

Teacher Candidates' Perspectives of Infusing Innovative Pedagogical Methods and Trauma-Informed Practices into a Teacher Education Program During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Emerging scholarship asserts that education during the COVID-19 pandemic should be viewed from the perspective of trauma. To address the complexities and navigate the ongoing challenges of simultaneously revising courses and field experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, one teacher preparation program purposely embedded trauma-informed practices to ensure the social and emotional needs of teacher candidates were met. This research centers on understanding teacher candidates' perspectives of these changes that coupled mental health strategies with a move to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings are organized around three themes: (a) engaging in pedagogical problem solving, (b) establishing an online community, and (c) building empathy. Implications and future research questions are also shared. In all, this research has the potential to inform program design efforts as it highlights the benefits of innovative course delivery as well as the persistent challenges of learning to teach during a crisis.

KEYWORDS: teacher preparation during COVID-19, school-university partnerships, trauma-informed practices, social emotional learning.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential Two: Clinical Preparation. A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.

Essential Four: Reflection and Innovation. A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

Essential Five: Research and Results. A PDS is a community that engages in collaborative research and participates in the public sharing of results in a variety of outlets.

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Over the past few decades, numerous professional associations and accrediting bodies have called upon teacher preparation programs to integrate opportunities to apply teaching strategies in PK-12 classrooms by encouraging design innovations like professional development schools (PDSs), school-university partnerships, and teacher residencies (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2018; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2013; Holmes Group, 1986, 1990, 1995; National Association of Professional Development Schools [NAPDS], 2021; National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010). To accomplish this lofty goal, university and school-based teacher education faculty must foster an environment that supports innovation, creativity, and thinking beyond traditional models of teacher preparation. This work centers on providing multiple opportunities for teacher candidates to engage for extended periods in authentic classroom settings with support from university faculty and school-based mentors. School-university partnerships provide these spaces for teacher candidates to learn their craft.

During the spring of 2020, teacher preparation programs were dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as PK-12 schools closed and teacher preparation programs moved to remote instruction. This radical shift not only impacted PK-12 schools but also had implications for teacher preparation programs across the nation (Hyler, 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020). Programs had to quickly adapt to ensure that teacher candidates could complete their coursework while shifting field experiences to alternative formats. Teacher preparation across the nation had to become innovative as they shifted face to face instruction to a fully remote and distance learning model while maintaining high standards of practice during the pandemic. Colleges and programs across the country with little notice worked to make extensive changes while simultaneously enacting their core values “including equity, humility, compassion, community, and service” (Hyler, 2020, para. 4). These values not only grounded this work but also were enacted to meet the needs of teacher candidates during the pandemic (Borup et al., 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020).

Emerging scholarship asserts that education during the COVID-19 pandemic “should be viewed from the perspective of trauma” (Horesh & Brown, 2020, p. 334). In the case of school-university partnerships, trauma-informed practices should be developed to meet the emotional needs of PK-12 students, teacher candidates, and mentor teachers (Borup, et al., 2020; Carello & Butler, 2015). However, numerous challenges existed for school-university partnerships wanting to embed well-being and self-care into the curriculum to address the mental health needs of teacher candidates (Borup et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Roman, 2020). Specifically, these challenges included: (a) collaboratively redesigning entire courses that were beneficial for the teacher candidates with limited time and technological expertise, (b) reconfiguring existing course assignments to ensure relevance and ensure teacher candidates were not overloaded with additional work presented in an online format, (c) developing methods to check-in on teacher candidates' mental health during the pandemic, and (d) designing innovative ways for teacher candidates to collaborate with mentor teachers to complete field experiences. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, this study sought to understand how teacher candidates experienced this abrupt shift. To investigate this shift, this study focused on how special education teacher candidates experienced, understood, developed, and socially constructed meanings from the

daily events and interactions over the course of two COVID-19 pandemic semesters, Spring and Fall 2020. The guiding research questions were: (1) What were special education teacher candidate perceptions of using trauma-informed strategies during the shift to remote and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What were the benefits and challenges of shifting to a remote and distance learning model for the teacher candidates?

Literature Review

Trauma is an emotional response to an event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disaster, or an accident. Epidemics and pandemics specifically related to infectious disease like COVID-19 are often traumatizing to individuals, potentially leading to post-traumatic stress and ongoing psychological distress (Boyras & Legros, 2020; Kanzler & Ogbeide, 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2007; Salmanian et al., 2020). Scholars also suggest that we will likely see an increased prevalence of trauma both during and after COVID-19, with increased diagnoses of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS) burdening systems like healthcare and education, that were already struggling to meet the needs of vulnerable populations (Kanzler & Ogbeide, 2020).

Further, the use of trauma-informed frameworks were challenged by COVID-19, yet front-line workers rapidly adapted the use of traditional and virtual trauma-informed strategies (Bender et al., 2021; Kanzler & Ogbeide, 2020). While health care workers were challenged to address concerns in a health care context, college campuses and PK-12 schools also worked to address COVID-19 related challenges. Forced relocation, as the case of moving instruction from schools to home, has been associated with negative effects on physical and psychological well-being and functioning (Uscher-Pines, 2009; Sahu, 2020; Weaver et al., 2020).

While the COVID-19 pandemic may be a once in century event, evidence suggests that some individuals demonstrate resilience living through the aftermath of traumatic events including infectious disease epidemics, natural disasters, war, violence, and oppression (Di Pietro, 2018; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Ivbijaro et al., 2020; Shigemoto & Robitschek, 2021). Individuals are very capable of thriving despite aversive and traumatic events. Emerging research showcases how dimensions of hardiness, self-enhancement, coping skills, positivity and laughter are crucial to gaining resilience from a traumatic event (Bonanno, 2004; Ivbijaro, et al., 2020; Shigemoto & Robitschek, 2021).

