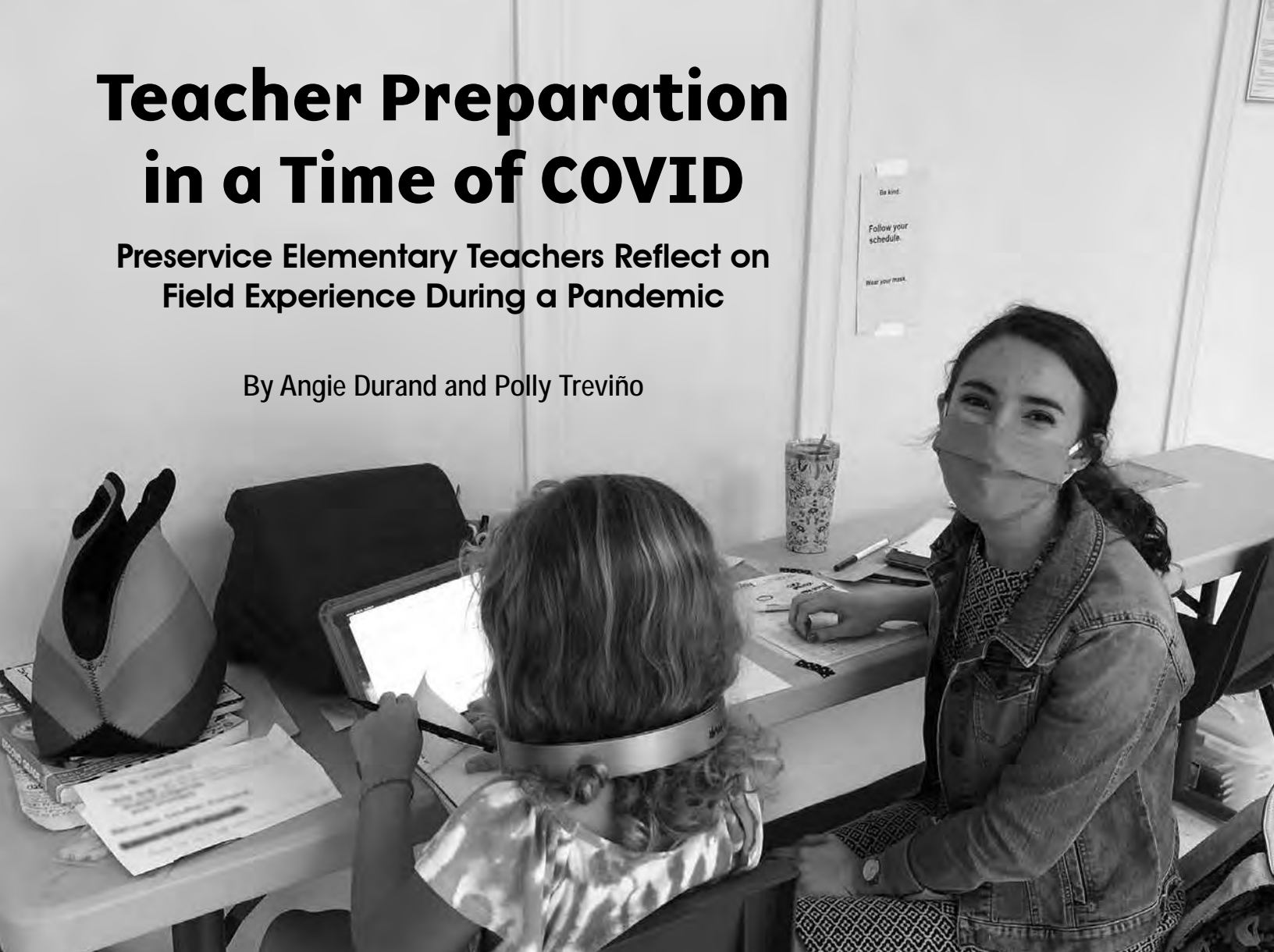


Teacher Preparation in a Time of COVID

Preservice Elementary Teachers Reflect on Field Experience During a Pandemic

By Angie Durand and Polly Treviño



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Abstract: In this article, two university professors describe how field-based experiences for preservice elementary teachers in literacy methods courses were adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of completing conventional field experiences and classroom observations, the preservice teachers served as adult helpers for virtual learning at a school district learning center. The preservice teachers reflect on their experiences assisting children who were learning virtually and describe what they learned during the experience. Preservice teachers reported learning strategies for engaging students in virtual learning, classroom management

skills, dispositions for teaching, such as flexibility and adaptability, and the importance of building relationships with students.

