experience of student teaching because technically I have not completed it.*

Question #6: How are your challenges the same and/or different then what your cooperating classroom teacher(s) are experiencing?

Student teacher responses to question #6 reiterated the sense of frustration reported in prior questioning about the altered experience.

- *I wasn't considered essential*

Student teachers indicated that they shared the concerns of their cooperating teachers about the quality of the student learning experience during online teaching.

- *We are both figuring out all the different technology we have never used before.*
- *As a teacher, I would say the biggest concern between both of us is if the students are actually learning.*
- *We have many of the same challenges through distance learning when it comes to our students turning in work and not being able to communicate with them like we use too. We also both struggle with motivating them.*

Question #7: What do you qualify as your personal success(es) as a student teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Respondents offered varied points of encouragement as their personal success(es) during their COVID-19 student teaching experience. Among them, student teachers reflected on the experience with appreciation for the opportunity to build soft skills like work ethic, teamwork, and communication.

- *My personal success would be being more involved.*
- *Due to this pandemic and my continuous volunteering I was able to get to know school staff better such as my principal and the school counselor.*
- *My personal success is being responsible by communicating with my cooperative teacher and discuss the students' progress and challenges while homeschooling.*
- *I feel I was very successful in communication. I tried reaching out to my mentor on almost a daily basis*
- *I try to take a positive outlook on this situation. We are, so far, the only class who has gotten the opportunity to witness how a school district reacts during such an emergency.*

Student teachers who were able to take full advantage of the opportunity afforded to them by their school district to fully participate in online teaching qualified that experience as a success. Responses indicated an appreciation for the skills acquired.

- *My personal success would be that I would be able to run online classes and I would not be afraid of jumping into it.*
- *I have learned how to use the Zoom app. I have learned how to create lessons that I can put on an online website in which the students can access.*
- *My personal success is being able to expand my knowledge about online resources the students can use. There are so many that I feel the districts should incorporate more online based work.*

Question #8: What have you learned that you believe you may not have had the opportunity to learn otherwise?

Respondents expressed mostly positive perspectives in response to question #8 which challenged their reflection of the experience. Student teachers reported feeling lucky to have experienced the crisis and challenge of a transition to online teaching and the opportunity to keep the overall mission and vision of education at heart.

- *That there is always a solution to be able to educate the young and make sure they are growing intellectually.*
- *That there is always a way to still learn. A Pandemic doesn't scare teachers away that easily.*
- *I learned that there is always a way to try and continue teaching to his/her students during a pandemic with different resources.*
- *I learned through my personal experience that at the end of the day the goal is to make sure each student has learned a piece of new information.*

Question #9: What concerns do you have about your personal student teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Concerns expressed in response to this question ranged from student teachers' uncertainty about their futures to the quality of their training experience during student teaching. Responses indicated a sense of worry about their readiness for a classroom of their own.

- *That I wasn't able to impact the students there with in the short time I was student teaching.*
- *I feel like my student teaching experience was cut short.*
- *I missed out on a month's worth of hands on experience in the classroom, and I do not want this to affect my certification.*
- *I believe the weeks that I miss due to COVID-19 really is undermining how I view myself as a future teacher and makes me think how it will affect me later once I have my own classroom.*
- *My concern with the pandemic is that this is going to change education as a whole.*
- *I did not get the full experience.*
- *My concerns are that due to my absence from the classroom, I am not growing as a pre-service educator.*
- *I am concerned that future employers will not see me fit for a job due to the lack of time in a classroom.*

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have several implications for teacher preparation post-COVID-19 especially as it relates to the clinical experience. Student teacher responses reflected inequity across the group as it relates the quality and comprehensiveness of the experience during school closures and the pandemic. Some student teachers were able to participate fully in the transition experience and in the assigned school district's continued efforts to continue instruction using online platforms. There were however many students who were not able to participate in school district response. It is evident that those student teachers who were not able to remain engaged

had a much more negative perception of their student teaching experience, and expressed more concern than others as to the value of the experience overall.

In anticipation of the 2020-2021 academic year, equally evident is the apprehension of returning to face-to-face instruction. Many school districts in the state of Texas are cautiously planning for the possibility of a return in the fall, but also planning for the likelihood of a continuation of remote instruction. Thus, as educator preparation programs prepare to assign student teachers to classroom placements, it is imperative that there be an agreement that all student teachers will be permitted to engage in all aspects of the K-12 experience as new as it may be and as often and drastically as it may change in order to permit broad exposure to the new reality of the teaching profession. Programs must work to ensure that student teachers are well-supported and highly engaged in all opportunities to learn and build a diverse repertoire of skills during the student teaching experience with particular attention to access to school district online learning platforms and planning sessions. School districts must recognize this as prime opportunity to enhance the professional development of new teachers for the future of K-12 education, as novel as it may be.

Educator preparation programs are also encouraged to view this experience and student teacher responses as an indication of the necessity to revamp teacher training to include and enhance use of technological resources and related pedagogical strategies. The new reality of K-12 learning is a driving force for the push beyond learning how to use the smartboard and parent communication apps. Preservice teachers must now be equipped to plan and deliver instruction virtually, to assess student learning and differentiate for students from a social distance, and to effectively collaborate with parents and colleagues online. This new educational landscape brings new definition to the concept of the digital learner. Future teachers must be prepared both in skill and in confidence for the possibility of needing to support students and their individual needs thru virtual learning.

The results of this survey study also provide evidence to suggest that educator preparation programs can and must do a better job to support student teachers through their student teaching experience. Several students reported varying degrees of uncertainty and fear about successfully completing their experience despite circumstances beyond their control. Student teachers reported feeling worried about graduation, certification, and the future of the job market. The student teaching experience is clearly a time of professional growth and personal identity development. The support offered during this experience must be valued as a crucial part of that period of progress.

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