



Pipeline Disruption: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Next Generation of Teachers

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Abstract:

This qualitative study aims to provide insight into why teacher candidates, interested in pursuing K-12 teaching, made the decision to leave their traditional teacher preparation programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized sociocultural theory as the framework to ground the research. The study finds the educational disruption caused by the pandemic added a layer of complexity to candidates' experiences, including missed opportunities, limited clinical experience, and a general sense of uncertainty, which altered teacher candidates' outlook on the teaching profession, impacted their education journeys, and ultimately shifted their immediate career trajectories. The results from this study indicate that clinical experiences are an important predictor of whether teacher candidates remain in their preparation programs. With this research study, we hope to support the development of a more robust teacher pipeline.

Keywords:

Teacher preparation, COVID-19, pandemic, teacher pipeline, clinical experiences

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The United States faces a teacher shortage. The shortages are particularly acute in math, science, special education, and English as a second language (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). The causes are multifaceted, including well-documented attrition among early career teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018) and a projected rise in demand for teachers with the increasing population of school-aged children (Sutcher et al.,

2019). In addition, total enrollment in teacher preparation programs has been declining by over one-third since 2010 (Partelow, 2019). The number of students completing teacher preparation programs has declined by 28% between 2008-09 and 2016-17 (Partelow, 2019). Thus, the teacher pipeline has been leaking, with fewer entering and completing teacher preparation and many never entering teaching or leaving early in their careers. This is especially true for teachers of color who are less likely to enter the field and leave teaching at higher rates (e.g., Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Sutcher et al., 2019).

This leaky pipeline has dire consequences for K-12 students. A shortage of teachers results in more emergency licensed or non-licensed teachers in classrooms who lack sufficient preparation to teach effectively. Student engagement and academic success are negatively impacted in the absence of high-quality teachers (e.g., Sutcher et al., 2019). Studies demonstrate that urban districts and districts serving students from low-income backgrounds and non-dominant racial/ethnic communities, who arguably are most in need of high-quality teachers, are especially impacted by teacher shortages (e.g., Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018).

The global pandemic intensified factors leading to attrition for all teachers (e.g., Zamarro et al., 2021). Studies from early in the pandemic indicate that teacher turnover declined in some districts, with economic conditions encouraging teachers to stay in their positions (Rosenberg & Anderson, 2021), but as the 2020-21 school year began, many districts were unable to fill teacher vacancies (Dabrowski, 2021; Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). Teacher workloads increased as teachers adjusted once again to completely different modes of teaching, and morale decreased (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; Pressley, 2021). Pressure “to simultaneously teach online and in-person, with limited material...and preparation, and mixed messages about whether teachers...were valued by their schools and communities only served to exacerbate pre-existing frayed conditions” in teaching (Wilson & Kelley, 2022, p. 14). The pandemic was not the only event that put pressure on teachers. Factors in the broader social, cultural, and political contexts, including the racial reckoning with the murder of George Floyd, as well as “economic precariousness, and environmental catastrophe additionally have caused disequilibrium” (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022, p. 5). For example, teachers were and continue to be caught in ongoing battles over curricula and even word choice related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This has led teachers to resign or lose their jobs (Natanson & Balingit, 2022).

While there is growing research on the impact of the pandemic on those already in teaching, research is limited on how these factors impacted those preparing to enter the field (teacher candidates), which is a “critical point in the teacher pipeline” (Wilson & Kelley, 2022, p. 4). Once enrolled, teacher candidates either complete their programs and enter the teaching profession, complete their programs and decide not to pursue teaching, or leave their preparation programs prior to completing the requirements. Research on where candidates go once “they leave the pipeline is spotty” (Wilson & Kelley, 2022, p. 25). Studies indicate that between 70-90% of those who have completed their teacher education programs enter a teaching position the following year (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Among those who complete 4-year bachelor's programs, 75% enter teaching within four years (Sutcher et al., 2019). There is very little research focusing on those who successfully complete their preparation program but do not enter teaching (e.g., Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). Even more limited are studies that focus on those who enter teacher preparation programs and leave prior to completing the program. This research study hopes to fill this gap in the literature to support building a stronger teacher pipeline.

The researchers examined the impact the pandemic had on candidates in two traditional teacher preparation programs, interviewing students who left prior to completing licensure requirements. Typically, traditional preparation programs are defined as undergraduate or postgraduate degree programs at institutions of higher education where students complete coursework and clinical placements, including student teaching (e.g., Podolsky et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). Clinical placements include field experiences where teacher candidates are placed in K-12 schools to observe and/or teach several lessons in a classroom setting, whereas student teaching is typically a semester- or year-long placement where teacher candidates gain experience gradually assuming all responsibilities of the classroom teacher. While there have been some studies on the impact on those who were in student teaching placements in March 2020 when schools were forced to shift to online instruction (e.g., VanLone et al., 2021; Walker & Ardell, 2020), very little research has been completed on how the pandemic affected those students still enrolled in earlier stages of teacher preparation programs. The 2020-21 school year forced many schools to provide online or hybrid instruction, which disrupted opportunities for clinical experiences. Additionally, veteran teachers and teacher candidates noticed significant challenges during the 2021-22 school year, including increased mental health needs, challenging student behavior, and pressure to make up for lost learning (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2021). No research was found on how these circumstances might have impacted teacher candidates considering entering the field. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature.