Keywords: preservice teachers, teacher preparation, field experience, virtual learning, COVID-19 pandemic

It was stressful knowing that I would be going back to school in the middle of a pandemic. I didn't know how anything was going to be structured or if we would even be able to observe in schools this semester. I had been looking forward to doing more observations this year, so I was disappointed to think that we would not be able to be in classrooms this year.

Educational institutions, from preschools to universities, have been particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Educating safely has required us to radically rethink how we do things. At our university, where we prepare preservice elementary teachers, university leaders decided to require all class sessions to be recorded and to offer the students the option to come face-to-face or register to attend remotely. If students registered for in-person learning, the university offered a hybrid-remote A/B plan for instruction. One-half of the class would attend class on A days while the other half would watch the recorded class. On B days, the groups would switch. The A/B schedule allowed classrooms to be

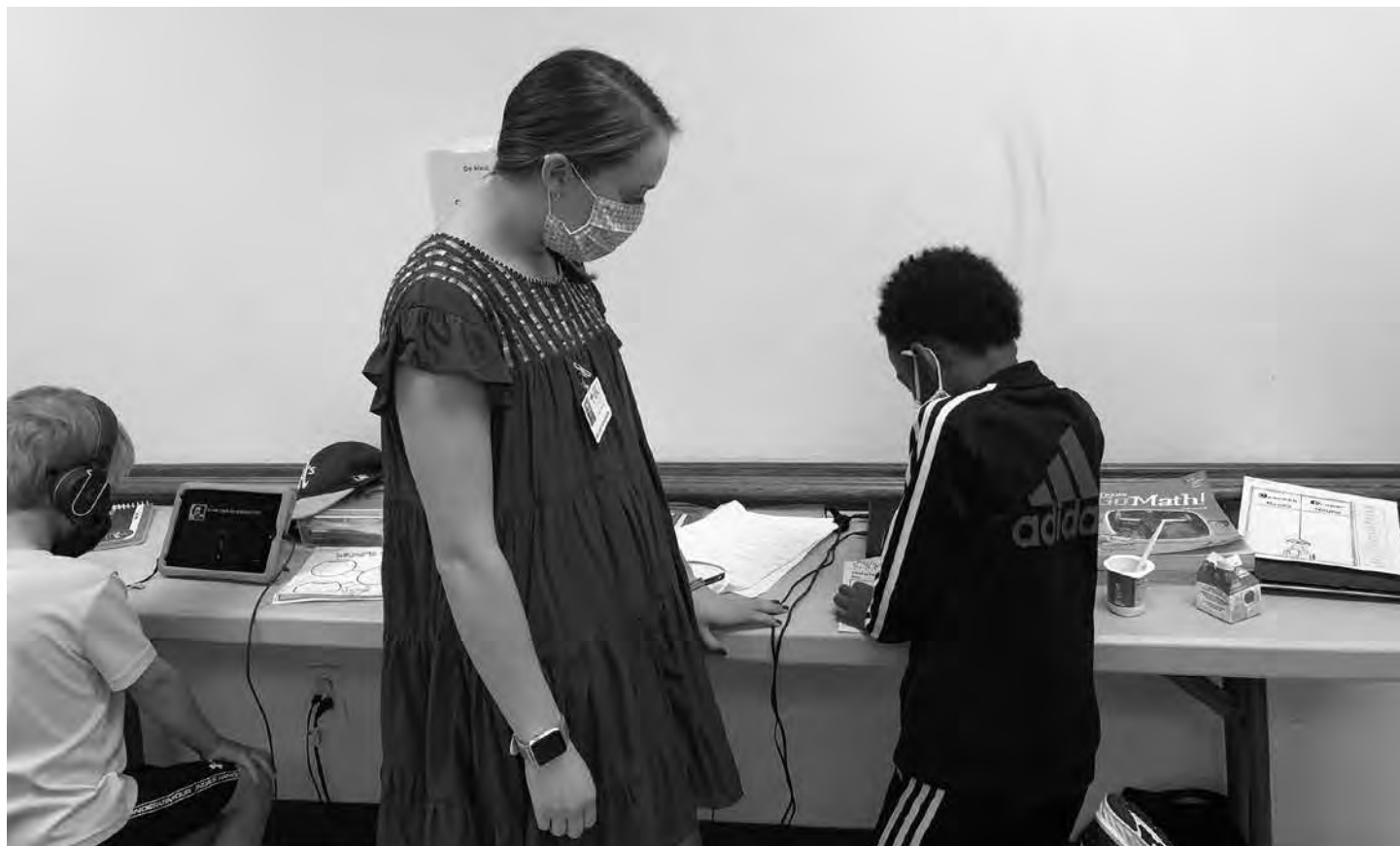
set up so that professors and college students had socially distant learning with the recommended 6-foot distance between each person. If students registered to attend remotely, then they would watch the video for all class sessions.

