COVID-19: Teacher Interns' Perspectives of an Unprecedented Year

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Abstract

During COVID-19, digital learning took on an unprecedented central focus in K-12 education. This study applied photovoice qualitative methodology to record and understand the lives and reality for teacher interns as they adapted to abrupt changes in the way they designed and delivered instruction while living homebound during a pandemic. Teacher interns shared their stories of transitioning to virtual or distance learning. Participants (n = 97) were a demographically and culturally diverse group of K-12 public school teacher interns from California. The findings from this study illuminate the need for U.S. public K-12 schools to develop specific professional development training to support teachers when unforeseen events may cause the physical closure of their schools. The implications of this study highlight a shift in the mindset of how to develop practices and policies to support teacher licensure candidates during times of crisis, which may affect their ability to teach and engage students in a distance learning environment. Their experiences showed that out of chaos came the development of critical thinking and unexpected skills that moved education forward for everyone involved.

Keywords

COVID-19, teacher interns, distance learning, photovoice, emergency remote teaching

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During COVID-19, digital learning took on an unprecedented central focus in K-12 education. This study applied photovoice qualitative methodology to record and understand the lives and reality for teacher interns as they adapted to abrupt changes in the way they designed and delivered instruction while living homebound during a pandemic. Teacher interns shared their stories of transitioning to virtual or distance learning. Participants (n = 97) were a demographically and culturally diverse group of K-12 public school teacher interns from California. The findings from this study illuminate the need for U.S. public K-12 schools to develop specific professional development training to support teachers when unforeseen events may cause the physical closure of their schools. The implications of this study highlight a shift in the mindset of how to develop practices and policies to support teacher licensure candidates during times of crisis, which may affect their ability to teach and engage students in a distance learning environment. Their experiences showed that out of chaos came the development of critical thinking and unexpected skills that moved education forward for everyone involved.

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Introduction

With the arrival and subsequent spread of COVID-19 in Spring and Fall 2020, digital learning took on an unprecedented central focus in K-12 education across the United States. Ready or not, school districts, educators, students, and parents were all forced to develop new proficiencies for accessing, designing, and implementing educational activities from home using technology (Van Allen & Katz, 2020). We applied the method of photovoice to inquire into the reality of life for teacher interns as they adapted to historic, abrupt changes in the way they designed and delivered instruction as they lived their own lives during the pandemic.

In response to these extreme times, teachers created their own collaborative, technology-supported, in-home work environments that supported their professional and personal needs (Donohoo, 2021). In their own unique ways, each teacher intern moved through different phases of adaptation from fear and trepidation to basic implementation, to thriving in a whole new world (Blankstein & Newsome, 2021). Technology-supported collaboration emerged as a means for building meaningful professional learning networks that offered these teachers a safe space to share personal and professional triumphs and problem-solve around common challenges (Krutka et al., 2016; Tsai & Yang, 2018). They shared experiences that showed out of chaos came the development of their own critical thinking, fresh knowledge, and unexpected new skills that could advance education for all stakeholders. Participants in this study were contracted, non-certified teachers with at least a bachelor's degree who were

enrolled in a master's level course as a part of a California credentialing program. Thus, during this discussion we use the terms teacher interns and teachers synonymously. Because this study was conducted in California, we use that state's nomenclature "intern" to classify our participants. As teacher interns, they were classroom teachers responsible for all curriculum, grading, and teaching of students. Each held a degree in a field other than education and was employed full-time and enrolled in courses to earn their preliminary California teaching credential. We make this distinction to avoid confusion, because the term "teacher intern" has different meanings across the U.S.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 global pandemic created an unprecedented shift in U.S. K-12 public education. Educators and educational leaders at all levels, whether novice or experienced, were forced to cope with a brave new world of education delivered virtually from within their homes. Fortunately, many teachers in the United States came into the COVID-19 crisis with valuable skills, personal resources, and environmental support which could be relied upon in unexpected times such as these (Office for Civil Rights, 2021).

Effective teachers are skilled at balancing wide-ranging, simultaneous demands both inside and outside the classroom. On a typical school day, teachers must adjust and adapt to an ever-changing school environment filled with a diverse collection of children who, themselves, are morphing in their skills, interests, and abilities from moment to moment. Said simply, to survive and thrive in the classroom, an educator must be adaptable (Granziera et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2018; Supiano, 2020).