The article begins with a review of the literature on traditional teacher preparation programs, which is the site of this study. The literature review then shifts to the challenges of teacher preparation during a global pandemic. Next, the researchers include a description of sociocultural theory, the framework that grounds the study. The methods section details the research design, sample, and participant characteristics, as well as the limitations of the study. The article then provides detailed findings for each research question, including discussion and implications for research and practice.

Review of the Literature

Teacher Candidates in Traditional Teacher Preparation Programs

The majority of those in teacher preparation programs in the 2018-19 academic year were enrolled in traditional programs (416,000 out of about 560,000 total; U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). Despite efforts to increase enrollment of teacher candidates of color, the majority were white (61.4%) and female (73.5%; U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). Still, this represents an increase in enrollment of candidates of color; in 2010-11, 75% were White.

Teacher candidates enter teacher preparation programs for a variety of reasons. Many are drawn to teaching because family members are teachers or they experienced a positive teacher role model in their lives (Wilson & Kelley, 2022). Intrinsic rewards are also often cited as reasons for pursuing teaching, including a desire to work with young people, a sense of the importance of teaching, intellectual stimulation and love of learning, and the ability to help others (Sinclair et al., 2006; Watt et al., 2012). External motivators, like flexible work hours and vacations, job security, and a sense that teaching is easy, can also draw people to the field (Sinclair et al., 2006; Watt et al., 2012). Sinclair and colleagues (2006) found that motivation to teach decreases within the first semester in a traditional teacher education program. Their quantitative design did not allow the researchers to determine why. Still, they speculated that as

teacher candidates entered clinical placements and complete coursework, they gained a more realistic understanding of the profession that decreased external and intrinsic motivators.

Traditional preparation programs often result in students earning a bachelor's or master's degree at a college or university. These programs include required elements set forth by the state for teacher licensure, including coursework, testing, and clinical experience hours that students must complete to obtain a license (see, for example, Massachusetts Educator Licensure and Preparation Program Approval Regulations, 603 CMR 7.04(2); New Hampshire Approval of Professional Preparation Programs, ED 603.02). Required coursework in traditional programs helps to ensure mastery of content knowledge as well as pedagogical content knowledge, or how to convey and teach content effectively, as well as pedagogies for meeting the needs of all learners (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teacher candidates learn about how students learn, curricular theories and development, classroom management, assessment practices, and other essential skills and knowledge to support the diverse learning needs of students effectively. Clinical experiences include both early placements where teacher candidates observe and assist with teaching among a variety of tasks, as well as a culminating clinical placement or student teaching, where teacher candidates are expected to assume most of the roles of the classroom teacher. In clinical placements, the teacher of record in the classroom, or the clinical educator, acts as a mentor, observing the teacher candidate and providing feedback. The student teaching experience must also be supervised, with an assigned supervisor from the teacher preparation program who observes, provides feedback, and completes evaluations to determine candidate readiness for licensure (e.g., Massachusetts Educator Licensure and Preparation Program Approval Regulations, 603 CMR 7.04(4); New Hampshire Approval of Professional Preparation Programs, ED 604.04).

Particularly important elements in teacher preparation are clinical experiences and student teaching. Studies have found that those who have at least one semester of practice teaching prior to entering a full-time position are three times more likely to stay after their first year of teaching compared to those with no practice teaching experience (Ingersoll et al., 2014). The more hours candidates spend in student teaching, the more prepared they feel to teach but this does not necessarily translate to effectiveness in terms of observation ratings from their clinical educators or principals in their first year of teaching (Ronfeldt, 2021). What did have an impact, however, was the schools where teacher candidates were placed. Teacher candidates were more effective in their first year of teaching when they had clinical experiences and student teaching in schools that promoted professional, collaborative learning environments among teachers and that had a history of strong achievement gains among their students. Working with clinical educators who model effective teaching practices and provide frequent, quality coaching also leads to increased instructional effectiveness in the teacher candidate's early career (Beck et al., 2020; Ronfeldt, 2021). Clinical experiences or student teaching in schools that serve racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students can also improve teacher candidate effectiveness (Beck et al., 2020; Ronfeldt, 2021).

Aligning clinical experiences with coursework and reflection remains critical to teacher development. This allows teacher candidates to make connections between the theory and approaches they learn in coursework with the practices they are seeing in classrooms (Beck et al., 2020; Ronfeldt, 2021). It also helps to avoid "pitfalls" or common misinterpretations of classroom observations, including making assumptions based on experiences as a student (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985). Just as coursework is not enough to prepare candidates, traditional programs assert that clinical experiences must be integrated with coursework so

candidates can analyze successes and identify why they are successful (e.g., Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985).

Teacher Preparation During a Global Pandemic

The pandemic abruptly shut down elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools nationwide in March 2020 before a rapid and challenging transition to online and distance learning. Teachers and students at all levels were working and learning from their own homes, often surrounded by their families. This brought new insight into student home lives and blurred what was private and public (e.g., Kidd & Murray, 2020). While teaching online introduced new pedagogical approaches, many, including teacher educators, expressed that the format was impersonal, less engaging, and removed from the realities of classroom teaching, which was particularly concerning for teacher educators (e.g., Kidd & Murray, 2020). This directly impacted student learning among K-12 students and college students; 80% of high school and college students struggled to stay focused on school, and 20% of college students reported that their mental health was significantly worse during the pandemic (Active Minds, 2020). Many were and are concerned about “learning loss” and widening the achievement gap as a result, particularly since these impacts were felt most by those from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students with disabilities (e.g., Kuhfeld et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The pandemic and shuttering of classrooms also had a direct impact on teacher candidates’ ability to complete clinical and student teaching experiences. Those in student teaching placements in March 2020 had to shift to online instruction along with their clinical educators, while those in clinical placements often had to leave prior to completing their hours.

