

LESSONS LEARNED: EXAMINING K-12 TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This qualitative study used interview data collected from nine K-12 teachers in South Texas to better understand the experience of transitioning to remote/online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon transcribing and coding interview data, six themes emerged: training and resources, teamwork and collaboration, self-care, student connections, positive support, and educator preparation. The findings of this study renew a call to action for policymakers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs alike to revamp and redefine positive and intentional teacher support, especially in times of unprecedented crises and change. Implications and recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: teachers, remote teaching, online teaching, COVID-19

At the beginning of the new decade, educators speculated with positive anticipation what this new era would mean to the world of education. Little did anyone know that teaching and learning as we knew it would soon do an about-face that nobody could have predicted. That change agent was COVID-19, which quickly landed square in the hands of South Texas Pre-K through 12 teachers. To mitigate the spread of the novel virus, schools at all levels of the education system transitioned to remote/online instruction. Although higher education has long offered courses of study online for compulsory elementary, middle, and secondary grade levels, this was new territory. With no precedent or guidebook, and little to no training or preparation, in a matter of a few days, teachers had to learn how to work through the transition by either self-taught methods or via fast and furious professional development offered at school districts.

Arguably, some content areas lend themselves a little more easily online instruction. However, teachers in non-core academic fields, such as physical education (Varea & Gonzalez-Calvo, 2020) and the arts (Kesendere et al.,

2020), found the transition to online learning particularly challenging. The same was true for teachers needing to support students needing special education or language-based services (Marshall et al., 2020). Beyond that, teachers were also faced with additional challenges such as connectivity and technical issues and a lack of technology devices or other resources needed for online learning. With schools closed and Pre-K through 12 children learning in their home environments, a myriad of new challenges came forward. Teachers were now struggling for their students' attention amid social issues such as absentee parents, siblings as caregivers, and various abuses (Blundell et al., 2020; Armitage & Nellums, 2020). The odds of success were stacked against.

With all these aforementioned issues, Pre-K through 12 teachers encountered last spring, the need to better prepare our teachers for these unexpected situations that arise has become evident. Preparations can emanate via professional development, school leaders' support, educational preparation programs training, and lawmakers at the local, state, and national levels. Teachers are the

hope for our future, and they need to be treated as the vital people they are. As the famous teacher astronaut Christa McAuliffe said, “I touch the future – I teach!”

Theoretical Framework

Self-efficacy is the extent to which a person believes in his or her personal capacity to perform or behave in the ways necessary to produce the desired results of a specific task (Bandura, 2010). In the classroom, teachers’ self-efficacy is then found in a teacher’s ability to effectively manage and execute the professional tasks and obligations necessary to affect academic outcomes such as student achievement and motivation (Barni et al., 2019). Ashton & Webb (1986) translate the concept of self-efficacy into personal convictions of capacity to help students learn such that teachers with a high level of perceived self-efficacy make greater efforts and can persevere when encountering difficulties, but those with lower levels of perceived self-efficacy invest less effort and are more likely to feel defeated in the face of adversity.

The concept of self-efficacy then boils down to the notion of the self-fulfilled prophecy (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007) such that if a teacher does not expect to be successful, he or she will not be and will easily resign to feelings of failure at the first sign of difficulty or complication. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) clarified that self-efficacy is a motivational idea based on one’s perception of competency rather than a concretely assessed or evaluated level of proficiency or ability. Teacher self-efficacy can be either be positively or negatively influenced by levels of experience, knowledge, and training (Morris et al., 2017), verbal persuasion from students, parents, colleagues, or administrators, or physiological arousal: joy, stress, etc. (Dellinger et. al, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

Research on teacher self-efficacy expands to the collective seeking to identify efficacy expectations of the team or faculty group of teachers toward an established goal (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Thus, where individual teacher efficacy is specific to the individual teacher’s success, collective teacher efficacy may serve as a determinant of school-level achievement and goal attainment (Bandura, 1993; Goodard et al., 2000). Self-efficacy theory serves as the theoretical framework for this study in that the research attempts to discover teachers’

experiences of teaching under unprecedented circumstances.

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (2010) theorized that individuals develop and gauge self-efficacy based on their interpretation of the following primary sources: mastery experience (knowledge, training, professional development, practice, and experience), vicarious experience (perceptions of support and collegial relationships, performance comparison, and observation), social persuasions (external validations, feedback, and discouraging or encouraging messages) and physiological and affective states (stress, fatigue, mood, and anxiety). Ballantyne and Retell, (2020) found linkages between teacher self-efficacy and emotional burnout and the propensity of teachers to leave the profession. This study aims to address a gap in the literature as to the impact of changes to the education system on teacher self-efficacy, namely the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its related shift to remote instruction. A review of the literature offers a summary of existing knowledge about the teaching profession as a precursor to this study and its findings.

