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Not Remotely Familiar: How COVID-19 is Reshaping Teachers' Work and the Implications for Teacher Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the teacher workforce into distance teaching essentially overnight. This educational migration, necessitated by the public health emergency, has dramatically altered and diversified the realities of teachers' working lives and the conditions in which they teach. This changing environment has important implications for teacher education. This paper presents five assumptions about teacher education and the uncertain work of preparing culturally responsive and social –justice oriented teachers for a rapidly evolving teaching environment. We seek to animate questions and concerns about teacher education in the context of COVID-19 and the implications for social justice teacher preparation.

Keywords

student teaching, teacher preparation, COVID-19, school context

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Not Remotely Familiar: How COVID-19 is Reshaping Teachers' Work and the Implications for Teacher Education

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced the teacher workforce into distance teaching essentially overnight. This educational migration, necessitated by the public health emergency, has dramatically altered and diversified the realities of teachers' working lives and the conditions in which they teach. This changing environment has important implications for teacher education. This paper presents five assumptions about teacher education and the uncertain work of preparing culturally responsive and social –justice oriented teachers for a rapidly evolving teaching environment. We seek to animate questions and concerns about teacher education in the context of COVID-19 and the implications for social justice teacher preparation.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the entire teacher workforce into distance teaching essentially overnight. This educational migration, while necessitated by the public health emergency, has dramatically altered and diversified the realities of teachers' working lives and the conditions in which they teach. In the spring of 2020, most teachers embraced the changes as necessary aspects of the emergency response and did all they could to ensure continued schooling for children. Yet, as plans began for the 2020-21 school year, it became clear that many of these changes will continue to shape schooling and, by extension, teachers' work.

As K-12 public school districts return to school, none expect schooling to look as it did prior to mid-March 2020. Some plan to be in person but with social-distancing measures that include six foot spacing, staggered schedules, plexiglass screens, and face masks. Others plan to stay remote either digitally (on-line

synchronous or asynchronous) or by sending printed materials home with students. And there are many hybrid versions being explored that include a myriad of the aforementioned formats (Superville, 2020). Schools are struggling to balance budgets, safety, and learning goals as they work to figure out what schooling will look like in an age of pandemics and expanded distance learning options. Amidst this uncertainty, teachers find themselves in a rapidly changing environment.

This changing environment has important implications for teacher education. How we prepare teachers is predicated on assumptions about teachers' work, shared understandings of equity, and knowledge of established structures and systems -- of how schools work. So much of what we believe we know has been called into question as we ask ourselves how to shift teacher education to meet the needs of a dynamic and unfamiliar teaching environment. What follows are five assumptions that raise questions about the response of teacher education to the COVID-19 crisis. By framing these as assumptions and questions, we hope to engage in a larger dialogue about the future of teacher education and the importance of grounding our work in what's happening in K-12 classrooms.

Assumption 1: We know what teaching work looks like

In a pre-COVID world, we could assume most public school teaching took place in classrooms with walls, desks, a teacher, and students learning together in-person. Spaces where students worked in groups, homework was assigned and collected, and a bell schedule organized the day were the unquestioned structures that guide the development of novice teachers. In educating pre-service teachers for teaching, we are preparing them for this normative conception of teachers' work. In teacher education, we prepare student teachers to organize the physical learning environment, create a classroom community and manage behavior, and utilize engaging pedagogical techniques for both didactic and collaborative teaching and learning. Of course not all teaching work is uniform. Variation in school location, size, and student population - among other things - alter the teaching context. But the in-person classroom setting has long endured as the default mode of K-12 teaching and learning.

Right now even the most informed and optimistic school leaders are unsure of what school will look like in the context of COVID-19. In-person, on-line, hybrid, and hyflex options are all on the table (Shaffer, 2020). Little of traditional teacher prep programs is premised on teachers orchestrating online zoom classes or juggling the hyflex challenge of lesson plans that offer simultaneous classes to both in-person and online students. While educational technology is often a component of teacher education programs, it has been critiqued for being a peripheral side aspect and rarely is it at the center making up the core curriculum (Zipke, 2108). Technology has long been touted as a possible source of significant school restructuring, but start

up and maintenance costs, inequitable home access, and lack of professional development and support for teachers have prevented widespread changes to public schooling (Barmore, 2015).