To navigate the classroom, teachers must learn to adjust their instructional practices to meet the individual and changing needs of their students (Collie & Martin, 2021; Marek & Chew, 2021; Parsons et al., 2018). In fact, adaptability of teachers is so important that the skill is integrated into standards of teacher quality recommended by organizations and researchers interested in educator development (Parsons et al., 2018). As the pandemic developed, educational leaders learned quickly that it was necessary to leverage the adaptability and resilience of their teachers in response to the crisis (Bagwell, 2020). This embedded flexibility and their willingness to modify and adapt to any situation may have opened for teachers their ability to navigate the COVID-19 classroom, be it in a virtual, hybrid, or traditional setting.

During times of both calm and stress, individual adaptability has been shown to have a protective effect. Teachers who show greater adaptability also have a stronger sense of associated wellbeing (Collie & Martin, 2017; Collie et al., 2018; Tebben et al., 2021). Teachers with that sense of wellbeing are more effective educators and are thus able to build stronger relationships with their students to enhance learning outcomes (Eadie et al., 2021; Passey, 2021). However, teacher wellbeing is difficult to cultivate and even harder to maintain. Teachers' sense of wellbeing has been shown to be connected to many different contextual and societal factors including, but not limited to, overwhelming workloads, lack of effective school leadership, and devaluation by society (Eadie et al., 2021; Passey, 2021).

The face of civilization shifted dramatically with the COVID-19 global pandemic. The most comparable conditions to the pandemic response might be planning for and responding to crises including natural disasters (Lane et al., 2020), active shooters incidents (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014; Dagenhard et al., 2019), or warzones (Rajab, 2018). It is not surprising that the face of education changed as well. Technology-supported instruction has been commonplace in K-12 public school classrooms for decades; yet at the start of the pandemic, the delivery of entirely virtual instruction was uncharted territory for most educators (Hartshorne et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Thus, along with the tremendous individual and societal challenges brought on by the global pandemic, teachers were forced to learn a new

way of delivering instruction virtually to students via cobbled together methods with sparse or non-existent training and support (Hartshorne et al., 2020; Lynch, 2020; Reich, 2021). This was especially significant to our participants, who were already struggling with the myriad challenges that face novice teachers. If nothing else, the pandemic demonstrated the need for all educators and education agencies to be fully trained and prepared to employ technology to support instruction at any given time and under any circumstance (Bagwell, 2020; Lynch, 2020; Marek & Chew, 2021; Mari et al., 2021; Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Rationale and Research Questions

We believe the effects of working from home and its impact on U.S. K-12 public school teacher intern will have significant implications for current and future educators. It is one thing to read about how an individual copes with abrupt change, but it is another entirely to witness how one adapts through their own voice and visual perspective. The uniqueness of photovoice allows participants to convey the reality of their lived experience through visual images and narrative descriptions (Latz, 2017; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). In this study, we sought to see and hear teachers, in their own voices from their own perspectives, tell the stories of what it was like to adapt to virtual instruction during the process.

During the pandemic, researchers began to describe how schools shifted to online learning and teachers taught from their private residences. We found no research describing the unique experiences of teacher interns. Stadtlander et al. (2017) suggested future research about how teachers who are also parents of school-aged children teach online while caring for and managing the instruction of their own children. We believe this study is both unique and important because it captured the evolving skills of novice teachers as they confronted, managed, and overcame arguably the most paradigm-altering phenomenon in recent history.

Research generally does not provide an opportunity for individuals to process and express emotions during the moment in which they occur (Dennis, 2014). Through the lens of photovoice we provided these teachers a medium to record and a platform to express their process of shifting to teaching at home while maneuvering daily lives. As researchers, we offered these teacher interns the opportunity to have their experiences witnessed and humanistically validated (Malka, 2021). Understanding how teacher interns navigate teaching virtually in a home environment may provide school districts and teacher licensure programs an opportunity to understand how to help teachers better prepare to work outside of a traditional classroom. We sought to answer the following research questions:

What does a home-based teaching workspace look like?
How did teacher interns set up their distance learning work environment? and
How do teachers who are also parents of school-age children coordinate teaching their students while managing the instruction of their own children?

