COVID-19 School Closure Experiences in rural Alaska and reimagining the Roles of Education and Teachers

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools and education moved online in the spring of 2020. With in-person classes canceled, the normal structure of school for K-12 students, teacher candidates, and their mentors disappeared. School districts scrambled to provide technology, develop schedules, and modify grading policies. Teacher preparation programs had to quickly determine acceptable student-teaching experiences and how candidates could demonstrate teaching competency. In this essay, we reflect on how stakeholders in parts of rural Alaska experienced the rapid transition to online instruction. We also share our vision for an education that includes a digital future without reinforcement of previous inequalities. Strengthening teacher education, providing meaningful professional development, and recognizing and valuing educators as the professionals they are is more necessary now than ever.

Keywords

COVID-19 school closure, rural education, online teaching, K-12 schools, Alaska

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic shut down schools and forced millions of students and teachers into emergency online learning (Sandford, 2020). This transition resulted in stress and trauma for K-12 students, teachers, and families. Respectively, teacher preparation programs experienced instructional and logistic challenges.

In the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, our secondary (grades 7-12) teacher candidates at the University of Alaska had just started their 15-week full-time student teaching experience in schools all over Alaska. We, as teacher educators and university supervisors, had the standard-based observation protocols and expectation charts ready for advising, evaluating, and supporting our teacher candidates. Suddenly, everything changed. With schools closed, in-

person classes canceled, and shelter-in-place orders, the typical structure by which K-12 students, their teachers, and our student teachers organized their day had disappeared, leaving many feeling lost and adrift (Fagell, 2020). Pre-existing inequalities of our society were magnified and aggravated by the pandemic, such as limited access to health care, unaffordable or unsafe housing, homelessness, job insecurity, and lack of affordable and broadband internet. The deep digital and economic divides in our country became very visible (Danese et al., 2020; Laster Pirtle, 2020).

School districts, where our teacher candidates worked, scrambled to provide technology for working from home to students and teachers. New schedules were developed, existing grading policies were modified, and ways to reconnect and find the "missing and lost" students had to be explored (Reich et al., 2020; Starr, 2020). Teachers tried to retrofit and reinvent their lessons for online delivery and spent much time just "being there" for students and families while managing their own coronavirus fears (Delamarter and Ewart, 2020; Kaden, 2020). Teacher preparation programs had to abruptly determine acceptable student-teaching experiences and how candidates could demonstrate teaching competency during the crisis; internship and graduation requirements for initial teacher licensure had to be modified and waived.

Besides the immense challenges, the pandemic also provided an opportunity to reimagine education focusing on accessibility, equitability, and affordability. What have we as teacher educators and teachers learned during the crisis until graduation in the spring of 2020 (Figure 1), and what will be the future of schools and the skills required for new teachers? In this essay, we reflect on how teachers and student teachers in parts of rural Alaska experienced the rapid transition to emergency online instruction. We also share our thoughts on how we envision education and teacher education to include a digital future that does not reinforce the inequalities of our past and present.

Figure 1 Class of 2020- High School Graduation at the parking lot of a rural Alaska school district during COVID-19 school closure

Our Context

Alaska is the largest and least densely populated state, with a landmass twice the size of Texas. It is a vast state of incredible natural beauty (Figure 2), the home to five major Alaska Native groups with rich cultural heritage, and a state with many challenges. Current challenges include endangered Native languages, prohibitive teacher turnover in rural areas, high energy and healthcare costs, and financial constraints related to declining oil revenues. Many rural Alaska communities, also called villages, are located off the road system and are only accessible by aircraft or boat and many miles away from services (Kaden et al., 2016). Students from our university-based teacher education programs are placed in schools throughout Alaska, including very rural and remote locations. Because of teacher shortages in rural schools, our secondary teacher candidates are often hired as full-time teachers on an initial (emergency) teacher certificate and complete their professional licensure requirements during employment.