Following the shutdown, in the 2020-21 school year, 67% of adults with school-aged children reported that their child’s school moved to distance and online learning (Irwin et al., 2021). Schools that provided in-person instruction rearranged hallways and classrooms to maintain social distance from classmates, with new routines for lining up, walking through the halls, and seating. Many districts offered hybrid instruction with students attending in-person 2-3 days a week and online learning at home on the remaining days. Often, the modes switched depending on the number of COVID-19 cases in the area (e.g., Zamarro et al., 2021). Masking and vaccination requirements were implemented depending on state and school board decisions. Those in higher education enacted similar changes as well, moving many courses online, requiring vaccination and masking, restricting class sizes, and limiting access to cafeterias, libraries, and other facilities in efforts to reduce large gatherings and maintain social distance (e.g., Pressley, 2021). For both K-12 and tertiary education, quarantine protocols were in place for those exposed to or who tested positive for COVID-19.

During the initial shutdown, many families continued to experience financial hardship. Those with elementary- and secondary-aged school children often reported strain from having to find childcare during quarantine and isolation periods (e.g., Heggeness & Fields, 2020). In this context, some school districts welcomed teacher candidates for clinical placements and full-time student teachers, while others did not for a variety of reasons, including limiting student exposure to only school staff for the health and safety of their students and the inability of clinical educators to take on the task of mentoring a teacher candidate with the added demands. As a result, states had to relax or even waive clinical requirements for certification. New Hampshire and Massachusetts, for example, gave teacher preparation programs flexibility to develop plans to complete clinical requirements, including the use of alternative experiences

such as simulations, mixed reality, and video observations (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2020).

This study was conducted in two traditional preparation programs that were impacted by the pandemic. Thus, it adds to the growing research base on the impact of the pandemic on education with a specific focus on the effect on those in teacher preparation programs. It also helps to fill the gap in the literature on attrition among teacher candidates, which is one point in the leaky teacher pipeline.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory explains how social environments interact and influence one another and in turn human development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These contexts include immediate environments of family, friends, and school, as well as cultural and political patterns and economic systems (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sarason, 1971; Wenger, 1998). Applying this to teacher candidates, learning to teach happens within the distinctive cultures in which teacher candidates interact. These cultures include their preparation programs, the communities surrounding their preparation programs, and the K-12 schools where they complete their clinical placements, as well as larger societal contexts and events such as the pandemic. Sociocultural theory posits that as people engage within their various cultures, they negotiate and create shared understandings of what it means to live and be within those cultures (Sarason, 1971; Wenger, 1998). History, tradition, race, power, cultural myths, and societal norms, as well as school norms and values, all impact these shared understandings, which in turn affects how people interpret their experiences, preferences, emotions, choices, and identity (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eisenhart, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Thus, culture influences an individual's sense of self. A sociocultural perspective understands identity as an interplay between interactions within cultures and how individuals interpret and negotiate these interactions with preconceived notions of what it means to be a member of the culture. For example, individuals enter teaching with preconceived ideas of what it means to be a teacher based on their experiences as students (Lortie, 1975). As teacher candidates advance through their preparation programs and clinical placements, their preconceived notions about the role of the teacher and their identity as a teacher are tested and renegotiated (Lortie, 1975).

Research from a sociocultural perspective focuses not just on individual participants but also the complex interactions within and among different contexts, seeing participants "as part of a matrix of existing relationships, practices, and ideas" (Sarason, 1971, p. 171). Using this lens allows an exploration into how teacher candidates' exchanges within and among their different contexts influenced their decision to leave teacher preparation. The research questions guiding this study reflect this perspective by focusing on how the pandemic impacted the cultures teacher candidates experienced and their decisions to leave teacher preparation.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study aims to provide insight into why teacher candidates who were interested in pursuing K-12 teaching decided to leave their traditional teacher preparation programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative studies seek "to construct descriptions of phenomena" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; see also Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles et al., 2014). Thus, given the research goals, qualitative methodologies are appropriate for investigating

teacher candidates' perceptions of entering and leaving teaching as a career. The following research question guided the study's design and analysis: Why do secondary teacher candidates enrolled in traditional four-year, undergraduate teacher preparation programs decide to leave prior to completion? In addition, the following sub-questions were explored:

- How do teacher candidates perceive the teaching profession?
- What role has the COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher candidates' experiences in teacher preparation programs?

A systematic analysis of interview data with eight teacher candidates who left their teacher preparation programs between 2020-2022 helped to address each of these questions.

Sample

For this study, interview data were gathered from teacher candidates attending one of two small, liberal arts colleges located in the Northeast. Both colleges offer similar education majors with a state licensure path for secondary education. Teacher candidates are required to double major in education and the content area they plan to teach (e.g., English, history, mathematics, natural sciences, fine arts, Spanish). Students must complete eight education courses in addition to their content major courses. Both programs have clinical hours matched with coursework and conclude with a semester-long student teaching experience with more than 400 hours of classroom experience.

There are two notable differences in the programs. One college begins both education coursework and clinical hours during sophomore year and then shifts to coursework with and without clinical experience during junior year. The other begins education coursework during the first year and then adds limited clinical hours during the sophomore year with full clinical experiences matched with coursework during the junior year. In addition, the two institutions had different COVID-19 protocols and regulations. One college had limited testing, optional masking, and fewer restrictions, while the other mandated testing and masking. Both enforced quarantine and isolation periods.

