Feature Article

Teachers of English Learners Respond to COVID-19 Realities: Online Graduate Program Insight

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Abstract

This article presents a descriptive analysis case study conducted in the stream of teacher action research. An instructor-generated questionnaire was administered to teacher education program participants (n=141) who are practicing U.S. teachers of English learners (ELs). All respondents were enrolled in an online graduate-level teacher education program with a concentration in bilingual education and TESOL certification. The results of the questionnaire indicate that, as teachers of ELs worked in a variety of pre-K–12 settings and modes of instruction during the pandemic, including school closures, 67.4% of teachers worked longer hours compared to their pre-pandemic workloads. Additional data analysis includes teacher-reported meaningful student engagement, instructional modeling in teacher education programs, and the use of technology in teacher education. As the educational profession evaluates the effects of the pandemic on the state of teaching and student achievement and sets post-COVID directions, this data may help inform decisions. The article highlights the value of modeling practices in tertiary instruction for educators and the use of educational technology in a teacher education program. It also advocates for increased teacher voice and agency in shaping professional development of in-service teachers. The article ends with a call to administrators, policy makers, teacher education programs, and publishers to acknowledge the unprecedented professional growth of school-based educators and seek teacher-generated reflections on the pandemic-induced changes in their pedagogy to help inform future professional development, educational policy, and teacher education program development.

Keywords: *EL, ELL, teacher education, bilingual education, TESOL certification, pre-K–12, pandemic, school closure, COVID-19, online graduate program, instructional technology*

Introduction

Summer of 2020 came and went, and the pandemic-ridden 2020-2021 school year is almost over. The air is filled with special excitement; as we make plans for another school year, the questions are still many, the answers are few, and the needs of the educators serving our   English language learners (ELLs) are diverse (Lindner & Schwab, 2020). Having dominated the United

States for some time, the pandemic conversation should be attended to in the graduate programs preparing teachers to work with English language learners and otherwise diverse student populations (Hamilton et al., 2020; Nuss, 2021b). As I watched the pandemic unfold, I invited my graduate students in the online Bilingual Education and TESOL Certification program to reflect on its effects in pre-K–12 setting together from March 2020 through April 2021. Geographically, enrolled students represented most of the fifty U.S. states and territories. There were ten cohorts of students involved in the survey with a total number of 141 participants.

I turned to descriptive analysis to investigate the causal effects of the societally-induced change on the classroom practices of teachers and the learning behaviors of their students during the pandemic. Used to describe social phenomena, this kind of inquiry is instrumental in creating an accurate contextual representation of cause and effect in applied social sciences, such as education, where questions of *how* a certain phenomenon affects the lives of its various participants can be answered (Gopalan et al., 2020). As a formal process of scientific inquiry following a well-established design routine of observing phenomena, identifying research questions, generating and testing hypotheses, and then conducting new observations and producing new questions and hypotheses (Loeb et al., 2017), this qualitative investigation favors a descriptive approach with the purpose to capture the events in two educational settings: pre-K–12 and graduate-level teacher education programs. The events were unfolding over the course of a year, from March of 2020 through April of 2021, making this a longitudinal study. This sets it apart from the many pandemic-related surveys administered to the teaching profession, as many of them were one-time here and now solicitations. A fundamental component of scientific inquiry, descriptive analysis is uniquely positioned to organize its observation sequence. It highlights the perspectives on the world and phenomena, driving new research questions, which, in turn, enable a new wave of hypotheses on the issues being observed and described as they influence new inquiry and policy development (Loeb et al., 2017). This exploration is also an example of teacher action research (Manfra, 2019).

Scope and Methods

This longitudinal investigation took place over the course of a year in an online teacher education graduate program. Data analyzed in this article are part of a larger data set collected by administering to students a sequence of questionnaires. This study reports on the data collected via one questionnaire with multiple choice and open-ended questions administered to 10 cohorts of participants between March 2020 and April 2021. To analyze the data, I reviewed all participants' responses and developed emerging themes. The qualitative and quantitative data was then used to capture and describe causal effects of the societally-induced change on the classroom practices of teachers and the learning behaviors of their students during the pandemic. This study also draws on my reflection on structural changes implemented in a tertiary teacher

education program in order to meet the changing needs of my students who, in turn, had to respond to the sudden shift in demands of their workplace.

