

**A Phenomenological View of the Effects of COVID-19 on Student Teachers**

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### Introduction/Theoretical Framework

It has been well documented that the student teaching process is critical for the development of school-based agricultural education teachers (Harlin et al., 2002). Smalley et al. (2015) found that cooperating teachers perceived evaluation of student performance, teaching, FFA, planning instruction, SAE, teaching profession, and school-community relations activities as very relevant to the student teaching process. However, what happens when the student teaching experience gets cut short, preventing preservice teachers from gaining the full experience in these areas? On March 19, 2020, the governor of Texas issued an executive order closing all public schools due to concerns of the spread of the pandemic, COVID-19 (Abbott, 2020). This effectively ended the student teaching experience for preservice teachers at Texas Tech University. With similar actions happening across the nation, what are the effects on the spring 2020 student teaching cohort? The need to answer this question prompted action for this study.

We know the student teaching process is important for developing self-efficacy in preservice teachers (McKim & Velez, 2017). Roberts et al. (2006) found that student teacher self-efficacy starts fairly high at the beginning of the experience, drops to the lowest point in the middle of the experience, and finally peaks at the highest point at the end of student teaching. Sorensen et al. (2018) found that student teachers just begin to shift from thinking about teaching from a student standpoint to a teacher standpoint by week seven during the student teaching experience. This study examines the student teaching process through the lens of the theory of teacher concerns. Fuller and Brown (1975) posited that teachers experience concerns in the three developmental stages of self, task, and impact. Student teachers would normally experience self-concerns and start to experience task concerns by the middle of their student teaching experience. Is this so when student teaching is halted because of a pandemic? The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of COVID-19 on student teachers through the lens of the theory of teacher concerns. Findings from this study could have implications for teacher preparation programs on how to handle future problems that prevent student teachers from gaining full experience.

### Methods

To address the purpose of this study, a phenomenological investigation was conducted. A phenomenology describes meaning for several individuals of lived experiences in a phenomenon and reduces meaning to a description of the universal essence (Creswell, 2012). Five students from the spring 2020 student teaching cohort (Emma, Megan, Kelley, Kristin, and Jennifer) were selected as participants because they all experienced the phenomenon of COVID-19 and had to end their student teaching experiences at week 10 of 17. Data were collected through required written weekly reflections and a semi-structured end of semester group interview over Zoom. We took notes and recorded the interview that was later compared to participant written reflections to improve trustworthiness and credibility. Themes were identified first by researchers individually coding, then all researchers meeting to compare codes and reduce to common themes. As suggested by Creswell (2012), bracketing was used to reduce researcher bias in the data analysis process. We used reflexive journals to record our biases toward the study and bracket out our own beliefs and focus solely on participant experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

The first theme that emerged from this study was that the student teachers had empathy for their students. This is exhibited best when the Houston Livestock Show was cancelled, and Emma said:

The toughest part was one of the seniors was helping us load the trailer because she had taken the day off to travel to Houston with us and after we told her the show was cancelled, it looked like someone had just ran over her dog. This feeling pretty much stuck around the rest of the week.

Empathy was also exhibited when Jennifer said in respect to the cancellations of the Houston Livestock Show, “This broke my heart for not only my kids but every kid that would be going or was already there.”

The second theme that emerged from the data was disappointment in ending the student teaching experience early. Megan said it best with “Thursday was the bombshell day. This morning we received our email about student teaching termination of experiences. A lot has changed from this virus spreading, but never did I think it would get to this.” This was echoed when Jennifer wrote “Today I got the news that my student teaching experience was over. This was very heartbreaking because there was so much I was looking forward to. I lost my motivation to do work, so I took a day off from it.”

The final theme identified was worry that student teachers did not learn enough during the process with possible negative effects on job prospects. Megan expressed concern during the interview by stating “I’m worried I won’t be able to get a job because my certification exam got cancelled and I won’t have full teaching certification.” Kelley voiced that “I didn’t get to see if I was good at training CDE teams,” while Kristin echoed these feeling by saying “I feel like my binder full of stuff to teach in a real job is missing stuff.”

## Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The themes identified in this study show student teachers at Texas Tech University were sad for their students while at the same time disappointed in their own situation. Reflection revealed the group believed they might be less prepared for a job because of the short student teaching experience. When examining these findings through the lens of Fuller and Brown’s (1975) theory of teacher concerns, it can be inferred that student teachers showed signs of thinking in the impact stage while showing concern for their students. This usually does not happen during student teaching, but rather in the first years of teaching. They also revert back to the self-concerns stage at the end of student teaching when they are worried about shortened experience effects on getting a job. The life altering experience of COVID-19 seems to have changed the order and timing of teacher concerns in student teachers and also had a negative effect on their self-efficacy. We recommend that teacher preparation programs develop a plan to provide professional development for first year teachers to help with this issue as soon as possible. Further research should be conducted to determine how teacher preparation programs can help student teachers that experienced a traumatic event during student teaching. A longitudinal study of this cohort across the nation should be conducted to determine impacts on job placement and retention in the profession.

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