

Student Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Navigating Being Both Student and Teacher

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic flipped the education world on its head, affecting teachers learning how to teach online, as well as students trying to learn in a virtual world. But there is a small group of candidates in higher education who had to balance both worlds: student teachers. This qualitative case study recounts the experiences of seven undergraduate and graduate students in the final year of their teaching preparation program during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Through these accounts, this study further analyzed and compared how switching to distance learning affected participants both as university students, as well as future teachers. These student teachers described the incredible challenges they encountered during this unique year, the worries they held for their PK–12 students, and the unique experiences and skills student teaching during a pandemic offered them. These student teachers' experiences were also analyzed using Self-Determination Theory's components of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Findings indicate that students, for the most part, felt related and autonomous but struggled more with feelings of mastery.

Keywords: teacher preparation programs, self-determination theory, COVID-19 Pandemic, clinical experience, student teaching, autonomy

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The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 has been perhaps the largest disruption to educational systems internationally in history. At its peak in Spring, 2020, 99% of students in the world had been affected (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). In addition, because PK-12 schools were required to shift suddenly to online, remote teaching, teachers bore a disproportionate brunt of this pandemic; suffering higher levels of stress, working additional hours, learning new distance learning platforms, and experiencing additional constraints on their time (Aperribai et al., 2020). One survey of more than 3,000 National Board certified teachers found that 75% of these teachers were working more hours, 80% found moving to online instruction to be a *somewhat serious* or *very serious* obstacle, and 50% reported feeling unprepared and in need of support (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2020). These issues appeared to be exhibited across the PK-12 spectrum.

Furthermore, the impact on teachers' mental health was also found in numerous studies. In one study of early childhood teachers, 38% described clinical levels of depression symptoms (Markowitz et al., 2020). Additionally, another study of secondary teachers found that 34% reported feeling anxious or very anxious during the pandemic; these experiences were worse for female teachers than for male teachers (Stachteas & Stachteas, 2020). Many teachers also reported stress and anxiety related to reduced incomes in their households, with one study finding 73% reported that it was at least *somewhat difficult* or more to now make ends meet in their household (Markowitz et al., 2020). Perhaps most disturbing, a year after the pandemic began, in April, 2021, 92% of teachers still reported that teaching was more stressful than prior to the pandemic, with 78% saying it was a lot or somewhat more stressful today than even one year ago, at the beginning of the pandemic (Kurtz, 2021).

Literature Review: The Impacts of COVID-19 on Student Teachers

The COVID-19 pandemic truly flipped the education world on its head, negatively affecting both teachers learning how to teach

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online as well as students in trying to learn in a virtual world. But there was a small group of candidates in higher education that had to balance between both worlds: student teachers. Student teachers, often also called pre-service teachers, are those in the final months of their teacher preparation program, in which they teach in a classroom under the supervision of a certified teacher, typically called a cooperating teacher, or CT. Student teaching is a challenging endeavor and a full-time commitment, even during a typical year. Not only do these pre-service teachers have to commit to teaching, but they must also balance these responsibilities with their university courses, extracurriculars, part-time work, family obligations, and more. In one study conducted pre-COVID, one in four first-year teachers reported being unable to focus in their field experiences without being distracted by other program commitments or expectations (Meyer et al., 2016).

Not only are the overall expectations of these teacher preparation programs sometimes overwhelming for student teachers, but also the expectations within their placements can be challenging. During their clinical year, student teachers are limited in their knowledge and skills due to a lack of experience in the classroom, but they are still expected to fulfill the same roles and responsibilities as veteran teachers (Noel & Shoffner, 2019). Furthermore, the experience they do gain within their student teaching year does not always have a positive impact, as practica consisting of continuous negative, discouraging, or restrictive experiences reduce the likelihood of continued practice (Almazroa, 2020). For novice teachers who do enter the profession on their own, they may become overwhelmed by the daily stressors and unexpected hurdles teachers face every day if they have not been given proper preparation. These factors and their effects on beginner teachers are reflected in the teacher turnover rate, which has shown to be highest amongst beginning teachers (Noel & Shoffner, 2019).

