Contribution of Research

STUDENT TEACHING DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19: THE IMPACT ON PRESERVICE TEACHERS FROM A REGIONAL HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTION

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Abstract

The student teaching experience is highly regarded in the teacher training sequence. In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 altered many aspects of life, including a wave of massive changes in the K-12 education system with incredible implications for preservice teachers. Thus, educator preparation programs understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student teaching experiences. This study surveyed a group of student teachers enrolled at a Regional Hispanic Serving Institution in rural south Texas to understand experiences and perceptions during this unexpected and influential period. Results confirm student teacher perceptions of the student teaching experience as vital to developing professional teacher identity but detail a sense of frustration at the recognition of their self-described loss of invaluable opportunity for practice. Findings are reflective of the additional challenges present in rural schools for students and teachers alike. The authors also discuss the implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: preservice teacher education, student teaching, rural schools

The teacher preparation experience is a complex mixture of coursework and training that culminates in practical experiences intended to prepare future educators for classroom realities. Regarded as the most influential and career-defining period of a future teachers' professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Liu, 2012; Smith & Rayfield, 2017), the practical experience, more commonly referred to as student teaching, allows preservice teachers to apply what they have learned in theory to what must be done in practice.

Education Preparation Programs (EPPs) throughout the United States place an estimated 200,000 preservice teachers in student teaching assignments every year (Greenberg et al., 2011). In the state of Texas, teacher candidates complete a minimum of 14 weeks of full days or 24 weeks of half days in a student teaching assignment that matches the grade level and subject area of the certificate

sought (19 Texas Administrative Code §228.2). Rules established by the Texas Education Agency require student teaching experiences completed in traditional classroom settings supervised by mentor and cooperating teachers where preservice teachers can be fully engaged in instructional activities with real students in real-time.

As a move to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, Texas governor Greg Abbott issued an executive order on March 19, ending face-to-face classes for several weeks (Abbott, March 19, 2020). On April 17, an extension of this executive order for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year occurred (Abbott, April 17, 2020). At the onset of that executive order, student teachers were only midway through this most crucial period of professional development and self-discovery. School districts entered a new world of online instruction and found themselves challenged with a wave of inequities to complicate the

process. In the absence of a precedent or emergency action plan, student teachers found themselves left out. Persistent health concerns forced many schools to begin the 2020-2021 school year online. Texas is home to the highest number of rural schools than any other state in the nation (Maxwell et al., 2019). Thus, it is important to study the experiences of Spring Semester 2020 student teachers to understand the impact of school closures on their professional development as future educators. This study used an open-ended survey to collect data from preservice teachers enrolled at a regional Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in rural South Texas during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the theory of workplace learning. Workplace learning is associated with learning in the natural workplace setting. In teacher preparation, the student teaching experience is the most classic example of workplace learning, where aspiring teachers are placed in classrooms with students and teachers and supported by administrators and mentors to create an experiential learning opportunity for professional growth and development. Imants and van Veen (2010) explained that especially as it relates to preservice teachers, teacher learning is achieved via individual or personal learning, social learning (collaboration), and "learning that occurs across the school organization as a whole" (p. 571). The underlying notion of workplace learning then is that there is a mutual and interdependent relationship between working and learning: the two come together, learning in context, to create a meaningful learning experience (Imants & van Veen, 2010), one which aids in the development of professional identity.

To that end, this study was also guided by the theory of teacher identity. According to Miller (2009), teacher identity is the result of constant negotiation of social and cultural understandings of the role, understandings which can be influenced by many factors. Those factors include school and classroom culture, community, and working conditions. Kim and Asbury (2020) noted that an important contributor to the development of teacher identity is positive relationships with colleagues, parents, and students; much of which were absent during the pandemic and related school closures. As Kim and Asbury (2020)

noted, "a shift to remote instruction, which disrupts or changes the nature of interpersonal connections, might be expected to affect teachers' sense of professional identity" (p. 1064).

Recognizing workplace learning theory as the near definition of student teaching and acknowledging the importance of healthy development of teacher identity, this study sought to understand how school closures as a result of COVID-19, affected preservice teachers during their student teaching experience.

Literature Review

Student teaching is a high-impact experience and is categorized as an important event in the development of a future teacher (Smith & Rayfield, 2017). Stripling et al. (2008) studied student teacher growth from the beginning of the experience compared to the end of the clinical period and found increases in student teacher efficacy in classroom management, instructional strategies, and student engagement. Where research points to a disconnect between a largely theoretical course sequence in teacher preparation and the actualities of the classroom experience (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020), the student teaching experience is the opportunity to narrow the divide, to bridge the gap. In a study of student teacher self-efficacy, Han et al. (2017) found that the student teaching experience provides an array of pivotal opportunities for the practice of pedagogical approaches making the experience one of the most important in the teacher training process.