Mastery Experience- Teacher Training

Morris et al. (2017) found that teachers’ knowledge plays an important role in beliefs about teacher self-efficacy such that teachers who believe they were well prepared have a more positive perception of their capabilities in the classroom, and teachers who are afforded more training opportunities are more confident than those who are not. The quality and design of training and professional development also impact perceptions of self-efficacy, favoring hands-on and immersive experiences over lecture and theory (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Thus, Ingersoll et al. (2014) contend that the linkage between quality teacher preparation and teacher retention is real. The researchers’ analysis found that above other characteristics such as the type of educator preparation program, there were significant linkages between differences in substance, quality, and design of teacher preparation and the degree to which teachers leave their assignments. It can be concluded then that teacher burnout is linked to a result of poorly trained or inadequately

prepared teachers (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Ingersoll et al., 2014). Teacher preparation is too important to dismiss as secondary to the goals of education. Instead, it is a vital piece of the conversation on school and learning improvement strategies (Tobery-Nystrom, 2011).

The concern is that the assumption that teaching is technical work (Peck et al., 2010; Hamel & Merz, 2005). The numerous responsibilities of teachers function as the root of various teacher frustrations evidenced in research and substantiate a perceived disconnect between teacher preparation and the realities of practice in the teaching profession (Melnick & Meister, 2008; Panesar, 2010; Barrett-Kutcy & Schulz, 2006). Teachers are caught between the demands of the school curriculum, state and federal regulations, parent concerns, and the diverse needs of their students. Concerns exist as to the extent to which preservice teacher preparation, and inservice teacher training and professional development tie theory into practice (Panesar, 2010; Flores & Day, 2006; Fletcher, 2013), making it difficult for teachers to balance responsibilities, important job tasks like classroom management and instructional workloads, with survival and performance.

Vicarious Experience- Support and Collegial Relationships

A teacher's work is also dependent on interpersonal relationships: connections with students, colleagues, and parents (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the dynamic and possibility of human interactions. Where remote instruction means that teachers and students do not share the same physical teaching/learning space, there are significant adverse impacts on personal connection and interactions (Hebebcı et al., 2020). Although the decision to engage in remote instruction/online teaching upon school closures was, given the circumstances, likely the best choice to maintain some level of educational engagement, this move caused a reduction in student motivation, damage to the student-teacher relationship, and has also shown sociological/psychological impacts (Hebebcı et al., 2020).

Lack of instructional and socioemotional support from administrators is also found to be one of the key contributors to teacher turnover (Stanley, 2020). Thus, the capacity of school leaders to strengthen school culture and guide instructional quality is imperative. To that end, the

role of the school principal has evolved to a priority focus on instructional leadership. Hallinger and Murphy (2012) define the concept of instructional leaders as the "influence process through which leaders identify direction for the school, motivate staff, and coordinate school and classroom-based strategies aimed at improvements in teaching and learning" (p. 7). Still, COVID-19 caused another shift in the role of school leaders who now find themselves tending to the needs of students, teachers, and parents more than ever before (Pollock, 2020). Now responsible for health, prevention, emotional wellness, and online learning (Pollock, 2020), Harris and Jones (2020) find that because school leadership has changed, most leadership preparation programs will find that they are gravely detached from the challenges facing school leaders today. As a result of the pandemic and the lasting impacts that can be expected, crisis and change management will prove to be new essential skills of the school leader. Accordingly, and to best support campus-level staff and students alike, school leader self-care must also be of priority focus (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Social Persuasions- Validating the Profession

Research finds that views of the role of teachers are socially constructed often from personal experience (Capel et al., 2005). Teachers fulfill academic roles as well as social roles. Ultimately, teachers are responsible for student learning. To achieve this, teachers plan lessons, assess student knowledge, differentiate instruction, communicate with colleagues and parents, manage classrooms, and mentor students. The profession, however, faces a long history of challenges to their status as professionals, a narrative that either attacks or admires the teaching profession. (Mundy et al., 2012) attribute the marginalization of teachers as professionals to long-standing ideals that have "reduced teachers to the role of service provider, rather than a professional (p. 2). Despite efforts to validate teachers as professionals given their intellect and training, and despite evidence to suggest that teachers are the most crucial component of influence on student achievement in schools, teachers' professionalism is undervalued (Mundy et al., 2012). Attention is often focused on the negative facets of the teaching profession, painting failures as a direct result of the quality of the teacher force (Allen et al., 2020).

