

## Impact of COVID-19 on Educator Preparation

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A pandemic of this proportion shutting down the world as we know it and creating a “new normal” is a concept that had only been seen in Hollywood blockbusters for our generation. However, with the insurgence of COVID-19, the world as we knew it halted and uncertainties across all aspects of life took place. COVID-19 has created serious challenges for Pre K-12 schools and communities that may permanently change the way educational services are provided and have forced in a very short amount of time for our school districts to completely reconceptualize how educational services were administered. In a similar manner, Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) at the university level were forced to make drastic, immediate changes for preparing teacher candidates that could continue for months and even years to come. At Missouri State University, all administrators and faculty responsible for EPPs worked collaboratively to plan instructional revisions essential to maintain quality of programming; yet enhance safety and accessibility for the students and educator candidates engaged in academic and field-based coursework. Below is an example of the steps that Missouri State University took to ensure that teacher candidates were given an opportunity to continue to grow and develop as educators while being sensitive to the additional stressors and factors which have impacted us all. These are just some of the measures being taken by one institution to ensure quality educators enter the field, however each university has made dramatic changes to support the current crisis mode.

The first step that was taken was that students were given an extra week of Spring Break to provide faculty time to revise coursework and students to adjust to any more pressing

matters in their lives. Even online courses were required to redesign the remainder of the semester to accommodate the students' transition to alternative housing and access to technology considering that campus computer labs and on-campus high speed internet would not be available for students. Most students would flee from the dorms to the safety of their homes to self-quarantine. To be fair, the transition to online instruction was not entirely new to students or the university. Missouri State University has been using Blackboard and Zoom programming for several years; thus, adapting to distance instruction was facilitated by existing services and accounts that were already in place. However, a transition this large or for this many applied courses was unprecedented. Faculty scrambled to make changes to assignments, projects, and instructional content and to enhance distance education options with the knowledge that internet connectivity for student would be significantly variable, from no access except through a hot spot, cell phone or sitting outside a local business, dial-up, to the convenience of high-speed connectivity. Planned face-to-face presentations and discussions had to be replaced by Zoom sessions or recorded presentations embedded with video and/or audio feeds. Applied projects were redesigned to allow students to complete them through teleconferencing or Zoom format. Yet, the redesign required more than formatting of presentations and assignment completion. In EPPs, many courses include applied projects implemented in the field with children and adolescents in schools or related settings, hinged on the vital relationship which exists between educator and student, or mentor and mentee. Thus, the most daunting challenge faced by EPP faculty involved the PreK-12 school closures that resulted in the loss of applied settings in which students practice and refine their skills to

become solid educators entering the field. So the question asked by all is “Where do we go from here?”

EPPs looked to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for guidance regarding the field experience requirements linked to educator certification. How can we certify students if they do not meet the minimal requirements? EPPs advocated that students should not be disadvantaged because of this crisis compounding the already looming teacher shortages. Practicum and Student Teaching courses include designations of contact hours and/or specific number of weeks in the field that are essential to assuring the educator candidates are fully prepared for their future responsibilities. EPPs worked tirelessly and advocated to state officials to give our students options. While DESE made revisions and adaptations to requirements whenever possible, they did uphold minimal mandated contact hours and numbers of weeks in the field for teacher, counselor, and school administrator candidates. Thus, EPPs were met with a conundrum and began working directly with educators in the PreK-12 schools to design procedures that would meet the state-mandated field placement requirements; yet, first and foremost retain the safety and health of the university students in those placements even before the school districts and state officials announced the cancellation of school for the remainder of the 2020 academic year.

Student teachers faced the requirement of a minimum of 12 weeks in the field, which traditionally is conducted on-site at a Pre K-12 school. Due to COVID-19 shelter-at-home orders and school closures, the traditional site-based options no longer existed; thus, student teachers were given two options: complete student teaching at a later date when schools reopened, or participate in the provision of PreK-12 educational services via distance means under the

supervision of their current cooperating teachers (CTs) and school district administrators. At Missouri State University, 100% of the preservice teacher candidates chose to assist in the provision of distance education with the supervision and support of their current CTs and district administrators. We as a university have students that are excited to be in this field, and are reading to make, as our logo implies, their “MISSOURI STATEment”. Special education student teachers did not hesitate to continue working with the educators and PreK-12 students from their placements. They knew the challenges that their classrooms, with their cooperating teachers, and their students were going to face and they wanted to help. They wanted to step in and support the restructure. To continue on the path that they had started even though it was going to be non-traditional. Pre-service educators responded to inquiries about their plans with comments such as this reply from a special education student teacher, “Since this whole thing has shut down the schools, I’ve been completing and assisting in writing IEPs, notice of meetings, and drafting up emails to parents with updates on what is going in with our district. I plan on continuing to work with my cooperating teacher (CT) and university supervisor until the end of my student teaching experience.” This student has continued with similar experiences to the ones that would have been had in the classroom. They are helping with one aspect that no one saw coming and has become one of the most time consuming, IEP revisions and modifications in addition to the already burdensome paperwork.