Roles of Researchers

Each of us has a personal and professional interest in K-12 public school education. Cheryl has held positions of a school principal in both private and public schools, in Europe, Africa, and the U.S. while working closely with her staff, especially novice educators. In higher education, Cheryl teaches and mentors teacher licensure candidates. She lives in California where she facilitates online teacher intern seminars, from which this study's archival data were obtained. Andrea worked in a large public school system in the special education department at the school- and district-levels. She has extensive experience instructing, mentoring, and supervising teacher licensure candidates from within the school system and at the university-

level. Jim worked as a public school district supervisor and middle school principal. He now teaches doctoral candidates, many of whom are teachers. Within our professional roles, we have supervised and mentored many novice teachers, including those who were in the process of obtaining their licensure while teaching in the classroom.

Methods

Conceptual Framework

The framework that guided this study was developed by Brown and Collins (2021) to analyze both visual and textual data. This process of systematic visuo-textual analysis connects the interpretation of visual artifacts in a step-by-step process using contextual datasets to develop a deeper understanding of the story being told by the participant. The role of the photovoice researcher is to "account for the visual information, the textual information, and the visuo-textual information combined" (Brown & Collins, 2021, p. 1281) during each step of the data analysis process. Brown and Collins equate the process to weaving each of the elements together to take a deep dive into data, thereby, providing a richer and more authentic meaning of the experiences shared by the participants may have a greater impact on those individuals who witness the conveyed narratives. The elements of the systematic visuo-textual analysis are defined by Brown and Collins as visual only, written documentation only, and visuo-textual combined. Each of the elements is then reviewed at two different levels, noticing and describing and conceptualizing. During each step of the visual-textual analysis, the researcher needs to be wholly vested in the process to *weave* the visual representations in an interactive and spiral analysis to move forward (Brown & Collins, 2021). Brown and Collins (2021) advise the researcher to "revisit the textual only and visual only work to confirm, consider and reconsider the initial descriptive findings" (p. 1282) from the first level of noticing and describing prior to moving onto the conceptualizing level of analysis. Like weaving, the analysis process must be repeated for each data set from the individual study participants in relation to all the data collected from the sample population.

Photovoice to Support Qualitative Inquiry

Photovoice as a research methodology is not new in qualitative research and has been employed in health care and health-based research (Fraser & al Sayah, 2011), the social sciences (Gubrium & Harper, 2013), and community development projects (Switzer, 2018). The applied practice of photovoice in qualitative research is a technique that is designed to evoke critical dialogue and conversations on topics which tell a personal story of an event or experience (Wang & Burris, 1997). Past methods of photovoice involved participants being provided a camera to take photographs independently based on a specific context or via a guided scripted practice (Wang, 2003). To generate discussion, Freire (1973) found the use of photos to be a powerful tool to incite action and awareness of issues that may otherwise be unknown to the public.

Within the field of teacher education, the classroom teacher relies on various learning modalities, including kinesthetic, visual, written, and auditory, to engage students in learning content and interacting with their peers. Most research about teacher licensure candidates has focused on the experiences captured by the person conducting the study through field observations or interviews. Photovoice is a qualitative tool that can offer an alternative method of collecting data that authentically and uniquely reflects the voices of the participants (Mulvhill & Swaminathan, 2011).

When faced with obstacles to traditional data gathering techniques, researchers may seek Innovative techniques. This was the case during COVID-19. As a result, we applied the technique of photovoice to help us understand the experiences of teacher interns. Photovoice was the best means to provide a "voice to see" the participants' perspectives through a different lens (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). As a classroom instructor, Cheryl gave each participant the option to select a photo or image they believed best represented their experience in teaching from their homes during the pandemic. She then gave each the choice to create a written narrative to describe what the photo or image meant to them in that moment. We agree with other researchers that the physical act of taking a photo or selecting an image helps participants empower their voice, capture the meaningful lived experience, and reflect on the moment (Gleason & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2021; Plunkett et al., 2013; Tsang, 2020) We also believe that such an interactive event may have a deeper meaning or effect in both their personal and professional lives (Mannay, 2010).

