Responding to Student Teachers' Fears: How We're Adjusting during the COVID-19 Shutdowns

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Abstract

The COVID-19 epidemic has wrought havoc on both K-12 education and teacher preparation, to say nothing of society in general. For many of our candidates, the normal fears and anxieties that surround student teaching have been magnified to the point of that even our most promising student teachers feel overwhelmed and panicked. In this article, we reflect on the need for teacher educators to acknowledge and respond to their candidates' fears. We outline some of the individual, pedagogical, and programmatic adjustments that we have made in wake of the COVID shutdowns. We conclude by acknowledging that these adjustments are part of a still-ongoing process.

Keywords

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The COVID-19 epidemic has wrought havoc on both K-12 education and teacher preparation, to say nothing of society in general. For many of our candidates, the normal fears and anxieties that surround student teaching have been magnified to the point of that even our most promising student teachers feel overwhelmed and panicked. In this article, we reflect on the need for teacher educators to acknowledge and respond to their candidates' fears. We outline some of the individual, pedagogical, and programmatic adjustments that we have made in wake of the COVID shutdowns. We conclude by acknowledging that these adjustments are part of a still-ongoing process.
Keywords: Teacher education, student teaching, COVID-19, emotional regulation

Introduction

Andrea is a single mother locked in a brutal custody battle. Her ex-husband has neither the means nor the inclination to pay child support, and she's had to give up her career as a professional chef to care for her three-year-old daughter. She's becoming a teacher partly out of an innate love for knowledge and partly out of desperate necessity. She's frequently availed herself of our office hours, and, in multiple, sometimes teary, conversations, she's revealed to us the depth of her fears. What if she loses custody of her daughter? What if her existing knowledge base doesn't translate to an elementary school classroom? What if she isn't able to connect with her students? What if she can't find a job? What if this incredible risk doesn't pay off?

Andrea's fears, in which the personal, pedagogical, and academic are inextricably bound together, are not irrational. In fact, in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic and the havoc it has wrought on both K-12 education and teacher preparation, to say nothing of society in general, her fears have taken on an even more urgent tone: Will I be able to finish this program? Will the timeline of my

student teaching be delayed? Will there even be jobs to apply for in the fall? How do I translate my just-emerging skills into a virtual environment? Are my students safe? Am I? Is my daughter?

These fears are not unique to Andrea. We, the authors, are both professors of education and field placement directors at a small, liberal arts college in the urban Pacific Northwest. Our university is located roughly five miles from what was a major COVID "hot spot," and the effects of the COVID shutdowns hit our campus and the surrounding school districts early and hard. The roughly 100 candidates in our three preparation programs were suddenly displaced. In the subsequent phone calls, emails, and Zoom meetings, we heard the same story over and over again: our candidates are scared. They are worried about their careers, their safety, and their futures. They are facing the unknown, and they are frightened.

To be clear, becoming a teacher always involves an element of stepping into and confronting the unknown (Delamarter, 2019a). Under the best of circumstances, this process that can facilitate personal and pedagogical growth, despite the stresses involved (e.g., Christie, et al., 2015; Fulford, 2016; Mezirow, 1991; Rowland, et al., 2015; Van Manen, 2015; Watson, 2017). Under the worst of circumstances, however, such as those our candidates are facing now, what once were growth-inducing stressors can give rise to terror, overwhelming even the most diligent and promising of student teachers. Instead of leading to transformation, the looming unknown can lead to withdrawal and, in some cases, collapse (Alastuey et al., 2005).

Given our candidates' level of fear and anxiety, and given the unprecedented nature of the unknowns they are facing, we have been reflecting on how we, as teacher educators and as a program, can respond to our candidates' fears in ways that facilitate their growth, despite the circumstances. Though our data at this stage is anecdotal, we have attempted to craft research-based responses whenever possible. Consequently, what follows here is not a scientific exploration but rather a reflective accounting of our attempts to respond well to an ongoing, ever-unfolding situation in which we ourselves are deeply embedded.