Goldstein (2015) wrote that as evidenced by a long record of low pay and blame for much of society's shortcomings, efforts to improve the professional status of teachers are repeatedly undercut. The same holds true today. Where in the teaching profession, professionalism is generally measured in terms of standards, accountability, and performance, the concept of professionalism itself is subject to perception and is, as a result, predisposed to internal and external influences (Sachs, 2016). In fact, research finds evidence to show that the COVID-19 pandemic and its related effects on the education system only amplified teachers' relentless work in urging society to view them as professionals (Asbury & Kim, 2020). Teachers now find themselves fighting for professional autonomy as those best positioned to know, understand, and adjust to the needs of their students, rather than have imposed upon them externally originated ideals (González et al., 2020; Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020).

Physiological and Affective States- Stress

A teacher's ability to cope with stress is directly correlated with their overall well-being (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2020). Conversely then, a teacher's inability to cope with stress results in strain on personal physical and mental health, and ultimately professional burnout (Herman et al., 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Add to that teachers' diminished perceptions of self-efficacy resulting from low supervisory support and low student motivation, and what results is a recipe for incentive to quit (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). By then, the damage to the student learning experience is done. Herman et al. (2018) found that teachers with high stress and low ability to cope have the most detrimental effects on student outcomes.

In almost a perfect summation of teaching in the year 2020, "pandemic learning is complex and contradictory" (Gewertz, 2020, p. 1). The impacts of COVID-19 on the education system are abundant. Research suggests that teachers are working to navigate a multitude of new complexities in their profession (Alea et al., 2020; Primdahl et al., 2020; Santi et al., 2020). Where the mission of public education in Texas is to "ensure that all Texas children have access to a quality education that enables them to achieve their potential and fully participate now and in the future in the social, economic, and educational opportunities of our state and nation" (TEC 4.001, 1995),

one aspect that is clearly lacking under the COVID-19 pandemic is access. Beyond the concerns of digital inequities, with schools closed and learning occurring online, access is limited for those students who also rely on the system for nutritional, physical, and health services (Masonbrink et al., 2020).

For teachers, the complexity of adjusting to remote/online teaching so quickly was compounded by problems found in a lacking availability of resources, network access and connectivity issues, minimal planning and implementation, a lack of understanding of how to evaluate student learning and determining effective ways of communicating with parents (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). Before the pandemic, one of the primary causes of teacher stress was workload (Catalan et. al., 2019). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher workloads increased as they worked to understand how to humanize online learning (Kaden, 2020) and reinvent their craft (Gewertz, 2020).

There is a need to further understand what teachers have experienced in the transition from the traditional classroom to remote instruction/online teaching, and how those experiences influence their feelings of self-efficacy. Results serve to inform efforts for meaningful change for continuous improvements to benefit the teaching profession. Especially as a result of COVID-19, and in anticipation of the ever-evolving trials of the profession, this work is necessary as careful attention to preserving the self-efficacy of teachers in the classrooms of our future. This study sought to better understand the experience of transitioning to remote instruction/online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study renew a call to action for policymakers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs alike to revamp and redefine positive and intentional teacher support, especially in times of unprecedented crises and change.

Methodology

Qualitative research seeks to understand participants in their natural environment and to understand the setting as a potential data source (Creswell, 2009). A largely investigative process of researcher focus on a social phenomenon, qualitative research requires a process of comparing, contrasting, cataloging, and coding (Creswell,

2009) as a means of constructing shared meaning of the experience. The focus of qualitative research then is on participants' perceptions and experiences, and the way they make sense of their lives (Lincoln. & Guba, 1985).

Phenomenology studies include explorations on the perceptions of its participants as experienced from the first-person point of view (Creswell, 2016). Additionally, the purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the universal essence of individuals' experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This qualitative phenomenological study used interview research as an approach to better understand the experience of transitioning to remote instruction/online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers and the immediate need to transition from a traditional classroom setting to virtual instruction as a result of the health crisis response to COVID-19?

Instrumentation

The researchers used semi-structured interviews conducted virtually using an online web conferencing platform to collect data. The interview consisted of 18 questions developed by the researchers and aligned to the established theoretical framework's primary sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experience, social persuasions, and physiological and affective states. Questions allowed flexibility for follow-up and/or clarification questions as appropriate. The questions were as follows:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What subjects and grade level do you teach?
3. What was your initial reaction to the news that you would need to move all instruction to an online format?
4. What are you finding as the challenges of this immediate need to transfer all instruction to an online format?
5. What has been helpful and/or who has been instrumental in making this work?
6. What concerns have the parents of your students expressed, and which concerns did you not anticipate?

7. What resources are you and your school district lacking that might have made this a seamless transition?
8. What do you miss the most right now?
9. What is it like now teaching without the immediate anticipation of STAAR testing?
10. With more planning and anticipation of online instruction, what might you have done differently?
11. What do you believe are the challenges that might prevent students from learning effectively during this time?
12. What student inequities have you seen come to the forefront through this experience so far?
13. What are you doing for self-care?
14. What are you most proud of in this experience?
15. What advice do you have for your students?
16. How will this change how you teach in the future?
17. How can educator preparation be better designed to meet this need for teachers who may experience this again in the future?
18. What do you hope policymakers and educational leaders will understand about your work and the teaching profession when this is all over?