To participate in the study, teacher candidates had to have declared education as a major or minor, participate in at least one semester of education coursework, and dropped the major during the 2020-21 or 2021-22 academic years. In total, 10 teacher candidates were identified and interviewed across two distinct preparation programs. Two were in elementary preparation programs, which have a different set of coursework and clinical requirements. Thus, this paper focuses on the eight teacher candidates who were enrolled in secondary education preparation programs. All teacher candidates were white; two identified as male and six as female. Candidates had completed between 13% (one course) to 50% (four courses) of their education coursework and 0-40 hours in clinical placements before leaving their teacher education programs. Most candidates were pursuing English degrees (n = 5); one was majoring in history, another in music, and one was a biology major (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at Departure	Semester Departed Program	Content Major	Percent of Education Courses Completed	Clinical Hours Completed Prior to	Expected Clinical Hours at Point of
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						Departure	Departure
Cecelia	Female	20	5	English	50%	13*	13
Dorothy	Female	21	6	Music	25%	3	60
Hazel	Female	21	5	English	25%	10	60
Kana	Female	20	5	English	50%	0	13
Lynn	Female	20	5	Biology	13%	20	30
Matthew	Male	21	7	English	38%	40	60
Monica	Female	20	5	English	13%	0	0
Robert	Male	20	5	History	13%	0	0

Note. *Clinical hours were conducted all online.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol was used with each teacher candidate (see Appendix A). Each interview was 30-60 minutes in length and recorded to ensure accuracy. Interviews were conducted via Zoom utilizing the transcription tool. These transcriptions were checked for accuracy by the researcher who conducted the interview.

Given the purpose and data sources for this study, descriptive analytic approaches were used. First, qualitative open coding methods were utilized to identify common codes (Patton, 2002). Each researcher read the interviews she conducted, identifying codes and themes that cut across the candidates as well as those that were unique to each candidate. Researchers used both deductive codes directly related to the research questions (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 2002) as well as inductive codes to represent concepts and ideas that seemed significant (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Researchers discussed their findings and agreed upon a set of emerging themes. For example, lack of clinical experience, life during the pandemic, and reasoning for entering the field were all identified as emerging themes. As a next step, each researcher prepared a case study description of each of their candidates to represent each of the emerging themes (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2002). These narrative descriptions were shared and checked by the other researcher against the original interview transcript to identify whether important data were missing as well as any disconfirming evidence. The narratives emphasized and brought to light how different contexts interacted with one another. As a final step, the researchers used more direct and conceptual forms of coding, focusing on defining categories that represented larger amounts of the data, and reorganized the findings according to broader analytic interpretations, which provided the “core” of the emerging findings (Charmaz, 2000; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical coherence was also used, interpreting and “systematically explor[ing the data] to generate meaning” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 46). In this step, interpretations move beyond the data to broader, general conceptual frameworks “that can account for the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the phenomena under study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 261).

Throughout the coding and analysis process, memos were drafted. Memos helped researchers “grapple with ideas about the data,” defining analytic direction or refining categories and hypotheses (Charmaz, 2000, p. 518). In addition, they helped guard against potential biases and helped increase the reliability and validity of the findings. Researchers shared memos with one another to discuss the ideas, questions, and emerging themes and findings.

Limitations

This study is limited to two small teacher preparation programs with a purposive sample. Thus, the external generalizability of the findings is extremely limited. The purpose of this study is not to provide a representative understanding of leaving traditional teacher preparation programs (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2006); rather, the goal is to offer detailed descriptions that allow readers to understand factors that influenced teacher candidates’ decisions to leave their preparation programs and the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research relied on interview data with candidates who knew the researchers well. Both researchers were academic advisors and/or professors of each of the candidates in the study. This presented both benefits and limitations. For example, candidates readily shared their experiences because they had already discussed their decision to leave with the researcher in the role of advisor. Precautions were made to ensure that candidates knew that they could keep information confidential and often researchers asked questions to which they already knew the answer to ensure that candidates wanted that information to be included in the study.

The analyses sought to create a true account by using candidates’ words as much as possible, enhancing the validity of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The report was shared with each of the candidates to conduct member checks and candidate validation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Stake, 2000). This helped to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis and presentation of the findings.

Findings

The researchers found the pandemic disrupted the candidates’ teacher preparation experiences during analysis of the main research question: *Why do secondary teacher candidates enrolled in traditional four-year, undergraduate teacher preparation programs decide to leave prior to completion?* The educational disruption caused by the pandemic added a layer of missed opportunities, limited clinical experience, and a general sense of uncertainty, which altered teacher candidates’ outlook on the teaching profession, impacted their education journeys, and ultimately shifted their immediate career trajectories.

Changing Perceptions of Teaching

Unpacking the first sub-research question, *How do teacher candidates perceive the teaching profession?*, the data suggest teacher candidates’ perceptions of the teaching profession were greatly influenced by the pandemic. While the pandemic was the focus of the second sub-question, the analysis found the pandemic was the thread that wove throughout the candidates’ experiences and shaped their perceptions of the teaching profession. For each candidate, their impressions of teaching were suddenly framed by a global pandemic. Our senior teacher candidates, in particular, expressed grave concerns about the changing landscape of the profession. Lynn stated that she believed “teachers are underappreciated and overworked.” She continued by explaining how teachers are asked to:

wear a lot of hats that are not teaching...especially now [with]...vaccine mandates [and] mask mandates. How can you even teach somebody to do the things that teachers are being asked to do [with] all this other stuff that as a teacher you don't picture that being part of your job?