Purpose of this Study

With most schools transitioning into distance learning online or engaging in some hybrid form of both in person and online instruction, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators to engage in teaching like never before. While teachers and

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administrators have often had years of experience both in the classroom and through their own education, prospective teachers in teacher preparation programs not only had to adjust to an online environment as students, but also had to learn how to be a teacher in this new environment as well. While a plethora of research emerged in the past year regarding the negative impacts related to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic for teachers (e.g., Aperribai et al., 2020; Markowitz et al., 2020; Stachteas & Stachteas, 2020), no studies could be found describing how these pre-service teachers experienced the pandemic or the extent of the impact of the pandemic on student teachers specifically. This research study pursued these uncharted waters by asking this simple question: What was it like to be a student teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic? Through this overarching question, we sought to investigate the many challenges, as well as to explore any unexpected but valuable experiences in which student teachers engaged. To investigate this question, this study recounts the experiences of both undergraduate and graduate students in their final year of their teaching preparation program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis of these accounts this study further compares how switching to distance learning affected participants both as university students as well as future teachers, with a focus on improvement of teacher preparation programs in times of crisis.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens for this study was Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as this theory helps us understand the extent to which these student teachers felt able to manage their own life and choices amidst this global pandemic. This theory purports that continuing to grow, learn and stay present in the process of becoming a teacher (i.e., their intrinsic motivation in their teacher preparation program) is directly related to three innate needs: the need for competence (i.e., gaining mastery), the need for relatedness (i.e., experiencing a sense of belonging), and the need for autonomy (i.e., feeling in control) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These components are crucial and have been shown to enhance PK-12 student achievement (Marshik et al., 2016). With

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this theory in mind, this study sought to understand the extent to which these student teachers felt autonomous to participate in their clinical year to the best of their abilities, supported and well prepared (i.e., mastery) to teach beyond their clinical year, and a sense of belonging in their placements and program.

Methods

These research questions were explored and investigated through a qualitative design, specifically a multiple case study design (Yin, 2009), bounded by both individuals and by one particular school of education in one small, private liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. Qualitative case studies are best for in-depth exploration of an issue (Creswell, 2013), as was desired to understand the experiences of student teachers during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

This case study utilized two mechanisms of purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) to ensure a wide variety of experiences were included. First, criteria sampling was utilized to create four lists of students of the nearly 70 possible student teachers at this university: (a) undergraduate elementary student teachers, (b) undergraduate secondary student teachers, (c) Master's in Teaching (MAT) elementary student teachers, and (d) MAT secondary student teachers. Next, random sampling techniques were utilized to select two participants from each of the four lists using a random number generator (see random.org) to ensure objectivity in participant selection. Random sampling was desired as we wanted to ensure we captured a typical student teaching experience. If students did not consent to participate, a new name was drawn from the list using the random number generator until all eight spots were full. One elementary MAT participant ended up withdrawing their participation in the study due to feeling overburdened, leaving a resulting sample of seven participants. All participants provided informed consent to participate and this research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Pseudonyms were used to represent individuals to protect participant confidentiality, and in many cases the data was aggregated to

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further protect confidentiality due to low program numbers.

Table 1 describes these seven participants, which represented a wide variety of grade levels, subjects taught, and COVID-related teaching contexts (i.e., hybrid, synchronous online, asynchronous, in person) across the two time points. For the most part, students were teaching fully online for most of the year, as their student teaching placements were ending just as the state required transitioning to hybrid instruction. Four of the students were undergraduates in their fourth and final year of the program while three of the students were MATs in a 10-month post-bachelors master's degree program. These students were diverse, with about half identifying as people of color. Six of the student teachers identified as female while one identified as male; this proportionality well represented the program as a whole. As students at the university, all had experienced fully online courses across the entire year. These remote classes were typically mostly synchronous in nature, utilizing Zoom or Microsoft Teams, although some courses utilized some asynchronous mechanisms. While the university did offer some in-person courses in the spring, because these were targeted towards first-years and sophomores, none of the participants in this study took an in-person course.