Although resiliency strategies do exist, many college students often turn away from formal professional help and support related to psychological and mental health needs. Contributing factors include financial constraints, as well as fear associated with a lack of experience with seeking mental health services (Liang et al., 2020; Shigemoto & Robitschek, 2021). For example, Liang et al. (2020) shared that “many college students who are plagued by mental illness try their best to hide their illness when the explicit symptoms are not obvious, fearing that they will be labeled with a stigma once they ask for psychological help” (p. 3). On the other hand, this literature base also highlighted the potential benefits of embedding mental health and trauma-informed practices into higher education teaching practice (Liang et al., 2020; Shigemoto & Robitschek, 2021).

Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, building a trauma-informed learning community was central to providing a supportive foundation for teacher candidates as they navigated numerous challenges. Offering mental health support, developing pedagogical problem-solving skills, and implementing an online community fostered that learning environment for teacher candidates to build upon (Aponte, 2020; Liang, et al., 2020).

Mental Health Support

Emerging research suggests that offering mental health support to students after a traumatic event is highly recommended and helps strengthen existing interpersonal connections between peers and faculty (Baran & Alzoubi, 2020; Borup et al., 2020; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020; Roman, 2020). Carello and Butler (2015) suggested that teacher candidates talk about their feelings regarding trauma as a way to normalize what is going on around them. To do this, they recommended verbal check-ins to check on the emotional status of the candidates. Further, effective trauma-informed teaching may include using flexible technology tools, such as Spiral, Spiral Lite, Quickfire Lite, Webjets and Padlet, as well as other remote teaching practices focused on self-care (e.g., online break out rooms, polling and whiteboard features, discussion boards) (Crompton et al., 2021; Roman, 2020). Sharing available resources with students is also important for college student health and wellness, because psychological safety is critical to learning (Conrad et al., 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2014). Resources needed during crises may include food, supplies, access to healthcare, and counseling. It is important to remember that educators are ethically bound to refer students who may need professional counseling to licensed professionals (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). While simple self-care strategies may be suggested to students or built into an online learning platform, any student who indicates they are struggling with PTSD, anxiety, or depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic or any other traumatic event should always be referred to a professional (ACA, 2014; Rosenthal et al., 2014).

While the importance of building relationships for mental health is seen throughout the literature, Joshi et al. (2018) reminded us of the importance of cultural context and how interruptions to daily life by traumatic events in different cultures may lead to different responses. Overall, this research is a stark reminder of how society's response to crisis situations is often determined by the cultural norms and the socioeconomic realities that make up the context of the responses.

Pedagogical Problem Solving

Pedagogical problem solving is a strategy that teachers use to work through complex problems that arise in their practice. Kidd and Murray (2020) referred to this shift as "pedagogic agility." This shift occurs when educators flexibly adjust their practice in quick and meaningful ways (Kidd & Murray, 2020; Ramsay et al., 2019). In essence, problem-solving requires teachers to develop an inquiry stance that allows them to not only raise questions and frame problems using multiple perspectives but also use research-based teaching strategies flexibly (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020). Often teachers use formative data to inform their decision making and arrive at potential solutions. Pedagogical problem solving is related to classroom management, lesson planning, meeting the needs of individual students, assessing learning outcomes, as well as building relationships with students and parents (De Simone, 2008; Putnam & Borko 2000; Zeichner & Conklin 2005). Without a problem-solving stance, problems can become persistent and often overwhelming (De Simone, 2008; Zeichner & Conklin 2005).

Last, current trends indicate a shortage of teachers entering the field, especially in critical areas like special education (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Reeves et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential that teacher preparation programs provide high-quality field experiences that allow teacher candidates to apply problem-solving skills which have proven to improve teacher retention rates (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Southern Regional Education Board, 2018). These

opportunities have the potential to positively impact candidates as they enter the field of teaching and engage with students during potential future crisis situations.

Creating a Learning Community

Learning communities assist in developing teacher candidates' knowledge and skills (Rigelmann & Ruben, 2012; Shanks, 2018). Typically, teacher candidates engage with faculty, mentors, and peers in face-to-face courses and field experiences. However, with the growth of online instruction and distance-learning methods due to the pandemic, teacher educators who were new to online teaching had to quickly learn best practices for building communities in an online environment. Building an online learning community requires faculty to purposefully design an online space including content, discussions, and assignments (e.g., case studies, group projects, book studies, etc.) that provide authentic learning opportunities (Crompton et al., 2021; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). For example, teacher candidates need opportunities to interact online to develop a sense of belonging as they discuss and explore what they are learning in meaningful ways (Friess & Lam, 2018; Picciano, 2002). Developing an online presence is related to the learning community members' perceptions of their interactions as well as their perception of being a member of the group (Crompton et al., 2021; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Therefore, sharing clear expectations, developing manageable content, and structuring appropriate activities are critical design elements to consider when designing online learning communities (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

More importantly, developing cohesive learning communities helps in modeling and building empathy in teacher candidates (Jones et al., 2014). Research suggests that building community by focusing on empathy can also occur in online learning environments (McDonagh & Thomas, 2010; Sevilla, 2019). This work is important as empathy demonstrates care, concern and well-being for students (Bouton, 2016; Leung et al., 2020) which is “the foundation of a safe, caring, and inclusive learning climate” (Borba, 2018, p. 23). A culture of empathy requires a focused and intentional effort to develop relationships (Leung et al., 2020; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Recent research highlighted the potential of providing teacher candidates with community engaged authentic learning opportunities focused on developing caring relationships with mentors and students (Bouton, 2016; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Research further suggested that candidates who engage in authentic work in learning communities have an “empathy advantage” (Borba, 2018, p. 23) as they are prepared to care in more authentic ways for their students when they enter the profession.