Preservice teachers in our undergraduate elementary education program take a literacy block that includes two pedagogy/methods courses: reading and language arts. With field experience at the heart of our program, our philosophy centers on bridging theory and practice. Preservice teachers learn theory in our college courses and then engage in field experience in local elementary classrooms where they apply and practice while being mentored by the college professor and the classroom teacher. For our literacy methods block, preservice teachers co-enroll in the two courses, attend class for three-hour blocks, and complete 60 hours of field experience in local classrooms. The semester begins with the preservice teachers meeting daily at 8 a.m. to learn language arts theories, teaching strategies, how to administer assessments, and how to disaggregate and use the resulting data. After three weeks of intense hands-on application, class meetings reduce to one day per week. On the other days, the preservice teachers report to local schools in partner school districts to work with a mentor teacher in a kindergarten through fifth-grade language arts classroom. The preservice teachers have specific strategies and activities they are required to complete during the 60 hours spent in the classrooms at the elementary school campuses. They conduct an interactive read aloud, deliver a phonemic awareness lesson for a small group, administer several reading assessments, interpret the data to plan instruction, and manage a small reading group. That is the usual, normal way each literacy block semester goes for our elementary education preservice teachers. However, the “new normal” of COVID-19 brought new challenges in 2020.

In summer 2020, school districts in the Houston area announced that they would start later in September instead of the typical August start dates. Many districts planned to start with remote instruction instead of in-person learning, and other districts were to offer both remote and in-person learning simultaneously. COVID-19 was making the typical field experience impossible.

As the start of semester grew close, we focused on how the instruction would be adjusted for our university’s hybrid-remote A/B plan as well as where or how the preservice teachers would observe in the classrooms. The department’s professors planned and reworked content to create appropriate learning experiences for the preservice education students. Many of the hands-on activities that were part of the normal teaching and learning processes could be replicated with some level of integrity through technology. The theories and examples were moved to a more online platform with the use of videos, webinars from multiple professional organizations, and professor-created videos. However, working firsthand with a group of elementary children could not be replicated using any readily available online source. The team struggled to identify activities that could possibly replace the 60 hours of classroom experience with elementary students and the mentorship provided by the classroom teacher.

As our Educator Preparation Program staff and professors brainstormed how to replicate the elementary classroom experience, our key partner school district made the formal announcement that, at minimum, the first six weeks of instruction would be fully virtual. Social media platforms were inundated with parents looking for help to manage pods of students. Many of these parents were working from home, but—needing to complete their own work—they were unable to guide their children through daily schedules for virtual school. They were seeking what has come to





For the next six weeks, the college students went to the Learning Center every morning and worked with one to five students for three hours each morning. By the time the six weeks of virtual learning were over, we had supported 45 elementary students attending the Learning Center, and they represented four area elementary campuses. Despite our best plans, the list of assignments that were typical for the literacy block were not completed. Helping the students with their daily work took all of the available time, and our preservice teachers were not able to add more lessons and assessments to the students' workloads. However, the time spent at the Learning Center was valuable and meaningful in ways that we could not have foreseen.

After the experience concluded, we asked our preservice teachers to reflect on the experience of serving at the Learning Center. Nearly every preservice teacher expressed empathy with the elementary students at the Learning Center because, as students themselves during the pandemic, they were also navigating hybrid-remote schooling with online coursework. They desired to assist students learning virtually because they also felt stress with the shift to remote learning.

When I heard that we were going to be helping the . . . students at [the church], I was excited to lessen the struggle for them and I was more than happy to help. I thought about how if I already knew how stressful it was for me, it definitely was really overwhelming and hard for such young elementary school students.

be known as the “adult helper” in virtual schools. Dual-working parents or parents who were frontline employees were struggling to find adult helpers. Several of these parents reached out to our university hoping to find education students who needed work and could serve as home teachers while the children were scheduled to be online for the day.