Recruited participants were contacted via email and provided with a copy of the consent to participate. The form assured participants that anonymity was the top priority of the study. Upon the consent of each participant, interviews were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and conducted virtually. At the start of each interview, the researchers again clarified the intent of the research and asked participants to again confirm their willingness to participate. Participants were also asked for permission to record the interview to allow for transcription and coding at a later point.

Sample

To best capture the most authentic and realistic participant account needed for this study, the researchers used purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on their current service as teachers in the Pre-K through 12 education system in the spring season of 2020, the height of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the South Texas region. Participants selected were employed at school districts in South Texas which were forced to close

and transition to remote/online teaching. A total of nine teachers were included as participants in this study.

Data Collection

Participant interviews were conducted at a mutually agreeable time and virtually, in accordance with social distancing recommendations for safety and health. Prior to the start of each virtual interview, the researchers requested the permission of each participant to record the session to enable transcription upon its conclusion. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The researchers transcribed each interview to enable the process of analysis, coding, and theming.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative data analysis can best be described as an ongoing process requiring the researcher(s) to move deeper and deeper into understanding the data. For this study, data analysis occurred in multiple phases. During the interview process, the researchers analyzed participant responses, connecting data collected to prior interviews. When necessary, during an interview, the researchers asked clarification questions to ensure exact understanding of participant experiences. To ensure the accuracy of the data collected, recorded interviews were immediately transcribed. Upon the conclusion of all nine scheduled interviews, the researchers engaged in a prolonged and repeated process of reviewing, processing, and analyzing the transcriptions to identify emergent themes and patterns.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Reliability and validity in qualitative research are developed through a four-pronged process of establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Accordingly, the study was designed to include the perspectives of only those participants employed as current teachers working in South Texas school districts in grades Pre-K through 12 during the COVID-19 pandemic who could provide authentic details about their experiences. In an effort to further establish reliability and validity, the researchers used member checks, asking participants of the study to confirm the findings, and provided opportunities for further comment. The researchers further engaged in peer debriefing to compare and negotiate coding results which

were independently derived and solicited external auditors to review the data and offer an objective assessment of the findings.

Participants

A total of nine teachers were interviewed for this study. All participants were current teachers in Pre-K through 12 classroom assignments in school districts located in South Texas. Participants represented a broad range of experience, spanning from 2 to 19 years of teaching, and a variety of subject areas. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms are used, and only summary demographic details are provided.

At the point of the interview, June was set to complete her 12th year as an elementary teacher. She described her initial reaction to news of the need to transition to online teaching as one of anticipation stating, “I knew this was going to happen.”

Gloria, also an elementary teacher, was in her 6th year of teaching. When she learned her district would also be making the move to online teaching, Gloria admitted feeling “surprised, shocked, scared.”

Jess has been a teacher for seven years in multiple grade levels. At the time of the study, she was teaching in elementary as well. Jess reported confusion upon learning of the transition to remote instruction, unable to conceptualize how it would work simply asking, “HOW!?”

Marisol described herself as an early childhood teacher with over 19 years of experience. Despite that experience, Marisol admitted to feeling “worry, concern, fear” about teaching online.

Anna has been a teacher for 13 years, most of those in an elementary setting. Upon learning that she would need to transition to online teaching, Anna said she was worried, “but of course willing to do what needed to be done. I never anticipated having to do this in my career, in my life. Never.”

Leslie has had a range of experiences in subject areas and grade levels in her 19 years of teaching. During the study period, Leslie was also assigned to the elementary level and had “no vision” for how online teaching would work for her or her students.

Melissa has been a teacher for 16 years in a variety of grade levels and is currently teaching remotely at the elementary level. Melissa described her “state of shock” when she learned her district would also be moving to remote instruction/online teaching.

Dolly admitted to feeling “overwhelmed at first” when she learned she would have to move online too. She has been a middle school teacher for eight years.

Elena described herself as a novice teacher in her 2nd year of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a secondary level teacher, Elena stated she was confused about what online teaching meant for her and her teaching field and was “convinced it wasn’t going to work.”

Results

The results of this study revealed six themes as lessons learned stemming from the experiences of Pre-K through 12 teachers who transitioned from the traditional classroom setting to remote instruction/online teaching upon school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

Upon a thorough and repeated analysis of the data collected, the researchers identified six emergent themes to describe the experiences of teachers transitioning from the traditional classroom setting to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic: training and resources, teamwork and collaboration, self-care, student connections, positive support, and educator preparation.