Conceptual Framework

Baran and Alzoubi (2020) developed a human-centered design framework to “help generate creative solutions to the pedagogical problems that teacher educators face” (p. 365) during the transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework highlights the following three premises: (a) building empathy, (b) engaging in pedagogical problem solving, and (c) establishing an online community of inquiry. Building empathy centered on developing an understanding of the teacher candidates and the issues they were experiencing during the pandemic. Second, pedagogical problem-solving involved reworking field experiences and engaging teacher candidates in alternative applied experiences that focused on relevant course content. Lastly, establishing an online community involved creating online experiences tailored to our learning community's social, cognitive, and teaching presence. For these reasons, Baran and Alzoubi's (2020) conceptual framework was used in this study to

understand teacher candidates' perceptions, benefits, and challenges of using trauma-informed practices during the shift to remote and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Context

Program Description

In response to the call from researchers, policy-makers, and accreditation bodies, the University of North Florida (UNF) undergraduate special education teacher preparation program employs a clinically-centered cohort model that tightly couples methods coursework with clinical placements across five semesters (AACTE, 2018; NAPDS, 2021). UNF's College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) has a network of professional development and partner schools across two school districts that partner with the university to host teacher candidates. The special education teacher education program uses a cohort model in which teacher candidates take the same courses and field experiences together as a learning community. Each early field experience and final internship are designed and implemented in coordination with our program's curriculum and in collaboration with school partners. Vertical staffing, where faculty simultaneously teach coursework and supervise the connected field experience (Tom, 1997), is embedded into the special education program to support teacher candidates and the partnership model. UNF's partnership model allows special education faculty and school-based mentor teachers to share oversight and coaching responsibilities of teacher candidates. The model's tenets include: (a) coaching that provides targeted instructional feedback and fosters critical reflection, (b) individual support for teacher candidates wrestling with the application of research based strategies to practice, (c) purposeful professional learning communities that provide opportunities for teacher candidates to support each other, and (d) curriculum support for bridging the research to practice gap by making explicit theory to practice and practice to theory connections (Jacobs et al., 2014).

Each field experience has a particular focus that emphasizes the application of the knowledge and skills learned in the associated coursework during any given semester. For example, during the typical spring semester, special education teacher candidates simultaneously take high leverage practices, mathematics and reading methods coursework coupled with a 10 hour per week field experience. Teacher candidates are expected to participate in weekly professional learning communities outside of those hours and continuously reflect on all aspects of their practice. In addition, teacher candidates complete critical tasks tied to their methods coursework in their field placement under the direction of their mentor teacher and university faculty. Generally speaking, special education program content and field experiences build upon the content of previous semesters. Collaboration is essential with school partners. Curricula and coursework are intentionally co-designed and co-developed with partner schools in mind. The program curriculum is integrated with field experiences to meet school partners' needs while at the same time offering multiple opportunities for teacher candidates to apply their knowledge and skills learned in coursework.

COVID-19 Adjustments

The special education teacher preparation program implemented a number of innovative course revisions due to the pandemic shutdown. As faculty were forced to re-imagine courses, they agreed to adopt '*a less is more approach*' when redesigning coursework with the goal of embedding trauma-informed practices into the curriculum. This included using a variety of

approaches to build social connections and personalize teaching methods. For example, faculty met and collaboratively agreed to provide teacher candidates with the opportunity and space to check-in at the start of each class. During check-ins candidates were encouraged to openly share their reactions, fears, challenges, and feelings of isolation that emerged. In addition to the pandemic shutdown, other societal events occurred simultaneously that added stress to teacher candidates' lives. Teacher candidates mentioned in class discussions how events such as the contested presidential election, the Black Lives Matter protests, economic instability, a world-wide sex-trafficking ring, and the death of an iconic Supreme Court justice impacted their mental health.

Faculty developed self-care modules and activities including videos, reflections, and discussion boards to check the pulse and social emotional state of the teacher candidates each week. One faculty member developed a podcast about mental health strategies for college students to access use during the pandemic (Rowe & Sparks, 2020). Further, faculty checked in weekly with candidates through email, texting, and group chats encouraging candidates to engage in regular self-reflection. The goal was to be supportive and flexible with assignment submissions. To meet this goal instructors used a flipped classroom design in which breakout rooms during synchronous seminars provided more structure to the sessions. In all, a strong emphasis was placed upon working together and supporting one another during this time. Early field experiences and internships were also reconceptualized. Virtual options were employed including: (a) collaborating virtually with mentor teachers to design instruction, (b) delivering synchronous lessons using Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms, (c) developing asynchronous and synchronous lesson plans including videos of instruction, and (d) completing simulations and critiquing exemplary teaching videos. The purpose of these activities was to modify the real-world application that takes place in practicum experiences with relevant alternative experiences.

A significant shift to the use of a team-teaching approach emerged during this time. The shift allowed faculty to facilitate content instruction, collaboratively address teacher candidates' social emotional needs, and monitor class interactions and assignment mastery while using trauma-informed practices to check-in regularly on the social emotional well-being of the teacher candidates. This model assured teacher candidates spent less time on Zoom and more time in their cohort community. Teacher candidates were able to use breakout rooms to work on assignments and work closely with the instructors in both their content and application of their projects.

Methods

This study employed explanatory sequential mixed-methods. Explanatory sequential mixed-methodology involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data before gathering qualitative data from a subset of participants in order to further understand, explain, or elaborate on the quantitative findings (Ivankova et al., 2006). The research team first developed a survey that included demographic information as well as thirty-three 5 point Likert scale questions and four open ended qualitative questions (see Appendix). The purpose of the survey was to uncover the perspectives of one cohort of special education teacher candidates about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their learning to teach.