Data Collection

To investigate the research question, two researchers completed two interviews with each of the seven student teacher participants for a total of fourteen interviews. To best understand how the experiences of these student teachers evolved or changed across the pandemic and across their experiences while student teaching, these interviews took place at two different points over the school year: once during the fall semester and once during the spring semester. These semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom and were recorded and then later transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Each interview started with rapport building and the question, *"Tell me about what it's been like for you as a student teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic."* Follow-up interview probes to this main question during the first interview included: (a) What has been challenging about student teaching during a

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Table 1

Participants' Student Teaching Grade Levels, Subjects, and Teaching Situations

Grade	Subject	Fall	Spring
K	All	Full distance learning; mixed synchronous & asynchronous	Shifted to hybrid (i.e. some of the time in person, some of the time distance learning)
K	All	Full distance learning until October; then hybrid small groups	Continued hybrid; shifted to larger groups
Grade 5	All	Full distance learning; mixed synchronous & asynchronous	Full distance learning with a new classroom of online only students when school transitioned to hybrid
Middle School	Spanish	Full distance learning; fully asynchronous	Did not change
High School	PE	Full distance learning; mixed synchronous & asynchronous	Did not change; was shifted to hybrid the last week of student teaching
High School	Math	Full distance learning; mixed synchronous & asynchronous	Did not change; was shifted to hybrid after the last week of student teaching
High School	Social Studies	Full distance learning; mixed synchronous & asynchronous	Did not change; was shifted to hybrid the last week of student teaching

pandemic? (b) What has been rewarding about student teaching during a pandemic? (c) What supports have been particularly helpful? Follow-up interview probes to this main question during the second interview included: (a) To what extent have you felt successful in this situation? (b) What do you consider your major strengths as a teacher? Do you feel any of these strengths are attributable to the pandemic? (c) What tips or advice would you have for other student teachers teaching under such circumstances?

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, researchers utilized three rounds of coding techniques. The first round of coding involved open coding, in which we identified emergent themes without a coding scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In particular, this round focused on looking at the changes in the transcripts from the first interview

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in the fall (i.e., near the middle of the student teaching experience) to the second interview in the spring (i.e., near the end of the student teaching experience). The second round of coding involved utilizing *in vivo* coding techniques (Saldaña, 2015), in which we utilized the participants' own words and phrases to assign themes to the data. This practice of honoring the actual voices and words of student teachers was inherent to this study. In the third and final round of coding, we utilized deductive coding to examine the transcripts for specific examples of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), including coding for examples of relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

Trustworthiness

The two researchers involved in this study were a teacher educator and a student teacher, both working within this particular teacher education program. It was therefore imperative that issues of potential bias be mitigated whenever possible to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, purposive sampling techniques, including random sampling and the use of random number generators, were used to ensure the data collected were representative of the wider student population and reduce researcher bias. Second, because of prior relationships from teaching courses for the teacher educator and taking courses for the student teacher, the interviews were conducted in such a way that no interviewer had a prior relationship or a relationship of authority with any interviewee (i.e., the teacher educator only interviewed students they had not had in class before, and the student teacher only interviewed students they also did not know personally). Third, this study utilized prolonged engagement techniques by conducting two interviews with each participant with months of time in between. Data were then analyzed in terms of consistency in responses over time. Fourth, the two researchers double-coded all data during both rounds of data analysis to increase dependability of the results.

Results

After compiling the first two rounds of open coding of the responses of participants from both sets of interviews, four

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common themes emerged: the difficulty student teachers experienced both teaching and being a student during a pandemic, the negative effect they saw on their students, how they had been supported throughout this experience, and the positives that had emerged from these experiences. The themes displayed use the participants' own voices. After these three themes are unpacked, the results of the third round of deductive coding, which sought to understand the extent to which these students experienced relatedness, competence, and autonomy, will be described.

“We are Drowning”

It is no surprise given the difficulty student teachers face in normal years that the key take-away of this study was that student teaching primarily in an online setting during the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be even more of a challenge. On an emotional level, the participants emphasized how “it’s just been a really draining experience” and that “the biggest thing is the socioemotional aspect of it and just really wanting to be in the classroom.” Another elaborated, saying, “It was really hard to be in my bedroom where I eat, where I sleep, where I do everything, and to also try to teach.” When comparing their experiences of their student teaching to their previous undergraduate years, one candidate specified, “I think that I have been stressed the past three years, but not to the extent or way I have been this year.” In some cases, the effect of not being in-person or of primarily teaching asynchronously (not teaching or interacting with kids live) made candidates say, “It kind of doesn’t even feel like I’m teaching at this point.”

