

Education During the Pandemic and Beyond: The Perceptions of PreK-12 Educators, School Leaders, and Student Teachers

Daniella G. Varela, EdD

Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Kingsville, Texas

Mike F. Desiderio, PhD

Professor

Department of Teacher and Bilingual Education
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Kingsville, Texas

LaVonne Fedynich, EdD

Professor

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Kingsville, Texas

Abstract

The extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system is yet to be seen. Turn on the local news and there are nightly stories about the public's concerns for student achievement gaps, learning loss, and the projected frailty of students' mental, social, and emotional health. In addition to students, a critically important population to study are those who will need to respond to students' issues: school leaders, teachers, and pre-service teachers. In an effort to triangulate an understanding of the impact on these groups, this study used the findings of three research initiatives, each of which sought to determine the bearing of the pandemic on the future of the education workforce. Synthesized results of qualitative research from the perspective of school leaders, teachers, and pre-service teachers revealed a consistency of themes across the three populations studied: a persistent and frustrating lack of preparation and resources, concerns about the future of their students, professional careers, and education, but above all, a sense of resiliency and determination to persevere. These common themes are discussed as a call to action because the findings provide implications for policy, practice, additional research, and a meaningful response to what was learned during this time of transition in K-12 education.

Keywords: teacher resilience, COVID-19, teacher preparation

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a wave of challenges to many aspects of life. In the spring of 2020, mitigation efforts to control the spread of the COVID virus resulted in face-to-face school and classroom closures, which drastically changed the education system as we knew it. School administrators, teachers and students were thrust into the world of online teaching and learning, a mode not typical in the prek-12 school system. Upon those school closures, Spring 2020 student teachers were only midway through the most influential and career-defining period of a future teachers' professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Smith & Rayfield, 2017), the clinical experience. Research is already extensive pertinent to the pandemic's impact on student learning. For schools across the country, the focus is now on closing the gaps and learning recovery. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the impact of the pandemic on the stability and future of the teacher workforce.

Researchers engaged in various endeavors regarding changes to teacher preparation, prek-12 teaching, and school leadership at the onset and throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Varela & Desiderio, 2021; Varela & Fedynich, 2021; Varela & Desiderio, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020b; Varela & Fedynich, 2020a). The results of those endeavors provided a deep understanding of the experiences of student teachers, prek-12 teachers, and school administrators and informed planning and practice as we move into this new era of education. A logical question to ask is what would we learn if we analyzed the triangulated data regarding the perceptions of experiences of all three populations during the pandemic? To answer this question, researchers triangulated data regarding the perceptions of experiences for student teachers, pre-K – 12 teachers, and school administrators in an effort to synthesize knowledge and drive meaningful support and efficacious change to benefit the strength of the teacher workforce as a means of best supporting students.

Theoretical Framework

This research was approached from multiple perspectives and thus driven by multiple theoretical frameworks. We examined pre-K – 12 teachers and school leaders experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic using Gu's (2007) teacher resiliency theory as an extension of resilience theory proposed by Garmezy (Neenan, 2009; Shean, 2015). Resilience theory posits that individuals overcome adversities in order to persist toward their goals. Teacher resilience is seen as a dynamic quality that equips education professionals with the tenacity to overcome the trials of their professional context (Gu, 2014).

Gu and Day (2007) noted that resilience is a result of strength and conviction and the capacity to maintain equilibrium and agency. Teachers and school administrators are caught between the demands of school curriculum, state and federal regulations, parent concerns, and the multiple diverse needs of their students. Gu (2007) acknowledged these challenges of the profession but went further to acknowledge that despite those challenges, teachers remain: they continue to be committed to their work, students, and to the profession as a whole. Drew and Sosnowski (2019) proposed that teacher resilience is the result of (1) a persistent sense of purpose, (2) a commitment to embrace uncertainty and failure as learning experiences, and (3) a reliance on relationships and collaboration. To a certain extent, context matters: teacher resilience is relative not only to personal dispositions but also to the professional culture (Flores, 2018). Ainsworth and Oldfield (2019) noted that professional factors like administrative support, workload, and well-being also contribute to teacher resilience. Given the massive challenges brought upon the teaching and school leader profession during the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher

resiliency informs this study in an attempt to understand teachers' and school leaders' experiences under unprecedented circumstances, and how they persisted.

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

To that end, our examination of the student teacher experience during the COVID-19 pandemic was also guided by the theory of teacher identity. According to Miller (2009), teacher identity is the result of constant negotiation of social and cultural understandings of the role; understandings which can be influenced by many factors. Those factors include school and classroom culture, community, and working conditions. Kim and Asbury (2020) noted that an important contributor to the development of teacher identity is positive relationships with colleagues, parents, and students, much of which were absent during the pandemic and related school closures. As Kim and Asbury (2020) noted, "a shift to remote instruction, which disrupts or changes the nature of interpersonal connections, might be expected to affect teachers' sense of professional identity" (p. 1064).