During spring 2020, a cohort of 13 special education teacher candidates enrolled in the second semester of their program. This same semester they were enrolled in methods coursework coupled with their first field experience, which consisted of interning 10 hours a week in

classrooms at a local partnership elementary school. All 13 were invited to participate in the study. Surveys were distributed via Google Forms, a web-based survey platform. Eight teacher candidates (63.2%) responded to the survey.

Demographic information, frequency and descriptive statistics were analyzed.

Demographic data revealed that all teacher candidates who completed the survey were female and anticipated graduating in the spring of 2021. A majority of the teacher candidates (75%) took at least four online courses prior to the pandemic. The respondents were diverse as three teacher candidates self-identified as White (37.5%), two (25%), as Black, and one each identified as Asian (12.5%), Latinx (12.5%), and Native Hawaiian (12.5%).

The second phase of the study involved purposefully selecting and interviewing participants. Teacher candidates were asked on the survey if they were interested in participating in the focus group interviews. Four candidates, one Black, one Asian, one White, and one Latinx, agreed to participate. To provide depth (Ivankova et al., 2006), two semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted using a video conferencing platform (e.g. Zoom). Each of the initial focus group interviews included two teacher candidates who shared their unique stories and experiences during the pandemic (Patton, 2015). After the initial interviews, a follow-up interview with two participants (one from each initial group) was held to clarify perceptions gleaned from the data and to gather additional information related to their experience. Each interview was recorded and transcribed immediately after the interview.

Interview data analysis began as two members of the research team first independently open coded the focus group interview transcripts labeling excerpts of data to summarize what the researchers saw in the data (Patton, 2015). After engaging in this initial independent open coding process, the researchers met to share, discuss, and begin categorizing the open codes into themes and patterns. Together, the two researchers compared the initial independently identified codes related to the research questions and collaboratively identified a set of shared codes related to the candidates' perceptions of trauma-informed practices and the shift to remote and distance learning (Patton, 2015). During this stage of coding, the researchers shared their codes, jottings, and notes, raised questions, offered suggestions, discussed limitations, insights, and thoughts about the emerging themes. In sum, the constant comparative method of reflecting and exploring the data allowed emerging patterns to collectively come into focus (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The analysis resulted in the construction of a portrait of the teacher candidates' collective lived experience using Baran and Alzoubi's (2020) human-centered design conceptual framework. This conceptual framework helped organize the findings around three themes: (a) engaging in pedagogical problem solving, (b) establishing an online community, and (c) building empathy. The framework permitted the research team to highlight the benefits of the innovative program redesign that infused trauma-informed practices into the program and assisted in uncovering the persistent challenges teacher candidates faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey results coupled with the interview thematic analyses provided depth into how the candidates experienced the shift to remote instruction that embedded trauma-informed practices and uncovered their thoughts, insights, feelings, struggles, and stressors.

In order to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of this study, the researchers used multiple techniques. First, source triangulation (Patton, 2015) was evident as this study employed multiple methods of data collection (i.e., surveys, interviews). Further, researcher triangulation, as a result of statistical analysis coupled with independent and collaborative qualitative analysis by a professor and student member of the research team, enhanced the

credibility of the inquiry (Patton, 2015). Finally, member checks of the findings were conducted with the candidates to confirm the study's findings and assertions.

Findings

When asked to share a word that captured their feelings about the situation, teacher candidate responses highlighted the complexity of the situation. For instance, teacher candidates identified some insights that led to resilience which allowed them to remain somewhat positive. However, at the same time, they identified their need to cope with a multitude of challenges. Participants shared that they were “grateful for the support from the professors and cohort”, “happy I can confide in and ask for help from my peers”, “appreciated the efforts to shift coursework on the fly”, and “recognizing everyone is doing the best they can.” On the other hand, they also used words such as “tired”, “sad”, “anxiety provoking”, “stressful”, “messy”, “confused by what to do”, “frustrated with the changes”, and “don’t feel like a teacher anymore”. Their experience during this unprecedented instructional shift underscored the complexity of the situation from the candidates’ perspectives. It is important to note that this complexity is linked to how teacher candidates experienced numerous contradictory feelings and tensions which are central to the findings shared below.

Engaging in Pedagogical Problem Solving.

Although efforts were made to assure opportunities for pedagogical problem solving, teacher candidates noted struggles. For example, some teacher candidates noted they continued to collaborate with their mentor teachers and helped design and deliver lessons even with issues related to access to the district’s instructional platform. Additionally, video-based assignments coupled with writing lesson plans initially were viewed as helpful by the candidates in learning foundational teaching skills. Over time enthusiasm for completing these virtual assignments waned.

When considering the move to remote instruction, survey results suggested that teacher candidates felt less prepared learning course content (62.5%). Specifically, teacher candidates felt less prepared to implement instructional strategies (50%), classroom management strategies (50%), communicate with parents (62.5%), and engage students in instruction (62.5%).

When asked during focus group interviews whether they felt prepared for their final internship or not, overwhelmingly participants responded with a resounding lack of self-confidence for what lies ahead. The primary reason the teacher candidates did not feel ready for their final internship was that they missed two early face-to-face field experiences in schools when instruction shifted to online during the pandemic. Further, they associated their difficulties related to learning how to be pedagogical problem solvers with being a “hands on learner and not getting to practice or fully comprehend materials after COVID,” “getting organized and trouble understanding revised assignments,” “lack of motivation due to feeling isolated which led to my mental and physical health decline,” “struggling to concentrate during online classes,” “not being able to work with my students and complete my field experience,” and “my experience felt less real which made me incredibly unmotivated.”