Hazel noted how impactful the media had been on her perceptions of the profession. She stated, "just seeing on the news, teachers protesting and then even some students are protesting now too." Like Lynn, Hazel felt the mandates and legal battles involving teachers, because of the pandemic, altered the focus of the profession in a negative way away from teaching and learning.

At the classroom level candidates noted how the pandemic changed their perceptions of teachers' daily experiences. Matthew highlighted how limited socialization and delayed maturity impacted classroom management. He noted, "[the students'] socialization level is significantly lower than where it's supposed to be, and it's just extreme behaviors, like not respecting anyone in the school or just doing whatever they want." In addition to student behavior issues, candidates also had concerns regarding remote learning. Hazel noted the daily uncertainty with the constant shifts between in-person and remote instruction: "sometimes you see the school bus, sometimes you don't because [the schools are] always [shifting] online or in person." Across teacher candidates, the pandemic altered their views of the teaching profession.

While the pandemic weighed heavily on the candidates' perceptions of the teaching profession on a broader scale and in the day-to-day classroom experience, candidates also discussed professional considerations that extended beyond the pandemic, including, for example, Lynn's concerns about school violence:

School shootings and teachers going to be armed to protect themselves and their classrooms is not something that a teacher should think of. I wouldn't want to be in that position—nobody should have to be in that position...so those are always things in the back of my mind, like is this really the profession I want to go into?

For Lynn, school violence added a layer of contemplation beyond the pandemic. While this was one of multiple reasons why she shifted away from the profession, it added to the complexity of how teacher candidates were viewing the teaching profession.

As noted above, candidates in their senior year, rather than junior year, elicited concerns about the teaching profession. The researchers attribute this primarily to the fact that seniors had just one semester left in college when they were interviewed. Thus, it is possible that the senior candidates were more likely to be in a place to deeply consider the next phase of their lives. For juniors, the pandemic had consumed their college experience, with just their very first semester unaffected and uninterrupted. For junior candidates, the researchers found their mindset was centered on "what can I still get out of my fractured college experience?"

Overshadowed and Underprepared by the Pandemic

Unpacking the second sub-question, *What role has the COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher candidates' experiences in teacher preparation programs?* the researchers found that candidates attributed their under preparation for teaching to pandemic-related shifts, including fewer clinical experiences and remote coursework. In addition, candidates were trying to get the most out of their limited remaining time in college while staying true to their passions. Candidates also grappled with their love of their content major and disrupted entry into the education program during a global pandemic. Ultimately, candidates expressed how their entire college experience was overshadowed by the pandemic, which ultimately impacted their decision

to leave the preparation pipeline. Robert felt completely overwhelmed by his return to campus after 18 months of remote learning from home:

I left when I was 19 [and] I came back [when] I was almost 21, so a big chunk of formative years of my life was just gone...it felt like being a freshman for the first five weeks again a second time. I had to reassimilate into everything. I had to get used to living away from home, I had to get used to the campus, I had to get used to [the city], I had to get used to in-person classes and it was just a lot at once.

While not all candidates had such strong responses to the pandemic's impact, all shed light on the many ways their disrupted education ultimately led them to pause in their pursuit of teaching.

Unprepared to Teach

Each candidate grappled with feelings of unpreparedness for teaching in a classroom. For some, it stemmed from their limited time as an in-person learner in college, and for others, it was fueled by canceled or truncated clinicals. For one senior, lack of teaching opportunities impacted his decision to leave teacher preparation just before the capstone student teaching experience. Matthew's first clinical experience, where he was to deliver two observed lessons and gain feedback, had been truncated and he was unable to complete the two lessons. Matthew expressed, "I sort of felt very not confident about going into a full-time student teaching placement with not really having delivered an in-person lesson before." Matthew's struggle with limited clinical experience resonated across candidates. Dorothy felt extremely apprehensive about the prospect of full-time student teaching. She had hoped for a more gradual experience rather than "I was all of a sudden going to be thrown full-time in the classroom and that was terrifying because I had no experience." As a junior, Cecelia left teacher preparation before beginning her clinical experiences even though she had thought she would be a high school English teacher for as long as she could remember. Cecelia explained how remote learning limited her opportunity to practice preparing to be in the classroom. She explained, "I felt like I don't even know how to interact with these children...we've learned all the things, but I feel like we didn't have it put into practice enough to feel comfortable." While the preparation program faculty reassured that they would begin with observation hours before teaching, candidates still struggled with the anticipation of moving from the role of student to the role of teacher.

Remote Coursework

Remote teacher preparation coursework served as another factor impacting teacher candidates' decisions to leave the pipeline. While candidates acknowledged that it is "not the [college's] fault and [there's] nothing that can be done, the reality of learning to be a teacher online was challenging." Cecelia noted, "I haven't even been in-person, at that point, yet for anything so...here you're going to be an actual teacher [and] I feel like maybe there weren't as many smaller steps." Such concerns were a constant challenge in teacher preparation as institutions and faculty balanced safety protocols and best practices, which led to fewer "smaller steps" into classroom teaching. Kana chose to study as a remote student her entire sophomore year. Upon her return to campus her junior year, she reiterated, "I'm missing out on being in-person and having the actual learning experience." Kana equated real learning with practicing pedagogical strategies in-person.