Online learning can be beneficial in many ways, but depending on the skill set and digital proficiency of the learner, it can also be difficult (Fedynich, 2014). Children in the K-12 education system require developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional approaches, often including hands-on and focused learning activities (Kim, 2020). The reality is that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, even the youngest early childhood students were dubbed digital learners exhibiting proficiency with touchscreen technologies and other online tools (Kim, 2020). This truth requires that educators are trained on and proficient with strategies and tools to appropriately "develop [student] thinking skills and understanding of technologies for learning in the 21st century" (Kim, 2020, p. 5).

Opportunities exist in teacher education to capitalize on current and future learning modes, namely virtual instruction (Kim, 2020; Sasaki et al., 2020). König et al. (2020) found that intentional training on communication technologies to develop digital competence is particularly essential in helping preservice and early career teachers adapt to a transition to online teaching. Thus, when this training is absent from the teacher preparation experience, teacher candidates are left underprepared and poorly equipped. In a study of physical education student teachers' feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic, student teachers reported feeling invalidated and questioning the purpose of physical education because they were not prepared to deliver that content effectively with only digital access to their students (Varea & Gonzalez-Calvo, 2020).

The value of the student teaching experience is well researched and justified. Thus, interruptions or circumstances that greatly alter the nature of the experience may negatively affect the preservice teacher. Alford (2020) found that student teachers during COVID-19-related school closures and shifts to remote instruction left them feeling unfulfilled, undertrained, and frustrated with the loss of time to connect and engage with students in an authentic and physical classroom environment. Such frustration manifests itself in many ways. Accordingly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted college students' mental health. Kapasia et al. (2020) found that 42% of undergraduate and graduate students were dealing with stress, depression, and anxiety, many citing financial concerns as a cause, and 75% of students surveyed confirmed the possibility that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may mean discontinuation of educational pursuits. Cao et al. (2020) found evidence to suggest that COVID-19 related delays in academic activity and progression created high levels of anxiety for college students. During COVID-19, student teachers also reported high levels of stress resulting in disengagement and absenteeism (Roman, 2020), worry, and loss of motivation (Ciğerci; 2020). Calls for social distancing to mitigate the spread of the virus complicated social interactions, and that presented a need to find ways to build community and nurture relationships from afar. Neglecting to pay due attention to mental health and concern for overall well-being may prove detrimental to the profession (Hill et al., 2020; Roman, 2020; Baloran, 2020).

The literature provides evidence to support the student teaching experience as vital to the teacher preparation experience. Studies have also detailed and validated the tremendous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the student experience. There is a gap in current literature to reveal what direct impact COVID-19-related school closures had on preservice teachers experiencing interrupted or terminated culminating clinical experience during the 2020 spring semester.

Research Design

To understand the impact on student teachers' perceptions of the student teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study utilized qualitative survey research of a sample group of student teachers assigned to practicum experiences in K-12 classrooms during the spring 2020 semester. Surveys were the selected data collection method in consideration of two primary factors: (1) At the time of the study, the COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face interviews impossible, and (2) Student teachers, especially as a result of the novelty of how the pandemic affected the traditional classroom, were overwhelmed in a drastically changed clinical experience. The researchers recognized that survey data collection permitted participant participation at a convenient time and in a convenient manner.

The study sought to use content analysis as an approach to find emergent themes in the data collected via survey research. Content analysis is the process of sorting data collected in qualitative research into groups according to consistent patterns or themes to derive meaning (Creswell, 2014). Nine open-ended questions were included in the survey administered to the sample group. Those questions were developed to encourage reflection of the semester-long student teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sample

The researchers identified a group of student teachers enrolled in an educator preparation program at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) of higher education in rural south Texas during the 2020 Spring Semester. The study is limited to student teachers assigned to K-12 classrooms across south Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most student teachers were assigned to classrooms in rural

school districts across the region in a variety of teaching subjects and grade levels. Sixty-nine student teachers had the opportunity to participate in this purposive sample study. Thirty-three student teachers consented to participate and completed the survey for a 48% survey response rate. All participants were in their culminating year of teacher preparation and completed all other requirements for teacher certification, including state licensure examinations.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed a series of nine open-ended questions to encourage reflection of the student teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon consent, participants were directed to an online survey data collection site to type their responses to each question. Survey questions were as follows:

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

2. What have you personally experienced and observed as a preservice teacher in this challenging time?

3. From your perspective, are the experiences the classroom teachers experiencing similar to yours?

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

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

6. How are your challenges the same and/or different than what your cooperating classroom teacher(s) is/are experiencing?