In addition, participants reported feeling like they were “drowning” with their excessive work-load, describing trying to fully commit to their responsibilities as a student, a teacher, and a person in an “endless cycle” of “ever present” to do lists. The long days involving teaching online as early as 8am and then completing evening university classes that were also online until 7 p.m., was described to be a “pretty miserable experience,” and the concept of “Zoom fatigue” came up again and again. In terms of the workload itself, several participants discussed how “it just feels like *a lot*” or “it feels like a full-time job, like around the clock.” The impact of these long days and overwhelming workloads

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within their teaching were in turn felt within their performance as a student. In one case, a participant had been approached by their professor after noticing they were “always really tired” due to the participant only “getting maybe 3 hours of sleep a day and then catching up on the weekend.” Several participants also compared what they were seeing with their students in their classes as teachers to that of their own behavior as a student in their university courses, noting “the stuff you complain about as a teacher is the same things you’re doing as a student.” One participant described their experience as a “great, great test of resilience,” seeming to encompass the common idea that their student teaching tested the limits of some of these candidates and their abilities to balance between the different roles in their lives. In some cases, however, participants were also able to find comfort in knowing they were not alone in facing these challenges, stating how it was “very helpful just to know that everyone else is going through the same struggles that I am in terms of balancing school work and student teaching.”

Finally, this experience also tested student teachers on a personal level. One of the students described repeated problems financially due to being laid off from their part-time job repeatedly as restaurants closed, then opened, then closed again. A second student described losing their on-campus job at the same time their parents also were laid off and had wages cut, causing a severe financial strain on their family. This student was forced to work an additional full-time 50 hours-per-week job on top of student teaching and classes to keep their family afloat. A third student was a single mother with three young children who were also at home full-time learning online themselves; she described really struggling with how “the separation between work and home is nothing.” Another summed up how, “during the pandemic everything seems more stressful, I probably would not be as stressed as I am if there wasn’t a pandemic going on.” In sum, these students described “a pretty miserable experience” with a “very harsh toll on my mental health.”

“But We are Failing our [PK-12] Students”

The second theme found among the participants was the

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concern for students and how these circumstances were negatively affecting their learning. This was not a specific interview question, but this theme arose again and again regarding the challenges these student teachers experienced. This was especially the case for younger students, as this was brought up by both kindergarten teachers, particularly in relation to students with special needs. For instance, one participant expressed how “I feel like it’s failing a lot of the students who need help the most,” primarily thinking about students that have been difficult to support in the online world.

Several participants discussed the difficulty in ensuring student engagement. One participant expressed this concern, saying “the thing that weighs on me most is student engagement and making sure we’re able to reach all students.” The students went on to describe navigating students who were “signed in” to their online environment but were not participating during the lessons. These issues were especially prevalent for the high school teachers, who repeatedly described issues with cameras being off: “they aren’t really there...all their cameras are off and no one is talking to each other...so there’s no way to force that interaction, and I think the biggest challenge is trying to facilitate that.” Another high school teacher elaborated, saying, “I think it’s pretty clear that there’s maybe 5 students who are there and actively participating out of 30 and then there’s just 25 blank screens, who I’ve never seen their faces, never heard their voices.” Another participant described how they “just want kids to learn” but that they did not feel like students were; the participant attributed part of this problem to how the lessons they were teaching were “so repetitive because we don’t have many different ways to do things [online].” Overall, these student teachers seemed to hold a deep empathy for their students’ experiences in navigating online learning and tried to find the best way to support them through it.

“We’re Here to Help!”

Among the questions asked in both their initial and their follow-up interviews, each participant was given the opportunity to share what supports had been helpful to them throughout their experience. In response, many of the student teachers discussed

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the supports that helped them both in their teaching and in their university courses; these supports acted as life rafts. Several participants mentioned how their professors were “super flexible” and “really available” to them outside of class. Many of them noted their appreciation for having professors that “acknowledge the struggle” and how they encouraged a “safe and positive environment” for them in their virtual meetings. In addition to having faculty supports, several participants also mentioned the value of having their university cohort as a support system, noting how “they’re the only other people that really know what you’re going through right now.”