For a long time, online education programs have been seen as a possible solution to persistent equity problems in access to instruction and as a silver bullet to alleviate the impact of teacher shortages and retention in rural schools. Some Alaska school districts with affordable access to the internet had embraced a robust technology learning infrastructure years before the school closures of 2020. In such settings, an existing district-wide technology infrastructure made the transition to online learning more manageable, as a mentor teacher described:

> *"Our district was a one-to-one district before the pandemic, which means that every student and teacher had a computer or tablet available for learning. This previous experience took the anxiety out a bit and helped tremendously with the switch to online learning, which was a very unreal situation."*

Other districts in Alaska scrambled more to provide students and teachers with technology devices and wireless internet hotspots in the transition to online learning. Some rural village schools without reliable internet infrastructure resorted to printed learning packages that got delivered to student homes and instructional support using handheld high frequency radios, which is an older and still common method of communication in small rural communities. Spotty or non-existent broadband internet connection is a constant limiting factor for businesses and education in many rural Alaska locations, a situation amplified during the crisis.

The reflections shared in our paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of the online learning and teacher preparation challenges and are part of a larger research project to document the transition to online education during the COVID-19 crisis in the spring of 2020 in Alaska. The quotes are from

interviews and personal conversations with teachers who allowed us to share their views in this article. The authors are both longtime educators in Alaska. One author is an instructional coach and doctoral student and is engaged in the emergency distance learning response to COVID-19. The other author is a pre-service teacher educator and researcher at the University of Alaska.

Figure 2 Fort Yukon fish camp, Denali Park, frozen Koyukuk River- Our home is rural Alaska

The Role of Community

During the emergency online learning experience, teachers and student teachers felt stress and anxiety to find new ways to support their students and often felt unsuccessful (Figure 3). Working from home, at times in quarantine, was isolating and depressing for teachers, student teachers, and their students (Kaden, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The transition from in-person teaching to online instruction took time to learn, mostly by trial and error. One teacher reflected on the transition to online learning:

> *"I greatly underestimated the complexity of successful online teaching, the amount of content I could teach, the time the preparation took, and how to engage students. Not being able to look over my kids' shoulders and having equipment set up to do science laboratory work was hard for me."*

School closures and shelter-in-place protocols had cut off students from their friends, teachers, and their extended family. Supporting struggling learners and nurturing student well-being were extremely challenging tasks for educators. In the virtual environment, teachers felt that the strategies they used to help struggling students in the physical classroom were no longer available. As one teacher put it*:*

> *"I felt very hopeful about my students who had home support and usually did well in school. I was devastated for those students who cannot be*

successful unless they are safe and supported in the normal school environment. Online learning is not for everyone. I am dreading August."

Students missed their interaction with peers and teachers deeply. During the closure, a high school student posted this quote about online learning on social media, *"...it's like someone took a sieve and ran school through it, straining it of all of the parts I liked."* Other, more reserved students thrived in the online environment, described as more kind and without the usual peer pressures that teenagers have. Student teachers and mentor teachers felt overwhelmed and challenged by the situation, but many also indicated that they would embrace their newly found confidence in online teaching and that they were motivated, optimistic, and hopeful about the possibilities that come with digital learning (Figure 3).

Some rural teachers reported that student, parent, and caregiver connections were strengthened during the crisis. Teachers and parents stayed in frequent contact by phone and e-mail, supporting student learning and well-being. Parents had direct access to assignments while helping students interpret and clarify directions, even co-teaching lessons with teachers and sharing their knowledge. While some families had the time to support their kids, other families had to go to work or guide the learning of multiple siblings. For parents of children with disabilities, providing the expertise and specialized support that schools do was almost impossible and, at times, unbearable (Danese et al., 2020). Those experiences demonstrate that future teacher candidates need to be better prepared to foster strong relationships with parents, families, and caregivers.