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

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

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

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of student teachers during COVID-19 school-related closures and thus the impact on the practicum of the teacher candidate. Analysis of the data collected helped researchers identify emergent themes/categories in participant responses. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a dependability audit is an effort to establish reliability in qualitative research. A dependability audit requires that researchers examine the research process, including an assessment of data collection, data storage, and the accuracy of the data. Data collected for this study used an online survey. Participants entered responses directly onto the online survey database. Thus, all data collected was the most accurate personal participant account. Because respondents were not required to provide identifying information on the survey, responses remained anonymous. Data was kept on the secure online survey database accessible only to the researchers until downloaded and externally secured to allow for evaluation and analysis.

The researchers coded responses to determine emergent themes. As a means of establishing internal validity of the data analysis, the researchers repeatedly engaged in a process of peer debriefing to eliminate bias and to test the emergent design. Once researchers categorized participant responses, the researchers exchanged analysis summaries and identified the emergent themes.

Results

From the sample of 69 student teachers, 33 respondents consented to and participated in this study for a return rate of 48%. Results are presented below according to each survey question. For each question, the authors provide summary details of responses as well as a list of emergent themes. Discussion for each survey question is pertinent only to the few themes with the highest coded frequency.

Question 1: Describe your experience as a student teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic and related school district closures

This question generated a total of 138 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into 12 categories. Table 1 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 1.

Table 1
Question 1 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Feelings	50
Experience	35
Remote/Online Instruction	18

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question 1 were Requirements (10), Expectations (6), Classroom Activities (6), Sense of Community (4), Health and Safety (2), University Coursework (2) Classroom Instruction (2), Resources (2), and Professional Development (1).

Data collected in response to question #1 revealed a concentrated focus on feelings and experiences.

Feelings

Student teacher responses exposed a range of emotions resulting from the student teaching experience during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Comments expressed feelings of worry, frustration, stress, and disappointment.

- "My experience as a student-teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic and related school district closures has been disappointing."

- "I worked so hard during this process for it all to be ruined."

- "I have been stressed about the circumstances around us."

- "Not knowing where we stand in terms of graduation makes it hard to deal."

- "I wonder whether I will be as well prepared as other previous student teachers."

- "Horrible missed out on valuable training."

Experiences

Separate from the disclosed feelings about the student teaching experience in Spring 2020, student teachers told of their perspectives on the experience. Responses were split, either expressing a positive perspective of experience or a more negative and general dissatisfaction with their experience. Respondents citing positive views of the experience spoke to the unique opportunity to learn and grow during the unprecedented events:

- "I am glad that I get to experience this**.**"

- "My cooperating teacher has been the absolute MOST AMAZING mentor of all time! I am so lucky."

- "We have the opportunity to see how teachers and the district deal with disasters like these."

- "I am really grateful that I was able to see how my teacher handled different situations throughout."

Student teacher responses which indicated dissatisfaction with their experiences pointed to a perceived sense of loss and lack of opportunity.

- "It has separated me from the students."

- "I feel that I missed out on my learning experiences."

- "I feel confusion, lost, and a sense of being robbed."

- "…the lack of opportunity, or the ability to contribute to the academic progress of students."

When investigating the student teaching experience, it was revealed that after spring break, some schools and districts allowed student teachers to continue working with cooperating teachers during the closure of campuses to face-to-face classes. Other schools and districts instructed student teachers not to report back to the campuses. This may be a major factor in the variances of feelings and experiences student teachers expressed, and the disparity is apparent in data collected for all nine survey questions.

Question 2: What have you personally experienced and observed as a preservice teacher in this challenging time?

This question generated a total of 111 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 19 categories. Table 2 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 2.

Table 2
Question 2 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Remote/Online Instruction	30
Experience	15
Resources	11
Adaptation	11

Other themes that emerged from the data for question 2 were Communication (6), Requirements (6), Expectations (4), Classroom Instruction (4), Student Behaviors (4), Parental Instruction (4), Responsibility (3), Feelings (3), Student Activities (2), Classroom Management (1), Exercise (1), Quit (1), Sense of Community (1), University Coursework (1) and Health (1).

Responses to question 2 centered on remote/online instruction, experiences, resources, and adapting. Student teachers observed school district and campus-level responses to school closures and the transition to online teaching from a unique perspective—as a learner, as a practicing teacher, and yet, still a student. Data collected here again highlighted the disparities among this student teacher group where some had the opportunity to fully engage with the school district and campus-level response, while others were prohibited from doing so. Thus, responses to question 2 teachers expose those opposing views.

Remote/Online Instruction

In placements where student teachers were restricted from any further participation, respondents found it difficult to continue their practicum experience in the virtual classroom.

- "My biggest challenge was to be involved during the online courses after the school decided to close and be able to put my own input."

For student teachers who were able to continue their practicum into the virtual classroom, most expressed concern that their cooperating and mentor teachers were not ready for the experience.

- "Some teachers need to be more tech-savvy."

- "Some teachers were not prepared."

- "I observed many teachers just as lost and confused as we are and being hit with this whole new platform of learning."

- "A lot of the teachers lack the knowledge on how to use apps, others don't have good internet service, and some didn't have any material or a computer to be able to work from home."