In addition to having strong supports at their university, participants often cited their cooperating teachers as valuable supports in their student-teaching placements. As many of the teachers participants worked with were also new to the world of online learning, several participants noted how these unique circumstances allowed them to feel like they were “working with [them]” and were given the opportunity to “constantly try to come up with things together” rather than a strictly mentor-mentee relationship. In other cases, some participants were able to integrate their own ideas early on in their placement, in which their CTs allowed them to “try things and fail,” while still having their support if things did not go as planned. Other participants mentioned their appreciation for their CT’s “patience and kindness” throughout the year as they were able to take on more responsibility while still having someone they could go to for questions and additional guidance when necessary.

While participants were able to list many of the supports they had during their placements, several expressed concerns about supports—or lack thereof—that will be in place following their student teaching. Participants noted they would be needing “a lot of support and guidance from those veteran teachers” when in their first teaching job. Many also expressed how their student teaching felt limited due to the online environment and that what they have learned in their university courses feels “still theoretical.” In turn, the ability to “have the support next year could be really beneficial” to guide them in the areas of their practice they feel less confident.

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“It Wasn’t as Bad as I Expected”

Despite the many challenges the candidates faced over the course of their student teaching, there were still many positive and rewarding experiences. Given that the CTs the candidates were working with were learning how to teach online alongside them, one said this experience “has given me the opportunity to feel like I can suggest different things...so I feel very involved in the process.” Another participant discussed how, despite difficulties in trying to increase student engagement, “it’s been positive” and a good learning experience that has “gone as good as it could have considering the circumstances.”

Many of the candidates highlighted the positive impact this particular way of student teaching had on requiring they get to know their students in different ways and be able to support them online in different ways. When asked what has been rewarding about their experience so far, one participant said, “getting students down on the routine and creating an environment online where they feel safe and comfortable.” Another participant discussed how “I think we’re getting a much sharper picture of what their home lives are like” due to students logging into class from their homes, which provided further insight into factors outside of the classroom that may be affecting their performance in school. Some of the student teachers also noted “small wins,” in that “there’s always those little moments that are fun, like I went to a breakout group and everyone was talking to each other and that’s the best.”

In addition to learning more about supporting the socio-emotional needs of students, several candidates discussed how the unique circumstances provided more ways to support the learning and engagement of students. When one of the participants transitioned into a hybrid model at their school which included in-person teaching, they discussed how “no way unless we were in the middle of a pandemic would we just have small groups of only four to five kids.” By “getting to know these kids at such an intimate level,” this participant felt they had “so much time to support each of them individually.” Another candidate considered how having the students online has made them “more talkative, more willing to connect, because...this is a lot of times their only social interaction for the day...I think that’s made them a lot more

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willing to build a relationship with me.” While the online environment provided several roadblocks for students and teachers, these student teachers also demonstrated that there are still many things that would be beneficial for future teaching practices.

These student teachers also described a plethora of learning in the area of technology that they might not have otherwise gained. One student described how they’ve “learned a lot more about digital resources than I think I ever would have in any other year,” while another agreed, saying how this situation “forced me to use more technology than I ever have in a job, and it will look good on a resume and also it’s just nice to be more comfortable with it.” These students reported using a plethora of new technologies to better instruct and engage students, including using interactive Google slides presentations; differentiating and creating choose-your-own-adventure type-assignments with EdPuzzle, Nearpod, and Google Forms; having students collaborate with each other on Jamboard and Padlet; assessing students in new video-based ways with Flipgrid; and engaging students with Kahoot and other polling software. It was clear these students should be proud of themselves, and they “gained a lot of skills as a teacher.”

Perceived Relatedness, Competence, and Autonomy of these Student Teachers

The third qualitative coding mechanism utilized deductive coding to understand these student teachers better in terms of their perceived levels of relatedness, their level of competence as a future in-service teacher, and the extent to which they felt autonomous, or in control, of their situation. In this analysis, the researchers used deductive coding to identify elements of text as descriptions of the three components of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000): relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Next, researchers coded these pieces of evidence as low (i.e., not feeling related, competent, or autonomous), medium (i.e., feeling somewhat related, competent, or autonomous), or high (i.e., feeling related, competent, or autonomous). The overall perceived levels for each of the seven participants ranged from low to high for each, as shown in Table 2.

