

A YEAR IN THE LIFE of MSI Teacher Educators During COVID-19:

Key Takeaways

Introduction

Over the past year, systemic and institutionalized inequities within and beyond the realm of education have been exacerbated by the pandemic. As a result, a great deal of attention has focused on the challenges faced by minoritized communities; less so on the resilience and funds of knowledge possessed by these communities. The shift to online instruction impacted PK-12 and higher education, where ingenuity in providing access to technology infrastructure and quality online instruction as well as attending to the social emotional needs of students and educators became critical.

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) also faced significant challenges in engaging teacher candidates in practice-based instruction, providing opportunities to engage with PK-12 learners in what would be considered traditional (i.e., face-to-face) instruction, and meeting state requirements for clinical experiences. For EPPs in Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) who serve a disproportionate number of students of color with great success, the pandemic created, increased urgency in meeting the needs of their teacher candidates.

BranchED is the only non-profit organization in the country dedicated to strengthening, growing, and amplifying the impact of educator preparation at MSIs, with the goals of both diversifying the teaching profession and intentionally addressing critical issues of educational equity for all students. As such, we are uniquely positioned to identify and highlight the successes and resilience these institutions experienced and demonstrated throughout the pandemic. This brief details lessons learned as we huddled with our core community to support their efforts and ensure all students have access to diverse, highly effective educators.



Key Takeaways

ONE

Clinical practice does not have to be a face-to-face experience.

An important aspect of teacher preparation programs is a practice-based approach that purposefully engages candidates in direct experience of teaching (practice) and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop the capacity to contribute to diverse communities. These experiences are essential in helping teacher candidates bridge theory to practice. In addition, states require completion of early field experiences and clinical teaching, also referred to as student teaching. Early field experiences provide opportunities for teacher candidates to observe in PK-12 settings and practice individual and/or small group instruction under the tutelage of a mentor teacher. Clinical or student teaching is the culminating experience in an educator preparation program in which teacher candidates spend at least one semester (full-time) in a PK-12 setting under the supervision of a mentor teacher, ultimately assuming responsibility for instruction. With the shift to fully online instruction necessitated by the pandemic, our MSI EPPs developed a variety of strategies to provide candidates opportunities to engage with PK-12 learners and practice their craft.

Mixed-Reality Simulations

Mixed-reality simulations are being used strategically within EPPs to provide teacher candidates practice-based experiences in lieu of traditional face-to-face experiences. Simulations are a well-validated approach to build expertise and have been used extensively in the military and medical preparation¹. Through simulations, participants can learn and apply new skills in an environment in which mistakes do not put others (e.g., students) at riskⁱⁱ and where guided, deliberate practice leads to expert performance in the classroom. Mixed-reality simulations utilize technology to engage candidates in deliberate practice with students, parents, and/or staff avatars. Using a human-in-the-loop paradigm, mixed-reality simulations allow for authentic, real-time engagements that mirror the unpredictable and complicated landscape of the PK-12 setting.

The need to provide opportunities to demonstrate and master teaching without being able to spend time in a traditional classroom called for exploration of technologies that could help TCs continue their development. Mixed-reality simulations were available prior to the pandemic and their use increased as it became clear that there would not be a quick transition back to face-to-face instruction. That experience revealed the extent to which mixed-reality simulations could support skill development and increase a sense of self-efficacy in meeting PK-12 students' needs. Further, because mixed-reality simulations also allowed teacher candidates opportunities to engage with adult avatars, they were able to practice working with families in ways not possible in traditional settings. As EPPs, along with PK-12 partners, transition to a return to face-to-face instruction, it is likely that mixed-reality simulations will continue to play an integral role in preparing TCs.

With the pivot to remote teaching and learning resulting from the catastrophic medical health crisis last spring, we immediately devised a continuity plan for our teacher candidates. As innovators, we had already explored the use of mixed reality simulations (MRS) in virtual learning environments for preparing teachers, but the pandemic allowed us to deeply explore using it programmatically for acquisition and skill development of our teacher candidates. I provided coaching sessions to teacher candidates in the areas of engaging students in lessons, creating positive learning environments, and communicating effectively with stakeholders. Teacher candidates interacted with avatars in these simulated learning environments to build skill and confidence. The luxury of using these safe spaces for learning is that as our teacher candidates feel “stuck”, they have their coach and peers to support them in-the-moment. One teacher candidate said it best, “I know that next time when I’m in an actual classroom and a student is off task having a side conversation and not paying attention, I will know what to do. I will feel like I’ve done this before and that’s because I have.”