Data collected did also note more positive observations of remote/online instruction where respondents indicated that good teaching was still occurring:

- "I have seen many teachers willing to go the extra mile to make sure students are still receiving the best education possible."

- "Our main priority as our students' teachers during this time is to make sure they [students] are at least learning SOMETHING."

Experiences

Student teacher responses to question #2 also implied evidence of respondents' ability to critically evaluate the student learning experience during remote/online instruction. Reported observations pointed to obvious difficulty teachers and students had in achieving an appropriate and productive online learning experience.

- "I have personally experienced and observed the difficulty for some students who don't have any technology at home to complete and submit all assignments."

- "I have also experienced that the students are having a difficult time with working from home due to resources."

- "It is difficult for some students who have accommodations."

- "To [sic] many distractions in the background when the teacher holds a lesson on Zoom."

Resources

At the forefront of the school closures and the related transition to online teaching, student teacher respondents noted an observed concern about resources. Responses pointed to resources as a matter of inequity for students, teachers, and for themselves.

- "At the moment, most schools and families have the resources to improve and enhance student learning with technology."

- "A lot of the teachers lack the knowledge on how to use apps, others don't have good internet service, and some didn't have any material or a computer to be able to work from home."

- "I have seen the apprehension parents have towards technology. The lack of technology in a household as well…"

- "Student teachers are limited if they cannot have access to their students through online means."

- "I have also experienced that the students are having a difficult time with working from home due to resources."

Adaptation

Data collected in response to question 2 also revealed student teacher concerns about the ability of students and teachers to adapt to remote/online teaching. Student teachers noted observations of how the transition to online teaching proved challenging for K-12 students:

- "I have also personally experienced my students' stresses towards this new way of learning."

To that end, student teachers also noted observations about teachers' need to adapt to the new format of instructional delivery and the understanding that teachers must be able to adapt to even the most unpredictable of circumstances to best serve their students.

- "I observed the need to quickly transition and make changes to [a] different form of communication and teaching."

- "Things can be changed within an instant, and you must be adaptable."

- "Personally, I have seen teachers go from one element to another and be able to adapt."

Question 3: From your perspective, have the experiences of your cooperating teacher(s) been similar to yours?

This question generated a total of 107 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 17 categories. Table 3 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 3.

Table 3
Question 3 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Experiences	28
Remote/Online Instruction	21
Communication	10

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question 3 were Feelings (9), Pandemic (5), Student Activities (4), Adaptation (4), Requirements (4), Classroom Instruction (4), Expectations (3), Health (3), Student Behaviors (3), Classroom Management (2), Sense of Community (2), Resources (2), Classroom Activities (2), and Professional Development (1).

The researchers asked question 3 in hopes that student teachers would help to provide a better understanding of the relationship between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher during the inimitable Spring 2020 student teaching experience. Responses again were split based on the extent to which student teachers were permitted to participate in the districts' learning continuity plan.

Experiences

Student teachers who were not permitted to engage in their assigned school districts' learning continuity plan cited experiences that differed greatly from their cooperating teachers' experience.

- "My cooperating teacher's experience is far more complicated than mine."

- "They have plenty to do while I am stuck doing nothing at all, which does nothing to help prepare me."

On the other hand, student teachers who continued to work with their cooperating teachers and classroom students after the cessation of face-to-face classes indicated having similar experiences as their cooperating teacher, thus more closely in line with the aspired immersive and authentic practical experience for student teachers.

- "From my perspective, my cooperative teacher and I are similar."

- "Yes, I do feel that our experiences have been very similar."

- "My cooperating teacher and I are experiencing the same thing."

Remote/Online Instruction

Student teachers noted apparent differences between what they were experiencing during the Spring 2020 semester of student teaching and what their cooperating/mentor teachers were experiencing regarding remote/online instruction. Survey respondents expressed a more willing readiness and skill level to engage in remote/online instruction compared to their seemingly lesser prepared cooperating/mentor teachers.

- "My teacher is about to retire, so she isn't as up to date with technology as I am."

- "She has had more struggles figuring out how to do so much in a little amount of time."

- "My teacher isn't technology savvy at all."

Some student teachers capitalized on the opportunity to offer their more proficient skills and collaborated with their cooperating/mentor teacher to respond to the challenge:

- "I was able to create the google classroom and assign our lessons."

- "We both had to learn this new way of teaching."

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

This question generated a total of 91 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 16 categories. Table 4 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 4.

Table 4
Question 4 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Remote/Online Instruction	21
Feelings	20
Classroom Instruction	7

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question #4 were: Communication (6), Classroom Activities (5), Health (4), Resources (4), Employment (4), Student Learning (3), Student Behaviors (3), Parental Instruction (3), Sense of Community (3), Experience (3), Expectations (2), Pandemic (2), and Adaptation (1)

Remote/Online Instruction

Student teachers expressed the desire to help with remote teaching but were unable to participate in the instructional activities due to district policies that imposed access restrictions on individuals who are not formal employees. This proved to be a point of frustration for student teachers.