Participants

There were a total of 141 participants in 10 cohorts of graduate students, all of whom were practicing teachers in a variety of pre-K–12 settings. All participants were enrolled in an online teacher education master's program with a concentration in Bilingual Education and TESOL Certification. Most of the respondents, 85.7%, reported they had ELs in their inclusive mainstream classrooms and/or worked with ELs in a bilingual setting. Geographically, enrolled students represented most of the fifty U.S. states and territories. All responses were made anonymous.

Pandemic discussion in a teacher education program

The idea behind proposing the survey to my students, making its results available to them, and offering to students a communication space in the discussion forum of the courses I taught was inspired by my desire to provide these teachers with a support structure, to enact a meaningful solution amidst the pandemonium and confusion in educational circles during the pandemic. As I witnessed fundamental shifts of instructional modes the teaching profession was experiencing in my own workplace of a pre-K–12 urban school district and tertiary teacher education program (Nuss, 2021b), I noticed that many teachers turned to social media for professional support and encouragement, a rich but not often curated resource. I saw the need for a high-quality collaborative discussion for educators and created such a space within my courses by providing teachers with a venue for reflection and an opportunity to exchange ideas. Very soon it became apparent that many of my students faced common challenges of having to

   (a) organize instruction in various modes in response to limited or ceased face-to-face instruction;
   (b) streamline the communication with families and collaboration with colleagues; and
   (c) make sense and use of the new technology in order to facilitate students' learning, among other priorities (not to mention the fact that many of these professionals were also facing COVID-19–induced personal tragedies and health crises while having to meet educational needs of local communities).

Evident from the start of the discussion, the degree of professional support available to teachers became a prominent and important variable—the teachers had different support systems provided by their districts, states, and local communities, which made course interaction that much more meaningful, as it encouraged nation-wide comparisons which, in turn, revealed nation-wide patterns (Domina, 2021; Nuss, 2021b). Sharing common discussion space opened opportunities for meaningful peer support and collaboration. The teachers commented on the challenges expressed by their colleagues, offered solutions and council, shared materials and technology tips, and provided each other with lasting support and encouragement.

COVID-themed discussions can get very personal with emotions swinging high (Gross & Opalka, 2020), so participation in the survey was optional: I left it up to the students whether or not to join the conversation. A Google form questionnaire (see Appendix) was created to initiate the exchange. The questions of the survey were informed by student comments in the discussion forum of the course, as well as by my professional observations of and conversations with teachers of ELs in a pre-K–12 school district I was working with at the time. Even though participation in this questionnaire was not required, the vast majority of students – over 98% – opted to participate as an alternative way to earn course participation credit.

The conversations that developed within the course based on this questionnaire revolved around a few main themes:

(a) facilitation of student engagement in and outside of school buildings;
(b) the actions or lack thereof of school, district, and state administrations in response to the pandemic;
(c) serving all students equitably and providing quality education to all—including teachers' own—children, as well as ways to continue making available for students access to educational materials, food, and safe learning spaces;
(d) re-evaluation of volume of instructional content: should or should not the content change in response to the new conditions, and if yes, what changes should be implemented;
(e) communication with families and what to do to engage families in more meaningful ways;
(f) tips on running various learning management systems and applications, as well as using technology responsibly and equitably;
(g) ways to differentiate instruction to better address the needs of linguistically, socially, and otherwise diverse students; and
(h) physical safety and emotional state of educators and interactions with local communities.

The forum validated teachers' feelings and provided actionable solutions to challenges.

Walking the talk: The value of modeling in teacher education
As the responses to the questionnaire were rolling in, I read and re-read them in search of common threads of high priority needs that could be addressed within the space of my courses. I was determined to be a part of the solution and actively sought out ways to be helpful: The very fact of initiating and sustaining this discussion and adjusting the course design to meet the demands of current realities of teachers' workplace was a meaningful event in itself; however, I wanted to extend my impact as an instructor.

