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Pandemic, partnerships and practicums: Learning to teach virtually

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Introduction

The field of education is no stranger to finding opportunity within adversity. Recent constraints due to the coronavirus pandemic created a need for extreme health protocols while maintaining accountability for the critical tasks of teaching and learning. This was a predicament regardless of student age or grade placement. Teacher education programs quickly faced dilemmas connecting matriculating undergraduates to PK-12 schools to satisfy clinical or practicum experiences, which aligns to Essential 2 of the Second Edition of the NAPDS Nine Essentials (National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2021). Similarly, PK-12 public school districts faced challenging decisions regarding student learning options ranging from completely virtual or completely in-person to hybrid learning environments. If in-person PK-12 learning was offered, outside visitors including higher education partners were not allowed inside the buildings per pandemic health and safety protocols.

A large Midwestern urban district bordering the Kansas City, Missouri metropolitan area has been a clinical partner with a Midwestern University teacher education program for six years to meet NAPDS Essential 2. During the coronavirus pandemic, partnership participants and stakeholders felt it was a priority to co-develop innovative and responsive solutions for student learning including undergraduate clinical preparation experiences (National Association for Professional Development Schools Essential 4: Reflection and Innovation [NAPDS Essential 4]). Questions central to this collaboration focused

on how to co-create viable, meaningful clinical experiences while satisfying health and safety expectations for both the university and the public school district.

District leadership and university-based teacher educators (UBTEs) met to discuss opportunities for the AY 20-21 clinical experience. Meetings in/ during March of 2020 with representatives from the urban district and the university resulted in creating new plans for clinical preparation to be implemented during AY 20-21. Plans detailed learning access via virtual teaching (one-on-one) sessions between each clinical undergraduate teacher candidate (TC) and a pre-selected 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grader learning in person who could benefit from additional experiences with core content. The new design required detailed scheduling and communication documents to guide principals, classroom teachers, UBTEs and TCs facilitating these distance learning opportunities. Virtual teaching sessions occurred during the school day to minimize access and technology barriers with young learners and to maintain the specific relationship between the clinical TC and each primary grade student during the semester. Each tutoring session resulted in prompt UBTE feedback, self-reflection for the clinical TC and ongoing generative learning between the university partner and PK-12 school district.

This responsive innovation in partnership thought was designed to support essential teacher preparation experiences using lesson design, instructing live learning, formatively assessing student learning, and a shared commitment to ongoing reflective teaching practice [NAPDS Essentials 2 and 4]. However, a sequence of essential steps was required before launching the plan in order to prepare both entities in the partnership.

Move Towards Virtual Teaching Teacher Candidate Experience

Traditionally, TCs are placed for twelve clinical days in a primary grade classroom for one semester. They are expected to teach three lessons to small groups of four students during the first quarter with peer coaching support. Second quarter they teach three lessons observed by UBTEs who facilitate reflection and provide feedback. Due to the coronavirus restrictions and required protocols for video conference lessons, each virtual lesson taught under the new plan was observed by a UBTE and a public school employee. Scheduling with all participants and observers inhibited the number of times TCs could teach each student virtually. UBTEs prioritized three opportunities for the TC to work with the students. The first meeting was a getting to know you session to meet the student, complete a written conversation between the TC and the student, review sight words and conduct a math skills check. The data would be used to develop and teach two lessons, rather than the six typically taught face to face: one ELA decoding lesson, and one math strategies lesson. Under this plan UBTEs provided immediate reflection, coaching, and feedback to TCs after each of the three meetings. Fall 2020 TCs emailed teachers a welcome and introduction to share with their public school student prior to the first online meeting. In response to teacher and administration feedback, the Spring 2021 TCs sent classroom teachers a video to introduce themselves to their new student. Teachers shared the videos with the assigned student and in some instances the whole class.

Response to Coronavirus

In March 2020, the leadership team in the Midwestern urban district also determined that for the remaining quarter of the school year the district would provide online learning resources to students while simultaneously ramping up

critical professional development for teachers. That allowed planning for a soft-rollout of a virtual learning management system to be used for summer school during July 2020 and the AY 20-21 school year. The long range plan developed by the district supported the virtual clinical experience.

Summer School 2020

Summer school operated with both 100% in-person learning (with strict coronavirus mitigation protocols) and 100% virtual learning options. Elementary staff who were hired to teach summer school either taught in-person learners or virtual learners, not both. There were 2,464 elementary students enrolled in the summer 2020 program with 1,719 (70%) attending in-person and 745 (30%) attending virtually. Experiences gathered during summer school helped to inform both in-person and virtual learning protocols for the AY 20-21 school year.