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Table 2

Perceived Levels of Relatedness, Competence, and Autonomy, Categorized in Levels through Qualitative Coding

Level	Relatedness	Competence	Autonomy
Elementary	Medium: Experienced a somewhat strained relationship with CT	Medium: Strengths in patience and kindness; struggles with lesson planning, feedback, creativity	Medium: CT assumed a less directorial role in the Spring which increased autonomy from Fall to Spring
	High: Described their biggest support was their CT	Medium: Strengths in reflective practice, reports that "next year, we're going to need a lot of support"	Low: "[My CT] likes to micromanage" (Fall); to Medium: "I [do] have some autonomy" (Spring)
	High: Described they "would not have gotten through this year without her [their CT]"	Medium: Strengths in SEL, technology, and flexibility; described needing supports in assessment	High: "I've felt super autonomous (Fall); and "My CT's just like 'alright go for it! Let's just try it!'" (Spring)
Secondary	High: Described how this situation facilitated an even more balanced relationship with their CT	Low: "I don't have any classroom management experience—I don't feel prepared to teach at all"	High: "I've felt pretty autonomous throughout the whole process" (Fall); and, "My CT really let me take things whichever direction I wanted to" (Spring)
	Medium: Described over time "their CT backed off a little bit" from their experience in the Fall, and in the Spring were "very helpful"	High: "As far as lesson planning and implementing content in creative fun ways, I felt very successful"	Medium: "My CT kind of tends to just take the reins little bit" (Fall), which improved in the Spring to, "Once January hit it was really just all me all the time"
	Medium: They felt like their CT was also figuring out what to do, which reduced collaboration, but they also felt supported	Low: "Everything is a little theoretical. I feel like I haven't gotten any real experience. It feels like classroom management is a big issue"	Low: "I just sit in on exercise videos" (Fall); improved to High in the Spring; "I had complete free range to do what I wanted"
	Medium: Felt empowered to work side-by-side with CT and other math teachers. although there was some frustration	Medium: Strengths in discovery-based learning, creative lesson planning, and relationships; described needing support to serve struggling learners	High: "I felt super autonomous, especially once I took over my own classroom, I was making all the materials and lessons and was a big player in our community"

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Relatedness

There were varied levels of relatedness felt by the participants in this study; however, all seven student teachers felt some sort of relatedness, classified through our qualitative coding mechanisms as either Medium or High, to their CT, their school and classroom, and their program. Most importantly in this finding was perhaps how the situation presented through the pandemic actually provided an opportunity of sorts for the student teacher to be on a level playing field with their CT, to be seen as a peer and colleague rather than a student and mentee. For example, one student described this scenario:

I think being in this environment has really given me the opportunity to feel like I'm working *with* her [the CT] because we're constantly trying to come up with things *together* because she's never done it either so I feel very involved in the process, which has felt rewarding. It sounds bad but the fact that no one really knows what they're doing has given me the opportunity to feel like I can suggest different things, and try and come up with different methods and things like that, so I feel very involved in the process which has been rewarding.

Competence

Students' perceptions of their own competence were the lowest rated component of Self-Determination Theory, with all but one student rating themselves either Low or Medium. Some students were worried about how their lack of in-person experience would translate on the job market: "To try to get a job and try to explain, like, 'yeah no I never have actually had to step foot in a classroom except to pack bags for kids that aren't there...'" Another agreed, saying, while they did "have some classroom experience because of my previous job it's still going to be a hard sell, I feel like." Others were not as worried, stating that they, "feel like my skillset will translate to in person," while another celebrated this new skillset, saying:

I think we're going to come out with some really unique skills and overall, it's going to make us better teachers, even though it wasn't a fun time. You can whine about it

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the whole time, but you can still learn something from it.

Lastly, one student who had previously questioned her own competence had actually just transitioned to a new, full-time job through the end of the year and noted that, “It took me until this week to realize, I know how to write a lesson plan, I know how to start with the outcomes and work backwards, and now I’m feeling a bit more confident about lesson planning.” She still was questioning herself a bit though: “But in terms of classroom management I didn’t really get to practice building in person relationships, so the community building and the classroom management has been a little bit rough to start.”