Knowing that our college students needed to work with elementary students and that many working from home parents needed someone to work with their elementary students, we explored possibilities of a matching system to connect our preservice teachers with the parents who needed adult helpers for their elementary school students. As we explored how to make these connections, we heard about area churches setting up Learning Centers in collaboration with the school district to provide safely distanced areas for elementary students to be monitored while parents worked uninterrupted in their home offices. Of course, the churches needed to find volunteers to help manage the students.

The Learning Center was the answer we were looking for to give our preservice teachers an opportunity to be with elementary students! We reached out to one of the churches near one of our partner elementary campuses, and they were thrilled to work with us and our college students. We then put the processes in place. Our preservice teachers had to apply and be approved with the school district. We had to rework field-based assignments so that they could complete them while they worked with the elementary students who were attending virtual classes.

On the first day, our class of 11 preservice teachers met in the parking lot of the church where the Learning Center was located. We found about 25 elementary students set up by grade in various rooms with six feet separating them. For example, one room had four students with one student sitting at the end of each of the eight-foot tables. The preservice teachers met the elementary students, and they reviewed each student's schedule and the paperwork needed to complete the day's required tasks.



They also described how they learned from watching the students' teachers teaching virtually.

I learned a lot about teaching during these strange times. I do not think I would have known anything of how to go about teaching in the online format, especially to elementary students! I am so grateful to have been able to participate in the learning at [the church].

they were responsible for keeping children on task, safely distanced, and masked. One student reflected on the challenges of balancing all these demands:

I had to remember all their different class schedules, keep them on track, and make sure they weren't always playing games when they weren't supposed to. It was also hard to keep them from getting up from their seats to talk to one another while also



They saw how teachers adapted to the virtual learning environment, utilized student engagement strategies, and employed classroom management techniques.

By having to jump into the role of [preservice] teacher in a unique environment, I also learned so much about classroom management—specifically how to keep students motivated, on-track, and on their best behavior. While all very new and definitely difficult, I am glad that I got to experience and learn from working with students in an online environment.

Not only were they able to observe virtual classroom management, but the preservice teachers also reported learning in-person classroom management skills. They described learning how to redirect children themselves.

Additionally, I was able to assist students during their live class sessions and their online homework. I helped to keep them focused and tutored them when necessary. Some of the students came to the Learning Center very behind on their work for various reasons. When this happened, I motivated the students to keep working by using checklists, brain breaks, and encouraging words. Overall, I believe [we] made the best out of a new, stressful situation that COVID brought to schools.

As the adult helper in the same physical space with the children,

reminding them to keep their masks up. Some of my students were great and listened to me the first time, while I had to tell the others multiple times before they actually did it.

Another commented on the challenges of masking, but also expressed gratitude for the masks:

I always made sure they were paying attention to their teacher and that they had their mask on. I would have never thought that I would have to tell students so many times to pull up a mask! Although, we are thankful for masks because without them we would not have been able to have any interactions with the students.

Masking management challenges are part of the “new normal” during the pandemic. In contrast, technology and hardware challenges are not new challenges; however, the 100% virtual learning environment brought a new dimension to hardware and connectivity challenges, because technological interruptions were more consequential in the virtual learning environment.

We encountered issues that were very new. For example, if a student forgot to bring their laptop with them, then the volunteers had to figure out how this student [could] share with others to access their classes and assignments. This is not a typical issue for in-person classrooms.



Teaching and learning in this virtual environment required adaptability and flexibility from all—from the classroom teachers, from the preservice teachers serving as adult helpers, and from the elementary students themselves. They described how there “was a lot of on-the-job learning, but in the end, we all worked together [to] put the students’ learning first.” This “on-the job” learning included adapting to the technology-mediated instruction and to the various teachers’ styles.

It was definitely a whirlwind of figuring out each campus’ (and each teacher’s) take on online learning as well as adapting to the technology that teachers and students are now depending on to do all their learning. I learned so much about different techniques to keep students engaged (brain breaks!), even while staring at a computer screen all day, and immediately noticed how dedicated these wonderful teachers were to making this remote learning experience as meaningful as possible for the students.

Because the students in the Learning Center represented multiple grades with teachers from several schools, the preservice teachers had to become adept at managing multiple schedules for the children.