When teacher candidates were asked about motivation, over half the participants (62.5%) shared they had a decrease in motivation when content was switched from face to face to online instruction thus impacting their engagement in pedagogical problem solving. Many candidates attributed the decrease in motivation to a “lack of personal interaction.” When asked in focus groups how personal interaction correlated with lack of desire to complete work, the answers

varied. One candidate shared that she felt like she was not learning to be a teacher because she did not pass teachers and students in the hallway. Another teacher candidate shared that “not having her professors see her teach demotivated her.” Before the pandemic, coaching observations were embedded throughout the field experience. Before moving to remote instruction, teacher candidates met with their professors and peers to design, discuss, reflect, and refine their lesson plans weekly. Since they were not able to complete their coaching observations and applied assignments in their field placements, one teacher candidate explained she felt “disconnected and lost motivation when they expected her to be completely devoted to school without any connection to her kids.”

One candidate in this study was enrolled in a yearlong residency. This candidate’s experience contrasted with the others as she was able to participate in a face-to-face clinical experience during Fall 2020. Her experience was markedly different from the others as her onsite experience allowed her motivation to remain high as she was able to work side by side with middle school teachers and students. While this teacher candidate’s access was limited in comparison to typical semesters, she was able to work with students each week during the Fall term. As a result of this experience, this teacher candidate stated that the experience, “further increased her motivation to become a special education teacher.” She shared that “having access to kids and receiving in person feedback from my mentor teachers was invaluable.” Further, she mentioned that she understood the contrast between her feelings and those of her peers who only had access to pedagogical problem-solving opportunities associated with online tutoring and one on one math instruction.

An unintended outcome of the shift to remote instruction was that teacher candidates began to raise questions of social justice and equity. They raised a number of concerns related to “inequities associated with providing instruction online to students with disabilities.” These included students with disabilities not having “instruction modified”, “online accommodations were difficult to use”, and “keeping students on task was problematic online.” For example, one student highlighted that “her students were not receiving their small group reading instruction” when instruction moved online. Her mentor teacher struggled to keep ahead of her students and guided reading groups were discontinued.

Further, teacher candidates raised questions related to inequitable access to technology, specifically focused on computers, tablets, or internet access. For instance, candidates shared that many students did not have the proper bandwidth at home to watch the video lessons she developed and “some of my students had to share devices with siblings” even though the district provided them with laptops. One candidate also raised an important issue regarding working in a Title I school, and stated that their students had an “inequitable access to technology as compared to other wealthier schools” in the district. Compounding these concerns was that candidates were extremely frustrated because they did not have access to the school Microsoft Teams account that they were using for online instruction because they were not considered district employees. Many of the teacher candidates felt that they could have assisted their mentors more and helped their elementary students with work if they had access to the district platform.

Establishing an Online Community

The move to remote instruction highlighted the need for faculty to develop an online community of learners with the teacher candidates. This intentional work focused on not only providing avenues for the teacher candidates to share experiences about how they were

experiencing the pandemic but also purposefully designing assignments and tasks for the candidates to engage with the content when field placements were not possible. Survey results indicated that teacher candidates identified some advantages and disadvantages of establishing an online learning community. For example, all the teacher candidates felt like they could trust their professors. In addition, a majority of students (75%) felt supported by faculty during the pandemic. On the other hand, a majority of students responding (75%) were neutral or disagreed about having their learning needs met and getting questions answered effectively by faculty (75%). Further, teacher candidates disagreed with or were neutral when questioned about relationships being maintained using the Zoom and Canvas platforms (62.5%). The majority of respondents (75%) disagreed or were neutral with their ability to stay on task during synchronous Zoom sessions. This aligns with responses that the majority of students (62.5%) struggled to develop a consistent schedule after the implementation of remote learning. In terms of interaction with peers, the majority of teacher candidates (62.5%) recognized a decrease in informal interactions within the cohort during the pandemic. This is similar to the responses (75% disagreed or neutral) about the limited capability of collaborating on assignments with peers during the shift to remote instruction.

Focus group interview data confirmed and provided depth regarding these benefits and challenges. Data revealed that establishing an online community was key to supporting teacher candidates' social, and cognitive growth through various activities, (e.g., instructor videos, online self-care discussions, and live seminar check-ins). For example, teacher candidates pointed out the benefits of participating in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The candidates viewed the PLCs as peer support groups where they were encouraged to share and discuss their thoughts and ideas. These methods increased teacher candidates' confidence that the faculty and students "were all in together during these hard times". Although some students indicated on the survey and in focus groups that they wished these PLC assignments and check-ins were optional, the interviewees agreed that they benefited from this structure.

Outcomes of the online learning community were directly related to candidates' mental health. For example, one participant shared that "isolation, depression, anxiety, and an increase in ADHD symptoms" were how she experienced the shift to online learning. However, the trauma-informed strategies and check-ins helped remind her she was not alone in her struggles. The teacher candidates also shared that they fostered a greater community through the usage of group chats and PLCs to facilitate cohort wide discussions. The group chats helped candidates to "sort out misconceptions, share lecture notes, and remind each other of upcoming projects".

Flexibility was noted as key to the transition as due dates were shifted regularly throughout the semester in order for candidates to complete their assignments as they tried to remain optimistic. One student, a full-time mother, enjoyed the flexibility and stated, "I would not have been able to continue [in the program] without the added flexibility." One interviewee shared they "needed gracious timelines due to stress." However, candidates noted that persistent challenges also existed as some peers were disengaged and were regularly absent in spite of these innovative efforts.