Autonomy

The data revealed how the candidates managed to find their place as teachers and obtain autonomy while working with their CTs. In some cases, the student teachers were able to fully embrace their role as the lead teacher and experienced high autonomy. Some actually attributed the extent of this autonomy to student teaching during the pandemic: “I don’t know if I would’ve actually had as much autonomy in person, but since everything is like fly by the seat of your pants, I get a lot of autonomy.” Another student elaborated on this shift in power and autonomy:

The power dynamics in the classroom is very different between a student teacher and a CT than a typical classroom, just because typically the main teacher has been teaching for 10, 15 years, and they really know what’s going on, and you’re the student teacher. Maybe you haven’t been in a classroom before so you’re there to learn and then in the online setting it’s a little different because both of you are new to what’s going on, so I found right off the bat I was not pushed, but allowed to enter into a more regular teacher role than more of a student teacher role, like leading lessons a lot sooner. Having a greater awareness of technology and how to use it was a big asset for me [in shifting] the power dynamics.

In other cases, it was more difficult for the candidates to retain autonomy throughout their experience. One participant discussed how their CT “kind of tends to just take the reins a little bit...

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he's always there, so I do feel like my lessons are a little derailed sometimes and I'm not always the one in charge." However, despite certain CTs trying to maintain some control of their classroom, all of the student teachers felt they were able to be fully autonomous when teaching lessons that they laid out and planned themselves. Further, all of the student teachers who described low autonomy in the fall experienced increased perceptions of their own autonomy during the spring, full-time placement.

Some students felt both autonomous in terms of the day-to-day aspects of teaching, but not in terms of others. Some, for example, felt a lack of autonomy in terms of supporting students. One elementary student teacher described how, "I think the most stressful thing is I feel like I can't help the students who need it the most." They described how because so much of the work was asynchronous, it was very difficult to "make sure all the students get the help they need and the support they need." These student teachers felt helpless in this way. Others felt a lack of autonomy in terms of district mandates and policies, like the grading and assessment processes and the constantly changing landscape in terms of COVID protocols and shifts to hybrid learning and back again. However, most chalked these issues up to problems that were out of their locus of control. Finally, students also reported feeling "really out of control" about edTPA, the required licensing test in this particular state, which was especially the case for those doing only asynchronous teaching: "That is something that I did not feel I had control over, and it didn't feel very fair." Feelings of autonomy ranged widely.

Discussion

It is clear that this situation was an incredible challenge for these student teachers. They described feeling that they were "drowning," both in terms of navigating the world of virtual teaching and in surviving the balance between virtual teaching and virtual learning in their courses. At the same time, students described supports that helped them stay afloat and identified benefits to the situation as well. While we hope a challenging pandemic does not occur again, students often encounter challenges during educator preparation programs. The question to

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consider now is how can we use what we learned to support our students better and in new and innovative ways, especially in terms of enhancing the relatedness, competence, and autonomy of our student teachers?

Relatedness

This study, like Ryan and Deci (2000) theorized, revealed that relatedness and relationships must be prioritized in teacher preparation programs. These teachers referred to their placements in the field as being highly impactful, either positively or negatively. Positive relationships between the student teacher and their mentor teacher have been shown to be the most influential in a successful placement, in which student teachers receive continuous feedback and support related to lesson plans and instruction (Almazroa, 2020). Contrarily, practica consisting of continuous negative, discouraging, or restrictive experiences reduce the likelihood of continued practice (Almazroa, 2020). In this study, nearly half of the seven participating student teachers did not plan on teaching the next year. While this decision was largely due to pandemic-related issues, these participants did, at times, struggle in feeling related. To increase feelings of relatedness, teacher preparation programs must ensure field experiences are high-quality, choose strong CTs and university faculty for supervision, and then provide mentoring and support on how to promote a sense of belonging with student teachers (Allen, 2003).

Competence

These student teachers, understandably given the year, struggled the most with competence and mastery. Teaching is hard, and one is certainly not a master teacher upon completion of a teacher preparation program even during normal years; however, these particular future teachers may need additional support around classroom management and actually being in a classroom in the years to come (Korkut, 2017). These student teachers expressed trepidation about both obtaining a job and succeeding in that job, especially the day-to-day operations of managing a classroom, based on their current experiences. Both teacher preparation programs and school districts might consider

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implementing new or revised mentorship programs for new teachers for the coming years. Understanding classroom management more comprehensively (i.e., Kwok, 2019) and the day-to-day operations of running an in-person classroom will require mentoring next year and beyond.