Fear and The Brain

The topic of fear and its impact on brain function has grown increasingly present in mainstream conversations, especially in light of the global COVID-19 health crisis. In recent years, the knowledge surrounding the impacts of fear and trauma on the brain and its resulting ability to learn have been integrated into educational conversations, both among K-12 professionals (Minahan, 2019; Portell, 2019) and higher education researchers (Mendelson et al., 2020; Rodger et al., 2020; Wall, 2020). As we work with student teachers through this public

health crisis, it is critical to remind ourselves of the impacts of fear and stress on their neurological processes and development.

One of the primary responsibilities of the brain is to keep us alive. Safe. Healthy. Protected. When the brain feels threatened, it shifts into an approach-avoid response; it asks the question, "should I embrace this or run away?" Our limbic system, which controls emotions, reactions, and arousal, houses the portions of the brain that sense threats, produce fear, and remember whether an object or situation is safe or dangerous (Rock, 2008). This area of the brain is even capable of processing and responding to stimuli before the rest of the brain is consciously aware of it, which is a critical characteristic to keep us alive in instances of extreme danger. We are all familiar with the total-body response that happens in times of acute threat, including the adrenaline rush and subsequent crash when the threat has subsided. It is important to remember, however, that the limbic system does not only react in cases of acute physical threat but responds proportionally to any level of social or emotion threat (Rock, 2008).

How does this knowledge about the brain and fear apply to our student teachers? We know that when the limbic system is activated and producing hormones to protect the body from threat, the ability to learn and process new information declines (Perry, 2006). This directly impacts our student teachers' abilities to continue to learn and process in their coursework during a typical field experience. During a crisis, like the one we are experiencing now, with dramatically changed internships and unexpected remote learning, these effects appear to be heightened. Our student teachers are experiencing trouble sleeping, eating, concentrating, and caring for their own mental health. Indeed, these symptoms of extreme stress are common among the general population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Based on ongoing conversations with our candidates, their fears are taking three distinct forms: fear for immediate safety, fear for the near future, and fear for the long term. Each of these fears has direct implications for the ways that our students learn and the ways that we can continue to support their growth.

Fear for Immediate Safety

Our student teachers are operating in an environment where there is a very real threat to their own safety as well as the safety of those near and dear to them. Our student teachers are parents, care givers, roommates, siblings, and individuals living alone. In all of these circumstances, there is an increased level of fear surrounding their ability to stay safe and healthy for themselves as well as those in their direct circles, combined with a concern for their students and their students' family members. The statewide school closures that began in early alleviated some immediate safety concerns while raising a host of others.

Fear for Near Future

While navigating their immediate fears, our student teachers are also wrestling with very real concerns related to the near future, including housing, current employment, and access to resources, not to mention programmatic completion and degree requirements. As college campuses and non-essential businesses have closed, many of our students have been displaced. They are sleeping on couches and air-mattresses, living off of credit cards, and struggling to find space for teaching and learning. They are struggling to fulfill minimum internship hour requirements, to create and deliver instruction, to plan and film for the edTPA, to work effectively with mentor teachers in a virtual environment, and to develop a teaching identity when they are far removed from a traditional classroom. These struggles lead to fears not only about their preparation as future teachers but also, in the near term, fears about their ability to complete program requirements and graduate on time. Instead of celebrating the end of one season and anticipating the beginning of another, every one of these candidates is watching their plans change and their futures become uncertain, all while afraid for their immediate safety.

Fear for Future

The fear of an uncertain future extends beyond graduation celebrations and the edTPA. Instead, our student teachers are not just afraid that they may not get teaching jobs; they are wondering if teaching, as a profession, has been fundamentally changed, if the vocation they had chosen will continue to exist. This is an existential fear, a fear borne out of questioning previously unquestioned assumptions about the nature of education. What happens to traditional educational sequencing when millions of students have lost at least half a year of instruction? How will we address the inevitable widening of the achievement gap due to the gross inequalities inherent in our cobbled-together remote learning realities? Will we ever return to face-to-face classrooms, or is remote learning now an entrenched part of American education? Will the damage to students' academic, social, and emotional progress ever be healed? Are teachers - is anyone - prepared for the daunting amount of work it will take to reboot and reimagine the future of education?