Methodology

Photovoice is a qualitative research methodology that utilizes images to tell the stories of participants. Through photographs, participants share personal knowledge that might be difficult to express verbally (Brown & Collins, 2021; Versey, 2021). Photovoice is unique in that it conveys the reality of lived experience through visual images and narrative descriptions from the participants themselves in real time (Brown & Collins, 2021; Latz, 2017; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). In this study, we saw and heard novice teachers both show and describe virtual or distance learning in their own voices as the events occurred.

Participants

The participants for this study were teacher interns who were classroom teachers of record in California in the process of completing the teaching practicum requirement for their respective credentialing program. Each held a degree in a field other than education, taught in a California public school, and were enrolled in online courses taught by Cheryl that were directly related to the completion of their credentialing program. These courses were occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we explain above, California classifies these teachers as "interns," and so that is how we reference them in this study.

We did not recruit participants, since archival data were used from online seminars Cheryl was teaching as part of their state credentialling requirements. Before beginning the study, she gained permission from the university to analyze the data. The participants were demographically and culturally diverse and represented all regions of the state of California including rural, urban, and suburban K-12 public school districts. Many of the interns were multilingual and represented a range of ethnicities and cultures. The study sample consisted of 97 teacher interns, 70 women and 27 men, representing multiple subject ($n = 39$), single subject ($n = 53$), and special education ($n = 5$) teacher licensure credentialing programs. The teacher interns represented various grade levels, elementary school, grades TK-5 ($n= 37$), middle school, grades 6 -8 ($n= 21$), and high school, grades 9-12, inclusive of all subject content areas ($n=34$), and special education both mild/moderate ($n=4$) and moderate/severe ($n=1$).Each of the study participants had full-time teaching experience of 1 to 5 years in the classroom with an average of 3.25 years of teaching students. These individuals had access to a wide range of technology applications and devices consistent with the resources of their respective school districts.

Data Sampling and Collection

As we explained above, Cheryl was the instructor facilitating online seminar courses through a California based K-12 teacher licensure program between the Spring II term of 2020 through the Spring I term of 2021. The teacher interns represented in this study were among those students enrolled in these courses. As a key assignment, the seminar students completed a weekly reflective journal of teaching practices based on prompts provided for the journal assignment. These included two choices: a traditional research-based question or an alternative photovoice journal assignment. If the interns chose to complete the alternative reflective journal assignment, they could choose from different writing prompts based on the impact COVID-19 had on their teaching practices, personal and professional life, and the types of activities they participated in to help combat mental fatigue and stress due to COVID-19 and teaching remotely. The assignment asked each participant to provide both a narrative reflection and a photo or graphic image that represented their response.

Approval to access and use the archival data was granted by the university's IRB where the courses had taken place. The archival journals collected and reviewed for this study occurred between April 2020 through March 2021 during the Spring II term of 2020 through Spring I term of 2021. Not all the teacher interns in the Spring II 2020 through Spring I 2021 terms participated in the alternative weekly reflective journal assignment on a weekly basis. They had the option of responding to one or two questions (entries) per week based on the prompts provided as an alternative journal assignment. 283 journals were reviewed from this period which included 515 entries. Of the entries reviewed, two specific journal reflection questions were chosen to be examined for the purposes of this study due to the frequency in which the prompts had received responses by the teacher interns. We analyzed the students' responses to these prompts:

- What does your teaching workspace look like at home? How have you set up your distance learning work environment? and
- If you have children at home, how are you teaching your own students? What does this look like?

Ethical Concerns

We understand the significance of using the personal visual data and reflections of these participants. We address these concerns in several ways. First, the assignments were completed voluntarily by each participant. As the instructor, Cheryl gave each student the opportunity to complete the weekly photovoice assignment or an alternative, more traditional assignment. Students engaged in the journaling activities to share and work through the angst of their experiences. Not all participants completed all photovoice assignments. Some did not complete any but chose rather to complete the traditional journal assignment provided in the course curriculum. After the courses ended, Cheryl realized the personal and visual reflections of the teacher interns were powerful information that provided windows into the workings of an international catastrophic phenomenon. She then followed the university's process and protocol to secure IRB approval to access, analyze, and publish the archival data. In preparation for publication and to maximize protection of participants, she obtained individual permission from the participants to use their images and narratives within this article. All identifiers are masked, so no participants or their locations can be recognized. In addition, because the courses were online, the students were afforded an additional element of anonymity.