A persisting theme of insecurity in the use of technology emerged within the very first group of responses. Being a recent technology convert and coming from an all-paper background myself, I had first-hand knowledge of just how obstructive inadequate capacity in this area could be and was compelled to do something about it. I turned to Hattie's (2008) ranking of influencers of student achievement based on meta-analyses of 800 studies (number of studies at the time of its first publication in 2008. The number of studies increases and effect sizes get adjusted as the research continues; see Hattie & Hamilton, 2020). According to this line of research, interactional videos deliver the highest effect size among various digital technologies with an effect size of .54. Considering the average effect size of .40 in Hattie's interpretation of surveyed studies, anything above .40 could be viewed as a desirable influence on student achievement. Based on this information, I modified the course instruction to include simple yet impactful interactional video technology in the very matrix of the course and made students' subsequent learning experiences more interactive. For example, instead of another discussion post, the students were now invited to work within the space of an interactive video in *EdPuzzle*. As a result, course participants were *working* with technology, not *writing about working with technology* in their discussion posts. They had a chance to *experience* technology in action and *feel its impact* on their own learning.

> **Note on the technology used**: *EdPuzzle* activity, housed on an EdPuzzle website, allows the use of a video where a learner can interact with it. As someone is watching the video, it automatically pauses at predetermined times and the screen displays a question for the viewer to respond to. The questions can vary and depend on the instructional goals of the person creating it; they can be answered with a multiple-choice (automatically graded by the program) or a free write response option (instructor grades by hand). The program has a low learning curve for both the creator of *EdPuzzle* activity and the learner, and it has a free membership option. For an example of an EdPuzzle video activity, see this link: https://edpuzzle.com/assignments/5f1e288a6fa2813f25650a82/watch.

This seemingly small change in the instruction delivery made a big difference for students: when asked to reflect on their learning experience by responding to the question, "Was EdPuzzle an enjoyable form of reflection for you, or would you prefer to watch a video and write an essay?" almost all participants chose "Yes, it was enjoyable and I felt productive," with two responding, "No, I didn't enjoy learning with EdPuzzle and would prefer to just watch a video and write an essay."

The participants appreciated the authenticity of their learning experience and noted in their course reflections that it was "refreshing" to get to be "on the other side"—in the shoes of their students. Some stated they had heard of *EdPuzzle* before but never took the time to look into it due to "technology overload" and the possible learning curve associated with acquiring new technology (Alqurashi, 2020). Having experienced it as a learner, the teachers now could see the

application's potential in facilitating student learning and felt they were "very likely" to take the time to transform some of their classroom instruction delivery to include this program into their classroom workflow:

> I found the EdPuzzle interesting in lesson delivery and as a means to check comprehension. It allows for students to see the question's keywords and to re-watch to listen for those words in order to help them organize their thoughts. As we venture into another 9 weeks or more of online teaching and learning, this resource could prove very useful (respondent Y., January 2021).

> Thank you for introducing us to EdPuzzle! I have never heard of it but I want to look into it further, especially being 100% remote learning for the first part of this school year, for my students! (respondent H., December 2020)

> I will be trying EdPuzzle with distance learning. Thank you for the resource! (respondent L., August 2020)

This example illustrates how a teacher education program may respond to the changing needs of those it serves and use modeling to differentiate instruction delivery. In this episode, the program matrix is changed to support the teachers in their quest for navigating the surge of technology suggestions channeled at and directly marketed to them during the pandemic as the result of decreased face-to-face instructional opportunities. A simple technology solution with a low learning curve is identified, and teachers are afforded the opportunity to experience its impact on their own learning, thus gaining command of this new technology.

How much *do* mainstream teachers of ELs work during school closure?
Going over student responses to the questionnaire was a sobering experience. One of the questions in the questionnaire stands out in its ability to reveal the pandemic's impact on the amount of time teachers in pre-K–12 settings spend preparing for, delivering, and differentiating their instruction for ELs and other learners. When asked to reflect on how much time the teachers worked during the pandemic as compared to pre-pandemic, 67.4% stated they worked more than usual, 17% reported working less than usual, and 15.6% stated they worked about the same amount of time as during normal pre-pandemic school days. Below is the chart with the data from the questionnaire:

During school closure, do you find yourself working
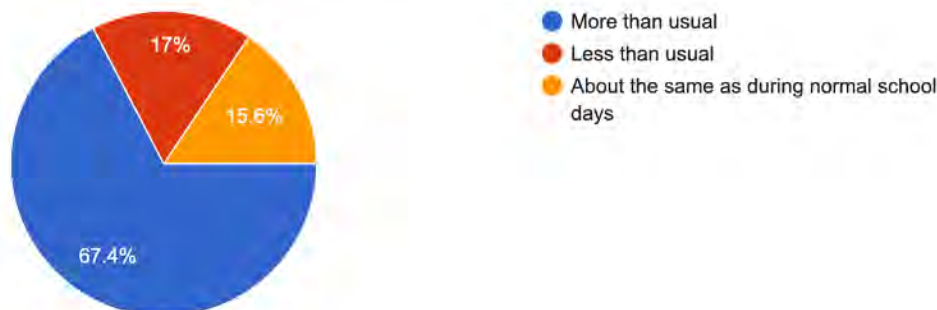
141 responses

- More than usual
- Less than usual
- About the same as during normal school days

17%

15.6%

67.4%

Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the question of whether or not their work hours changed with onset of the pandemic.

Continuous selfless giving

Once the results of the questionnaire were anonymously shared with the students, many responded with comments. Here are some of the teacher participants' reflections on the chart above:

> I think one of the reasons many of us are working more than usual is because everything is so new. I feel similarly to how I felt in my first year of teaching as I'm trying to keep my head above water and reach my students day by day (respondent A., May 2020).

> Many of us are trying to develop a new structure for an online class, spending a large amount of time communicating with our students and their families (which can be extra difficult when students' families are unfamiliar with technology and there is a language barrier), and we are having to find and create new materials in order to deliver content to students (respondent D., June 2020).

The fact that over 67% of teachers reported working more than usual and another 15.6% reported working the same amount of time when the school closures have overwhelmed the nation, as the COVID-19 wave engulfed one state after another, illustrates quite decisively that most pre-K–12 educators have held their ground: teachers worked even harder from home, responding to the diverse needs, linguistic and otherwise, of their EL and other student populations. No amount of micromanaging by the district or school administration could have achieved this kind of continuous selfless giving.

Facilitating *meaningful* student engagement during distance learning

Another conversation this questionnaire stirred up was meaningful student engagement when face-to-face educational setting was abruptly forced to shift to a distance learning environment. The topic of student engagement resurfaces in many teaching publications today and continues to dominate educational social media (Malkus et al., 2020). As this survey showed, there is a good reason why.

In your estimate, what part of your students is engaged and participating during school closure?
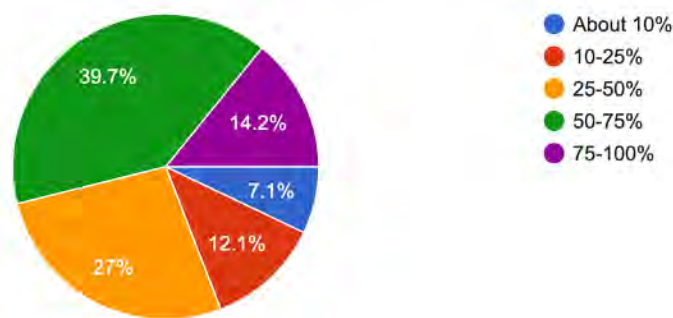141 responses

Figure 2. Student engagement during school closure, estimated by classroom teachers.

Many teacher participants reflected on how challenging it was for them to facilitate EL student participation and *meaningful engagement* when, suddenly, they no longer shared a common physical space with their students:

> My school... has chosen to use Google Classroom and Zoom as their two main platforms. While many students are attending the Zoom calls (about 50%), not very many are viewing and completing the materials and assignments on Google classroom (only about 10%) (respondent M., April 2020).

The perception of the reality where only about 50% of students were actively learning (green and purple in Figure 2) certainly reflected on the educators' attitudes: "It has been hard to stay motivated in putting the time and effort to create assignments and tutorials when it doesn't seem to be reaching students. However, **I do not want to give up in looking for creative solutions**" (respondent K., June 2020).

This data raises questions of the online graduate teacher education programs' purpose and effectiveness, as the data fosters and contextualizes the discussion about the support teacher education programs provide for the in-service teachers who enroll in them. These programs in

their current frame mostly manage students, ushering them through a sequence of courses, leaving little room for the faculty to be responsive in connecting to the immediate needs the teachers face in their workplace.