We also had multiple grades and teachers all on different devices at one time, which was crazy. In the beginning it was mainly about making sure the students [logged] on and [watched] their class at the right time each day (which was a struggle at first), which meant sometimes we somehow missed classes or small group meetings. But we eventually got [used] to what every student was supposed to be doing and at what time. Then it became about making sure they listened during class and did all their assignments after class. This also got easier once we had more time with students and were able to listen in on their meetings.

After a period of adjustment in the first days, the students settled into their virtual class routines, and the preservice teachers became accustomed to managing multiple schedules for students.

The first few weeks were interesting and required a lot of flexibility, but it was great to be able to help the students on a more one-on-one basis. Many of the students had a hard time staying focused and paying attention at first, but over time, they started to pay more attention. I really enjoyed being able to help them figure out how to do online learning in a different setting. I know how hard it has been for me to figure out how things are working now, so I loved being able to guide them through the new school year and give them some help in a new school year. I learned more in the weeks that I was there than I did in some of my other observations [in previous semesters]. I am very grateful that I got this opportunity to help students.

During these extraordinary circumstances, the preservice teachers confronted a reality of teaching that is present even under normal circumstances: Being a teacher requires flexibility and adaptability.

Another reality of teaching that the preservice teachers confronted was that of relationship-building. The social distancing and masking practices utilized in the pandemic have deepened our awareness of human interaction, and the preservice teachers noted the importance of interaction and building relationships with the students.

Managing . . . second-grade students who would rather play Prodigy (a math game that was all the rage in that [group]) was definitely a hassle, but if I could do it all over again, I would. In those few weeks, I came to really care about my students and I could see that me being there had an impact on their schooling.

While I did get called a “party pooper” (because I wouldn’t let them play Prodigy all day), I made sure that they were sticking to their schedules, did their assignments, gave extra help on assignments when they were confused and when they were on their breaks, a source of normal human interaction. COVID has definitely shaken things up, but that learning center helped bring a sense of normalcy to those students.



Even in a short time period, the preservice teachers were able to build relationships with the students they served.

I enjoyed my time working with my second graders and miss them greatly! The personal connection was so important in our time there [to be] successful, and it definitely reminded me just how important those relationships are in the classroom.

In fact, most of our preservice teachers mentioned some aspect of relationship-building in their reflections. They wrote that they were “very sad when it was time for [the students] to go back to in-person class,” that they wished they could follow the students to continue working with them in their in-person classes, and that they would miss their students even though they had worked with them for only a few weeks.