Training and Resources

Training and resources proved to be a dominant theme in the data. A prevalent concern of most participants in this study was the lack of training needed to transition quickly, readily, and effectively to remote instruction or online teaching. The data revealed this to be not only a result of skills training needed to proficiently use online teaching tools, but also a concern about the lack of resources needed to make it work. June stated,

“We were lacking the actual support and training. I think that if we’d already had some training it would have prevented a lot of frustration, heartache, tears,

ACTUAL tears. I just think some basic operative training would have gone a long way.”

Jess agreed stating, “we need to be better prepared with training.” Sharing the sentiment, Leslie was initially concerned that her teaching field was not a priority focus which meant she had even fewer resources and less guidance regarding her best next steps. She explained, “The district, I guess admin above us, was focused on core classes. They were only focused on core classes, so I didn’t have any guidance about how I was going to do [her subject] online, my lessons, for all students.”

With more warning, Leslie admits she “would have definitely sought tutorials, training, so that I could navigate Google Classroom without having to wait for someone to guide me.”

Anna expressed a deeper concern in her assessment of the lack of training and resources she experienced in the transition. She said, “we really didn’t have much set up. All content cannot be delivered online. Not the way we’re doing it right now. This is not sustainable.”

Teamwork and Collaboration

Another theme revealed in the data collected speaks to participants’ appreciation and need for good teamwork and collaboration. Especially in what proved to be a time of crisis and massive change, teachers reported a sense of assurance and comfort in the ability to lean on their teams and their leaders for support through the transition to online teaching. Gloria commended her colleagues and district stating, “I’m really proud of my district. For the most part, everyone is on the same page, and we transitioned as successfully as we could, together.”

Melissa expressed a direct appreciation for her district’s efforts to keep a strong team even if socially distanced.

“We need that time together. We are still having that form of communication, which is wonderful because without it, I would feel lost. We all want to be on the same page because the lack of communication would be our biggest downfall, and the community would see that.”

Comparing her experience to prior workplaces, she elaborated that “all the teachers working together and problem-solving and collaborating....that part has really

taken my breath away because I've experienced other types of districts and this has just been a breath of fresh air."

Jess expressed regret that social distancing requirements also changed what teamwork and collaboration looked like. She said she missed "the interaction with coworkers, you know, getting face to face and saying, 'okay you're doing this in your subjects, let me do this in mine so we can correlate and the kids can have cross-curricular learning opportunities.'" Still, Jess admitted to feeling inspired by the dedication of her team to one another and appreciating the "passion that we have as a team, as a unit. Honestly, something I have never experienced to this level in my 12 years of teaching."

Although teacher collaboration is not a novel concept, Anna explained that only as a result of the pandemic, this was the first time her team collaborated with other elementary schools in the district. That collaborative experience revealed intra-district inequities that she was not aware were present.

"The fact that we have to collaborate with other campuses makes it hard too because what we are seeing is that we were so far ahead of what they were doing with their kids, so we have to scale back. One teacher pushed back quite a bit because the assignments we had planned were going to be too much for her kids."

Self-Care

During the interview, participants were asked to describe their personal self-care routine. Most all participants had no plan or routine for self-care. Dolly said, "self-care is not quite working out." Marisol simply stated, "Oh, that's the last on my plate. Right now, I don't have personal time. I'm always their teacher."

In fact, some participants said they had not realized they were lacking self-care until that question was posed. Almost jokingly, Jess asked, "What's that?" and then answered, "NO. I have never hated a computer more in my life." Further expressing frustration with the uncertainty and complexity of the times, she said, "I don't want to hear that it's hard for you. It's hard for me, too. It's hard for everyone!"

June tried her best to think about what she could qualify as self-care. After a long pause, she said, "I

unplugged this weekend- so, unplugging and drawing a line." Gloria agreed stating that her best effort to attempt self-care was to "try to eat healthy and set boundaries. Know when to turn it off."

Anna also struggled to identify a self-care routine, answering instead that she "was up past midnight trying to get all the activities loaded" for the following day. She continued, "it's really a 24/7 job. I try to, I mean cook dinner and try to relax with my family, but now that you mentioned it, I realize not much. I'm not doing much for myself."

Family focus resonated with Melissa's response. "You know, I'm a mother first before I'm a teacher," and continued almost with conviction stating, "I have my own family in my own home so getting on Zoom with my students, I have to balance that, and you know they need the laptop as well, so that's a personal challenge I have."

Leslie's response offered a glimpse into what 'normal' teacher life was like before the pandemic. Her response indicated that what she lacked before the pandemic and its impact on her career was time. When asked to describe her self-care routine now, she proudly reported:

"I've started exercising again! I mean, I am realizing how busy life was. And now our whole family dynamic has changed. We're able to do things we've always wanted to do—exercising, cooking, arts and crafts, and just making time matter. It's been good."