However, in addition to the requirement of assigned weeks and contact hours at the student teaching and field placement sites, it was important to be sure the student teachers were engaged in meaningful work. As EPPs, and for our student teachers, we wanted to ensure that they were getting a valuable experience that was going to prepare them for the reality of

being an educator and give them the tools to be successful. Responses by student teachers indicated significant professional development opportunities were being provided by the CTs and school districts. Examples of these opportunities were reflected by replies such as this comment by a special education student teacher, “Last week we collaborated with the district Autism Instructional Coach on a student who is transitioning from the early childhood center in our district to create his goals from his VBMAPP scores, and then (my CT) talked me through how she would test these skills in the classroom and make the data sheets. Then they set me loose with another student and I got to do the whole process on my own which I found extremely rewarding. We then collaborated again this week and went over everything I had done for the student she assigned me. Getting to watch her and have her walk me through the thought process taught me so much and allowed me to understand the ‘whys’ better.”

Another response by a special education student teacher indicated she was provided with significant educational technology experience as she commented, “In response to COVID-19, I’ve been helping my CT revamp her curriculum! Likewise, I’ve really been an asset to her in terms of technology. I do (a lot) of the planning for our English Language Arts lessons throughout the week. We’ve thankfully been able to find some differentiated reading programs that allow us to track the type of comprehension questions asked and standards assessed during those quizzes. A lot of my planning has involved making the lessons engaging to the students, easily applicable for the parents, and curriculum-based and goal trackable for us teachers! It’s been a tight balancing act and it’s been tough. We’ve hosted weekly meetings with our paraprofessionals in regard to planning and what we’re aiming for.” These skills that these students are learning are valuable and are sure to enhance their abilities as educators

within the field, to think differently, to engage more, and to always be prepared for the unexpected.

Major revisions required of Pre K-12 educators have been a significant challenge and continuing to mentor preservice teachers could be considered an added burden. Yet CTs overwhelmingly opted to retain their student teachers and work with them during the shutdown, seeing their student teachers as a key asset during the transition, and learning alongside each other. As EPP faculty reached out to student teachers regarding their situations and their progress, student teachers have responded with appreciation for their CTs and school districts, such as this student's comment, "During my student teaching time, I have been meeting weekly with my cooperating teacher and zooming with her to discuss all the tips and tricks to get ready for teaching next school year. She asked me to compile a list of questions and topics prior to spring break that I felt I wanted to learn more about and focus on during our time apart. This has been an INCREDIBLE opportunity for me, and I have learned so much from her." The opportunities for growth and development have been endless and outside of the traditional format but have expanded student understanding of what it means to engage your classroom, to show your classroom that you care, and to connect with families like never before.

While the student teaching experience was clearly impacted by the school closures due to COVID-19, in some ways it was less of a detriment to those preservice teacher field placements than the impact upon other field practicum courses. Most pre-student teaching field placements do not begin during the first weeks of the semester, as they require some initial academic preparation, and they typically are expected to be spread out across a limited

number of hours per week and multiple weeks across the semester. For many practicum courses, field placements may have just begun when COVID-19 school closures began, and many students may not have reached the minimum requirements of content hours needed for the DESE and/or the program guidelines. Furthermore, those preservice teachers may not have engaged in enough hours at the school site to effectively support their CTs in the field at this time. Thus, programs have had to consider options such as continuing field placement hours in a later semester (i.e., summer school or Fall semester) or providing opportunities to participate in collaborative Zoom sessions with CTs in the field. For those field placements that do not have a minimum number of content hours, but have competencies that must be met, faculty are providing alternative projects that incorporate the use of online modules, case examples, or even opportunities to practice assessing and teaching their classmates via Zoom sessions.