Some candidates had contradictory views about the flexibility provided. For instance, some students viewed flexibility as unnecessary as they preferred guide posts like due dates and assigned readings to help them balance their course load. Flexibility also allowed them to "procrastinate and have assignments build up that were then all due at the end of the semester." The ongoing changes led some candidates to be confused "because the due dates and assignments were always changing, we were not always sure what we were expected to do." One

interviewee noted that this flexibility did not make her feel like a teacher and shared how her internal motivation was “different” once flexibility was provided. Historically, she would turn in assignments early to show her dedication to the program. Her motivation to stay engaged came crashing down as she heard a professor extend the project due date to the end of the semester. Another candidate shared how the ever-changing deadlines made her feel “less professional.” She spoke of her perception of other fields, such as “STEM majors have to finish their projects by the deadline and they do not have exceptions.”

One example discussed by candidates illustrates the complexity that existed within a constantly changing and highly fluid situation. During Fall 2020, teacher candidates hoped they were going to have placements in brick and mortar junior high school settings. This changed when the local school system did not allow anyone except final interns to physically enter the schools. Instead, teacher candidates were provided transition-aged students from an on-campus program and expected to teach financial literacy online. The teacher candidates were not pleased with the applied assignment centering on using math and science for elementary standards. They noted that there was not a lot of time to “figure it out” as they have had the privilege of doing in other assignments in the past. It was an additional challenge for some candidates to teach financial literacy, as they themselves did not feel fully confident and comfortable with the topics. Further, the candidates were frustrated with not having access to individual education plans (IEPs) or other documents that outline how to best accommodate these students and modify lessons. One candidate notes, “I do also feel like I got jipped though due to the fact that I didn’t get to work hands on with students. I feel like this was a completely different experience.”

An overarching emergent theme from focus groups interviews was that while teacher candidates recognized the efforts of faculty to build a community and use trauma-informed practices, many needed additional supports to manage stress and emotions during the COVID-19 crisis. Further, candidates appreciated the flexibility afforded but pointed out some persistent challenges associated with flexibility.

Building empathy

Closely tied to establishing and sustaining an online community was the third theme of building empathy. Building empathy became an immediate priority of our program faculty. As previously described, faculty used self-care modules coupled with group and individual check-ins with teacher candidates to gauge candidate health, needs, and well-being. In order to create a forum for empathy, they heightened social presence by incorporating online discussions and peer feedback into the Canvas modules used to support course delivery. Overall, these efforts were viewed favorably by teacher candidates (62.5%). Data from the survey further revealed that the redesigned coursework tailored to the pandemic was viewed favorably by a majority (75%) of the teacher candidates. Data supported that this approach not only helped the classroom community feel less isolated but also demonstrated an ethic of care that was valuable to the teacher candidates’ mindsets.

Focus group discussions uncovered the complexity associated with cultivating contexts that communicate empathy. Participants identified positive and negative factors related to these efforts. First, participants discussed how creating spaces for personal connections was important but challenging. For example, they noted that informal Zoom meetings, discussion boards, and checking in on candidates during Zoom seminars were beneficial. One participant noted:

They [faculty] recognized that we would experience a range of emotions, anxiety, sadness, grief, fear, and uncertainty and made themselves available. They provided us

with cell phone numbers in case they needed anything or wanted to chat. We discussed our feelings at the start of every class. They designed modules about vulnerability and mental health for us to participate in with our peers.

Participants recognized the effort and care program faculty had taken to redesign and change face-to-face courses midstream to remote instruction. Others discussed how the shift to remote teaching and learning had been notably smooth and provided them with opportunities to dive into content like lesson planning and using explicit instruction strategies in more depth. They also recognized that the online modules provided teacher candidates the flexibility to access and complete the course modules at their own pace.

Recognizing the struggles teacher candidates were facing, faculty believed that demonstrating empathy included integrating trauma-informed practices into the experience. Participants favorably viewed faculty efforts to embed trauma-informed practices and mental health resources. For example, the candidates highlighted how faculty used a *TED Talk* by renowned author and researcher Dr. Brene Brown (Brown, 2010) coupled with discussion boards to discuss vulnerability. In addition, teacher candidates found faculty efforts to start each Zoom class session using a cohort wide check-in protocol beneficial. The check-in protocol allowed teacher candidates an opportunity to “be vulnerable and share with each other what was transpiring in their world” before starting class. This time allowed for teacher candidates to “feel heard and validated our feelings”. Teacher candidates also shared that they were able to see first-hand that their professors were also struggling which helped strengthen relationships and build a community of learners.

Participants named a number of challenges impacting their emotions that required empathy during the pandemic. They yearned for a return to any sense of normalcy, as many worried about their families, friends, and PK-12 students' physical and mental health. Many candidates lived away from their parents and families during this time. Some also discussed economic uncertainties related to the pandemic shutdown as they were unable to work. In fact, some relocated, at least temporarily, by returning home to live with their families to help manage the stress and save money. Teacher candidates also were concerned about the well-being of their students. For example, they lamented and described being removed from schools and the lack of interaction and desire to be closer with their PK-12 students.

Even with faculty embedding trauma-informed practices, over time some candidates continued to struggle. They noted that they found themselves not being “as present in coursework as they would have liked to be”. Some participants experienced a “sense of loss” and “anger” during the pandemic. While confined to their homes, they recognized the challenge to find a balance and create boundaries between school and family life. One participant who was a mother shared that juggling school and family impacted her life dramatically as she had to care for her child while balancing school and work. Once again, these struggles raise issues of social justice and equity as many candidates had to work to pay their bills and their jobs were dramatically impacted by the pandemic. Some were laid off from the restaurant industry, while others had to continue working in stressful service-oriented positions. Meanwhile other candidates transitioned to working online.