Understanding the Data

As we studied the data, we followed Brown and Collins's (2021) framework for analyzing visual and textual data. The data evaluation criteria were related to the study's intent and research questions, and the process was two-fold. First, we examined the photos or visual materials independently. Following the initial review of the photos, we selected photos that best represented the research questions and intent of the study. The process of reviewing the visual materials for composition and conceptualizing the meaning of each image, both individually and collaboratively, supported the interconnections to envision the themes derived, which in turn solidified the building of the team's conclusions (Brown & Collins, 2021).

The next step was to analyze the visual and textual content. The process of reviewing the textual content that accompanied each photo provided a rich description of how the specific image directly related to the context in which the photo was presented. The process of conceptualizing the text for specific words and phrases that reveal themes plays a significant role in building a bridge between the photo artifact and the textual meaning (Brown & Collins, 2021). Through this step in the data analysis process, we sought to explore how the data scaffolded to create a new understanding and knowledge of the captured experiences in real-time of the participants (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). As we analyzed the interrelated and entwined visual and textual data, we developed a clearer and deeper understanding of the experiences of everyone. Cheryl and Andrea independently analyzed the narrative and visual data for commonalities and categories through resonant images. They then shared and merged their analyses. Although the participants' visual and narrative reflections were idiosyncratic, we were surprised at the continuity that flowed across stories and images Through our analysis the following themes emerged: workspace infringement; critical role of technology; students as priority; and a teacher for all students.

Results of Analysis

We have chosen representative statements based on the archival data from participants to reflect each theme. Each participant is identified by a gender-neutral pseudonym. The archival narratives and images that follow were carefully selected and curated so that their identifying information was removed to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Theme 1: Workspace Infringement

Like all classroom environments, the teaching from home workspace was highly individualized and closely connected to the resources of the teacher. Teaching workspaces, no matter their location within the home, were a clear intrusion upon the teachers and their families. The classroom infringed upon every aspect of the home. Workspaces were placed anywhere there was room, even in locations where "teaching space" had to be created, though there was none. Teaching occurred in the midst of living rooms, garages, and spare bedrooms everywhere. Teaching took place anywhere and everywhere a teacher was able to find room and a modicum of quiet. Teachers made do with what they had available in space and technology.

Participants described differing perceptions of teaching by adapting a home environment. A lack of resources, including physical space, was a consistent thread woven throughout the narrative descriptions of selected photographs. Pat's photograph, Figure 1, depicts an observation made regarding the need for control in their workspace. The time in which teaching took place during the day allowed for the participant to work effectively at the

dining room table but when the school day concluded teaching materials needed to be removed to maintain a semblance of order within the household. Having a sense of control rang true with participants since the world around them seemed out of control. Pat shared,

> When I am done, I have to clean up right away and put things in their place. If not, it'll get out of control quickly. I am lucky that I can go to the school when I need to teach, I have that flexibility. This means all of the messy projects, art supplies, and other items are in the classroom. Which is nice since I can keep my home environment clean, tidy, and controlled. My classroom right now is a bit of a mess and kinda chaotic, but that's how I am feeling with COVID not knowing which end is up.

Figure 1
Controlling Workplace Chaos at Home

Adapting the workspace to mitigate infringing on other household members was essential to maintain a sense of normalcy and sanity both for the teacher and their family. Participants were creative in finding a suitable workspace that could accommodate their teaching needs. Morgan, a physical education teacher, adapted a garage space and woodworking bench into a working classroom and desk (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Using Available Space and Resources

They explained, "The ability to have students look at my face close up when I am lecturing and zoom out with the push of a button so students can see my body and copy my movements."