- "Even if it is virtual work, I have no access to it because of confidential reasons [school district did not permit access to online LMS]."

- "For about two weeks, I was unable to join class groups because my email is not part of the school's database, 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."

Responses also indicated a sense of insecurity in that student teachers did not feel prepared or adequately trained to navigate the transition:

- "My biggest challenge during COVID-19 is being involved in the process of transitioning to online schooling and knowing how to transition or prepare."

Feelings

Student teachers reported a myriad of feelings in response to question 4. Feelings centered on loss and longing for a better and more meaningful connection with the students they felt were lost when schools closed and transitioned to online instruction.

- "I really miss them and wish I could see them all one more time."

- "…not knowing if I would see these students again…"

- "…knowing that Spring Break was the last time I saw them (students) hurts…"

Student teachers also reported feelings of a desire to help their students, cooperating/mentor teachers, and their schools despite not knowing how to or not being permitted to do so.

- "I don't know if it is because I am a teacher that I always feel the need to help."

- "I cannot help, my cooperating teacher has a big momma bear complex and is trying to protect me, so she tells me to stay home."

- "I completely understand [not being allowed access to online LMS], but my heart is there, so I want to be there to help."

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

This question generated a total of 109 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 23 categories. Table 5 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 5.

Table 5
Question 5 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Remote/Online Instruction	16
Feelings	11
Student Learning	10

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question 5 included: Classroom Instruction (9), Expectations (8), Sense of Community (7), Experience (7), Time (5), Assessment (5), Communication (4), Classroom Management (4), Pandemic (3), Quit (3), Requirements (3), Classroom Activities (2), Student Activities (2), Parental Instruction (2), Responsibility (2) Employment (2), Adaptation (1), Student Behaviors (1), Resources (1), and University Coursework (1).

Remote/Online Instruction

Notably, a point of respondent focus is the novel reality of remote/online instruction. Student teachers who talked about remote instruction described the difficulty they were having with the online classroom, expressing a certain level of frustration and disappointment in what has been deemed an unexpected student teaching experience.

- "Now, the classroom is virtual and not in our element."

- "Now, we cannot get in contact with the students directly."

- "We are stripped of the normal everyday class day to a screen."

- "Not ONLY do I have to teach it, but I have to VIDEO myself for all to see, and let me tell you, that is not easy."

An interesting point that can be seen in these responses is that only a third of the student teachers talked about remote learning. What were the other two-thirds of the student teachers doing for their practicum at this time? Responses indicate that student teachers almost resent their inability to be as involved in the process as they surely would have in a standard student teaching, face-to-face experience.

- "It makes it difficult to help each student individually as I am not included as well as not knowing what they are studying at the moment."

Interestingly, student teacher respondents made a point to distinguish between what they deemed to be their more successful face-to-face instructional practice during student teaching (prior to school closures) and the remote/online experience thereafter, as though to suggest that they only equated face-to-face instruction as classroom instruction. To that end, respondents described the face-to-face experience with positive connotations:

- "At the beginning of the semester, I was able to connect with the students and understand the struggles they were having in their assignments."

- "During student-teaching I was able to present lessons and help students with work assignments."

- "I could differentiate on a moment's notice to guide the instruction for a positive outcome, and also reteach if necessary."

Feelings

Results of the survey show that the frustration of navigating the transition to online learning during the Spring 2020 student teaching experience manifested itself into a range of other feelings. Responding student teachers expressed disappointment, helplessness, defeat, and personal stress because of the end of face-to-face instruction and schools going to virtual instruction.

- "I also want to take the time to be kind of disappointed in this department."

- "In these times, I feel like I'm merciless to the virus."

- "I feel that there really isn't anything I can do to change my current situation."

- "These challenges are different because I feel unaccomplished."

- "Then, on top of school worries, you also worry about your family and how the virus can affect them."

Student teachers also expressed worry about the student learning experience via remote/online instruction, an otherwise important part of the professional development process for preservice teachers.

- "I struggle with making sure my students are understanding."

- "This has been a challenge to accommodate all students' needs."

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

This question generated a total of 95 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 21 categories. Table 6 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 6.

Table 6
Question 6 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Remote/Online Instruction	18
Experience	14
Responsibility	10

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question 6 included Communication (8), Student Learning (6), Uncertainty (6), Feelings (5), Parental Instruction (4), Assessment (4), Classroom Management (3), Classroom Activities (3), Expectations (3), Classroom Instruction (2), Online Professional Development (2), Student Behaviors (2), Clarity (1) Employment (1), Time (1), Organized (1), Sense of Community (1), and Resources (1).