This data also lends evidence to the discussions of the quality of learning that took place during the pandemic (Blagg et al., 2020; Domina et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Malkus et al., 2020) and possible achievement gap educators and families may be mitigating in the coming school year (Domina et al., 2021). How much learning takes place when a student is engaged vs. not engaged in learning? Moreover, how accurate teacher's estimate of student engagement really is? Acknowledging the deeply nuanced nature of the notion of engagement (Lester, 2013), I use the term engagement with the understanding of its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interconnected components in their meaningfully impactful nature (Fredericks et al., 2004). It is easy to predict that the questions of meaningful student engagement during the 2020-2021 school year will remain on the educators' and researchers' radars.

Conclusion

(I) Reliability, Limitations, Generalizability

This research presents preliminary results as it reports on the COVID-19 discussion that took place in an online Bilingual Education and TESOL Certification graduate program of a School of Education in a southern university in the U.S. The discussion took place from March 2020 – April 2021. The descriptive analysis investigates first-hand accounts of the realities and effects of the pandemic and school closures expressed by ten cohorts of pre-K–12 teachers, all enrolled in a graduate-level tertiary teacher education program with concentrations in bilingual education and TESOL certification. It is also a reflection of a graduate teacher education course instructor who allowed the pandemic to inform some of the instructional content by opening up the space of the courses to students sharing their perceptions of the realities they were facing at schools, the questions these new realities posed for them, the ways teachers responded to the pandemic-related challenges, particularly those stemming from having to respond to and work through the new student behaviors and societal inequities. This effort stemmed from a deep concern for the condition of educators in the field during COVID-19 and the daily realities that the pre-K–12 teachers faced. The study uses quantitative and qualitative data provided by teachers participating in the pandemic-based questionnaire and the discussions that ensued on the pages of the shared online courses space implemented as a change to regular course workflow to describe and analyze the pandemic-induced educational realities.

The reliability of teacher action research and quasi-experimental descriptive research results, claims, and estimates are known to vary across the designs (Golapan et al., 2020; Manfra, 2019; Nuss, 2021a), and this study is subject to such. First, the participants were not randomly identified: they were self-selected among their peers as teachers who committed to enhancing

their professional development by enrolling in a graduate-level university course. Further, my students were enrolled in the program where the demand for equity and student advocacy is inherently high, as these students were acquiring certification to work with ELs, an area of education traditionally related to the advocacy efforts that reach beyond those in regular education (Calderon et al., 2019; Nuss, 2020; Zacarian et al., 2021). Despite the noted limitations of the study, its narrative and results may help inform the decisions many state-, school- and district-level administrators are facing today (Hamilton et al., 2020), as the schools moved into planning for the 2021-2022 school year.

(II) New reality by design
Mirroring nationwide conversation rates (Blagg et al., 2020), graduate student participation in the discussion forum space devoted to the pandemic was exceptionally high   , with the number of student posts reaching far beyond the general course requirements. It did not seem to matter anymore to these teachers whether or not they had already met their course participation goals: Without exception, the educators were not just reflecting on the current realities, but actively searching for meaning within. Deep individual reflection and collective teacher inquiry (Manfra, 2019) moved into the construction of a new reality as the educators reflected on each other's unique experiences and engaged in shaping new instructional practices and perceptions. The results of this study may inform future policy decisions in organizing instructional delivery frameworks, advancing teacher action research (Manfra, 2019; Nuss, 2021a), and teacher education program design (Nuss, 2021b). It also serves as a model of differentiating instruction for adult learners in teacher preparation programs.

While it would be difficult to generalize the results of this investigation to all teachers, the data can be representative of the teachers who work or prepare to work with ELs. At the very minimum, it may help to alleviate any doubts about the quality of effort teachers put into their work with the linguistically and otherwise diverse student population as they respond to the pandemic demands while working from home and through other modes of instructional delivery.