How We are Responding to Student-Teachers' Fears

Our student teachers' fears shape the work they are doing every day and greatly impact their ability to concentrate, sleep, eat, maintain healthy habits, and learn new information. As a program, as educators who have a mission of training holistic, adaptive, and learner-focused educators, it has been imperative for us to adapt, focused on the needs of our student teachers first and foremost. What

follows is a rough description of responses that we are still in the process of developing.

Acknowledging Our Own Fears

First and foremost, we need to admit that we, too, are scared. Our futures are uncertain, as well. Universities are reeling from COVID-related shut downs. Face-to-face courses have moved online, forcing many of us to turn living rooms and closets into makeshift offices. We are teaching with children on our laps, dogs barking in the background, and piles of laundry floating just off screen. Furthermore, a "normal" fall is looking less and less unlikely as universities make plans to extend the shutdown into September and beyond. For many universities, this has led to unprecedented financial difficulties. Both contingent and tenure-track faculty are facing cuts in hours, pay, and, in some cases, jobs themselves.

Furthermore, we are suddenly tasked with teaching people to use modalities and instructional techniques that we ourselves don't always know how to use. Our collective field of expertise has undergone a seismic upheaval in less than a semester, and we find ourselves trying to do a job for which we have not been trained and under conditions of extreme duress. This is hard. It is humbling and sometimes humiliating. It requires every bit of our intellectual, interpersonal, financial, and emotional resources with no guarantees that those resources will be replenished at any point in the future. We, too, are scared.

With this in mind, perhaps one of the greatest services we can provide our student teachers is a framework to help them process their fears, such as modeling how to reflect on one's emotional state. Reflective modeling has long been established as an important element of teacher preparation (Delamarter, 2019b), and it needs to be extended to include aspects of emotional regulation and expectation management. While a number of studies have documented the positive effects of social-emotional learning (SEL) on K-12 student achievement (e.g., Bierman et al., 2010; Jones, Brown, Hoglund, & Aber, 2010; Schonfeld et al., 2015), SEL strategies have been shown to have a positive impact on college students' academic performance, as well (e.g., Cullen, Bloemker, Wyatt, & Walsh, 2017; Wang et al., 2012; Wyatt & Bloemker, 2013), particularly in times of major life transition (e.g., Parker et al., 2005). Creating spaces for candidates to openly discuss their fears and providing both the structure and tools for them to categorize, reflect on, and respond to those fears has enabled candidates and professors alike to regain an internal locus of control, at least to a degree.

Adapting as Teacher-Educators

Shifting to a digital platform. One of our candidates' most commonly expressed fears is that they've not been pedagogically prepared for the world they're now faced with. They know how to teach students in a classroom, but

they're unsure of how to teach effectively in a remote environment. Student teachers in general have expressed anxiety about teaching online (e.g., Poyo, 2016). With this in mind, one of the most practical changes we have made to our courses to provide opportunities for our candidates to create synchronous and asynchronous instructional materials designed for use in their new virtual classrooms (e.g., Andrei & Buckley-Marudas, 2019; Cooper, Farah, & Mrstik, 2020). In our methods courses, this has meant abandoning our regularly-scheduled peer-teaching exercises in favor of creating instructional videos and simulating remote learning contexts.