Remote/Online Instruction

Responding student teachers again expressed the difficulties of transitioning to remote teaching for both themselves and their cooperating teachers. Although several of the responding student teachers perceived their experiences similar to those of their cooperating teachers, respondents highlighted again their inability to participate fully due to restricted access and their observations of disparities of technology proficiency.

- "She is having to learn how to use online classroom tools and such."

- "I'm more tech-savvy."

- "Since I don't have a school district email, I can't sign on to the google classroom account."

- "We are both figuring out all the different technology we have never used before."

- "In her case, she has never used technology outside of the classroom, and she is not familiar with what is out there to deliver her lessons."

Experience

In comparison to their own experience, a majority of responding student teachers admitted that although they were dealing with their frustrations as a result of their inability to participate fully, they recognized that the experience of their cooperating/mentor teachers was much more complicated.

- "The challenges between my cooperating teacher and myself are definitely different. I wasn't considered essential."

- "All of the pressure is on my cooperating teacher."

- "My challenges are not even challenges compared to what my cooperating teacher is going through."

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

This question generated a total of 95 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 22 categories. Table 7 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 7.

Table 7
Question 7 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Remote/Online Instruction	11
Feelings	10
Communication	9

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question #7 included Classroom Instruction (6), Pandemic (4), Requirements (40, Classroom Activities (4), Expectations (3), Experience (3), Adaptation (3), Availability (3), Classroom Management (2), Quit (2), Sense of Community (2), University Coursework (2), Health and Safety (2), Resources (1), Parental Instruction (1), Employment (1), Hobbies (1), and Supervisor Assigned Work (1).

Remote/Online Instruction

Despite what student teacher respondents perceived as the most complex aspect of the Spring 2020 student teaching experience, approximately 30% of the respondents qualified the exposure to remote/online instruction as a point of success.

- "My personal success would be that I would be able to run online classes, and I would not be afraid of jumping into it."

- "Becoming prepared to use all different software to help teach my students…"

- "Being more familiar with technology and not being afraid of using it."

In reflection, respondents viewed their experience as one which afforded them the opportunity to explore new tools in ways to affect student learning in new ways.

- "Creating a mini blackboard for my 5th graders through google classroom…"

- "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."

Feelings

Question 7 sought to encourage student teacher respondents to reflect on their Spring 2020 student teaching experience through a constructive lens. One respondent powerfully recognized that "we are, so far, the only class who has gotten the opportunity to witness how a school district reacts during such an emergency." Other responses to this question generated a series of data emphasizing their feelings about the experience and how those feelings equated to a new definition of success in the practicum.

- "I like to think I was successful as being there as support for all students and [my] mentor teacher."

- "[I] am grateful for the opportunity."

- "My personal success would be learning that teaching/learning can be fun and is versatile."

- "I really fell in love with teaching during my student teaching experience."

- "I qualify my personal success during this pandemic that as a future teacher I learned to be flexible in any kind of situation, also being positive and keeping with our students in any moment."

Communication

Respondents also highlighted the importance of good communication skills during this unparalleled student teaching experience, a skill that, if ignored, might have changed the course of their preparation and disqualified their success in the practicum.

- "As a student-teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, my personal success is being responsible by communicating with my cooperative teacher and discussing the students' progress and challenges while homeschooling."

- "I tried reaching out to my mentor almost on a daily basis even if I was unable to get online initially."

- "I was willing to adapt and communicate with the administration to get what was needed for the students."

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

This question generated a total of 74 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 29 categories. Table 8 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 8.

Table 8
Question 8 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Feelings	11
Remote/Online Instruction	11
Student Learning	5
Adaptation	5

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question #8 were: Resources (4), Change (3), Pandemic (3), Experience (3), Expectations (2), Classroom Activities (2), Student Behaviors (2), Quit (2), Uncertainty (2), Technology Use (2), Family First (2), Prepared (1), Teamwork (1), Hoard (1), Isolation (1), Expendable (1), Creativity (1), Patience (1), Parental Support (1), Time (1), Employment (1), Classroom Management (1), Communication (1), Parental Instruction (1), and University Coursework (1).

Feelings

Question 8 brought us the most diversified, yet the smallest set of data, from responding student teachers. Because student teachers are preservice practitioners, the researchers expected to see responses pertinent to the teaching profession, and lessons learned related to such. Respondents, however, used this as an opportunity to instead detail some of the more personal lessons learned, including the value of personal connections and other matters of importance.

- "I have learned that I miss my kids. I mean, I knew I was going to miss them, but I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye."

- "I lost one of my students. They took their own life and going back to that classroom was painful."

- "I have learned that every day is a blessing."

- "I have learned to control my emotions."

- "Care for everyone closest to you and constantly check on them."

- "…not get frustrated."

- "…how to deal with an extremely stressful situation."

As a point of inspiration and grit, one student teacher respondent noted the realization that "a pandemic doesn't scare teachers away that easily."