This report presents a preliminary, not exhaustive descriptive analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the longitudinal investigation that took place from March 2020 through April 2021. Representing the teacher action stream of research, the study shares common traits of such explorations identified and described in Manfra, 2019 and Nuss, 2021a, particularly, limited institutional support in study design and data analysis, lack of access to text analysis software, as well as the time constraints. Nevertheless, the study sheds light on the effects of COVID-19 in two educational settings, pre-K–12 and tertiary teacher education, and adds to the understanding of how teachers learn and work to overcome adversity.

This qualitative and quantitative data captures and describes causal effects of the societally-induced change on the classroom practices of teachers and the learning behaviors of their students during the pandemic. It suggests that

(a) during school closures caused by the pandemic, 83% of teachers worked longer (67.4%) or the same hours (15.6%) as pre-pandemic;

(b) teachers benefited from the immediate professional development they could turn to without detriment to their professional reputation;

(c) online teacher education program is perceived by its students, who are practicing pre-K–12 teachers, as more efficient and beneficial to them when such program embeds differentiated instruction in the very matrix of its courses, modeling instructional strategies for the program's students;

(d) teachers may willingly uptake an instructional strategy for use in their own practice once they experience the strategy as a learner;

(e) when working through the pandemic-induced challenges in delivering equitable education to all learners, teachers experienced unprecedented professional growth, which was achieved by working longer hours to research, prepare, deliver, self-evaluate, and improve instruction and to connect with families and students;

(f) teachers and other school-based educators must engage in rigorous formal reflection writing practices to detail first responder accounts of their changed pedagogy as these accounts should largely shape future professional development discourse;

(g) as first responders, school-based educators are well positioned to impact the educational profession by sharing their newly acquired pedagogical practices and must have voice in shaping of their professional development, rather than being simply managed by the districts' administration, professional development providers, and tertiary educational programs.

The data gleaned from the survey, however rich, is not the most valuable contribution of this study. This work's main value is in validating teachers' voice and elevating teacher agency. The pandemic created conditions where the lasting experience of working through constant change made a strong impact on each individual teacher for whom responding to the change caused professional growth of an unprecedented scale. District and state administrations and tertiary educational systems must acknowledge it and account for it moving into the post-pandemic reality. How to do it is another good question. Given my extensive experience with instructional coaching, I suggest partnership (Knight, 2019) and subject-specific instructional coaching, such as EL instructional coaching (Nuss, 2020), as possible vehicles of developing such differentiated professional development. This study helps charting a way into a new reality where teachers are viewed as capable professionals who thrive when they collaborate, not being talked at or micromanaged.

I, therefore, end with the following calls to action:

- A call to administrators and policy makers involved in educational decision-making, as well as tertiary teacher education programs, to acknowledge the vast change in the educational workforce taken place over the course of the pandemic of 2020-2021, give school-based faculty a greater role in making professional development decisions, and facilitate further strengthening of teacher voice and agency in the profession.
- I appeal to teachers and other school-based educators to recognize the exceptional value of their newly gained expertise and consider embarking on the rewarding journey of rigorous formal professional reflection practices, such as teacher action research and case studies, and making the resulting texts available to a variety of high quality peer-review publishing outlets.
- I call to educational publishing venues to recognize the shift toward increased teacher agency in the post-COVID education and to provide publishing opportunities past those traditionally available to school-based educators, taking teacher-generated discourse beyond 'practice corners.'

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Her degrees are M.Ed. and PhD.

Appendix

Questions used in the Google form survey

1. During school closure, do you find yourself working: more than usual, less than usual, about the same as during normal school days?
2. In your estimate, what part of your students is engaged and participating during school closure? About 10%, 10-25%, 25-50%, 50-75%, 75-100%
3. What kind of technology do you find yourself using the most during school closure? Please list three of your top go-to's
4. Do you feel like you raise a storm of activity with your students? If not, what obstacles do you have? What would help you?
5. What do you wish you had done in February of 2020 that would help you and your students now?
6. Do you feel you have adequate instructional and otherwise support at your workplace right now (technology, SEL, and more)? Yes/No

7   We hear today that life will not be the same after the pandemic. What do you think life after the pandemic will be like for teachers?

8   What is your number one fear and concern for what life after the pandemic will be like (in general, not school-specific)?

9   How would you describe your typical workday during school closure?

10 What activities do you do or see other teachers do that harness the most student engagement?

11 Do you have additional comments? Please share your thoughts!