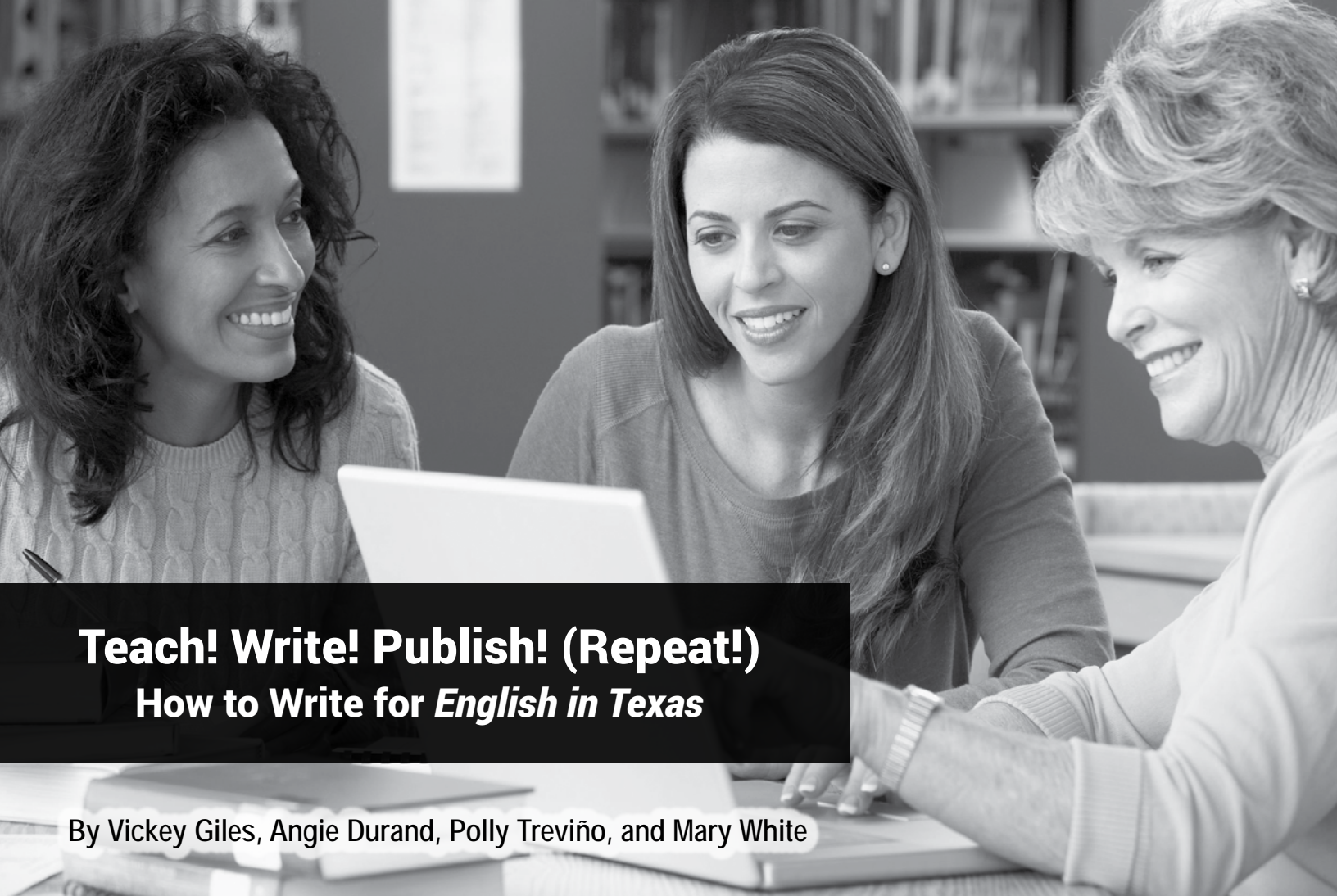
The field-based experiences, giving preservice teachers time with students in classroom settings with mentor teachers, are the cornerstones of our preservice teacher program. Given the limitations in the pandemic context, our typical plan for field experiences had to be adjusted and reconsidered to work within the partner district’s use of virtual instruction. Although our preservice teachers were not able to complete their typical field-

based assignments, we were able to adapt to the moment in a way that supported our preservice teachers’ development and simultaneously served our community and partner district. One of our preservice teachers summed up her experience in this way:

This fall, I had the opportunity to work with students at the virtual learning center. Though this fieldwork experience looked different than any other fieldwork experience I have had, I learned a lot and will look back on it with fond memories. At this learning center, I was able to work with kindergarten and first grade students. I sat with them as they had their online meetings and was able to observe their teachers in their teaching. I was very impressed with what I saw from the teachers. They were very organized, patient, and understanding with the students. They also were able to hold these young students’ attention very well. When the students were in class, they were engaged in the lesson, and I have to give major credit to their excellent teachers for that. When the students were off of their calls, I got to work one-on-one with them to help them with any assignments their teacher assigned. Because of these students being so young still, I did notice that online learning was tough on them at times, but they persevered and finished each day with good attitudes! This experience taught me what a virtual classroom looked like, which will be incredibly useful to me should I have to teach in this manner in the future. It also taught me many classroom management strategies as I had to become these students’ teacher in a way. I am very grateful to have had this opportunity and am very thankful for everything I learned through these students and their teachers!

Ultimately, what did our preservice teachers learn about teaching and learning during the “new normal” of the COVID-19 pandemic? The experiences in the Learning Center were valuable and provided career-long lessons for when they become teachers with their own classrooms. They learned to engage students in learning. They learned to meet classroom management and technology challenges. They learned flexibility and adaptability. They learned the importance of building relationships with students. Sounds a lot like the “old normal,” don’t you think?





Teach! Write! Publish! (Repeat!)

How to Write for *English in Texas*

By Vickey Giles, Angie Durand, Polly Treviño, and Mary White

Vickey Giles, Angie Durand, Polly Treviño, and Mary White are professors at Houston Baptist University and co-editors of *English in Texas*. Their research interests include all facets of language arts instruction, from children's literature to technology integration, from grammar to reading acquisition. They can be reached at EnglishinTX@hbu.edu.