- Criselda G. Garcia, EdD

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Open Educational Resource Curation and Authorship

Open Educational Resources (OER) offer innovative strategies for supplementing clinical experiences during and beyond COVID-19. OER repositories such as OER Commons house instructional materials that are free and available for everyone to use. They can also be authored by both teacher educators and teacher candidates. The possibilities for open authorship made OER instructional materials a solution to address the lack of face-to-face instruction during COVID-19. Teacher educators at MSIs nationwide developed an increased interest in OER use and authorship for teaching candidates virtually.

Teacher educators learned skills such as exploring, curating, licensing, designing, remixing, and authoring OER in a series of professional development opportunities facilitated by BranchED. These skills were then applied in teacher education classrooms with candidates, preparing future teachers with skills to author their own openly licensed instructional materials to use in their PK-12 classrooms. For instance, six teacher educators who participated in BranchED’s OER professional development sessions delivered workshops in which they taught OER skills to candidates, in-service teachers, faculty, and resource staff in November and December of 2020. As a result of these workshops, 95% of attendees said that their ability to use OER improved and that they would be able to apply what they learned to their work.

During the workshop session, students asked questions about Creative Commons licensing and OER in relation to their future work as teachers and collaborated in small groups on a skills application activity. In their small groups, students were asked to search for a Creative Commons-licensed image, correctly attribute it in a document, and reflect on its effectiveness and suitability for classroom use based on a basic visual literacy framework designed to promote inclusive representation. I continue to offer sessions on OER to our future educators.

- Kimberly S. Grotewold, MLS & MSHE

Texas A&M University-San Antonio
Education Librarian

Communities can lean on one another for support.

Throughout the pandemic, we have learned of the resiliency and importance of strong partnerships. As school districts and universities quickly made the shift to online learning in the Spring of 2020 and then shifted among a variety of modalities (face-to-face, hybrid, virtual) throughout the 2020-21 school year, relying on relationships ensured continued quality experiences for teacher candidates.

The shift to fully online instruction also revealed the need for professional development for in-service (PK-12), pre-service (teacher candidates), and higher education faculty to learn and/or enhance their understanding of and ability to implement high quality online instruction. MSIs have a unique understanding not only of the students they serve but of the communities in which they are situated. They exemplify an ethic of care that attends to the lived experiences of their students. They also embody an ethic of community, the responsibility to engage in communal processes as educators and address “the ongoing challenges of daily life and work in schools”ⁱⁱⁱ.

To that end, several MSI EPPs, attuned to the needs of their communities and cognizant of how they and their teacher candidates could support those needs, strategically developed resources (technical and human) to meet those needs.

Teacher educators from Chicago State University developed a series of webinars focused on eLearning, which are open access. These hour-long webinars included specific online teacher strategies, introduction to various technology tools, and stress management tips for educators.

In many instances teacher candidates served as technology ambassadors when working with in-service teachers. Teacher candidates demonstrated their technology skills by assisting in-service teachers in learning about and implementing high quality online instruction. This opportunity also enhanced teacher candidates’ understanding of PK-12 learners and gave them significant insight into the platforms, systems, and hardware utilized in PK-12 settings.

Other MSIs explored ways to support parents who found themselves in the dual role of caregiver and teacher, helping their children learn in a virtual environment as they themselves navigated technology in new ways. Faculty at Texas A&M International University engaged their teacher candidates in creating videos spanning all content areas to help parents engage their children in virtual learning. In addition, students used their technology and bilingual skills to connect literacy learning in both Spanish and English.

As soon as we heard about school closures due to the pandemic, we knew we had to provide support to our educators as they abruptly transitioned to remote learning. My colleague and I put our minds together to create a series of webinars in support of eLearning. The average attendance for each webinar was 650 educators mostly from Illinois. The information and support that we provided were overwhelmingly positively received by attendees.

- Rasha Elhage, PhD

Chicago State University
College of Education
Associate Professor

- Deborah Lynch, PhD

Chicago State University
College of Education
Professor

I have adapted a digital-storytelling format to use with lesson-study demonstrations in relation to literacy learning. While I have utilized this instructional technique for over ten years and have published research on it, the methodology of lesson demonstrations in a digital format took on a new emphasis with the challenges our learning community endured during the COVID-19 restrictions. As a way of providing these digital resources to the wider community, Dean James O'Meara promoted the use of a college website that would allow children, educators, and parents to link and learn from these digital lessons.

- Heriberto Godina, PhD

Assistant Professor of Curriculum & Instruction, Texas A&M International University

THREE

Creativity is key for collaboration.