A common sentiment among candidates was the uncertainty candidates felt after spring 2020 when they were all sent home. This meant candidates failed to experience introductory coursework as a means of determining their "fit" for the profession. This sense of uncertainty

was never resolved as Lynn shared, “COVID definitely did not help...if I was able to finish out that course and I was able to teach my lessons, would I still be more drawn to [teaching]? I still don't have the answer for that.” Candidates acknowledged that maybe they would have left sooner or never left at all had they benefitted from an uninterrupted experience in teacher preparation coursework.

Limited Clinical Experiences

In addition to remote courses, teacher candidates experienced canceled and disrupted clinical experiences in the field across three semesters. Clinical experiences serve to support the gradual transition from student to teacher; without these, teacher candidates were unable to assess their interest or success in the field. During the shutdown semester, teacher candidates were just getting to the point in the semester where they teach lessons in the field. Matthew explained, “I loved learning about all this stuff, but because of COVID, we were sent home before we were even able to give an in-person lesson to our students.” Similarly, Hazel acknowledged how impactful it was to lose the opportunity to teach early in the program: “we stopped doing the in-person student teaching and we had just started with that so I feel like that's a big deal because it's everyone's first in-person [teaching] and then we all just stopped.” Lynn believed that the missed clinicals would have been the time when she would have known how she felt about teaching. She explained how missing clinicals “definitely had an effect because I think that would have been the time to really show myself whether or not I could do it and if I enjoyed it.”

The collective impact of remote coursework and fractured clinicals left teacher candidates with less certainty about their interest or possibility for success in the classroom. For Robert, the pandemic pause meant he struggled with his sense of readiness for teaching: “I did not feel ready for [teaching] coming off the pandemic.” He found assimilating to college after an 18-month period of learning from home to be a real challenge. Robert explained, “I come back to school after not having been there for a year and a half [and] to go out and teach students, I did not feel prepared enough.” Limited and disrupted clinical experience impacted each teacher candidate who ultimately chose to leave the teaching pipeline.

Fear of Missing Out

Half the teacher candidates lamented how much of their college experience was lost because of the pandemic. These feelings intensified when candidates returned to campus, especially those who chose remote learning for one or more semesters. They wrestled with the idea of missing out on more of their college experience due to the demands of clinical work and a semester-long student teaching. Matthew described his view of student teaching as “it's eight hours—7am-4pm—then you get home and it's like all lesson planning...I feel like I'd be missing out on campus life.” Often there was a particular extracurricular experience creating an intense struggle for the candidate. For Monica it was the dance team which she'd been a part of since her first year, but the team had practiced online for three semesters. Once in-person practices began, she grasped the full-time commitment: “after the first month of practice, I realized how big of a commitment it was.” In addition to evening practices, her weekends were spent fundraising for team travel. Student teaching would have been difficult to manage on top of these obligations.

Robert was pulled to balance his time as a member of the cross-country team, knowing he'd only have two years to compete athletically before graduating. He was concerned that he “wouldn't be able to [commit] the energy that I should to the team...I feel like I would be selling

them short if I didn't fully give what I could to the team." When thinking about student teaching his final semester on campus, Robert wondered, "is this practical during my last semester?" Ultimately, Robert chose to give his time and energy to his athletic team.

Cecilia realized that she wanted to have more time to explore the offerings at a liberal arts institution. As a secondary education and English major in the honors program, Cecilia had her tight schedule planned since her first year with no flexibility or exploration outside the core options. As she contemplated leaving the education major, she "saw a new light" with her advisor and thought "I can actually...take these other courses...to explore some other things." Cecilia recognized that she had made her decision to become a teacher long before she entered college or knew what college would be like, so she reflected on how "I don't want to make this big life decision without having enough room to take other classes and explore other options." Cecilia feared that she would miss out on something she didn't even know about if she stayed in the rigid structure of a double major with student teaching. Whether it was extracurriculars or academics, the fear of missing out on more after three COVID-19-affected semesters meant candidates felt they needed more flexibility and more time to explore their interests without the constraints of a teacher preparation program.

Love of Content

The intense love of their content impacted secondary candidates' decision to leave teaching. Candidates expressed a deep passion for the subject matter they planned to teach. Lynn explained, "I really love science. I would want to teach science because I'm a science nerd, and I would just want to share it with everyone." While their love of content was often an initial reason why they considered becoming teachers, this love also became an impetus to push them away from teaching. For Matthew, it was the lack of buy-in and poor behavior from the students in the classrooms, but also the realization that he was more interested in teaching the type of content taught at the college level. He explained, "I was subbing [and I realized] I didn't really want my day to be so focused on dealing with correcting behavior issues rather than actually teaching." Matthew continued:

I was looking at what assignments teachers give their students in high schools and what texts they're reading and what type of books they're reading and I realized...most likely [I'm] never going to be able to [teach what I want] in a high school setting. I realized my own academic interests and my own happiness might be better suited at a college-level position.

Like Matthew, candidates' love for their content pushed them to realize that they wanted to teach on their terms without the confines of state curricula. While initial assumptions might lead to conclusions that the candidate's love of content was outside of the influence of the pandemic, the researchers found a layered effect where candidates' love of content coexisted with their beliefs about being unprepared to teach and fear of missing out; the collective sum was departure from teacher preparation.