Figure 3 How student teachers and their mentors experienced the move to online learning during COVID-19 and described their motivating experiences
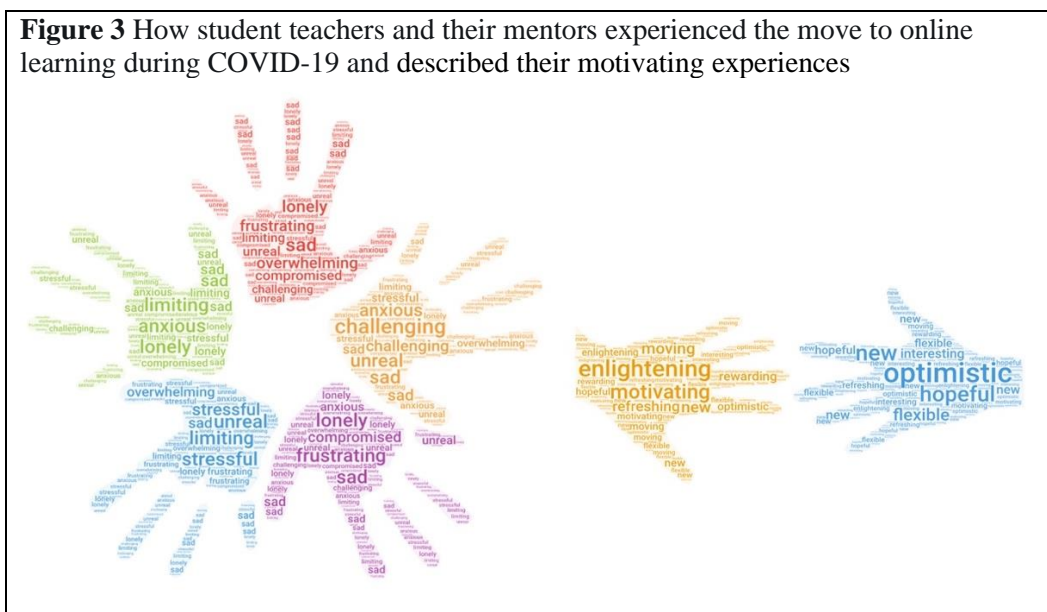
Curriculum and Rethinking Testing and Accountability

The crisis highlighted that teaching is not all about delivering content, and learning should not be about passing standardized tests and seat time. Standardized testing was suddenly irrelevant during the crisis, and waivers for K-12 state testing were issued in fast succession. Some schools allowed student teachers to support online teaching if the mentor teacher felt comfortable. Not every mentor did, and mentoring teacher candidates the traditional way was not possible. Some rural school districts sent student teachers home as villages tried to limit the spread of the virus by outsiders. Other candidates stayed to support online learning with their mentors.

The demand for including social-emotional and trauma-informed practices into teacher education programs was highlighted during the crisis. Teachers saw it as their first responsibility to connect with students and check on their safety and well-being. Many phone calls and e-mails were sent, and friends were contacted to find students who did not log on for school or went missing:

> *"Checking on my students' well-being and asking them about their day was crucial for me. Some of my students had to provide childcare for younger siblings and help with their schooling. Family support was not equal. Living off the grid and depending on a generator for electricity caused issues for recharging the computers."*

Some teachers indicated that they learned more about the possibilities of online education and agreed that more flexibility in education delivery is needed.

> *"Meaningful learning experiences that connect to students' home lives, family, and their identities gave my students agency to pursue what was relevant to them. Freed from the constraints of the bell schedule, there was more time to focus on connected learning, hobbies, and interest-driven projects."*

Teaching students in ways that allow them to keep their cultural identity is essential for motivation, curriculum relevance, and ultimately student achievement (Eppley & Corbett, 2012). No commercially designed online curricula product without a connection to the locality will ever replace the role of place-relevant education and relationships in learning (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2020). Online curricula can support learning for many students but need to be carefully designed, localized, and individualized so as not to deepen inequality and social divides.

As a result of the crisis, there are valid concerns, but also a loud hype, about long-lasting learning gaps for students. News stories predicted a COVID-19

dip in test scores and the falling behind of a whole generation (Goldstein, 2020). Student teachers will undoubtedly be confronted with this issue, and teacher education programs should approach the resulting testing discussions thoughtfully. Possible commercial solutions enter the educational product market daily. Many include more testing, more computer work, and a slew of new products that promise a quick fix to close those gaps and bring test scores up fast. There should be concern about the loss of student learning, but testing our way toward educational success will not work. Teachers know, and research confirms that standardized test scores are most strongly related to students' life circumstances, socioeconomics, and social and emotional needs (Biddle & Azano, 2016). The constant pressures in the U.S. to catch up to elusive standards and inequitable testing accountability systems are not helping students grow and thrive in a global world. The fundamental notion that standardized testing is a useful and necessary task of measuring student achievement is being challenged by the crisis more strongly than ever. There is hope for more holistic approaches. Our duty as teacher educators is to permit and support discussions on this topic in teacher preparation courses.