However, due to the move to remote learning some teacher candidates shared that they were able to actively participate in some of the Black Lives Matter events happening in the region that they probably would not have been able to participate in during the traditional program. The movement to online delivery allowed more flexibility to engage in some activism efforts, like participating in protests, while completing coursework asynchronously.

In sum, by taking time to build opportunities for empathy into the semester, faculty allowed teacher candidates to share emotions during coursework and assisted teacher candidates in unpacking these emotions. Some outcomes of this work included teacher candidates creating icebreakers to share with classmates, writing letters to loved ones that they were not able to see, and putting together care packages for the students that they were not able to work with in person any longer. In all, empathy focused on supporting teacher candidates in seeking ways to find balance in their lives and manage their emotions.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand special education teacher candidates' experiences of learning to teach during an unprecedented pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic required program faculty to make rapid changes in program design and delivery. The study provides teacher educators insight into teacher candidate experiences and perspectives when they are moved from learning to teach in face-to-face classrooms to learning to teach online. Focusing on these experiences, we sought to uncover what teacher candidates learned as well as what could have been improved. The conclusions and recommendations we share below are meant to be suggestive.

First and foremost, purposely embedded trauma-informed practices and extended opportunities of support for teacher candidates were beneficial. Teacher candidates highlighted that strong relationships with their professors and within their cohort were enhanced by using trauma-informed practices. These relationships and practices nurtured teacher candidates during the initial phase of the pandemic and extended through the Fall 2020 semester. Investing attention and using trauma-informed practices enabled authentic relationships to continue and trust to be developed (Baran & Alzoubi, 2020; Borup, et al., 2020; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Quezada, et al., 2020). Specific practices including regular check-in time for candidates and group texts supported teacher candidate coping (Crompton, et al., 2021; Roman, 2020). The results of this study suggested that trauma-informed practices led to a variety of professional benefits that support candidate success and provide opportunities for learning how to support PK-12 students' social emotional learning. The infusion of these practices showed promise and future research should investigate their impact even when the program returns to face-to-face instruction.

The program redesign integrated empathy and an online learning community to support candidates (Shanks, 2018), yet candidates reported anxiety, pandemic fatigue, as well as on-going struggles related to the political context (Borup et al., 2020; Carello & Butler, 2015; Hyler, 2020; Roman, 2020). While our nation faced the COVID-19 pandemic, we were simultaneously engaged in a public reckoning focused on ongoing racial tension and socioeconomic inequities. The focus on empathy and the online learning community provided a space for teacher candidates to connect with others and share their struggles (Bouton, 2016; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Picciano, 2002; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Some candidates actively participated in events that promoted equity and diversity while others engaged in conversation about inequities that their students faced. Teacher candidates recognized the digital inequities facing many students in terms of technology and internet access (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020). Furthermore, candidates raised issues about equity related to special education services as most students with disabilities they were working with in their placements were not receiving the level of service they had received pre-pandemic. All teacher preparation programs should provide opportunities for teacher candidates to wrestle with classroom, school, and district policies that

exacerbate inequity. In particular, special education teacher preparation programs should collaborate with local partners to design applied assignments that allow teacher candidates to learn about and uncover how students with disabilities are taught in a variety of settings and how these students are provided access to the general education curriculum as required under federal law.

Although the infusion of trauma-informed practices supported special education teacher candidates during this difficult period, over time candidates grew tired of the remote instructional model and yearned for the return to face-to-face instruction and re-entering schools. Teacher candidates believed that they needed face-to-face opportunities to “learn how to teach” and voiced concern about their ability to gain pedagogical problem-solving skills within a remote instruction environment (De Simone, 2008; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Zeichner & Conklin 2005). Specifically, candidates shared a list of missed opportunities such as working closely with schools and families to support PK-12 student needs during the crisis (Ingersoll, et al., 2014; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

While the special education teacher preparation program highlighted in this manuscript attempted to create space for alternative authentic learning experiences for candidates, these innovative efforts could be improved. Emerging research strongly suggests that teacher candidates’ roles could have been shifted to assist their mentor teachers deliver instruction during the pandemic (Darling Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Hyler, 2020). Mentors were overwhelmed and struggled with the immensely challenging situation of rapidly shifting to remote teaching. Part of the tension in this study was the result of school district policy that initially did not allow most candidates access to PK-12 students using the district's remote instructional model. While recognizing the inherent difficulties of moving a large, urban school district fully online, restricting access to only students and school district employees negatively impacted teacher candidates’ experiences.

Innovations implemented by teacher preparation programs during the pandemic have the potential to build stronger partnerships between programs and partner school districts (Hyler, 2020; Van Nuland et al., 2020). Emerging scholarship highlights how teacher programs and school districts can effectively collaborate and use innovations during this time of crisis to support PK-12 students’ basic academic and behavioral needs (Ellis et al., 2020; Hyler, 2020). Our teacher candidates yearned for opportunities to learn to teach in classrooms while working closely with their mentor teachers (Darling Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Van Nuland et al., 2020). Given that just a few decades ago, teacher preparation programs typically relied on internships placed at the end of a teacher preparation program, candidates clearly identified the importance of multiple and scaffolded field experiences in learning to teach. Therefore, programs should continue to work with school-based partners to collaboratively design relevant field experiences for their teacher candidates.

One benefit of learning to teach during the pandemic may be that as programs quickly pivoted to operating in emergency/crisis teaching mode, teacher candidates gained experiences of working through crisis situations (Hyler, 2020). As faculty made shifts, so did teacher candidates. This “pedagogic agility” (Kidd & Murray 2020) is critical for candidates to develop so they can adjust their practice quickly to meet the ever-changing needs of the classroom. These experiences have the potential to positively impact the candidates as they enter the teaching force and engage with students during any future crisis situations.