Abstract: The editors of *English in Texas* invite readers, particularly in-service teachers, to write for the journal. By answering frequently asked questions about the Call for Submissions, the editors describe how potential authors can take an idea through the writing process, transform it into a manuscript, and submit it for publication in the journal.

Keywords: writing for publication, journal articles, language arts, elementary secondary education, teachers as authors

Calling all language arts educators to write!

If you were fortunate enough to hear Rebekah O'Dell call for teachers to write, you may have heard your inner voice say, "I need/want to do that!" Or maybe you have been in the middle of a lesson and thought, "This is a great idea for the classroom that I want to tell someone about!" As language arts educators, most of us experience the urge to write, but sometimes are just not sure where to begin. Or maybe you wrote an article, sent it off to a journal, but it was not published, so you got discouraged (many of us have experienced this). We want to help you write and get published. Read on!

Ok, you've convinced me! I want to write for *English in Texas*! Where do I begin?

Start by reviewing the Call for Submissions on the TCTELA website (https://www.tctela.org/english_in_texas). You can also find the Call for Submissions in the current issue of *English in Texas*. Each issue has a specific theme, which is described in the call. You are a reader of this journal. What teaching practices, disciplinary knowledge, or teaching experiences would you want to read about in this journal? Reflect on it and write that!

I have an idea for a manuscript, but it doesn't fit the issue theme. Should I write it and submit anyway?

Yes! We look for manuscripts that fit the issue's theme, but we also look for manuscripts that are relevant to the field or are particularly timely. Moreover, we look for manuscripts that fit future themes, and your manuscript might be perfect for a future theme. *Please* write and submit your manuscript!

What types of manuscripts are you looking for?

English in Texas readers teach in a range of contexts, from kindergarten through higher education; therefore, we are looking for articles that appeal to language arts teachers in any of these contexts, from early childhood through preservice teachers. We have three article types: classroom innovations articles, research articles, and columns. Knowing the characteristics of each article type will help you draft your manuscript accordingly.

Classroom innovations articles are focused on teaching practices. We are interested in articles that share authentic practices that language arts teachers have planned, implemented, and reflected on. Classroom innovations articles are eight to twelve pages in length (approximately 2,000 to 3,000 words) and showcase an approach, technique, strategy, or lesson or unit.

Research articles report investigations of teaching and learning in language arts. Research articles are ten to fifteen pages in length (approximately 2,500 to 3,750 words) and follow research article conventions reporting the method, results, and discussion of results. We are interested in research conducted with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method techniques. We are also interested in research reviews that synthesize research findings for our teacher-practitioner audience.

The third type of article is the column, which is a regularly featured space for teachers to share specific experiences or teaching ideas in a short format of 500 to 1,000 words. Our journal features two columns, "Putting It All Together" and "The Tech-Savvy Teacher." "Putting It All Together" features teachers' authentic experiences differentiating language arts instruction for special populations. "The Tech-Savvy Teacher" features tools and strategies for technology integration in language arts instruction. Read the Call for Submissions to learn more about each of these columns.

The call for submissions instructs authors to query the editors before submitting columns. How do I do that?

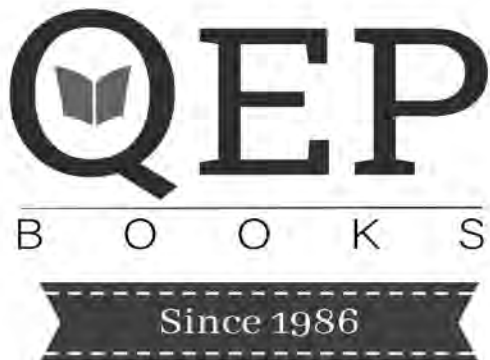
Send an email to EnglishinTX@hbu.edu. Tell us which column you would like to write ("Putting It All Together" or "The Tech-Savvy Teacher") and provide a brief summary of the topic you would like to address in your column. Explain the unique viewpoint that you would bring as the author and the key ideas that you think you might express in the column. If you have an idea for a column that doesn't fall into "Putting It All Together" or "The Tech-Savvy Teacher," send your query anyway.

Querying the editorial team is not limited to column ideas. If you have an idea for a manuscript but are not sure about its suitability for *English in Texas*, you can follow the same query procedure to inquire about an idea for a classroom innovations article or research article.