       With the onset of COVID, teachers scrambled to find a suitable place at home to teach. The issue was compounded when multiple people in the household worked as educators and space was a premium. Robbie's photograph, Figure 3, shows the modifications they made to a bedroom, then a second bedroom, which was adapted daily to a private teaching space, free of distraction, during the school day. The adjustments made were continuous since the teaching workspace was temporary due to the family's home environment. Robbie reflected:

> I had to hastily set up another workspace. The result was me, teaching from on top of cardboard boxes from my son's room. Once things became a bit more settled, I moved into my other son's room and set up his drawing desk. Every morning I must move the desk to a new position so my Zoom background image will show up, as well as move my office chair and related equipment back into his room every morning, and back out every afternoon.

Figure 3
Setting Up Makeshift Teaching Spaces

       Taylor's photograph, Figure 4, represented the overwhelming task these teachers faced as they tried to separate home and workspace.

Figure 4
Separation of Home and Workspace
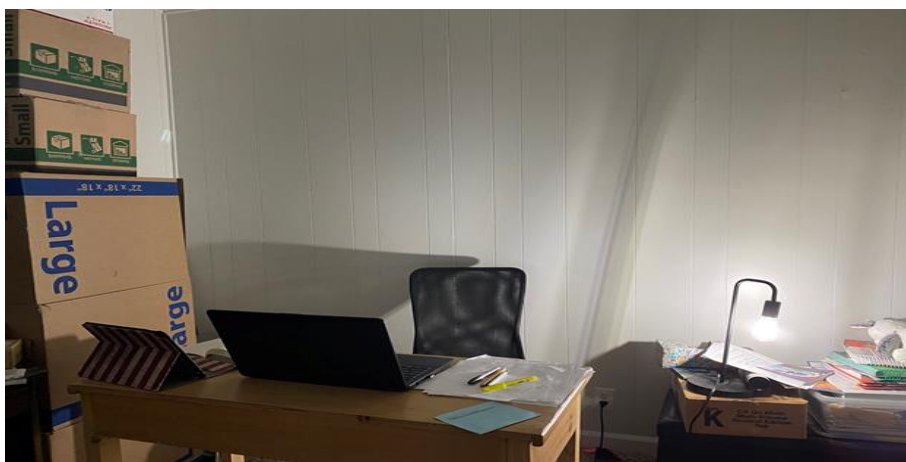
To carve out a teachable workspace, Taylor boxed up and rearranged the contents of the room. Taylor explained:

> My environment is chaotic because I have had little to no down time. I normally cannot operate well in the chaos, but I have adapted to my 3 foot in front of me mentality. I have no separation between work and home anymore and due to my personality, I have a very difficult time separating myself from my endless to-do list.

Theme 2: Critical Role of Technology

For teachers who had a dedicated home office space available, the physical intrusion was somewhat lessened. As technology and other resources became available, in-home classrooms began to look more and more like technology centers and in-school classrooms. Using technology and with some creativity, teachers found ways to make teaching from home as effective and efficient as possible given the unprecedented and ever-changing circumstances. Common challenges included deciding what part of the lesson would be videotaped and posted for asynchronous learning to further support students after the school day was over and choosing the programs or apps to use the next day in the classroom to help explain concepts and provide real-world examples. These tasks consumed additional time outside of their official school day. Thus, the social and emotional intrusion of having the technology-based classroom in the home was consistent and pervasive. Driven by technology, the at-home classroom was open 24 hours per day. Teachers were never completely out of the classroom because the classroom was always with them.

Riley photographed the sheer amount of technology along with a multitude of teaching aids needed to effectively deliver meaningful and engaging daily lessons to students (see Figure 5). They explained:

> I use my iPad as a document camera when I am at home so that I can still show my students the correct way to hold a pencil as well as the handwriting and printing practice. I have my ABC charts, 100 charts, TE's [teacher editions] and all of the same manipulatives that the students have handy while teaching. I also have a whiteboard and anchor charts to use for essential questions and writing.

Figure 5
Multiple Technology Devices in Action

Our participants struggled to integrate technology in a virtual teaching workspace. Many of the participants explained they were overwhelmed as they worked to learn how to use the devices needed to teach online in an unfamiliar virtual teaching environment. Integrating those devices (see Figure 6) with teaching aids to teach students proved to be a challenge. Finley revealed:

> I have my computers, an extra monitor to try to see my class while I am flipping through a million tabs, I have my document camera setup along with a digital tablet that I have installed but have yet to figure out how to use.