Student Connections

Data collected clearly revealed that teachers highly value the connection they work hard to have with each of their students. When asked what they most missed during the online teaching experience, the number one response was their students. Melissa said, "I miss them, and I think about them all the time." June simply wished she could tell them to "just do the very very best they can because that's all we can expect of them. I'm sorry (begins to cry)...um...and just for them to know that we miss them."

Each participant became emotional at this point in the interview. Each participant talked about how important their students are to them not only in the classroom but even more so in what they described as this stressful experience. Marisol talked about the students she worries about most.

“I have two CPS cases in my class, I know I’m their comfort. And of course, those are the two students I don’t hear from in the past three weeks. So that’s scary. Just that everyday connection. The hugs. Around my legs, you know? I miss them.”

Positive Support

Participants talked about how important it is that they have positive support from their administration and policymakers to effectively do their jobs no matter the circumstances. Leslie explained when that isn’t present, it is counterproductive to the mission. Speaking about policymakers, she said “I think their expectations are so high, but they don’t realize, I mean they focus more on the test than the student needs.”

However, when positive support is present, participants indicate that they feel safe, protected, and encouraged. In appreciation, Gloria said, “My superintendent has been open to all suggestions, extremely flexible and understanding.” Melissa commended her administration which “has really emphasized that we need to come from a place of understanding and love because we are multitasking at home.”

Marisol, who was initially worried about how to effectively deliver her content to her students, was relieved when she realized that she had positive support from her leadership. “The administration has been beyond supportive of everything we are doing.” She added, “The district has been really proactive. They’ve uploaded training, they’ve grouped us with other teachers so we can collaborate because they felt if we web a foundation with our schools the instruction will be strong. They’re trying, and I love it.”

Educator Preparation

Results of the coding process revealed educator preparation as an emergent theme. Participants took the opportunity to use this experience to detail what educator preparation programs should be included in the training sequence for new and upcoming teachers. Anna said, “Programs need to use this to change how they prepare teachers. It’s stressful, so some preparation beforehand will be very helpful.”

Reflecting on her years of experience after completing the teacher training program, June said,

“I mean even before this, I would have said that you know, you can sit through the educational courses and yes, you are learning the pedagogy, and you’re learning things like that, but there’s a lot of things that you get in the classroom, and you’re like nobody taught me how to do this!”

Agreeing that that is probably most true at this moment in education, Marisol said educator preparation programs “gotta incorporate technology, like instructional technology, not learning how to use the smartboard. The smartboard ain’t doing nothing for me right now.” Gloria also talked about the need for a more meaningful focus on instructional technologies training stating, “It’s more than smartboards and Elmos. It’s knowing how to build and deliver a class online, communicating with parents through technology. It’s just a new way.”

Jess made a point to highlight the ability to communicate with parents as well, stating, “I feel like all teachers need to have customer service skills, especially when it comes to talking with parents.” Speaking to the value noted earlier in the interview about teamwork and collaboration, Jess also suggested that educator preparation programs must work harder to emphasize good teamwork, “like in groups, PLCs. Like in my 4th grade team, we are a total of four teachers. Two of us work together really well, and the other two...I don’t know what they do. They’re not interested in collaborating. Regardless of how you feel about each other, you have to know how to work on a team.”

Marisol also addressed a co-curricular focus in that educator preparation programs should include preparation pertinent to the “soft skills, how to communicate with each other, how to do conflict resolution with each other.” She worried that those soft skills “are being thrown out the window right now because we are so concentrated on core academics.”

Discussion

This qualitative study used interview data collected from nine Pre-K-12 teachers in South Texas to better understand the experience of transitioning to remote instruction/online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon transcribing and coding interview data, six themes emerged: training and resources, teamwork and

collaboration, self-care, student connections, positive support, and educator preparation. The findings of this study renew a call to action for policymakers, school leaders, and educator preparation programs alike to revamp and redefine positive and intentional teacher support as a means of increasing and preserving high levels of teacher self-efficacy, especially in times of unprecedented crises and change.