Future Research

Future research efforts should include a larger survey of teacher candidates across programs and universities. Specifically, the research should take a deeper dive into how teacher candidates report their experiences within each of the three areas: building empathy, establishing an online community, and opportunities for pedagogical problem solving. In addition, longitudinal studies should explore the impact that a move to remote instruction has had on current teacher candidates. Ideally, comparisons of the perceptions of teacher candidates who completed face-to-face field experiences with others who moved to a remote instructional model might shed light on the assets of each approach. Additionally, studies of faculty perceptions about the shift to remote instruction and impact on their job responsibilities and mental health should also be conducted. Lastly, the authors are curious about how this group of teacher candidates will perform during their induction years given the reconfiguration of field work to online learning. Therefore, conducting a follow-up study with this cohort could inform the literature on teacher retention particularly about learning to teach during a crisis. The concern about attrition is real, recognizing the shortage of special education teachers that exists across the nation (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Moreover, this research will potentially inform the field about the influence high quality field experiences have on retaining teachers in the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

Conclusion

The authors recognize the limited scope of our study of one cohort of special education teacher candidates but believe there are some relevant lessons to be learned that can better support teacher candidates and help teacher educators strengthen programs. This research highlights the importance of teacher preparation programs rapidly responding to shifts in the learning to teach environment. Programs need to be agile and able to respond with the use of best online teaching practices. In the case of the pandemic, support for teacher candidate learning required coupling pedagogical instruction with social emotional learning as well as building an online and social presence that connected and communicated with the teacher candidates on a regular basis. Other lessons learned included purposely designing activities to allow students to wrestle with emerging issues related to social justice and equity. These activities have the potential to positively impact candidates as they use their knowledge and skills to address these persistent dilemmas and ideally improve outcomes for PK-12 students.

Historically, teacher preparation programs have not prepared teacher candidates for or through online instruction (Borup, et al., 2020). Similar to the research of Dymont and Downing (2020) and Roman (2020), our investigation confirms an emerging pattern that candidates may have persistent doubts, questions, and uneasiness during the move to online learning. The shift to online and remote instruction necessitated by the pandemic highlights the need for teacher educators to think outside the box. We need to embrace innovative instructional technology to support pedagogical problem solving while simultaneously considering candidates' mental health needs. This ultimately will prepare candidates to enter the profession with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to meet the demands of our ever-evolving school contexts. This will require open honest dialogue, collaboration with school partners, as well as willingness to engage in the difficult work of program redesign.

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Appendix

Survey

Demographic/Background Questions included

1. Gender
2. Ethnicity
3. Anticipated graduation year
4. Number of online classes taken prior to pandemic.
5. Technology access available during pandemic.

Likert Scale Questions – Responses - 1 Not at all, 5 Very much or completely

6. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to stay on task during zoom classes?
7. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to stay motivated to learn via online classes?
8. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to have your questions answered effectively?
9. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to learn with the technology embedded in the revised remote courses?
10. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to collaborate with colleagues on an assignment.
11. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to be creative in classes that shifted online
12. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to access the content in Canvas.

13. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to obtain authentic examples to enhance your learning?
14. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to receive the necessary feedback on your progress in the class.
15. With the move to remote learning, how much were you able to access students in your field experience to complete your applied assignments?

Likert Scale 1-5 – Prompt - How much do you agree with the following statements: 1 strongly disagree, 5 Strongly agree

16. I felt prepared to take courses online before the pandemic crisis.
17. I feel prepared to take courses online after the pandemic crisis.
18. The restrictions due to the remote learning COVID-19 pandemic have caused a decrease in learning course content.
19. The restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have caused a decrease in the informal interactions in the cohort.
20. The support (e.g. resources, communication) from the program faculty has decreased after the implementation of the new COVID-19 remote learning.
21. My motivation for learning has decreased after the implementation of the COVID-19 course changes.
22. I was able to develop a schedule after the implementation of the new COVID-19 changes.
23. I am able to complete my semester or course(s) on time after the implementation of the new COVID-19 changes.
24. I trust my professors(s)
25. My learning needs were met.

26. My peers in the cohort support me.
27. I prefer learning at my own pace and schedule, so distance learning is perfect for me.
28. During the pandemic, I learned more for my courses from texts and written sources, rather than from class sessions or field experiences.
29. During this pandemic, I learned more about life and people than content from my courses.
30. During this pandemic, remote education was a good alternative to traditional classroom learning.
31. The course content was relevant and tailored to issues that are important during this pandemic.
32. I feel less prepared to implement instructional strategies because COVID-19 disrupted my experiences in coursework and/or fieldwork during my preparation.
33. I feel less prepared to implement assessment strategies because COVID-19 disrupted my experiences in coursework and/or fieldwork during my preparation.
34. I feel less prepared to implement classroom management strategies because COVID-19 disrupted my experiences in coursework and/or fieldwork during my preparation.
35. I feel less prepared to engage students in lessons because COVID-19 disrupted my experiences in coursework and/or fieldwork during my preparation.
36. I feel less prepared to communicate with parents and families because COVID-19 disrupted my experiences in coursework and/or fieldwork during my preparation.
37. The online platforms (Zoom and Canvas) allowed for intern and student relationships to be maintained.

Open Ended Questions

38. As a pre service intern during the Global Pandemic of 2020, what are some of the positives of the transition to online learning that you experienced?
39. As a pre service intern during the Global Pandemic of 2020, what are some of the challenges of the transition to online learning that you experienced?
40. What are some of the hardships you faced when learning became remote?
41. How was your mental health impacted during the pandemic and the shift to online learning?
42. Do you have any additional comments about the transition to online learning?
43. We are conducting focus groups. If you are interested in participating, please leave Name, Number and Email below.