Method

This study used qualitative conceptual content analysis which seeks to establish the existence and frequency of concepts in textual analysis as the guide for the following research question:

RQ1: What are the similarities in experiences between pre-service teachers, teachers, and school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In order to answer the research questions, the researchers selected for analysis three sets of data collected during the Spring 2020 semester: qualitative survey data collected from a sample group of pre-service teachers assigned to practicum experiences in K-12 classrooms ($N=33$), qualitative survey data collected from a sample group of school leaders ($N=30$), and data collected from qualitative, semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers ($N=9$). Analysis and triangulation of the data helped researchers identify similarities of the emergent themes/categories in participant responses. The researchers used peer debriefing to eliminate the influence of personal biases and to achieve internal validity of the data analysis process (Spall, 1988).

Results

Three themes emerged from the content analysis as similarities between pre-service teachers, pre-K – 12 teachers, and school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic: *remote teaching/online teaching*, *feelings and experiences*, and *resilience*. These are illustrated in Table 1. The following subthemes were identified under the parent code *feelings and experiences*: loss, frustration, and uncertainty.

Table 1

Similarities in Experiences Between Pre-Service Teachers, Teachers, and School Leaders

Theme	Code Frequency
Remote Teaching/Online Teaching	205
Feelings and Experiences	148
Resilience	125

Remote Teaching/Online Teaching

Responses in all three sample groups pointed to *remote teaching/online teaching* as a priority focus. Participants in the three groups talked primarily about the lack of proficiency necessary to positively affect student learning using instructional technologies with which they were not familiar and had no prior training. Teacher One said, “were we lacking the actual support and training. I just think some basic operative training would have gone a long way.” Pre-service Teacher One said, “It is very difficult to teach young kids over an online platform,” adding the individualized instruction was nearly impossible in the virtual setting. Respondents also expressed concerns about how their students must overcome tremendous adversities to understand and succeed in online learning. School leaders pointed to the difficulty of supporting their students without the technological resources or training and proficiency needed to do so effectively, and what that meant for the learning experience.

The researchers noted some differences between the three sample groups in relation to the *remote teaching/online teaching* theme. Pre-service teachers expressed concern that there was not only little training prior to the rapid shift to online teaching, but also concern that many of their sponsoring school districts were not prepared to include them in the transition. Thus, there was added concern that they would miss out on the “in the moment” crash-course training as well. While teachers also expressed concern about the lack of training, their concerns were focused on how to make the learning stick. Teacher respondents indicated a concern about the sustainability of prolonged online learning, not just due to a lack of resources and preparation but because they couldn’t envision how to deliver all of the content online.

Accordingly, school leaders were more concerned about reaching all students and appropriately supporting their teaching staff as they navigated online teaching. Where most school leaders said they were ready and poised in their ability and willingness to support teachers

during online learning, an equal majority said they were worried about the lack of resources in their school district to make it happen.

Feelings and Experiences

Another theme found in the analysis of similarities between the three sample groups was *feelings and experiences*. Survey questions and interview questions were written to encourage a reflection of experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-service teachers, pre-K - 12 teachers, and school leaders expressed many similar *feelings and experiences* in their responses. Respondents spoke about their feelings of loss, frustration, and uncertainty. The frequency at which these themes were identified gave the researchers cause to code loss, frustration, and uncertainty as subthemes. The biggest loss felt across all three groups was the loss in connection with their students. Pre-service teachers, pre-K – 12 teachers, and school leaders all terribly missed the interaction with their students, and missed their otherwise daily opportunities to build strong relationships. Pre-service Teacher Two said, “I feel confusion, lost, and a sense of being robbed of my experience.” Pre-Service Teacher Three said, “I feel that I was expendable to the district.” In much of the data collected, the researchers noted that respondents used words such as surprise, shock, scared, worry, concern, fear, frustration, and heartache to explain what they were going thru during the COVID-19 pandemic, but above all, worried about the academics and the quality of the student learning experience.

Participants described their experiences as both difficult and eye-opening. Pre-Service Teacher Four said, “being a student teacher was very hard during this time. The experience is such an eye opener to all that a teacher has to do and what a teacher does outside of the classroom.” Pre-K 12 teacher Two described her as experience as one with “no vision for how online teaching would work for [her] and [her] students.” Pre-K - 12 teacher Three explained that her experience left her “overwhelmed at first,” and “convinced it wasn’t going to work.”

The researchers noted some differences between the three sample groups in relation to the *feelings and experiences* theme. Pre-service teachers felt a strong sense of loss and frustration as a result of their inability to continue the clinical experience. The lost time that could have been otherwise devoted to their professional teacher identity development, and therefore believe themselves to be less prepared than others for the teacher workforce. Pre-Service Teacher Six was unable to complete the student teaching experience, an administrative decision at the sponsoring school district. Pre-Service Teacher Six said, “I feel there was good experience I could’ve gained by at least helping the teachers had out the meals-to-go to students.” Pre-Service Teacher Seven was also unable to complete the student teaching experience, and believed that lack of a comprehensive experience negatively impacted job prospects and confidence. Pre-service teachers were primarily concerned about their professional futures.