Mastery Experiences- Training and Resources

Participants spoke to their frustrations as a result of a lack of training and resources needed to have been better prepared for the transition to remote/online teaching. A teacher's comfort is in the classroom. COVID-19 related school closures forced schools to swiftly enter the world of online teaching and learning evidently without proper training, preparation, and in some cases, without the appropriate tools needed. Though participants did reference the minimal technology training opportunities included in educator preparation program experiences (smartboard, Elmo, etc.), all noted that none of that had any impact on how prepared they were to build and deliver an online class. Participants also expressed concern that they lacked the knowledge and training needed to create and facilitate an online class that was developmentally appropriate for their students. Marisol was especially concerned about this as an early childhood teacher. She said, "how do I keep it developmentally appropriate for pre-k? How do we teach basic skills that you need your hands for through a screen?" For teachers, it wasn't just about building a class online. The transition to remote/online teaching also meant they had to quickly identify the deliver the content in impactful ways that work for their students at various levels of readiness.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event coupled with incredible ramifications that changed the landscape of education. As of this writing, many schools are still engaged in remote/online teaching, some now complicated with teaching online and students face-to-face simultaneously. Teachers need and deserve training to do so effectively and are owed the resources to do their jobs well. Inservice teachers desire thorough and ongoing training and support on instructional technologies beyond relying on (and potentially overwhelming) the resident technology gurus on their campuses. School districts must work to provide deliberate, intentional, and formal training

and professional development. Educator preparation programs are uniquely positioned to have observed this anomaly from a distance. In anticipation of what will prove to be a wave of massive changes to the teacher training sequence, preservice teachers must be trained and equipped with the tools, knowledge, and skills to successfully engage in remote/online teaching, too. Additional comments as to recommendations for improvements in educator preparation are included later in this discussion

To that end, another theme that emerged from the data collected focused on educator preparation. The researchers found it an appropriate time to ask participants what they believed was important for educator preparation programs to know using their experience with the transition to remote/online teaching. The participants were, after all, uniquely positioned to offer first-hand accounts of their experience to inform educator preparation program leaders what teaching is really like in this new era. The data revealed a call to improve teacher preparation to better incorporate instructional technologies. Preservice teachers must know, understand, and have good practice with technological resources beyond the tools they might expect to find in a traditional classroom. Aspiring teachers must be equipped with the relevant skills and proficiencies needed to reach all students across various modes of instruction.

This may prove to be a tall order. In fact, June admits that "there's a lot of things that I feel, um, are truly just baptism by fire when you get into the classroom." Still, participants offered some ideas to help get programs started. Elena suggested that educator preparation programs include opportunities for teacher trainees to:

"work in groups where one is the teacher and the others are the students with multiple learning needs, and the teacher has to build and deliver an online class. And then they switch and do that multiple times with different content. You know, so they all get the experience."

Participants also talked about the importance of good communication and interpersonal skills. Whether referencing parent communication or the right disposition for teamwork, participants suggested a stronger emphasis on developing teachers as good communicators.

Vicarious Experiences- Teamwork and Collaboration

The findings of this study also shed light on the value of strong teacher teams, teamwork, and healthy and frequent opportunities for collaboration. Using words such as “community” and “lean on each other,” participants talked about how important it was that teachers had opportunities to work together, to observe and engage with one another, to share ideas, and to learn from each other through this novel experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants reported feeling reassured and encouraged to push forward despite the adversities because of their strong teams and as a result of their bountiful opportunities to collaborate.

To ignore the significance of teacher teamwork and collaboration is to ignore the potential for increases in student achievement. In fact, in the absence of strategic opportunities for collaboration, students suffer. Anna spoke about her experience working with a neighboring elementary school within her district—the first time district-wide grade level teachers gathered to discuss curriculum and instructional practices, only as a result of the transition to online teaching. During that collaborative opportunity, Anna began to piece together the potential causes for the disparities in student achievement within the district and formed alliances with struggling teachers to improve instructional approaches. Thus, school districts must work to ensure that as much and as often as possible, teachers across the district are provided with opportunities to collaborate with one another, to strategize and remedy areas of weakness, and to align instructional practice with success-proven approaches. To that end, it is worth noting that collaboration, even across district lines, is a recommended best practice. In fact, participants of this study commended teachers all over the country who jumped on social media platforms to share their ideas. If collaboration then knows no boundaries, then school districts and leaders must recognize and seize those opportunities in the best interest of student learning and to nurture a healthy and balanced work environment for teachers.

Social Persuasion- Positive Support

Almost as though in a direct call to administrators and education leaders, participants also discussed the importance of positive support. Data collected and analyzed suggests that teachers need to know they have support,

encouragement, and strong leadership from their administration. All participants in this study emphasized that they were appreciative of the level of support they felt from their administration, even though many of those school leaders were themselves lost and lacked confidence in the transition to remote/online teaching (Pollock, 2020). It is worth noting that good leadership does not mean having all the answers. Good leadership simply means a willingness to stand alongside your team in their time of need and a commitment to work together in taking the next best steps. Where participants used words such as “flexible” and “understanding” to describe what they treasured most about their administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study found evidence to support the notion that school leadership must work through change together with their team. Teachers desire to feel valued as professionals, particularly in times of uncertainty.