At the onset of the pandemic, faculty were tasked with quickly converting their courses from face-to-face instruction to an online course format. While this was incredibly challenging, it fostered innovation and collaboration across campuses nationwide. Faculty experienced in online instruction supported their colleagues as they navigated the development of course modules, the logistics of Zoom, and the merits of synchronous and asynchronous teaching formats.

The ability to digitally collaborate led to increased engagement for many educational work groups. Faculty once bound by location were now communicating with colleagues across the country writing grant proposals, presenting at virtual conferences, and developing creative strategies to support students. While engagement in an online environment presented challenges at times, unique tools like collaborative notetaking, breakout groups, and virtual whiteboards fostered the exchange of ideas and provided real-time opportunities for feedback from peers and instructors.

These new creative practices lent themselves to the simplification of teaching and learning down to its most essential parts. Pre-pandemic academia was more likely to include routines and rituals that existed only to reproduce hierarchies that protect the dominant culture. A need to achieve student success amidst limitations on students' physical, temporal, and cognitive resources created opportunities to break down hierarchical barriers and rethink practice. The result is that learning is more student-centered and gets to the heart of learning that students will apply in their future teaching and work contexts.

We all learned together as we transitioned to and embraced remote learning. Our Teacher Candidates needed new strategies to use while student teaching in their now-remote TK-12 classrooms; our instructors also needed to embrace new technology when facilitating university student learning. It was a challenge for both groups, but I overcame it and flourished because of our joint objective to educate each other. When observing my student teachers, I saw they were using Jamboard, a tool I had not used before. So, I tried it out. The graphic background provided context to the information students shared on their sticky notes. The very visual representation of the topic we were discussing supported my students' learning. Students in my courses commented in the class meetings' Exit Tickets about their experience using Jamboard: "The Jamboards are fantastic since we can look at them in the future." and "I was most engaged during the Jamboard activity. Being able to reflect and see everyone else's responses and how they differed". Because of the knowledge my students shared with me, I was able to instruct more beautifully and effectively.

- Dr. Maria Gross

*Azusa Pacific University, School of Education
Director of Clinical Experiences/
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Division of Teacher Education*

Assess for learning and not for grades.

The global pandemic provided opportunities for educators to reimagine course-based assessment. Many practices that had been long accepted were quickly modified and adapted, providing space for flexibility and innovation as students and faculty navigated the pressures of the pandemic. Common assessment-focused changes included flexible deadlines, pass/fail grades, and innovative assignments and assessments better suited to online learning. These alternate assessment practices, often advocated for by students, were intended to ensure equity and accessibility for students taking courses during this challenging season. For example, the adoption of a pass/fail grading system at some MSIs allowed students to focus on progress toward learning outcomes, as opposed to a traditional letter grade, while navigating the uncertainty and anxiety of the pandemic.

When the University of La Verne transitioned to an online learning environment due to the Coronavirus shutdown, one of my professors immediately adapted our in-person course and provided unique options for assessments. They allowed us to submit our reflections on classroom readings by offering the choice to respond to prompts using creative (podcast, poem, art, and video) or traditional ways. I took full advantage of this and wrote a one act play on non-violence. Frankly, this was a huge turning point as a teacher candidate, and I thought why is everyone not doing this!!? Being understanding and open to students using their abilities and what matters to them most, is a valuable tool in creating engagement in the classroom.

- Meena Duguay

University of La Verne
Department of Theatre Arts
B.A. Theatre
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Educational Technology
Outreach Coordinator

In June 2020, a survey conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment^{iv} found that 97% of respondents indicated that they made changes to their assessment practices due to the pandemic. This broad shift in assessment practice provides opportunity to leverage meaningful assessment for learning recentered around ongoing feedback and equitable assessment principles. During the pandemic, issues of inequity in assignments and assessments were brought to the forefront of conversation as faculty worked to support students with varying access to technology and housing and a wide range of external pressures. Shining this light on inequitable assessment practices leads us to reimagine assessment in ways that recognize and support our increasingly diverse student populations by leading with equity-minded assessment practices.

Social Emotional Learning is for everyone!

The pandemic required higher levels of social-emotional skills and provided a wider entry into discussions and practices involving the well-being of

students and faculty. While social-emotional learning (SEL) is ongoing, it is often very personal, with each individual navigating different levels of stress, trauma, and disruptive life experiences. In contrast, during the pandemic, faculty and students shared the same disrupting experience. This allowed for more mutual understanding of the need for support. Additionally, in education circles, SEL is often associated with providing students the necessary social-emotional skills to be successful. However, as faculty lived through the pandemic, their own social-emotional needs rose to the surface, creating a deeper understanding of the importance of SEL. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need of SEL for everyone.

