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COVID-19, Middle Level Teacher Candidates, and Colloquialisms: Navigating Emergency Remote Field Experiences

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Abstract

COVID-19 challenged teacher educators and teacher candidates in ways we could have never imagined. Colloquialisms regarding the move from educator preparation to practice shifted from common truths to dynamic considerations in light of the pandemic and transition to emergency remote teaching and learning. In this essay, we share our experiences working with middle level teacher candidates during the COVID-19 pandemic. We identify the ways in which our teacher candidates rose to the challenge and demonstrated critical thinking, creativity and compassion beyond our prior expectations of rising middle level educators amidst a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty.

Introduction

As teacher educators, we begin our field experience courses sharing a few truths regarding the reality our teacher candidates will soon face in the classroom: No two days will be alike; It's time to put your education to action; Plan your lessons, but be prepared to make adjustments; Relationships and community are key to the classroom. We spend weeks unpacking these colloquialisms with candidates as they share their experiences in the middle level classroom. And, as expected, every semester brings with it a variety of unexpected twists and turns. Yet, the spring semester of 2020 would challenge our candidates and ourselves in ways we could have never anticipated, putting our yearly colloquialisms to the test.

Despite our research and writing on virtual 6-12 education, our specific institutional programs currently do not include undergraduate courses devoted to the preparation of online teaching. And so, when we found ourselves thrust into emergency remote teaching, we felt it imperative to support and guide our candidates in this transition. We wanted to provide them a safe space to express concerns and work collectively to craft instructional strategies that would ease this shift for everyone. As such, we devoted the majority of our virtual weekly seminars to the discussion of candidate concerns and experiences. In considering the direction and outcomes of our conversations, we share insights as we strive to reflect and enhance our current

work and attention to the needs of future middle level educators.

“No two days will be alike.”

One of the joys, and anticipated fears, of entering the teaching field is the fact that every day is a unique experience. And, while we may not know what each day will entail, we generally accept a particular pattern, repetition or rhythm to the day. The moment our field experiences transitioned to the online context, this reality took on a deeper, more nuanced meaning. Suddenly, we lost all routine. We *all* found ourselves immediately overwhelmed. As teacher educators familiar with virtual education, we were quick to identify ways of transitioning our seminar to the online format and cognizant that this would be a semester of trial and error. Our candidates, understandably, were concerned for what this new reality would mean for their progress towards certification and licensure, their connections and engagement with students, approaches to teaching and assessment, and more so, what it would mean for their learners.

It was certain that no two days would be alike as we shared how our experiences were evolving, and along with it, our emotions, relationships, and understandings of adolescent needs in a time of trauma. Some candidates transitioned from a state of consistent stress, to one of creativity and energetic optimism for their newfound abilities in navigating a virtual space. For example, several candidates immediately sought out ways of transitioning collaborative

writing and peer consultation from physical group discussion to online collaborative documents and integrated comments. Candidates teaching within the math classroom used ingenuity to transform their cellphone, books, and desk lamp into a make-shift document camera. Without the use of a whiteboard, they created effective means of sharing their mathematical process and computations with students through a recorded Youtube video series. They channeled their creative and critical approaches to teaching, and found the drive to press forward in their work with learners.

Other candidates noted how their experiences and emotions shifted from day-to-day or hour-to-hour. A great deal of emotion and ability to navigate this new context rested on the health and well-being of the middle level learners, families, friends, and selves. After all, this was *not* virtual teaching and learning - a point we reiterated again and again throughout our seminar sessions. Rather, this was “emergency remote teaching” - or, unanticipated teaching within a remote setting during a worldwide emergency.

Our seminar sessions became a place of safety and sharing. Candidates spoke of their daily experiences and emotions. They shared worry over learners who were not active in their virtual course - could it mean they were ill, hurt, or in need of help? How could they help those who might lack the technological resources to engage in the class? They spoke of personal and professional struggles - would they be ready to take on their own classroom upon graduation? Would they find a teaching position at a time of such disruption? They shared strategies, learning platforms, applications, and approaches to instruction that might work for a variety of learners and situations. But, in addition to all of this, candidates and professors alike shared how their own lives were shifting day-to-day. We spoke of our families, friends, and selves. It seemed that amidst the daily uncertainties, there was one constant - our connection and ability to support one another throughout this journey.

“Expect the unexpected.”

It is not uncommon for teacher candidates to experience imposter syndrome, or a doubt in one’s abilities, upon entering their field experience. Despite the foundation of knowledge they receive in adolescent development and

pedagogy, field experience requires candidates to put their knowledge into action. With the move to emergency remote teaching, candidates were called upon to not only engage their understanding of effective pedagogy, but to do so in a manner that translated across a virtual context during a pandemic. The field experience they anticipated was not the experience they would encounter.