The Role of Schools and New Possibilities of Hybrid Learning

Teachers will be needed in the future! This is an important message for our teacher candidates. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that public education is a major variable for the economic well-being of countries and states, globally and locally. Schools play a critical social role in societies, including supervising kids so parents can go to work, providing meals, and offering services to special needs students. Schools are often the only safe places some students have (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Figure 4 Rural schools are also community centers (Point Hope, Alaska; the school building is in the center of the village next to water and oil tanks)

Especially in rural areas (Figure 4), schools exceed the single role of an education facility and function as places where people meet, interact, and strengthen their social networks (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). Having only a virtual school without a physical building to connect in person and without teachers would amplify and accelerate the process toward losing social empathy, cultural integrity, contact with nature, and community viability in rural Alaska.

We could envision schools differently in the digital age. Schools could look more like modern and open community centers. Students could study at flexible times, be engaged and self-driven, empowered, and given choices. The curriculum could be grounded in the local culture, and what is being learned could be meaningful to mitigate local and global problems. Teachers with whom we talked, also explained that they would use more flexible performance-based assessments, focusing on improvements in student work. Technology, flexible hybrid curricula, and human interaction are elements for initiating global communication and could lead to culturally shared understandings, empathy, engagement, collective problem solving, dreaming, innovation, and action. Teacher candidates should know that online supported education with place-relevant lessons has the potential to help students to see possibilities and take responsibility to protect our global world.

Vision for Education and Teacher Education

The old model of schooling where everybody sits in the classroom and the teacher lectures at the front of the room is obsolete; however, promoting the move to online teaching as a permanent solution to education and the current budget problems is short-sighted and will fail (Yang, 2020). Trying to go back to the old standards of teaching, teacher preparation, and student teaching will not be enough and spirited efforts to break new ground need to be encouraged (Kaden, 2020; Reich et al., 2020; Starr, 2020). If we want to reimagine education, we also need to name and ease our longstanding inequalities as a society, including racial, economic, rural, and digital divides. We must address the need for affordable healthcare, social workers, counselors, and professionally educated teachers. Standardized testing should be rolled back, and new ways of assessing student-teacher competencies in teacher education programs need to be explored.

The COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that technology-supported learning will be part of the future of education (Reich et al., 2020). Traditional teacher preparation has to change to include more opportunities for candidates to develop skills in planning and teaching in technology-rich learning environments. Teacher education programs will need to accept more flexibility in what counts as student-teaching in the future. Student teaching experiences as an online teacher need to be accepted as fieldwork and should be provided as part of a diverse student

teaching preparation. Teacher candidates will also be expected to have the newest knowledge in technology and online pedagogy learned in their teacher preparation programs. Thus, teacher education courses should be redesigned to include online learning methodology, pedagogy, assessment, and instructional design. All teacher-preparation programs need to provide coursework and field experience in online instruction in a virtual or hybrid classroom. Teacher education programs themselves must expose student teachers to remote learning and include quality online courses as part of the required preparation work. A stronger focus on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices in educational courses and during student teaching is necessary, as teachers with more robust social and emotional competencies are less likely to report burnout and are more likely to fostering strong teacher and student relationships, demonstrate high levels of patience and empathy, and are better prepared to deal with trauma-related to COVID-19 and other events (Danese et al., 2020). Working with parents, families, and caregivers and building trust are key skills new teachers need to develop.

Teacher candidates are transitioning through a particularly uncertain time in terms of their professional lives and work during the ongoing crisis. As teacher educators, it is our responsibility to provide attractive and inspiring pathways toward becoming a teacher, to include technology-supported education delivery in required course work and allow for more flexibility to gain teaching experience. Including student teachers to be part of the change of future teacher education is important. Accreditation agencies for teacher education, state education departments, school leadership, and universities are called on to allow and encourage new approaches to teacher education, including preparing candidates for hybrid and online instruction and exposure to technology-rich learning environments.

This sudden, unplanned, and unprecedented disruption to education has the potential to change the educational landscape forever. As teacher educators, we are part of that change and carry the responsibilities of preparing new generations of teachers ready to build a more equitable education system of the future. Let's do it—thoughtfully and collaboratively.

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