Pre-K 12 teachers spoke mostly about the loss they felt in that they could not be in a physical classroom with their students and at the school building with their colleagues. Where teachers made general references to their concerns about achievement gaps and learning loss, their concerns were mostly rooted in what was missing in that moment. They expressed concern for their students and peers on a personal level, worried about their social and emotional health. While pre-K 12 teachers indication that they believed students need their teachers, it became evident to the researchers that pre-K - 12 teachers needed their students.

School leaders were primarily concerned about inequities. One school leader respondent said, “the level of preparedness was based on availability of technology and/or ability to obtain

devices for our students...not being a 1-1 district impeded our progress. We also realized our students do not possess the appropriate technological skills.” Another school leader stated “one size does not fit all. Some schools simply need more resources than other.”

These school leaders were not just concerned about resources for their students. Varela and Fedynich (2020a) found that when school leaders were asked about the district’s readiness to provide equitable learning experiences remotely, whether readiness in terms of resources or staff training, only 37% of respondents agreed. They were worried about their staff and what it would mean to properly and quickly provide the training, support, communication, and resources necessary to continue a positive and impactful learning experience for their students.

Resilience

A third theme that emerged from the data as a similarity between all three sample groups was *resilience*. Despite the challenges on the work at all levels, and the difficulty experienced, pre-service teachers, pre-K - 12 teachers, and school leaders spoke of their desire to persist, appreciation for the challenge and learning experience, and a determination to continue forward in the best interest of their students. Pre-Service Teacher Five expressed gratitude in that the “experienced challenges still mean I am learning how to be a teacher first and foremost.”

Teacher Four admitted that even though there was worry, there was just as much willingness to “do what needed to be done.” Pre-K - 12 teacher Six said, “I am really proud of my district. For the most part, everyone is on the same page and we transitioned as successfully as we could, together.” Pre-K - 12 teacher Seven noted that although the experience has been trying, there is a deep appreciation for the “passion that we have as a team. Honestly, something I have never experienced to this level in my 12 years of teaching.”

All school leader respondents indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic would change how they lead their campuses/districts in the future. School Leader Five saw new opportunities for community engagement to mitigate the impact should something like this happen again, noting that “collaborating with other districts would assure student’s success and parent collaboration.” School Leader Four said, “while disruptive in so many ways, COVID-19 has forced me to rethink instructional delivery modalities. Online learning is no longer the exception,” and added that perhaps against all preferences, that schools must be preparing for what is coined as “the new normal.” In agreement, School Leaders Six and Seven commented about recognizing the need to make plans for this new era of education.

Discussion

The extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system is yet to be seen. Concerns abound pertinent to student achievement gaps, learning loss, and the projected frailty of mental, social, and emotional health. In addition to students, a critically important population to study are those who will need to respond: school leaders, pre-K -12 teachers, and pre-service teachers. Synthesized results of qualitative research from the perspective of school leaders, pre-K - 12 teachers, and pre-service teachers revealed a consistency of themes across the three groups studied: a persistent and frustrating lack of preparation and resources, concerns about the future of their students, professional careers, and education, but above all, a sense of resiliency and determination to persevere.

Although commendable and arguably definitive of the teaching profession, participants’

resilience should not be perceived as *enough* to carry them through and into the future of education. Findings make clear that there is need to provide better, stronger, more intentional support of our educators at various levels of their development and careers. As noted in the theoretical framework, Drew and Sosnowski (2019) proposed that teacher resilience is the result of, among other factors, a reliance on relationships and collaboration. Kim and Asbury (2020) noted that an important contributor to the development of teacher identity is positive relationships with colleagues, parents, and students. This carries tremendous implications for school culture, in-service professional development and support, and even the teacher preparation program experiences of pre-service teachers.

Professional development is found to impact the job satisfaction of teachers (Troesch & Bauer, 2017; Gaias et al., 2018; Toropova et al., 2021). Reeves et al. (2017) found that teachers' job satisfaction was foretold by the availability of resources and collegial relationships. Accordingly, school and campus culture must be conducive to and encouraging of teamwork and innovation. School leaders must work to create an environment that both protects and responds to the needs of its teachers in the same way we expect schools to create an environment for students that does the same.

Teacher education must also be different going forward. Teacher training must work to include recognition of and response to the changing dynamics of the K-12 education (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Educators (current and future) must be equipped with the skills necessary to effectively advocate and collaborate, must be provided with meaningful opportunities to do so, and they must be heard. To that end, it should be noted that pre-service teachers are preparing for their future careers in a tumultuous time. Resilience won't be enough. The system as a whole will be challenged to create healthy and supportive working conditions for long-term success (VanLone et al., 2022).

The goal of this study was to understand how the experiences of pre-service teachers, teachers, and school leaders during the pandemic were similar. In doing so, we develop an understanding of how the pandemic affected the education workforce collectively—the whole rather than its parts. The implications of the findings are multifaceted. The data revealed that pre-service teachers, pre-K - 12 teachers, and school leaders need support by way of strong partnerships, opportunities for healthy and frequent collaboration, and resources. These common themes are discussed as a call to action as the findings provides implications for policy, practice, additional research, and a meaningful response to what was learned during this shock to the system.

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