Common threads throughout our conversations were those of connection, relationships, flexibility, and choice. In essence, candidates demonstrated their ability to hone in on what they learned regarding early adolescent development and effective middle level pedagogical approaches despite the change in context and circumstance. For example, some English language arts candidates created virtual BINGO card activities to serve as an opportunity for content enrichment. This provided students options for strengthening and demonstrating their understanding of a text as a way of not only enriching their learning, but taking into account student access to resources, availability to engage in learning, and time available to devote to course engagement outside of the school setting.

Candidates recognized that they *must* put the needs and experiences of their students at the forefront of their planning and practice. Seminar discussions centered on the learners - finding ways to ensure content was meaningful and purposeful, without overwhelming learners or instigating additional trauma; identifying methods of translating traditional practice to meaningful and accessible choice and enrichment options while understanding student access to resources and content might change at any moment; and ensuring greater flexibility in terms of expectations for student engagement, effort, completion and response, knowing that some students and families may fall ill, grieve the loss of a loved one, or find themselves without work, food, or shelter. And, while candidates recognized the importance of academic progress and expectations of learning for their students, they realized this was a time for ensuring the basic needs of learners were being met to a degree they had not previously anticipated. Were students safe? Were students healthy? Did they have food and shelter? They gave keen attention to the social and emotional needs of their students, rather than a focalized emphasis on academic development.

“Plan your lessons, but be prepared to make adjustments.”

Throughout their program of study, candidates practice lesson planning. As teacher educators, we help candidates navigate key components of lesson preparation as they take into account the context of their classroom, state standards, lesson objectives, procedural steps, pacing, content, and assessment of student learning. All the while we explain that preparation is key, but no lesson is set in stone. And, while we recognize that educational technology is an important facet to today’s educator practice, many of the pedagogical strategies we employ rely heavily on methods of traditional classroom instruction. Technology is often viewed as a *suggestion* within the lesson planning template rather than a primary area of emphasis. As candidates transitioned to emergency remote teaching, they discovered an essential need to adapt and adjust with reliance upon technology beyond anything they could have anticipated. Now, candidates were asked to utilize their knowledge of lesson preparation, student interests and needs, and the ever-changing circumstances brought forth by the pandemic to adjust daily expectations, instruction, assessment and communication.

Every district set varying expectations of how schools would engage students and families following the transition to emergency remote teaching. As schools across our respective states began to close, district leaders scrambled to identify ways of approaching education with consideration for the needs of students and families. Each district made the initial determination of when and for how long to shutter the physical school location. No matter the time frame, some districts pressed forward in expectations that students would consistently log into online courses and progress in curricular content. Others encouraged student engagement through choice and enrichment opportunities. Still others were hesitant to require any form of remote learning as the population of learners were not all likely to have the resources, availability, or services necessary to successfully navigate online learning experiences. As a result, every candidates’ experience was unique with regard to lesson preparation and instruction. While some candidates were expected to effectively translate the teaching of new concepts across the digital divide, others were expected to press “pause” on their attempts to engage learners. Once they were provided initial guidance, they had mere

days to put a plan together and set it into motion.

Once districts made a determination, candidates had to utilize online systems and programs compatible with district expectations or requirements. While some candidates were able to call upon aspects of their educational technology preparation, others scrambled to navigate new platforms and applications. Some candidates were able to utilize systems already in place within their traditional field experience settings. For example, some candidates continued to utilize Google Classroom to post course assignments, videos, and documents. However, others worked within schools with limited technological resources. As a result, those schools relied heavily, if not completely, on traditional resources - paper, pen, and textbooks. In this way, candidates often had to learn everything about the district’s newly adopted platform from the ground up. If the platform was not one they had encountered in their program of study, they hurried through virtual training sessions and trial-and-error practice as they found ways to effectively incorporate the platform into their content area and remote instruction. As a result, we worked together throughout our seminar to help candidates learn more about their required platforms. We engaged in the management system together, discussed our successes, struggles and discoveries, and collaborated on ways we could make it work for their students.

In addition to establishing systems that would best meet the expectations of the district, candidates had to explore ways of ensuring applications and instructional approaches were accessible and adequate in meeting the needs of their learners. In essence, they found an added layer of pedagogical thought and application essential to their current experiences within lesson preparation and instruction. For example, candidates understood that while synchronous sessions might serve as digital replication of face-to-face classroom instruction, there would be days when they or their students would be unable to attend a lesson in real-time. Some learners lacked resources to log into live lessons or shared devices with family members in their household. Others might not be able to attend due to their health, the health of a loved one, or concerns for their own safety. As such, candidates had to identify ways to provide options for learners that relied on both synchronous and asynchronous supports.