Best practices during virtual instruction. We have also begun explicitly teaching our students how to adapt best instructional practices into an online environment. For example, while our candidates have been well-trained to promote small group interaction in a face-to-face environment, we are working with them to adapt those techniques into their online equivalents, such as Zoom breakout rooms Acosta-Tello, 2015). As candidates have grown more familiar and competent with managing the technical aspects of their virtual platforms, we have emphasized the ongoing importance of pedagogical fundamentals: clear learning goals, regular formative assessments, and meta-cognitive reflection. We've adapted our current courses to give them space to make the connections between the skills they've already begun to develop and the new settings in which they find themselves. For example, while candidates already know the importance of establishing clear expectations in a classroom setting, clear expectations in an online setting must involve discussions of "netiquette" and the frequent monitoring of discussion forums (McGuire, 2016). Additionally, while candidates already recognize the value of prompt and effective feedback in a face to face setting, we are helping them connect those practices to feedback an online setting. Effective online feedback can fall into two categories: "information and acknowledgement" (Graham et al., 2001). While information pertains to student learning performance, acknowledgement "confirms that some event has occurred [such as] assignments or emails have been received" (McGuire, 2016, p. 72).

To help candidates make the connections between their on-ground and online teaching practices, we have created low-stakes reflective assignments that scaffold comparisons between the two modalities, and we have begun intentionally modelling and highlighting the ways that we, ourselves, are adapting our own courses. With each change we've made in order to shift to remote teaching, we've explained our decisions and, in many cases, allowed our candidates to take an active role in the redesign process.

Modifying Program Expectations

As we begin by acknowledging our students' fear, their needs drive significant changes to our program expectations beyond the adaptations to our

instruction. These include intentional changes in frequency and tone of communication, updating our testing and graduation requirements, and modifying the way we are observing and evaluating our student teachers.

Increased communication. In our experience, communication is a critical component of success in any learning endeavor, especially one such as student teaching where we have over 15 districts, at least 12 field supervisors, and approximately 75 student teacher and mentor teacher teams on three different timelines, all tasked with the vital work of growing new educators. Though we have always strived to communicate directly and regularly, our communication has increased dramatically during this time. We are meeting regularly with field supervisors and student teacher and mentor teacher teams. Beyond that, field supervisors are meeting weekly with student teaching groups, along with observations that would occur during a typical internship. Every piece of communication reminds the reader that we know this is an unusual, unexpected circumstance and we are committed to meeting each student teacher where he or she is currently, with the goal of achieving certification at the center of our work together.

Updated testing and graduation requirements. Early in the shutdown, one of our candidates' most urgent concerns involved filming for the edTPA. Because completion and submission of the edTPA has historically been a graduation requirement at our university, our candidates were worried the shutdowns might cost them not only certification but graduation, as well. Indeed, when it became clear that Pearson was maintaining the requirement for synchronous instruction as part of the edTPA, many of our candidates began to despair.

While our program has no control over Pearson or state-level certification requirements, we can control our own graduation policies. One of the first adjustments we made was to remove the edTPA as a requirement for program completion. That is, our candidates could earn their degrees without submitting the edTPA. Though the edTPA is still required for state-level certification, candidates' immediate concerns about graduation have been alleviated.

Student-teaching observations and evaluations. Our program was forced to make rapid decisions on how student teachers can illustrate their readiness to teach through alternative methods. Beyond the typical teaching observation cycle, we have pivoted towards additional, non-traditional analysis including more robust connections between course learning and video analysis, asynchronous learning facilitation, and written reflection on the inTASC standards in an effort to collect data we can use to support certification. As we've modified and adapted our curriculum and sequence in response to student fears and need during this public health crisis, we are again reminded of the importance of being holistic, adaptive, learner-focused educators.

Conclusion

We are still in the process of figuring out how to move forward in light of the COVID shutdowns. Each time we think we have a clear path ahead of us, the situation changes, and we have to readjust. The future is uncertain, and the present feels chaotic. However, although the current crisis has thrust teacher preparation programs into uncharted waters, the fundamentals of good teaching still apply: we need to know our students well enough to respond to their needs. The hallmark of our program – creating learner focused, adaptive, and holistic teachers – is more important now than it has ever been. Paradoxically, our candidates' fears are forcing us to cling tighter to what we believe while simultaneously compelling us to loosen our grip on the things we now realize we cannot – and should not - control.

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