

Lessons from Pandemic Teacher Candidate Supervision

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has taught supervisors of teacher candidates some critical lessons. From our time in quarantine, surfaced the disquisition of a focus on personal and professional work-life balance, creative problem solving in the home, and K–12 teacher candidate supervision. The necessity for self-care during the pandemic and in educators' professional lives was highlighted when a death in my family and an injury brought into question the new not-so-normal. These changes have been focused on virtual pedagogy, which has been lighting the path to credential completion alongside professional and personal encouragement. The dispatch going forward is for supervisors and teacher candidates to use communication to find joy and efficiency in their lives while maintaining a heightened level of listening and care for ourselves and others.

Introduction

The email from the university read that class attendance was optional for the week of March 9–13, 2020. Although I thought the idea of university-wide tolerance for absenteeism to be peculiar, I stayed calm and carried on. Soon after, we were notified of a pause in instruction and university affairs. This also seemed unusual since the word “pause” is

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typically applied to something that you are watching and not the life that you are living. Quarantine and stay-at-home orders statewide sounded the alarm that real life was about to become like media streaming, or like *Groundhog Day* in particular. Days in quarantine became strangely repetitive, with the position of the sun telling us what time of day we were living in. Some things that did not repeat themselves were the unique faces and experiences of my teacher candidates. Challenging at best, each day I was privileged to support and guide teacher candidates professionally while being privy to their own stories personally. Throughout the stay-at-home order, supervision of teacher candidates morphed into the search for a new professional-personal life balance, heartening Zoom meetings, and enhanced self-care.

Disquisition

A New Professional-Personal Life Balance

As my university went on pause due to Covid-19 stay-at-home orders, my home front went full steam ahead. My college daughter returned with a truckload of belongings. My high school son wrestled with the idea that his senior year was over—never to be experienced again. While my husband, a 29-year veteran of face-to-face instruction, began the slippery slope of online teaching. The immediacy of the shifts in our physical and cognitive realities was astounding. Many days found us all in different rooms simultaneously engaged in Zoom meetings: my husband and I providing instruction, and my daughter and son receiving instruction. The challenge was to strike a balance between work and personal life within the same space, although each of us were using it for a myriad of connections.

In family meetings, we looked at our temperaments along with our personal and professional needs. Then, we discussed what were “must haves” for each person and creatively problem solved to meet those needs as a family community. Just like in episodes of *House Hunters*, the kitchen and bathroom schedules were in most need of a remodel. My daughter tended to be a slow riser, and my son was famished after morning workouts, so we decided that they could have the kitchen to themselves in the morning. This meant that my husband and I awoke early to hear the drip of the coffee maker and the smell of sizzling hash browns. We coordinated our bathroom times around the rhythms of each other’s days like Axel, Sue, and Brick in *The Middle*. My husband reduced our car insurance to use our resources most judiciously, and I committed to gardening projects to best utilize our outdoor space. We all agreed to update our door message boards to alert others of ongoing Zoom meetings.

Family meetings mirrored my teacher candidate supervision meetings in which we discussed the highs and lows of each teacher candidate's learning community and their many struggles with the shift to virtual schooling. One neglected byproduct of the almost universal shift to online instruction was the heightened role that parents played in supporting their children's learning. For example, the family community of one of my teacher candidates was working on the healthcare pandemic front-line. This resulted in students being cared for not by their parents (a one-generation digital divide), but by grandparents who likely grew up without the internet (a two-generation digital divide). Thus, the digital divide widened even further—not just geographically from school to home, but also generationally—for some students. Grandparents in these cases navigated internet stability, Zoom, Pear Deck, and Padlit. Undeterred, the teacher candidate rallied, stretching to greater lengths to reach her students by creating user-friendly technology tutorials that equipped caring grandparents to support their grandchildren's academic growth.

Another teacher candidate's administration set boundaries such that only the teacher of record, or the "Cooperating Teacher," could provide content instruction. Together, the teacher candidate and I brainstormed ways to be a part of the class while not delivering curriculum. Ideas surfaced like reading chapter books to the students with accompanying handouts and being available for "office hours" for student/parent questions. Teacher candidates researched learning applications, demonstrating to Cooperating Teachers how technology could increase engagement in virtual instruction. Teacher candidates also created age- and content-appropriate exemplars of Screencast-O-Matic, Kahoot, and Google Classroom. This enabled the Cooperating Teacher to maximize the time and resourcefulness of the teacher candidate while still following administrative directives. An important lesson that I learned was that meeting as a community to dialogue about expectations and changing needs appeared to benefit the teacher candidate as much as it benefited my family.