At this moment it is difficult to predict the degree to which the overnight shift to distance learning will affect the long term structure of public schooling and reality of teachers' work. Given that uncertainty, it is hard to know how to shift teacher education. While it seems clear that we need to pull technology classes from the periphery of teacher education toward the center, what form of teachers' work should be the focus of our pre-service programs? Do we imagine distance learning is a short term blip and stay focused on preparation for in-person classroom teaching? And if not, then which teacher setting do we prioritize in our preparation programs? Synchronous virtual classrooms? Asynchronous remote instruction? Flexible lesson planning that is accessible simultaneously online and in person and also recorded for remote access? The multiple possible permutations limit proactive teacher education adaptation. One thing though seems sure - we can no longer assume we know what teaching work looks like.

Assumption 2: That we know how to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive

Over the last twenty years, teacher education programs dedicated to a social justice mission have become increasingly proficient at preparing teachers to improve the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Foregrounding the primacy of relationships with students, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) requires that teachers create classroom environments where students feel welcomed and their diverse life experiences and identities are validated and reflected in their learning. These trusting relationships form the foundation for high expectations and student achievement. The preparation of culturally responsive teachers has been one of the ways teacher education has worked to close opportunity gaps for students from historically marginalized communities.

While teacher education programs may differ on the exact details of how they teach CRT, the development of culturally responsive teaching is grounded in the context of face-to-face instruction with strong relationships built with students, families, and communities. As pre-service teachers begin their practicums, they are often asked to closely observe what is on the bulletin boards at their placements. Who is seen? Who is celebrated? What and whose stories are told? What kinds of books are in classrooms and in the library? Do they reflect the cultural diversity of the student body? Student teachers observe how their mentor teachers interact with families and students. How do they learn about their students and families? How do

they connect content to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds? How do they create inclusive classrooms that celebrate diversity?

While the tenets of culturally responsive teaching may persist across settings, we can not simply assume that the enactment of CRT practices and pedagogies are directly transferable from the in-person classroom to other teaching formats. How do we translate all of that personal observation and interpersonal connection to remote teaching contexts? What does culturally responsive teaching look like in an asynchronous class? How about in an online synchronous class where students are rendered invisible by blanked cameras? And what about when the cameras are on? How do teachers integrate an unprecedented overlap between school and home into their culturally responsive practice? What happens if some students are in person and some online in the same class? How do we adapt the CRT strategies and systems for a multitude of settings? We need to expand and refine our understandings of CRT from the physically bound classroom to encompass an array of remote teaching and learning situations if we hope to adequately prepare pre-service teachers to be culturally responsive and social justice focused educators.

Assumption 3: That mentor teachers can guide the development of novice teachers

In addition to providing coursework in the theory and methods of teaching, teacher education programs facilitate a meaningful practicum experience where preservice teachers gain the direct classroom experience they need to feel confident in their skills and to comply with state licensing requirements. The belief that teaching work is best taught in an apprenticeship model is firmly rooted in the history of teacher education. It is commonly accepted as a core feature of teacher preparation (Anderson & Stillman, 2013) with compelling links to teacher retention (Ingersoll & May, 2014) and teacher quality (Goldhaber et al., 2020). The whole mentor teacher model is premised on experienced classroom teachers and teacher supervisors guiding the growth and development of the novice student teacher.

The abrupt move to remote teaching disrupted conventional conceptions of mentor and novice. Some experienced teachers, long accustomed to confidently navigating their classrooms, suddenly found themselves floundering with new delivery systems. Sometimes the novice knew more than the mentor, for example in things like how to: set up zoom meetings, collect school work in virtual classrooms, or create pre-recorded content for asynchronous instruction. How can we describe the apprenticeship model when the roles of novice and expert are altered by new realities of teaching? The mentor teacher model assumes a level of expertise. So, how do we make sense of mentors who are, in some ways, novices themselves?

Responding to challenges is part of the work of teaching and novice teachers gain experience in navigating distance learning alongside mentor teachers. But

student teachers also need the knowledge and guidance of experienced mentors grounded in the grammar of schooling. To what extent can mentor teachers, themselves contending with both uncertainty and a vastly changed work context, support the growth of novice teachers? And if an increased percentage of mentor teachers are unable to provide a substantive and supported practicum experience for novice teachers, then how should teacher education respond? Does this simply require programs to screen mentors for a new set of skills? Or perhaps the mentor-novice model becomes more collaborative and less apprenticeship? In any case, the definition of effective mentoring needs to be revisited in a COVID-19 teaching context.