Late Entry into the Program

Similar to teacher candidates' love of content, late entry into the program created an additional layer of complexity which, when coupled with the pandemic, led to increased feelings of being overwhelmed and underprepared. Two candidates in the study struggled with the demands of the education program due to late entry. Shifting to a double major halfway through their collegiate experience meant the candidates had to take summer courses or extra courses

during the semester to meet all program requirements. They were also forced to drop minors and the honors program. Like so many of the pandemic-related themes, entering the program late felt overwhelming to the candidates. Monica explained how she felt in her first 300-level course: “I was immediately overwhelmed because we were already starting to do lesson planning and they were using acronyms that I didn’t understand...a lot of my classmates had some [clinical] so I was one of very few people who hadn’t been in the classroom.” From the first day of class, Monica felt less prepared than her classmates due to her late entry. Like Monica, Robert felt his delayed decision to enter the teacher preparation program meant added pressure to complete all the coursework. He noted, “if I declared that major early in freshman year, I would have really felt less stress.” Robert had to figure out how to condense a double major into three semesters, which added both pressure and financial demands to take summer courses he needed to graduate on time. As Robert considered his late entry, he mentioned, “if I had a little bit more time to think about it...I would have been a lot more prepared, but it was a lot on my plate at once and I didn’t feel fully ready for it.” The pandemic meant Robert experienced an immediate onslaught of demands upon his return, which made him reconsider his decision to enter the education program.

Discussion

The pandemic added a layer of complexity which ultimately pushed candidates to make the decision to leave the pipeline—at least for the time being. Many participants were adamant that they would return to education. Some envisioned going into K-12 classrooms, in fact, one has already accepted a position as an assistant teacher, while others aspired to teach in higher education settings. The findings indicate that participants in this study entered and left their teacher preparation programs for many of the same reasons as candidates in any given year. In fact, many might have left even without the pandemic as they experienced many of the same factors the researchers have heard from candidates in past years. These include entering the program late in the undergraduate experience and feeling pressure to fulfill all the requirements for licensure, experiencing an intense love for the content area and wanting to take more coursework in that subject, and facing doubt at realizing the realities of teaching. As Matthew explained, the pandemic added to these considerations:

If you’re looking to see the impacts of COVID on [teacher candidates leaving teacher preparation], I would definitely say that the people who are still passionate about going into education and knowing that this is for them will still do it. I think it was for the people who are maybe 90% sure, but the other 10% were a bit on the fence, it might be something to push them over. I definitely don’t think it helped.

These findings are consistent with sociocultural theory as this study found that the pandemic compounded factors within participants’ various contexts leading them to leave teacher preparation. Tighter COVID restrictions did not lead to more leavers. Neither did the number of uninterrupted semesters of college prior to COVID; the same number of juniors and seniors departed. Seniors were more reflective on the impact of the pandemic on the broader landscape of education (e.g., swift transition to remote learning, enforcing mask mandates), where the juniors focused on their personal educational journeys (e.g., athletics, clubs). The findings also indicate that the pandemic resulted in new barriers, including remote coursework and limited clinical experience, that left candidates feeling unprepared to teach.

This study’s findings mirror research about why individuals enter the field and documents why some leave. Participants spoke to intrinsic motivators of wanting to make a positive

difference in the lives of young people and follow in the footsteps of family members who were teachers, both of which are consistent with research findings on why teachers enter the classroom (Sinclair et al., 2006; Watt et al., 2012; Wilson & Kelley, 2022). As the literature suggests, after the first semester, motivation to teach decreased for several candidates (Sinclair et al., 2006). Part of the decreased motivation certainly had to do with coming to grips with the realities of teaching and the many hats that teachers are tasked to wear, as mentioned by several participants. In addition, the pandemic amplified mental health needs, led many to reevaluate priorities, and made it difficult for students—both K-12 and college students, including the teacher candidates in this study—to focus on their work (Active Minds, 2020). These factors in their sociocultural contexts intersected with one another as well as factors of the pandemic and drove candidates in this study “over the fence.” Several candidates had envisioned becoming a teacher since before they could remember. Even with the pull of long-held beliefs that teaching was their future, candidates struggled to make sense of their path given the pandemic disruptions to their educational journeys that brought into focus doubts about the teaching profession as well as new interests.

Similar to teacher candidates the researchers had advised in the past, some candidates felt pressure to complete their licensure requirements in condensed timeframes and others were eager to take more courses in their content area, which precluded them from completing their education requirements. The pandemic heightened these factors for several participants. Lack of in-person learning at the college, feeling overwhelmed upon return to campus, and a sense of wanting to engage in activities like sports, clubs, and other extracurriculars all had an influence on the desire to complete education coursework requirements. Often, these factors in their sociocultural contexts were layered upon one another.

The pandemic had the greatest impact on clinical experience hours. Limited, truncated, and virtual clinical experiences deterred candidates in the study from continuing in their teacher preparation program. As research has found, clinical experiences prior to student teaching are an important predictor of early career teacher retention (Ingersoll et al., 2014). The results from this study indicate that clinical experiences are also an important predictor of whether teacher candidates remain in their preparation programs. Disrupted and virtual clinical experiences also prevented many teacher candidates from establishing strong relationships with their clinical educators. Given the positive impact clinical educators can have when they model effective practice and provide quality mentoring and coaching (Beck et al., 2020; Ronfeldt, 2021), this, too, may have exacerbated teacher candidates' early departure from the pipeline. In addition, coursework could not be aligned with clinical experiences when hours were canceled or suspended. Courses typically designed around clinical experiences were not always able to integrate new pedagogies in ways that candidates found effective. Collectively, disrupted clinical experiences impacted teacher candidates' confidence and willingness to persevere in the pipeline.