Seminar conversations sparked the sharing of experiences in trial and error. We ensured candidates that this was in no way “business as usual” with regard to their field experience or virtual education. We listened to each other share ideas, concerns, and evolving implications of daily engagement and practice in emergency remote teaching. Candidates mentored, supported, and encouraged one another in finding ways of effectively adapting their approaches for the betterment of their learners, and themselves. Adjustment was a constant necessity and reminder of the current reality we were all facing.

“Relationships and community are key to the classroom.”

Throughout their program of study, our teacher candidates come to understand the fundamental significance of fostering connections and caring relationships within the middle level classroom. As they enter their final field residency, candidates focus on building relationships and coming to know and understand the identities, experiences, funds of knowledge, interests, and needs of their students as having foremost importance to classroom planning and instruction. And, while they utilized strategies and day-to-day communication to cultivate these connections, candidates now found themselves seeking out ways of leveraging and maintaining those connections.

Candidates became creative in finding ways of establishing and maintaining presence despite the disruption to face-to-face interactions. For some, this meant recording videos of their lectures, book discussions or assignment directives. Others established virtual office hours and synchronous class meetings as a way of encouraging real-time conversation. Candidates based their approach to connection on expressed needs and interests of learners, as well as accessible resources and district or school expectations. For some, this would mean email exchanges and collaborative documents dominated communication efforts. For others, it would mean taking time from direct instructional focus to provide opportunity and space to share-out feelings and experiences. The pandemic promoted candidate attention to the significance of human connection. And, throughout the experience, candidates continued to emphasize relationships, leading to a final week of bittersweet farewells and tearful

congratulatory videos shared by parents and middle level learners, alike.

Connection and relationships also took on a greater emphasis within our seminar meetings. While our usual seminars included time to talk about our lives outside of field experience, we often centered these conversations on requirements for certification, ways of crafting solid resumes and cover letters, as well as information on job fairs and the interview process. This semester, more so than prior semesters, outside of the context of seminar meetings we found ourselves reaching out to one another to share in good news or celebration, to vent frustrations, offer support and suggestions, and to check-in on one another’s health and safety. For example, when a candidate discovered they would be evaluated on their teaching in an unfamiliar conferencing application, the cohort met together within the online system to provide the candidate opportunity to become comfortable manipulating the application’s tools, identify ways of managing student interactions within this space, and to rehearse their lesson prior to formal observation. When another candidate discovered a similar need for an online evaluation, but could not formally meet with learners due to district mandates, fellow candidates and their professor volunteered to serve as “students” for the purpose of the evaluation.

Overall, the experience seemed to bring our own cohorts closer together as a “family,” rather than simply a group of learners and educators. The connections established within our individual seminar groups strengthened throughout the transition and engagement into emergency remote teaching, as we provided additional support and encouragement to one another in a time of unprecedented stress and anxiety.

Lessons Learned

As teacher educators, we strive to remain reflective. No two semesters are alike in that we consider the prior semester and students, and strive to identify ways we can learn from our experiences to enhance our course and practice. The sheer anomaly of our experience made Spring of 2020 a time of considerable reflection. We refuse to view this semester as our “new normal.” While we are hopeful the experience of emergency remote teaching and learning will spark support within our institutions in

achieving our goal of infusing greater emphasis on technology and virtual education into our programs of study, it is also a time unlike anything we have witnessed, and hopefully, unlike anything we will witness again.

While this experience may have revealed applications, programs, and pedagogical approaches, we can modify to meet the needs of middle level learners in the online space, this was *not* a lesson in effective virtual middle level teaching and learning, or effective virtual teacher preparation. Our experience was one in emergency remote teaching. Students did not choose to enroll in virtual learning - they were forced into it, often with limited available resources and support. Families did not sign up for homeschooling - they were required to find ways to navigate this new context while simultaneously experiencing a pandemic in differing and unique ways. Our candidates did not receive specialized training and preparation in online pedagogy, technology and assessment - they were required to adapt in a haphazard manner. As such, we believe the key take-away from this unique experience rests not as much on a need for enhanced technology education - though that is important - but, on how we can continue to empower our future teachers to think critically, creatively, and compassionately about their content, pedagogy, learners, and selves.

Above all else, what resonated in this experience was our candidates' ability to critically examine their goals, creatively approach this challenging terrain, and collectively support one another through it all. In striving to meet the needs of their learners, we worked together to support one another's social and emotional needs. As a result, we are eager to engage candidates in an enhanced focus on educational technology, but even more so, continue our focus on empowering candidates to take the tools they have garnered in their time within our programs, and find ways of rising to the challenge - no matter what that challenge might be.