Physiological and Affective State- Self-Care and Student Connections

With increasing focus on mental health, perhaps one of the most concerning themes that arose from the data was self-care. Participants reported very little attention to self-care. As the saying goes, “you can’t pour from an empty cup.” As in any other profession or aspect of life, self-care is important for personal mental health, professional contentment, gratification, purposefulness, and happiness. Palmer (2019) wrote that by failing to use skills and strategies for self-care, teachers may experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, secondary traumatic stress, and burnout. Participants gave evidence to suggest that their inability to engage in self-care activities is due to either a lack of time or because they are too busy to think about working it into their schedules. Perhaps more so now, as a result of the transition to remote/online teaching, teachers are overworked, overwhelmed, and currently undertrained and short-resourced. These stressors compound the damage resulting from a lack of prioritizing the self and mental health.

The findings of this study support the contention for professional development activities targeting teacher self-care and mental health. Especially in times of crises and change, teachers need meaningful strategies to best take care of themselves, their health, and their well-being. Where research finds that teachers who neglect self-care are less likely to perform well in the classroom, less likely

to want to engage in collaboration and teamwork, and more likely to have a negative impact on students (Iancu et al., 2018), school leaders are encouraged to create space, time, and effort to positively support their staff. Some ideas include ensuring a healthy work environment, fun and engaging opportunities for social interactions, fitness and nutrition programs in the workplace, etc. The researchers recognize that school leaders are not solely responsible for teacher self-care but are well-positioned to aid in that aspect. With that said, teachers must learn to, as Gloria suggested, “unplug” and “draw the line.” Teachers must learn to prioritize their personal and mental health as a direct contributor to their professional performance and satisfaction.

One of the unique elements in the data analysis revealed that teachers missed their students. Arguably compared to the other themes, this is not a theme that might have emerged if the circumstances were different, and teachers were working in their traditional classroom settings. In such a case, they would not miss their students because they’d be in the classroom alongside them. Nonetheless, it highlights the priorities that teachers value about their profession: students and student connections. It can be concluded that because teachers value student connections and, under these circumstances, those connections were interrupted if not disconnected, participants’ professional contentment and personal mental health were impacted. Positive student-teacher relationships have incredible implications for students learning and student achievement, yes. But as evidenced in the data collected, those student-teacher relationships are also a source of teachers’ professional and personal validation. The transition to remote/online teaching left participants longing for the chance to connect with their students on a personal level, something that they initially perceived as difficult in an online setting. Melissa noted, “I do get to see some of them, but it’s not the same. We’re limited in our time together because we have one hour to do our Zoom session, and then that’s it.”

The challenge now is to find constructive and meaningful ways to develop and maintain positive student connections in an online learning environment. The transition to online teaching in March/April 2020 interrupted what student connections may have already been established. The school year ended with many of those students and teachers never actually seeing each other

again. The current academic year began virtually, which likely complicated teachers’ ability to *establish* positive relationships with their students. An important aspect then of training, professional development, and educator preparation will need to be focused on building and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships in an online environment. Teachers must now know how to get to know their students on a personal level, recognize and understand their interests and disinterests, and tailor to their learning needs and motivators from a social distance.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is recommended to understand the complexities of teaching online and in-person simultaneously. More research is needed to identify pedagogy best designed to effect increases in student learning when a teacher is trying to be present and engaged in two places at the same time. The COVID-19 pandemic made this a reality at all levels of education. Thus, investigations at both the Pre-K through 12 and higher education levels are appropriate. To that end, additional research may seek to explore compulsory online education.

The findings of this study suggest that, given the convolutions apparent in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, additional studies on teacher self-care and mental health are warranted. Given existing research, that shows this to be a major contributor to teacher burnout, and the findings of this study that indicate that teachers do not make time (or have time) for self-care, more research in this arena is vital to protecting the future of the teaching profession.

Conclusion

The 2020-2021 academic year began online for many school districts across the country. Research already finds that the impact of the COVID-19 on the teaching profession reflects decreased enrollment in teacher training programs and a propensity of current teachers to want to leave the classroom (Lachlan et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). In South Texas, a region already fraught with teacher shortages, some teachers instead opted to take advantage of options for early retirement or to resign rather than to risk their own personal health in the classroom or to continue engaging in online

learning. Education simply cannot afford more teachers leaving because they do not have the confidence of proper training, support, or mental health to continue effectively. Students at this critical point in time cannot afford to be in learning in classrooms, physically or otherwise, from teachers who are worried, overworked, stressed, and/or too tired to try anymore.

Despite the adversities, the fact is that teachers can, and as the results of this study have shown, teachers did. As a tribute to teachers' tireless work of heart, it is worth the time, effort, and energy to take these findings as lessons learned and turn them into resources for investing in our most precious guardians of the future.

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