Assumption 4: That we know the risks of student teaching

Student teaching is not without risks - but traditionally those risks have been limited to overwork, stress, self-doubt, and sometimes professional attrition. Although practicum is what pre-service teachers are most eager and excited about when they start their teacher education programs, it is a precarious time for many of them. During practicum they simultaneously navigate exhausting workload expectations with the competing demands of life as both a student and a teacher. Some may also find themselves stressed as they are pedagogically torn between emulating their mentors' teaching strategies or implementing some of the approaches they learn in their programs. Additionally, practicum reveals the nature of teacher' work as more than content delivery. Discovering that teachers are expected to engage disaffected students, resolve conflict, mitigate the effects of trauma on learning, and respond to unexpected and sometimes tragic events (e.g., school shootings, police violence, the death of a teacher or student) can erode professional commitment. Research suggests that student teachers are not immune to the stressors of teaching (Gold & Roth, 1993; Schorn & Buchwald, 2005) and during practicum, the experience of decision fatigue, feelings of burnout, and low self-efficacy are common. These stressors are important but familiar for teacher education and teacher educators are used to supporting preservice teachers in negotiating these risks.

The spread of COVID-19, the current lack of success in containing its transmission, and the intention of some school districts and teacher education programs to reopen in-person pose new challenges and introduce new risks for student teachers, teacher educators, and K-12 school communities. Most K-12 school districts are planning at least partial returns to in-person schooling. Schools are developing virus inhibiting safety protocols premised on personal protective equipment, sanitation practices, and social distancing protocols that limit proximity and degree of exposure. Reduced class sizes and bubbling students into pods is one model schools are exploring as a containment mechanism that allows targeted rather than whole school quarantine closures. How successful these measures will be in

containing the virus remains to be seen. What is certain though is that student teaching in the time of COVID-19 includes unprecedented risks of exposure and illness to preservice teachers as well as their school placement communities.

Building a teacher level immune system is practically inherent to the first few years of teaching, given the rapid spread of colds and flu among school children. But the notion that these schoolhouse illnesses could pose serious health threats is as novel as the virus itself. At the most basic level, in-person student teaching risks exposure to the virus with all the related risks of the illness, including: lost work and study time, inability to complete the practicum hours for teacher licensing, and the possibility of serious long-term health complications. Presumably if a student teacher is exposed at their school placement then they, along with their classroom pod, must quarantine. But what about the risks beyond the student teacher? If teacher education classes also meet in person, could student teachers end up unwitting vectors as they move from classroom pods to teacher education classes with other student teachers who then go into different schools and classroom pods? Given the asymptomatic spread possibilities of the virus, would a fourteen day quarantining of the pre-service cohort and instructors be enough to inhibit contagion? The pandemic is hitting communities of color disproportionately hard (CDC, 2020). What if the student teacher is in a vulnerable community and they contribute to the already inequitably distributed spread of the virus? What precautions should teacher education take to address these risks?

These questions pose logistical demands and ethical dilemmas for teacher education programs - though they are premised on the assumption that successfully placing student teachers in practicum classrooms is even possible.

Assumption 5: That K12 schools will continue to partner with teacher education programs to offer student teacher practicums

The provision of a student teaching practicum is predicated on the voluntary participation of mentor teachers and schools. The mutually beneficial relationship between teacher education programs and K-12 schools is the foundation of this partnership. Teacher education depends on schools for student teaching placements, and schools reap the energy, newly adopted instructional strategies, and added labor of student teachers. School leaders may feel providing student teaching placements is a still worthwhile endeavor, but their participation is always optional. Teacher education programs, on the other hand, rely operationally on practicum placements. State licensing laws require student teaching hours in public school classrooms with mentor teachers and opportunities to teach school-age students. So what happens if a large number of public schools decide the costs of hosting student teachers outweigh the benefits?