2020-21 Enrollment and Mitigation Protocols

As families registered for AY 20-21, initially 25% chose the virtual learning option and 75% chose in-person learning. District reopening plans included strict mitigation protocols including limiting class sizes for in-person learners and establishing wait-lists. Outside visitors, volunteers, and parents were not able to access schools to help minimize exposure risks. During the school year, all mitigation protocols remained in place with only the amount of social distancing space being amended as current health and safety guidance was amended.

Legal Requirements for Virtual Lessons

While outside partners were unable to come into schools to work in AY 20-21, they could devise plans to work with in-person learners via virtual means. During discussions with the university partner, specific legal requirements for virtual instruction had to be written into the partnership memorandum of understanding to

comply with local School Board Policy. Those requirements included that a school district teacher or administrator must be present on the virtual platform during all synchronous instruction between an elementary student and college TC and that parental consent be obtained for videotaping the instruction to be used solely by university instructors for feedback to TCs [NAPDS Essentials 2 and 4].

Evaluating Teacher Candidate Experiences

Midwestern Urban District Demographics

A large Midwestern urban district bordering the Kansas City, Missouri metropolitan area has been a clinical partner with a Midwestern University teacher education program for six years. The district consists of 30 schools (PK - 12) educating nearly 14,500 K-12 students and 800 early education learners. District factors include the following: student population (56% White, 12% Black, 21% Hispanic, 9% multi-racial compared to the state at 71% White, 16% Black, 6% Hispanic, 4% Multi-racial), mobility rate (30-32% annually compared to the state average of 20-23%), free/reduced lunch percentage (70.2% compared to the state average of 49.3%) and 90/90 attendance percentage (79.1% compared to the state average of 85.3%). There were 20 elementary schools participating in this collaboration.

University Program Background

The urban district and the university collaborated to provide one-on-one teaching sessions for primary grade children in grades 1-3. The early childhood and elementary teacher education program is a four year, teacher certification degree program that prioritizes learning to teach in rural, suburban, and urban contexts with junior and senior clinical experiences. The courses TCs take the semester they are in urban settings, ELA, math, and social studies/science, focus on content and strategies appropriate for grades

1-3. The program has a conceptual framework grounded in Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence that asserts a successfully intelligent person utilizes reflective, creative, practical, and analytical skills to capitalize on strengths and improve weaknesses.

Participants

Three university cohorts each semester, six cohorts total, participated in virtual teaching. A total of 121 TCs with completed informed consent agreed to participate in this virtual teaching review. Additionally, each elementary student had a guardian-informed consent form on file. The six cohorts were concurrently enrolled in three undergraduate content courses (ELA, math, social studies/science) and a field based practicum course sharing the same UBTEs. The majority of the TCs were traditional-aged college students with little to no prior teaching experience and were enrolled in on-campus, socially distanced junior-level face-to-face coursework. Courses met twice a week and were blocked 8:30 a.m.-3:00 p.m. TCs met half of the semester on campus and spent half of the semester *completing online learning modules about pedagogy and conducting three one-on-one tutoring sessions with a student from an elementary school for their clinical experience*. TCs self-reported gender with three male and 118 females. The majority of the TCs were residents of the region served by the regional comprehensive university, primarily rural and suburban communities. One hundred six TCs, 87.6% of enrolled candidates, completed an end of semester survey about their virtual teaching experience.

District representatives and UBTEs collaboratively developed an online survey consisting of 12 questions with 11 open-constructed responses (see Table 1). Surveys were completed during the class following their last day of field experience. TCs were able to complete their responses in 20-30 minutes.

Table 1

Learning to Teach Virtually Survey
1. What did you do to prepare to teach virtually?
2. How confident were you about teaching virtually at the beginning of the semester?
3. How confident were you about teaching virtually at the end of the semester? Please explain your response to #2 and #3.
4. Did participating in virtual peer teaching and peer lesson reviews (before tutoring) prepare you to tutor a student? Please explain your answer to #4.
5. What did you do to develop a relationship with your online student? Was it successful? How do you know?
6. What would you do next time to develop a relationship with an online student(s)?
7. How well did your student learn the ELA and math content in your lessons? Please provide a few specific details to support your response.
8. What could you do next time to support student success?
9. What did you learn about using technology as a tool for teaching?
10. How did virtual teaching affect your education as a preservice teacher candidate?
11. How will you respond to future opportunities to teach virtually?
12. Would you encourage other preservice teacher candidates to engage in virtual instruction? Why or why not?