Remote/Online Instruction

Responding student teachers did make a point of addressing the obvious novelty of learning how to teach remotely/online during the Spring 2020 student teaching semester. Student teacher respondents acknowledged that "remote teaching is one thing that I would never gotten to experience otherwise." The experience of learning how to teach remotely/online not only offered practice and proficiency but encouraged student teachers to think progressively about creative ways to continue to engage with students to impact student learning.

- "I learned that there is always a way to try and continue teaching to his/her students during a pandemic with different resources."

- "I have learned how to conduct an online face-to-face meeting with 1st graders."

- "Remote teaching has always been used, but with kindergarten, it is a whole different experience."

Student Learning and Adaptation

Data collected and themed found ties between student learning and adaptation. Respondents expressed recognition and appreciation that regardless of the situation, the goal and purpose of education is to help students learn. In this scenario, student teachers credited adaptation as necessary to do to help students learn.

- "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."

- "I believe with the pandemic, I will learn more on how to find creative ways to help my future students to understand the material."

- "There is always a solution to be able to educate the young."

  "Always stay open-minded such as the students, parents, change of classroom, change of a meeting, planning day, absence, weather and now teaching online."

- "There is always a way to still learn."

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

This question generated a total of 75 responses from the 33 student teachers. After a content analysis, responses emerged into the following 13 categories. Table 9 illustrates the categories with the highest response frequency for question 9.

Table 9
Question 9 Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
University Course Work	19
Employment & Uncertainty	19
Prepared	12

Other themes that emerged from the data collected in response to question 9 were Feelings (6), Classroom Instruction (5), Communication (4), Remote Instruction (2), Change (2), Lost Opportunity (2), Teamwork (1), Technology Use (1), Pandemic (1) and Health and Hygiene (1).

University Coursework

All student teacher respondents expressed concern as to whether the shortened/altered student teaching experience would qualify them for teacher certification and/or whether they'd be able to graduate. Common curiosities in response to question 9 asked:

- "Will this prolong my student teacher internship?"

- "Will [I] still be able to graduate accordingly on schedule?"

Clearly, student teachers were uncertain and equally anxious about what this meant for their immediate futures, having entered the student teaching experience with a certain degree of promise and completion but now immersed in a world of ambiguity.

Employment/Uncertainty

Accordingly, student teacher respondents also expressed concerns about the longer-term impact of the experience and perceived difficulty in finding a job after a shortened student teaching experience. Worries centered on whether they were properly prepared for the teaching position, for the job market, and again whether they'd be eligible for the Texas Teaching Certificate.

- "I do not want this to affect my certification."

- "I won't be able to find a job."

- "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."

Preparedness

Responding student teachers expressed their doubts about being prepared for their future classroom. Student teachers expressed fear that potential employers would view them as underprepared due to the shortened and altered student teaching experience of the Spring 2020 semester.

- "My main concern from my personal student teaching experience is that I don't believe I am well prepared enough as I was not able to complete all 15 weeks."

- "I know there is still a lot more I can learn and improve."

- "I know there was so much more to learn and complete while during student-teaching."

- "I am concerned that future employers will not see me fit for a job due to the lack of time in a classroom."

Conclusions

An overall analysis of the data revealed that remote/online instruction, feelings, and experience came through as the most frequent categories across all nine survey questions, indicating that student teacher responses centered in these areas. Table 10 illustrates the results.

Table 10
Overall Emergent Categories & Response Frequency

Categories	Response Frequency
Remote/Online Instruction	146
Feelings	120
Experience	84

Remote/Online instruction

Remote/Online Instruction is relatively new to South Texas K-12 education, and its prominence as a top category in this study is reflective of that reality. Student teachers expressed uncertainty about teaching online but also addressed a level of appreciation for the opportunity.

- "I have had to learn how to conduct an online face-to-face meeting with 1st graders and not get frustrated."

- "It is very difficult to teach young kids over an online platform, but my mentor teacher has taught me to take each login as a success."

- "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."

The results revealed a group of respondents who were unable to continue at full capacity in their assignments due to school district restrictions. Comments from that group indicated a sense of frustration that they were unable to capitalize on the remote/online teaching training opportunity.

- "Now that schooling is done online, it makes it difficult to help each student individually as I am not included as well as not knowing what they are studying at the moment."

- "Student teachers are limited if they cannot have access to their students through online means."

more complicated than was finishing a school year online. In either case, by preventing student teachers from full participation, exposure to the veracities of appropriately serving K-12 schoolchildren in times of crisis was denied.

Respondents expressed various levels of concern about the quality of the training experience and how that might affect eligibility for graduation, certification, and job marketability. These are natural and expected concerns, but what this also reveals is a desire for better communication from educator preparation program leadership (Varela et al., 2020). Granted, during COVID-19, there have been more questions than answers, especially as it relates to the education system. Still, this is a lesson learned for educator preparation programs and policymakers to strengthen the line of communication and to develop a clearly defined plan of action in the event of a future and similar occurrence.