COVID-19 may tip the scales too far for schools, making the risks and challenges of hosting student teachers unacceptable. Before the virus, schools could assume that hosting practicums meant a commitment of time and energy to have student teachers on K-12 campuses, but their presence did not pose considerable safety risks. COVID-19 has undoubtedly called that assumption into question. If exposure to more people increases the risk of contracting the virus (and by all accounts from the department of health, that is the case), is it ethical to ask schools to assume this risk? And, if teacher education programs are face-to-face, is that risk multiplied because student teachers will be exposed to their colleagues? Have these added complexities made the inclusion of student teachers too much of a burden and risk for K-12 schools? And, if schools do decide to take on that risk, what safety measures will teacher education programs be obliged to uphold?

Embedded in this are important social justice issues. Many social justice oriented teacher education programs seek to ensure student teachers complete at least one placement in historically underserved communities - the very same communities that are experiencing a disproportionate rate of infection (Godoy & Wood, 2020). Should student teacher placement be altered to minimize risk to vulnerable communities? And if so, what are the implications of channeling student teachers away from high-need schools? While schools receive no payment for hosting student teachers, they do benefit from having access to a pool of well prepared potential employees. Student teaching has been identified as an effective employment pathway and retention strategy for high-need schools (Bartlett & Thompson, 2018; Carter Andrews, 2009; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). Questions of *if* and *where* student teachers should complete their practicums raise important considerations for social justice focused teacher education.

As school districts roll out plans for the fall, with a myriad of models for socially-distanced teaching and multiple configurations for hybrid and remote teaching, teacher education must be poised to respond to concerns about the safety of practicum placements and articulate harm reduction strategies that both reassure K12 school leaders and ensure high-need schools maintain equitable access to the workforce capacity contributions of the student teacher recruitment pathway.

Implications for Teacher Education

Teacher education programs must adapt to the changing context of teachers' work to ensure pre-service teachers are ready for their future classrooms. Contending with these five assumptions about the shifting realities of K-12 schooling will position teacher educators to respond accordingly. Continuing to operate as if we are still preparing teachers for the pre-March 2020 grammar of schooling will not return us to those days, it will only hinder our capacity to adapt and evolve. Just as there are many K-12 permutations of how to adapt to COVID-19, so there may be an array of

teacher education program responses. We are in a historical moment where the grammar of schooling is being disrupted and teacher education must respond. Uniformity of teacher education is not the goal; rather, the goal is to carefully consider the assumptions underpinning traditional forms of teacher education and to be intentional and considered in charting paths forward so that we may clearly articulate the assumptions that shape our programs. This isn't simple work. It requires an excavation of both individually and collectively held conceptions of schooling, teaching, and teacher education. To do so, each teacher education program must take up and answer these questions:

- What is the grammar of K-12 schooling that drives this teacher education program? How do we understand the nature of teachers' work? For which version of teaching work is the program preparing pre-service teachers? Traditional classroom instruction? Remote asynchronous? Online synchronous? Hyflex? To what extent is it our responsibility to shift significant aspects of teacher preparation to meet any or all of these variations in the grammar of schooling?
- What does culturally responsive teaching look like in each program's version of teaching work? How does the shift to remote teaching and the dissolution of divisions between home and school complicate our understanding of culturally responsive teaching? What new opportunities and demands does this pose to beginning teachers?
- How can we adapt mentorship from traditional models of mentor and novice and toward co-teaching or shared expertise? What role might teacher education play in building the knowledge base for remote teaching and supporting K-12 partner schools in this transition?
- What are the new risks of student teaching and how do we mitigate them for pre-service teachers, their students, and the schools and communities in which they teach? How much risk are we asking people and schools to take and how much risk are we comfortable with for our program?
- How do we ensure that teacher education practicum continues to be mutually beneficial to both student teachers and the schools that host them? What do K12 schools need from teacher education programs by way of adaptation, support, and recognition? And what alternative practicum models might we offer if traditional spaces are not available to our students? How could this be an opportunity to re-assess the relationships between teacher education programs and schools bridging the traditional university/K-12 divide?

Adapting to the current context and future possibilities requires an examination of assumptions that have long guided the work of teacher education. While this

discussion focuses on the response of teacher education to the COVID-19 crisis, it also animates questions and concerns about the nature of preparing teachers for a changing world and the responsibility of teacher education to be responsive. Teaching for social justice is not a static process. It requires both individual and institutional adaptability, the constant examination of assumptions, and the willingness to ask questions and make change based on the answers we find. This historic moment offers us an opportunity to look deeply at long held assumptions, articulate our core values and priorities, and possibly make changes in teacher education that extend well beyond the end of the pandemic.

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