These teachers also repeatedly referred to the many requirements on their time in terms of coursework and program components as being stressors, which likely impacted feelings of mastery. Research agrees, suggesting that overly high expectations for student teachers' time commitments contributes significantly to the problem of excessive workload, often identified as one of the biggest stressors within these teacher preparation programs (Almazroa, 2020). These student teachers discussed Zoom fatigue, competing priorities between the coursework and the placement work, and the state-licensure test (edTPA) as causing stress. Teacher preparation programs should consider reviewing all program requirements and possibly condensing or removing some, especially during times of crises, to only the requirements most likely to enhance competence.

Finally, while this study was about student teachers, not their PK-12 students, we would be remiss if we did not mention that these findings revealed our PK-12 students may need support for years to come as well. These student teachers encountered difficulties supporting students with diverse learning needs, working with students with inconsistent internet access, teaching younger students with limited experience with online tools, and engaging students online, including trouble with the dreaded "cameras off" phenomenon. Teacher preparation programs must consider how we can better equip our pre-service teachers to support students in the coming years and how we can directly support PK-12 students in terms of learning loss, which may be inequitably severe (Pier et al., 2021). In addition, teacher preparation programs must consider how to support our pre-service teachers to enhance students' social emotional learning and reduce impacts of trauma (Buntin & Gavulic, 2020; Dooley et al., 2020).

Autonomy

Lastly, a key finding of this study was that these student

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teachers appeared to experience higher levels of autonomy during this past year than they would have otherwise experienced. The pandemic actually facilitated this autonomy by shifting many students into a *colleague*, rather than a *mentee*, role with their mentor teacher due to the steep learning curves for all. This shift was a positive one, with other research agreeing that student teachers prefer a more *participatory* role, rather than just an *observatory* role (Almazroa, 2020), and even in-service teachers reported autonomy-supportive leadership styles as reducing stress and emotional exhaustion during this stressful time (Collie, 2021). Because this situation was facilitated by virtual learning, it is important to consider how these feelings of collegiality and autonomy can be fostered during non-COVID times. Perhaps an emphasis on fostering autonomy during training and mentoring for CTs could foster these feelings. Perhaps facilitating partnerships between CTs and student teachers around topics in which both are novices could cause similar situations to those surrounding virtual learning. Perhaps there are ways for the requirements in teacher preparation programs to offer choice to enhance student autonomy in showing their own mastery of the learning. Given that we know autonomy for teachers is important in general for student achievement (Wei et al., 2019), teacher preparation programs must continue to innovate in how autonomy for their student teachers can be enhanced and even facilitated, organically or artificially.

Limitations

While the recommendations we offer in this article are supported by data, caution must be executed due to the limitations of this study. While representation was ensured by stratifying participant selection and then utilizing random sampling techniques, this study was limited in scope in that it was inclusive of only seven participants within one teacher preparation program in the Pacific Northwest. This study would have been strengthened by a larger sample both within this one institution and beyond this institution. Further, while prolonged engagement occurred by tracking student experiences over time across two separate interviews, future research should employ triangulation

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techniques, such as by including observations and analyzing artifacts. In addition, future studies should follow-up with these students across an even longer period of time, as it is difficult to predict what the long-term effects of student teaching during the pandemic will be on these student teachers.

Conclusion

Student teachers are not alone in their experiences during this pandemic, but they have faced a year far-removed from typical experiences of previous student teachers. These student teachers had unique perspectives, as they could see the issues from both sides: “It’s funny being a student and a student teacher at the same time, because the stuff you complain about as a teacher is the same things you’re doing as a student! So who am I, I can’t complain, I don’t want to have my camera on either!” Despite the many difficulties these student teachers experienced, there is still value in how this past year will impact their future as fully-licensed teachers. One of the participants summed this up well, saying: “I think that there is the reality of 2020 and 2021: everybody’s been altered.” We have all been altered, so let’s ensure teacher preparation programs leave altered for the better.

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