Language in Chapter 228 in Title 19 of the Texas Administrative Code, a section of the code that provides in great detail the requirements for educator preparation program (ownership, governance, curriculum, training, etc.), made room for the possibility of school closures. Specifically, the rule states:

> (d) If the governor declares a state of disaster consistent with the Texas Government Code, §418.014, Texas Education Agency staff may extend deadlines in this chapter for up to 90 days and decrease clinical teaching, internship, and practicum assignment minimums by up to 20 percent as necessary to accommodate persons in the affected disaster areas. (19 Tex. §228.1(d)).

These rules were a result of natural disasters in the state, like Hurricane Harvey in 2017. To that end, a 20% reduction of assignment minimum for clinical teaching amounts to a little less than three weeks. In the Spring 2020 semester, schools closed for three months or more. There were (and remain) no rules or plans in place for events like COVID-19 that would close schools for three months or more, nor to plan for the possibility that closures would move K-12 education online. In fact, Chapter 228.35 specifies that field and clinical experiences take place in "*actual school settings rather than… a virtual school setting*" (19 Tex. §228.35(e)(6); 19 Tex. §228.35(e)(8)(A)) and that observations by field supervisors must be conducted at the candidate's face-to-face assignment (19

Tex. §228.35(g)(1); . As the COVID-19 pandemic has proven in many ways, education is forever changed, and as the experiences of student teaching during COVID-19 have shown, teacher preparation must change as well. Still, rules currently only make an exception to a face-to-face setting for clinical experiences for the 2020-2021 academic year (19 Tex. §228.1(e)). In September 2021, Governor Abbott signed into law Senate Bill 15, which grants funding for students attending school virtually in districts choosing to offer that model (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Thus, the results of this study encourage redevelopment of current rules guiding teacher preparation to better reflect where K-12 education is headed versus where it has been. If ever there were a situation that forced the transcendence of the status quo, this is it.

With that, it is important to note the implications of this study on teacher preparation. The next generation of teachers must be prepared to teach online. Teacher preparation programs must create space for meaningful learning experiences and high-quality practical experiences to understand how to deliver instruction, how to engage students and parents, and how to assess student learning online. Further, the findings of this study urge the need for teacher preparation programs to include an intentional focus on building teachers' capacity to provide learning resources for all students, regardless of their financial situation. Rural schools, like those in which many of this study's participants were assigned for clinical experiences, face socioeconomic challenges that impact student achievement (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Neglecting this obligation would be a disservice to the future of the teacher workforce and the potential impact to influences increases in student achievement.

There is also an opportunity to engage preservice teachers in action research. Student inequities are magnified during school closures; thus providing an equitable learning experience becomes more challenging. Student teachers are in a unique position, being both students and teachers, to research and practice strategies aiming for equitable learning experiences for K-12 students in an online world. The student teaching experience is a perfect occasion to not only practice what has been taught in the teacher preparation sequence, but also to find answers to new problems, to test new strategies, and cycle findings back to educator preparation as an approach to continuous improvement.

Colleges of education and educator preparation programs should also consider strategic partnerships with on-campus resources such as distance learning support and instructional technology services. At institutions of higher education, these staff offer training specifically designed to help educators enhance the online learning experience. Combining that kind of guidance with a developing understanding of student learning and pedagogical strategy, teacher educators and student teachers can work together to tailor to the needs of K-12 students learning in an online world. Further, as a means of developing stronger partnerships with local school districts, colleges of education and educator preparation programs are encouraged to engage K-12 teachers and administrators in the same instructional technology training opportunities. Additionally, collaborative opportunities exist for colleges and programs to aid rural schools in the pursuit of funding opportunities intended to remedy infrastructure and logistical issues in rural areas and to initiate a response to the evident need for new and ongoing professional development benefitting teachers' instructional practice.

Teacher education must be different going forward. Programs must work to design teacher preparation in a way that is both proactive and responsive to the changing dynamics of the K-12 education, not only as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because of the inequities that continue to complicate any ease of transition (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Student teachers deserve the most immersive, authentic, and deliberate opportunity for professional development during their practicum (Varela et al., 2019). Teacher preparation programs in partnership with school districts owe it to themselves and to all students (K-12 and post-secondary education) to create and carefully facilitate that experience (Varela et al., 2020).

The results of this study highlight the various ways in which the student teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic was disconcerting and frustrating. The results also reveal perceptions of the experience as encouraging. To the best of their ability, student teachers rose to the challenge and qualified the experience as an opportune moment to inventory the *new* skills they'll need to succeed in their future classrooms. Without a precedent or plan, teacher preparation programs and student teachers adapted as well as possible alongside their K-12 partners. Going forward, the challenge will be to fortify and progress.

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