As EPPs look to the future, just as Pre K-12 schools are preparing to allow education to continue despite potential future school closures due to health or weather-related events, higher education faculty members are creating similar contingencies. At MSU, every faculty member has been asked to complete a Risk Management/Mitigation Assessment to address the potential need to provide coursework from a distance or utilize mitigation procedures in face-to-face classes. While MSU does offer a significant number of online courses that do not require students to come to campus, most undergraduate programs are not designed to be distant education programs as many traditional students prefer to take courses with face-to-face interaction. Thus, planning for the future must address the interests of those students who do not wish to complete an asynchronous, noninteractive program of study as well as those who may be unable or unwilling to come to a university campus to receive

instruction. Procedures for increasing the classroom size in comparison to student enrollment are being developed to allow space between students. Faculty and staff are considering the use of gloves and masks, including transparent masks that allow for persons with deafness/hard of hearing to see the speaker, to reduce the risks inherent in seated classes. Furthermore, the innovations being incorporated into Spring 2020 coursework due to COVID-19 are providing the groundwork for future revisions that will replace previous methods or as “fallback” options should future shutdowns occur.

At MSU, every faculty member has been asked to develop plans and course options that allow for online or distant educational access. Every course must be ready for implementation via platforms such as Blackboard, Zoom, or other online systems. Additionally, all materials must be adaptable and accessible for students with limited internet access and technology options, including some who will not have strong wifi capabilities or who will be using only cellphones or tablets, rather than computer stations at the university. Exams must be developed that can be administered via online resources, so future online examinations may incorporate such technology as Lockdown Browser to restrict access to internet while taking that exam. Instructional materials that are checked out to students must be protected from contamination; thus materials such as assessment kits that students check-out to practice diagnostic procedures may come with guidelines for implementation such as wearing gloves and masks while working with the kits, returning them individually in large ziplock bags for sterilization between student checkouts, and delays between checkouts to allow time for contaminants to be reduced before the next use. The University must also be prepared to provide those gloves, masks, and sterilization materials to the students engaged in this work.

Field placements continue to be a concern as faculty plan to meet the needs of Fall 2020 and beyond. Rather than waiting for field placements to be spread out across a semester, faculty are considering front-loading placement hours and experiences to complete those competencies and contact hours before seasonal influenza and future COVID-19 outbreaks may occur. Applied projects that involve administration of assessments to sample examinees, instruction of lesson plans to children in schools, or applied classroom management approaches in a school or agency may need to be the initial emphasis early in the semester to allow completion of the projects prior to potential interruption of school operations. While it may seem to be a simple task to assign students to a school early in the semester, in fact it often requires a complete redesign of the course as content that must be taught prior to the time in the field may need to be reorganized with priority information condensed or presented in a highly efficient manner. EPPs will begin contacting Pre K-12 school administrators as soon as possible in May - June 2020 to establish field placement plans, rather than waiting for Fall 2020 to arrive; thus, allowing immediate placement of students in school sites early in the fall semester. Identifying and obtaining technology needed to address revised methods of instruction and field-based competencies will be completed during Summer 2020, which will now be a time of redesign, planning, and preparation by EPPs as they consider what may lie ahead in Academic Year 2020-21.

Beyond any of the logistical supports that are required for students to be successful in coursework in both traditional and non-traditional supports there are also health and well-being concerns. There are students that without university housing would be homeless, food insecure, going back into homes with years of abuse or neglect. There were students

whose primary source of income was terminated from the loss of a job, or a spouse's job. There were students who became primary educators in their own household to their own students while trying to learn to be an educator themselves. The university has banded together to make emergency funds available to students, suspending the university's funding campaign to focus on a student funding campaign. To create food banks and to ensure that every faculty member reached out to every student to see how they were doing mentally and physically and find out what as a university we could do to support them. To purchase hot spots for students that did not have internet connectivity so they could continue their students. Even to create a new grading system to ensure that if students had to focus on other priorities outside of school that they would have options instead of dropping out or failing.

None of us are certain about what Academic Year 2020-21 will bring in terms of delivery of coursework, Pre K-12 school operations, and preservice teacher willingness to return to their current academic programs and universities. However, it is certain that innovation, creativity, collaboration, and technology will be highly prized elements of academic programming. Supporting these students in not only their coursework and educator preparation but ensuring that they are healthy and well in every aspect of their life. If nothing else, our community of educators has been brought closer together even though we are far apart. And we know that the lessons learned in Spring 2020 will be valuable as all educators prepare for the future beyond COVID-19.