Implications

The results of this study highlight the need for continued research on teacher candidates leaving the pipeline. The researchers have anecdotal evidence that the reasons these eight participants gave for leaving (e.g., pressure to complete licensure requirements, uncertainty about the profession) are common among secondary education teacher candidates from their experience as faculty and academic advisors. Little research has been conducted on why teacher candidates leave their preparation programs. Determining whether these factors are common

could help teacher preparation programs provide needed support that might help keep candidates in the pipeline. Longitudinal studies are also needed to track whether and how those who leave teacher preparation programs return to the pipeline.

Further, continued research on this point in the pipeline could help to determine how factors in sociocultural contexts intersect and interact with one another in ways that assist teacher candidates when faced with challenges. For example, the pandemic has brought to light the important role of mental health in student learning. Further research that explores these intersections could provide helpful insight into how best to support teacher candidates as they are preparing to enter the field.

In terms of implications for practice, the findings underscore previous research on the critical component of clinical experience in teacher candidate development and decision-making related to continuing in their teacher preparation programs and entering the profession. Teacher candidates in this study could not envision themselves as teachers due to a lack of experience in the classroom. Many were uncertain and felt unprepared to enter student teaching because their clinical experiences were abbreviated or canceled. Most had never taught a lesson. The prospect of student teaching and taking over all teacher responsibilities was daunting. Ensuring that teacher candidates have plenty of “small steps,” or clinical experiences in the classroom that allow them to explore and gain confidence in their decision to pursue teaching is needed.

Increased clinical experience hours could provide teacher candidates with opportunities to gain more confidence and help support candidates in cases where they are unable to complete some of those hours. While the pandemic was the major cause for candidates’ missed clinical hours, candidates who declare the major late, experience illness, or study abroad for a semester often are unable to complete all the scheduled clinical hours. Given the findings, both researchers plan to approach their departments about ways to increase the number of hours. Both researchers also know from experience that it is more difficult to teach the content of the coursework when candidates lack clinical experience in the classroom. Candidates in this study noted this as well. When courses with clinical components had to cancel clinical hours, the courses fell flat. Alternatives, like teaching to a group of peers rather than students in a classroom, lacked authenticity, especially for classroom management. The ability to support teacher candidates in reflecting on how theory relates to practice is much more limited when they are not in classrooms. Teacher candidates also have fewer opportunities to reflect on their own developing conceptions of what it means to be a teacher with support from teacher preparation faculty and K-12 practitioners when they have fewer clinical experience hours.

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Appendix A

Introduction

It is critically important to train and retain qualified teachers for K-12 schools. Many are leaving teaching and fewer students are enrolling in teacher preparation programs. With the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on teaching, many are wondering what impact this might have on teacher attrition. This interview is part of a study that seeks to understand why students who initially had an interest in going into K-12 teaching leave their preparation program. Your participation in this interview will provide valuable insight into what might be some factors that could help the profession recruit and retain quality teachers for elementary and secondary schools and the long-term impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic might be having on the profession.

Everything you say in this interview is confidential; I will not share your name or identify you in any reports from the study. If I want to share what you have to say, I may quote you, but I will identify you as, for example, "Participant 1." You may decline to respond to any questions or stop the interview at any time.

This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. I will begin by asking general questions about your background, then move to questions about why you entered the education major and your experiences in those courses, and then ask about why you decided to drop the major.

Do I have your permission to record this interview with you? [Note: If a participant does not wish to be recorded, take notes, but do not proceed with recording. If the participant agrees to be recorded, turn on the recorder and repeat the question so that the positive responses to this question and subsequent responses are recorded.]

Before we start, do you have any questions or concerns about this interview or the study?

Background Information

1. Tell me a bit about why you were interested in going into elementary or secondary education.
 - a. When did you declare your education major?
 - b. Did you think of teaching as a long-term career? Why/why not?
 - c. When did you leave education? What is your major now?

Experiences in Education Courses

2. What courses did you take when you were in the education major?
3. What were your experiences like in your education major?
 - a. What did you think of the content of the courses?
 - b. What did you think of the rigor of the courses?
 - c. What did you think about the other students in your courses?
 - d. What grades did you receive in these courses?
 - e. How did your education courses compare to other courses that you were taking? (Which did you prefer more? Which were more rigorous?)
4. Did you have clinical experiences while you were in the program?
 - a. If so:
 - i. Tell me about those experiences: where were you placed, how many hours did you complete, did you have to complete any assignments in your placement?
 - ii. What was it like working with your clinical/cooperating teacher? What was it like working with students?
 - iii. Were there any changes that had to be made to your clinical experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic? Did you do a remote placement?
 - b. If not:
 - i. Why not?
 - ii. Were you hoping to have a clinical placement?

Decision to Leave the Major

5. When did you start thinking that you were going to drop the education major?
6. Why were you thinking that you wanted to drop the education major?

- a. Did the COVID-19 pandemic have an impact at all on your decision? If so, how so?
- b. What pushed you to leave the major?
7. Did you have any concerns about going into K-12 teaching?
8. Are you still planning to go into K-12 teaching?
 - a. If so, what is your plan to get licensure?
 - b. If not, what career path are you pursuing now?
9. What is your new major?
 - a. What made you decide to pursue that major?
 - b. Have you already taken courses in your new major?
 - i. If so, how do they compare to your education courses?
10. What are your career plans after graduation?

Conclusion

11. Overall, what are your thoughts about leaving the education major?
12. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is important for me to know?

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