Here at Albany State University, I have implemented the Pedagogy of Hope Faculty Learning Community. Together, the faculty and I are reviewing best practices related to the pedagogical strategy. This includes working collaboratively (across disciplines) to design experiences for the entire University community that align with SEL strategies. Our goal is to help mitigate the stressors associated with the twinned Pandemics of COVID and Anti-Black Racism, and to support students in their abilities to critically reflect upon their agency in resisting any efforts to limit them and their potential.

- Tiffany D. Poque, PhD

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SIX

From pivoting to revamping.

When COVID-19 hit and quarantine shifted instruction to online, educators described what was taking place as pivoting learning. These pivots were essentially experiments in teaching and learning. Experimental methods in many cases caused inequities to be realized in ways that that could no longer be ignored. For example, virtual class meetings with cameras reveal socioeconomic inequities. Also, some students had no or reduced internet capacity. It was not uncommon for faculty to hear from students who completed assignments from the parking lots of fast-food restaurants with free WIFI. Many students also lost jobs and/or had to work more than one job to make ends meet. This on top of a lack of childcare turned time into a resource of privilege.

At the same time, COVID-19 taught educators many lessons about adaptability. As the nation was forced to quickly change the way teaching and learning happened, we learned how adaptable and flexible education truly can be. This adaptability applied to seemingly immobile operations such as school and university schedules and modes of support. It also applied to the ways in which educators meet learners. Rather than being institution, teacher, or instructor-centered, COVID-19 learning was student-centered at its core. Learners had varying levels of access, literal and figurative bandwidth, and resources. Educators adapted to this by experimenting with new ways to teach inclusively out of necessity.

The shift to online instruction during the pandemic was a catalyst for collaborations that support inclusive practices. In our early reading instruction course, we created a co-teaching lesson plan assignment. Candidates seeking general education and special education credentials worked together in digital spaces to develop and deliver literacy lessons, that would be delivered in inclusive classrooms. One educator took the role of a general education teacher, another the role of a special education teacher. We also invited co-teaching practitioners from the field as guest speakers to model and discuss how inclusive co-teaching looks online. The results were impressive! Our teacher candidates produced realistic inclusive lessons that will serve a range of children in general education settings.

- Amber L. Bechard, Ed.D.

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What's past is prologue.

The inclusive teaching that was born out of necessity during COVID-19 has the potential to change the future of education post-COVID-19. Teacher educators and teacher candidates are unlikely to lose the muscles they built during the pandemic to center students and increase accessibility. We are hopeful that these practices and perspectives that center learners will be modeled in teacher education for decades to come. And what started as experimental pivots will lead to a lasting revamping of education to make it more inclusive for all learners.

Similarly, BranchED built muscles, which we will continue to flex beyond the pandemic. We focused our technical assistance and professional development offerings on inclusive teaching and learning in online environments. For example, we offered sessions on virtual student support, social emotional learning, and open educational resources. We also shifted EPP support during COVID-19 so that it was virtual. We adapted critical friends visits from in-person to virtual. Additionally, we went from offering team-intensive in-person Summits to virtual webinars, workshops, and institutes on a variety of topics to meet teacher educators where they are. We are also digitizing our support in the way of resources, videos, and e-learning to be housed in our digital resource repository. These are muscles we have built that make us stronger to support MSI EPPs and their communities for the future we envision together.

Conclusion

MSI Faculty and Students – Stronger Together

The dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and racism continue to be felt more poignantly at MSIs and among their students of color. This year teacher educators often had to wade through these crises with and alongside their students as their communities struggled, and continue to struggle, inequitably with the health crisis of the pandemic and the trauma of systemic racism. Against the backdrop of the murders of people of color, hate crimes, an attempted insurrection of our government, an intense political scene, a surge of migrants at the border, historic protests, and more; MSI faculty did not use online learning as an excuse to not engage with these topics. Rather, they thought more intentionally about how to make space for their students to reflect, discuss, and be heard and seen. While learning through a screen can sometimes allow participants to opt out of dealing with emotions, students continued to seek acknowledgement of the reality of their lived experience and the events going on around them in their communities, and MSI faculty rose to the occasion. The ability of students and faculty at MSIs to be able to lean into experiences together is what inspires continued work toward a more just and equitable society.

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ⁱⁱ Dieker, L. A. et al. (2014). The potential of simulated environments in teacher education: Current and future possibilities. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 37, 21-33. Doi: 10.1177/0888406413512683

ⁱⁱⁱ Furman, G. C. (2004). The ethic of community. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(2), 215-234.

^{iv} Jankowski, N. A. (2020, August). *Assessment during a crisis: Responding to a global pandemic*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-COVID-Survey.pdf>