***Zoom Meeting Ingredients:
Listening Ear, Pedagogical Instruction, and Encouragement***

My own reality afforded me an understanding of my teacher candidate's experiences and brought to light the importance of being fully present in each of our Zoom meetings, providing relevant online pedagogical support, and being an ongoing source of encouragement. In anticipation of our meetings, I sent the Zoom link and password to teacher candidates days before each meeting. During the meeting, the

summary of the previous meeting, as well as a pre-organized outline with embedded due dates and credential program requirements, were reviewed via the Zoom screen share function. Prior preparation for Zoom meetings meant that I could focus on attending to my teacher candidates' well-being during our online time together.

Implementing relevant pedagogy translated into learning relevant technology. Assigning teacher candidates to review at least one instructional application or website for each of our meetings became normative so that they could generalize their training in face-to-face student engagement and instructional delivery to the new format—virtual. Teacher candidates were also asked to familiarize themselves with navigating each new application, gauging its grade level appropriateness, and using it in their virtual instruction. This made the teacher candidates' instruction more accessible to K–12 students while also making them potentially more marketable to post-Covid-19 principals.

Prior to Covid-19, teacher candidates regularly commented on the uplifting quality of my supervision, and during the pandemic, I found myself digging even deeper to encourage them. At times, this was difficult because my emotional reserves were tapped, and our pedagogical Zoom conversations transitioned rapidly to a review of the latest credentialing communication, with their hopes and dreams hanging in the balance. Most teacher candidates had enrolled in the credentialing program anticipating full-time teacher employment in Fall 2020. Their professional aspirations were matched with personal aims, including weddings, births, and family financial obligations. We discussed post-Covid-19 employment options juxtaposed with completing the state-required Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA), and I attempted to relieve their fears by encouraging them to stay focused on their students and skill development. I celebrated their small successes (e.g., assignment submissions, completion of TPA requirements, or success with a new app) enthusiastically, while keeping them on a steady path to program completion. I learned to be flexible to their needs and the medium of instruction, while still communicating the long-term vision of a viable teaching career.

Necessity for Self-Care

I have a propensity for movement when times get challenging. Daniels and Piechowski (2009) suggest that people who are academically high performing are prone to one of five “overexcitabilities”: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional. Overexcitability is defined as an innate tendency to respond in an identified manner to

various forms of stimuli, both external and internal (Piechowski, 1999). I have a psychomotor propensity. This means that the psyche reaches its healthiest state when movement and metacognition are simultaneous. Different movements resonate with different people. Some prefer a car ride, a long run, or a bike ride down a steep hill. The movement tends to loosen the spring within the heart and soul, which sparks creativity and constructive metacognition. Running has long been my psychomotor refuge. However, in mid-April, when I sprained my ankle, I was faced with a new “not-so-normal.” Looking at the Mayo Clinic’s online descriptions of ankle sprains, my daughter diagnosed, “Let’s see... Swollen to the size of a grapefruit?... Yep! Displays all the colors of rainbow?... Yep! It’s severe!” Once the purple and blue had reached its fullest hue, my husband exclaimed, “Yah, that’s a doozy. Haven’t seen one that bad for a long time.” My son, ever enthusiastic, chimed in, “Wow! I have never seen that combination of blue, purple, yellow, and red before. You know, like, on a person.” Running on my rainbow of an ankle was not going to work, so I sought out other forms of movement.

Most inspiring and calming were our nightly family walks. Slow and short at first, they got longer as the swelling and discoloration faded. Throughout the late California winter, my family and I bundled up with umbrellas in hand and walked the empty, silent streets in the evenings. Many days we had been in individual Zoom meetings for hours, and this walk afforded us a time to share our frustrations and triumphs. Whereas pre-Covid-19 we were in separate work/life spaces, the experience of Covid-19 Zoom conferencing had united us. My children lent their expertise with technology, while my husband and I lent our listening ears to their sorrow at the loss of high school and collegiate experiences—each passing weekend a reminder of what “could have been.”

When my parent died unexpectedly in early May 2020, I was immobilized with grief and heartache. The psychomotor in me shut down. The added anguish was a paralyzing appendage in the pandemic reality. With no funeral permitted, the burial was my only cathartic milestone. The day of the burial, my son commented on the strange, concurrent alter-realities of death in a worldwide pandemic: our normal life reality; stay-at-home order reality; and the silent, 6-feet apart, cemetery reality. In Rachel Carson’s book *The Sense of Wonder*, she comments, “Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts... There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter” (p. 41). Daily car rides to the mountains to gorge on winter’s robust waterfalls, lively streams, green forests, and rocky hillsides were restorative. The car rides up the mountain attended to the

psychomotor in me, and the vibrant beauty of the Southern Californian early spring lifted my soul to make it one more day. “Tomorrow is a new day” never had more meaning. The important lessons of the necessity of self-care and flexibility, not just in times of a worldwide pandemic, but also in the pandemonium of K–12 school life, came into full view. Even when the new normal is not normal, finding a space and activities that manage the unique makeup of who we are as people and as educators is paramount to the well-being of our families and students.

Dispatch

Pandemic life cast a spotlight on the importance of treasuring the measured happiness of quarantine life, the power of harnessing our voice for good, and the necessity of physical and emotional care. It prompted creative solutions and held us accountable to change through our shared space with loved ones.