Survey Results

The process of analyzing the survey data began with text queries conducted using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Notations were made to document potentially relevant statement contents. Statements were later coded by conceptual elements found throughout student responses. Four categories or themes, capturing recurring thoughts, were identified: preparation, student support, use of technology, and the impacts of teaching virtually.

Virtual Teaching Preparation. Practice, practice, practice. TCs repeatedly commented on the importance and value of practicing with friends, peers, roommates, in front of a mirror, etc. Practicing beforehand allowed students to develop confidence in their ability to work with students virtually. Through prior practice, TCs received valuable feedback and were able to reflect on their lesson which gave them the opportunity to identify potential environmental distractions, rewrite instructional scripts, and modify instructional presentation materials. Practice also gave students opportunities to become comfortable with the virtual teaching tools used. “Practiced zoom meetings with peers ahead of actual teaching time to make sure zoom worked properly and I understood how to use it and the difficulties my student and I may face.”

Providing Student Support. Though there were a few minor challenges, such as technical glitches, TC responses revealed one major challenge to supporting students. “I think the biggest problem with virtual learning is getting the student to talk. They are nervous and so are you, so if they aren’t responding to your questions, you move on to other things. I feel if we had a little more time at the beginning of each meeting to ask more questions about the student and they get to ask us questions it would build that relationship further. I feel asking them questions once and only doing lessons after made it hard to get to know the student.”

As a result, participants indicated a few instructional changes they would make. In order to better support elementary students, TCs reported that they would spend more time on: getting to know you activities, learning more about appropriate use of technology, giving pre-assessments, and asking quality questions. TCs believed that they needed to get to know their students better including students’ personal interests and learning profiles to build stronger relationships, develop more meaningful lessons, and ask quality questions. “Create more questions to get to know what skill level they are at and create questions that will let me get to know the student.”

Use of Technology. TCs said they learned to use new tools and how to solve technology issues. “It is a GREAT asset! Very engaging rather than them just looking at your face the whole time.” Another said, “Difficult but possible.” Students shared that using technology allowed for flexibility

and required them to think creatively. Some found tools they will continue to use when teaching in person that they would not have otherwise looked for.

“Teaching virtually was not what I had anticipated with teaching in general, but it has definitely broadened my views on education. It has opened my mind to more possibilities for learning opportunities for future students.”

Impacts of Virtual Teaching. Many TCs found virtual teaching to be a valuable experience. Some said they would prefer teaching face-to-face but most are willing to teach virtually again. Their confidence increased over the course of the semester. For the survey question, How confident were you about teaching virtually at the beginning of the semester, 50% reported not confident, 47% somewhat confident and 3% very confident at the beginning of the semester. How confident were you about teaching virtually at the end of the semester, 32% were not confident and 73% were very confident. TCs reported that they developed new skills and instructional knowledge, grew professionally (knowledge and skills) and strengthened their desire to become a teacher. “Teaching virtually was not what I had anticipated with teaching in general, but it has definitely broadened my views on education. It has opened my mind to more possibilities for learning opportunities for future students.”

Most participants (91.5%) said they would encourage other TCs to engage in virtual instruction. One participant stated, “Yes, it creates a creativity of how to incorporate technology into the classroom and many other ways you can use technology such as using with communities, parents, other teachers, sick kids at home, principals and so so so much more.” Another participant shared, “I believe it would help the teacher candidates learn the importance of student connections, accommodations, and being adaptable. I also believe it is the technology we need to incorporate in the classroom to prepare students for in the future considering the circumstances.”

Summary

One-on-one virtual teaching provided a novel clinical preparation for undergraduate teacher candidates to engage socially and academically with a primary grade student (NAPDS Essential 2). Although health and safety protocols limited opportunities for interactions, TC survey responses indicated the interactions were meaningful and added value to their experience as a prospective teacher. TCs reported an increased confidence in teaching virtually and that the experience broadened their view of teaching and learning. They noted that quality assessments, building relationships with their student, and practicing the lesson prior to online delivery were critical to their success and the success of future lessons. Most would encourage other TCs to engage in virtual instruction.

In future semesters TCs will continue to create a video introduction for their small group. UBTEs will seek opportunities for TCs to learn virtual tools during face-to-face instruction. One virtual experience to be continued will be TCs peer practicing lessons via Zoom. Learning to teach virtually provided an opportunity to sustain school/university partnerships and work collaboratively in response to a crisis. This experience will be the basis for future reactions to interruptions in clinical preparation field experiences (NAPDS Essential 4). Using this model universities and school districts may build a collaborative foundation to provide virtual teaching opportunities for TCs whether it be in response to health concerns, inclement weather or other as yet unidentified interference to teaching and learning.

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