I teach the writing process to my students, but the idea of drafting a professional article is intimidating. Do you have any tips on drafting a manuscript? How do I take it from idea to manuscript?

Simply think about the best articles and ideas that you have read in the past. Most teachers have a story to tell, so think about writing your story for the journal as your opportunity to tell your story. Brainstorm the ideas that work in your classroom and consider the activities or the how-to for your favorite activity or lesson and write it out. Let your creativity flow! Don't stop the process! Often, the ideas come from the successes that happen in the classroom, those times when the other teachers in your hall ask for details on how to do what you did in their own classrooms. Perhaps you have a lesson related to the theme that was over-the-top successful. You could write a manuscript explaining how you developed the lesson, what the plan was, how you implemented it, and what advice you have for others who want to implement it. Send it in and let others share your instructional designs! Maybe you have a reflection on the journal's theme as it pertains to your classroom or teaching context, or perhaps you would like to share resources such as trade book titles, assessments, or even writing prompts with other teachers. Sharing these could stimulate the thinking of other teachers in the field, and we are interested in learning about the innovations and ideas that spring from your classroom.

Use your fellow teachers as a sounding board for the idea that you want to write about and submit. Even better, recruit your fellow teachers to collaborate with you to write together! Writing a manuscript with someone else is a great way to reduce any intimidation or fear you might be feeling. You can share the writing




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among your co-authors, and the manuscript you produce will benefit from the perspective that each co-author brings.

I have my manuscript drafted. How do I prepare it for submission?

English in Texas has submission guidelines listed in the journal and on the Call for Submissions webpage (https://www.tctela.org/english_in_texas). (Scroll all the way down the page.) Pay close attention to the submission guidelines. Go down the list and check that your manuscript meets each of the guidelines. Make sure that your manuscript is a Microsoft Word document, is typed in 12-pt font, and is double-spaced, even the References page. We follow the APA Style, 7th edition. If you are not familiar with the style, you can find help at <https://apastyle.apa.org/> or on the Purdue OWL website. Check that your manuscript follows APA Style, especially in citations and references.

You will need to prepare an abstract (150-200 words) and choose 5 key words that help others identify the main content of your article. Choose your key words carefully. If your manuscript is published, these are the key words that index your article in databases. You will also create a title page. Follow the instructions in the submission guidelines, making sure that author name(s) are listed only on the title page and not in the manuscript itself. If you have any tables and figures in the article, you should put those in a separate file. Finally, you will need to prepare a cover letter. Once again, follow the instructions in the submission guidelines.

I've prepared my manuscript for submission. Now what?

Congratulations! You did it! Now, it's time to submit. Send your cover letter to EnglishinTX@hbu.edu, with your manuscript and any tables and figure files attached. Please make sure that your attachments are in Microsoft Word document format. We will acknowledge receipt by e-mail.

After I submit the manuscript, what is next in the process?

Once you submit your manuscript, the editorial team will determine if it is suitable for publication in *English in Texas*. We evaluate the manuscript holistically, considering the topic, the intended audience, whether it aligns with the theme of the current issue, whether it aligns to a future issue's theme, and its overall relevance to the journal's readership. Promising manuscripts are then forwarded to a team of reviewers. Our review panel consists of current teachers, administrators, and scholars in the field. The reviewers review the manuscript and provide feedback on its content. Even after a manuscript is accepted for publication, the author may be asked to revise the manuscript according to the reviewers' feedback. In the final step, accepted manuscripts are sent to our copy editor for final review and proofreading.

You almost have me convinced, but I am still not sure if I can do this.

You can! Try some of the strategies below to get started, or send us an email before you can talk yourself out of it.

1. Schedule a time on your calendar to sit and just write down your ideas.
2. Take one of your ideas and list three to five thoughts you have related to the idea (resources, lesson strategies, reflections, student responses, etc.)
3. Write on each of these thoughts. The journal calls for 2,500–3,750 words. Divide this number by the number of reflections and write this much on each one of those thoughts. Save it!
4. Let those words sit and then schedule a time to come back to them in a few days.
5. Read about writing (maybe you want to do this first)
 - Rebecca O'Dell's article in *English in Texas*, Volume 50.1 (Spring/Summer 2020)
 - Kate DiCamillo's blog "On Writing"
 - Articles you may have flagged as those you want to read when you have more time. The time is now!

Write for yourself. Write for your sanity. Write for your students. Write for *English in Texas*!

Teach. Write. Publish. Repeat!