Our personal lives were thoroughly vetted with only what brought us joy and efficiency as we survived to balance out our teaching. Marie Kondo (2020) has referred to joy and efficiency as a *tidy heaven* in her tidying crusade. One approach for supervisors could be not only to ask what a tidy heaven is for each of us, but for our teacher candidates as well. Informing ourselves of the elements of the teacher candidate’s tidy heaven and building Zoom meetings around these specific preferences would result in more constructive virtual meetings. For example, scheduling meeting times to accommodate teacher candidates caring for children or elderly parents meets the needs of their unique life circumstances. Another example is providing clear communication of expectations in multiple learning modalities. Where assignments are concerned, writing out the instructions in steps allows teacher candidates to move through new procedures in a sequential fashion. Also, including links to tutorials and examples of completed assignments provides meaningful instruction in visual, musical, and auditory learning modalities. For instance, discussing the article *Face-to-Face vs. Online Instruction* (State University New York, 2020) in which the qualities of the two learning formats are compared, teacher candidate reflections can center on their specific learning preferences and what these preferences might look like in the virtual academic format. In these ways, the teacher candidate and supervisor can co-create and customize their virtual instruction.

Using our strengths to understand the socioemotional makeup of teacher candidates not only builds rapport; it also opens a window into identifying a viable and effective language of encouragement. Supervisors serve as connections between the teacher candidates’ academic/theoretical

worlds and the practical/virtual classroom. As in the way that professors occupy their roles in meeting students' emotional needs, so too do supervisors become more important as they occupy the primary or sole point of higher education contact for many teacher candidates (Field, 2020). Amplifying pedagogical supervision to include encouragement and support for the long road to credential completion not only supports teacher candidates but also serves to model these practices for their use with future students. A careful look at the impact of supervisors' reflective and listening strategies may prove valuable. Roth (2020) suggests starting with open-ended reflective questions for the teacher candidates, which "gives them time to discuss how they are maneuvering" pandemic student teaching (p. 19). Then, affording teacher candidates a measure of patience as they formulate their responses and ground their ideas in theory can yield meaningful results for K–12 students. Additionally, providing teacher candidates with a space to offer anonymous feedback may generate reflection on the part of both the teacher candidate and the supervisor. For example, the Start-Stop-Continue strategy can afford teacher candidates the opportunity to provide focused answers to focused questions (i.e., what the supervisor should start doing, what the supervisor should stop doing, and what the supervisor should continue doing). Once the responses are analyzed, a review of what the supervisor is willing to stop and start doing with the teacher candidate can open the door to concrete actions that strengthen the teacher candidate–supervisor rapport (Boston University, n.d.). This feedback can be created in Zoom Polls, Google Forms, or Poll Everywhere depending on the length and type desired by the supervisor.

It is incumbent upon educators who care for others to care for themselves as well. Self-care that motivates us to indulge in our passions in the short term and to plan bucket lists for the long term builds resilient reserves of hope for our educational future. Modeling to teacher candidates how we sustain our enthusiasm for educating in complicated times and demonstrating our resiliency to changes in the educational landscape can inspire teacher candidates to do the same. One specific approach could be to begin Zoom meetings with a Pear Deck emotional barometer check-in slide. Teacher candidates could mark on the barometer (somewhere between confident/strong and holding on/struggling) how they are feeling, which could lead to a discussion of their emotional well-being in a non-threatening manner. This could open the door to greater transparency on the part of the teacher candidate and greater empathy on the part of the supervisor.

The article *How to Measure Resilience with These 8 Resilience Scales* from Positive Psychology offers important information about the nature

and measurement of resiliency. For example, in having candidates read about and discuss the 10 components of resiliency (i.e., optimism, altruism, moral compass, faith and spirituality, humor, role modeling, social support, facing fear, finding meaning or purpose in life, and training), a supervisor and teacher candidate could determine one to two components to strengthen professionally throughout the term. A follow-up activity of completing one of the eight resiliency assessments would provide results that could serve as a foundation for cultivating professional resiliency. A reflective discussion on cultivating resiliency as educators, based on teacher candidate feedback, could bear fruit for the longevity of a new teacher's career.

Conclusion

The pandemic prompted a new professional-personal balance driving me to work collaboratively to find solutions and cultivate effective, caring communication. The recipe for work meetings included navigating Zoom, listening like never before, and offering a potent dose of encouragement. Self-care took center stage in smaller, more confined spaces. Going forward, supervision of teacher candidates will look different, but with intention, we can maintain the same reflective and pedagogical touch. Building upon our virtual strides in communication, pedagogical technology, and self-care can create a strong teacher candidate–supervisor rapport. Maintaining our focus and energy on these qualities of pandemic life and teacher supervision will truly cultivate professionalism and resiliency in ourselves and the future teachers we supervise.

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