

Chapter 10

Early Childhood Preservice Teachers' Transactional Experience During Emergency Online Clinical Practice

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ABSTRACT

School closings and transition to online remote education in pre-k to 12-grade schools that the teacher education programs partner with created a necessity to be innovative in supervising clinical practice students. This study aimed to understand the experiences of early childhood preservice teachers during emergency online clinical practice and remote supervision. Moore's transactional distance theory for online learning was adopted as a theoretical framework. The results demonstrated that the student teachers gradually gained autonomy with the support of their mentor teachers and supervisors. The structure of the online environment limited the dialogue between the student teacher and the supervisor, the student teacher, and the learners in the clinical practice classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Clinical practice (CP) experience or teaching internship allows teacher candidates to observe how the content they learn in teacher preparation courses translates into practice and to create their professional identities in natural classroom environments

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-1806-5.ch010

(Rodgers et al., 2018). The quality of the guidance that teacher candidates receive from the teacher training program at their university and their mentor teachers during internship significantly affects the degree of success to which they will complete their field study. Candidates often receive this guidance through face-to-face feedback, in-class observations, and during in-person seminars. Until COVID-19 school closures, nearly every teacher education program implemented this traditional field-work structure. With the transition to emergency online education, teacher education programs had to invent ways to adapt clinical practice or internship requirements to the circumstances surrounding schools at every level. The early childhood teacher education program and the institution where this study was conducted are in a region with one of the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, almost a million between January 2020 and September 2021 in the U.S. (NJ COVID-19 Info Hub, 2024). The program candidates were placed in virtual clinical practice classrooms from Spring 2020 to the end of Spring 2021 because the clinical practice sites and the institution stayed in emergency online education during this period. Supervising early childhood preservice teachers in online student teaching for three consecutive semesters was a unique situation for the program faculty. Because of the lack of prior research on emergency online early childhood education student teaching, the author of this chapter, the faculty supervisor, sought to understand this phenomenon from the student-teacher perspective. The current study aims to discern the transactional experience a group of early childhood education (ECE) preservice teachers went through during emergency online CP and supervision.

Literature Review

Student teaching is a time for every preservice teacher to truly hone into practicing and perfecting their teaching skills, learn the conventions of a natural school environment, develop collaborations with fellow teachers and mentors, and see the product of their work in student outcomes. Such time can significantly transform student teachers' perceptions about learners, teacher image, and how teaching should be in a real-life classroom. Research literature significantly contributed to understanding the value of field experience and student teaching regarding preservice teachers' development and transition to professional life (Couse & Recchia, 2016; Lin & Jones, 2020). What we did not know as the teacher education community was the supervision of student teachers as the school closing related to the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. The following section examines the existing research literature on alternative methods of student teaching, challenges of online practicum, and relationships built in student teaching. It articulates how the current study can contribute to early childhood teacher education.

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