Figure 6
Workspace for Maximum Efficiency

Theme 3: A Teacher for All Students

For teachers who were also parents of children in school, their roles as teachers took on two forms. Teachers of a virtual classroom full of students and teachers of their own children learning from home themselves. Never has the role of the teacher been more in the forefront. Teaching as an occupation is challenging enough but teaching one's own children at home while also teaching a full classroom all while navigating a global crisis was unheard of until now. This pandemic was not time or geographically limited, which made this even so different from other forms of educational crisis planning and response.

Parent-teachers were faced with finding their own children the space to work and learn within the home. Home internet connections were strained. Technology resources were stretched thin as everyone in the household required an internet connected device with which to access their teaching or learning materials. In more ways than one, the home became a living, breathing classrooms for all.

The children of teachers (see Figure 7) must vie for the attention of their teacher-parents. Participants offered insights of their personal stories about balancing the role of being a parent and teaching. However, participants were less focused on the hardship of teaching both their children and students virtually than they were on the impact of the precarious attempt to deal with home-work obligations the effect on their professional focus. Parker explained:

> My youngest, a third grader, requires a lot of assistance and help with assignments. Now, it seems like I am working non-stop, even after my classes have ended. Is distance learning the cause of this madness? I literally workday

in and day out. What keeps me going is my students and my career? There is no one to blame for how and why things are the way they are. So many people around the world are dealing with these same issues.

Figure 7
Children of Teachers Learning Virtually

Parent-teachers of young children struggled to find time to structure the day for their classroom students and their own children. They looked for ways to maintain order in their children's lives and in their homes while everything seemed to be turned upside down. There was not enough time in the day to effectively teach in their virtual classroom while providing their own children the time they so desperately needed simultaneously. This concern was easily understandable, given the difficulties faced by teacher interns during the global pandemic. Relating to effectively scheduling the virtual school day (see Figure 8), Skyler shared:

It is difficult trying to teach my students and teach my kids. I am used to going to work, coming home, and helping my girls with their homework. Now, it seems like I am working non-stop, even after my classes have ended.

Figure 8
Class Scheduling, Balancing the School Day

Parent-teachers of older children were also burdened by their circumstances. Older students required time and space in the at-home classroom as well. They were often faced with long days of isolation, engaged across the information superhighway, learning from their own teachers from behind their closed bedroom doors. Jaimie's photo, Figure 9, directly illustrates the needed privacy and isolation older children faced when learning from home. The role of parents in this instance is to support their children after the school day has ended. In all reality, the participants were both teachers during the day and night. Jaimie revealed:

> Doors closed and my children come out once in a while to raid the kitchen. Most of our role as teachers for our kids comes at night. Some of their teachers have definitely not adapted well to distance learning and the direct instruction time isn't utilized very well. So the kids struggle to complete their homework since they have not had a lot of instruction in-class. Neither of my kids are particularly happy with distance learning, but they are doing their best and we are doing our best to support them.

Figure 9
Behind Closed Doors

Theme 4: Students as Priority

Despite all they were facing in their own lives, these student teachers prioritized the needs of their students. They set aside the chaos of their personal situations and remained focused on their students as much as possible. Teachers worried about what their students were going through and how their students were being affected as the COVID crisis dragged on.

Even though these teachers struggled with their personal mental health and wellness while teaching virtually, they prioritized compassion and empathy for their students. Their workday seemed to never end, putting in long hours well beyond the end of their students' school day. Some participants stated a 10-to-12-hour workday was common. These participants were willing to put in the hours to support student learning at a cost to their own health.

Students learning virtually often became disengaged or tasked with taking on additional household responsibilities due to their parents' jobs as front line workers with irregular hours of employment. Many of the students had to face the brutal reality of loved ones becoming ill or succumbing to COVID. Several of the participants shared the role pets played in teaching students. Pets were the unsung classroom ambassadors (see Figure 10), bringing a sense of joy,

hope, and purpose to students who were learning from home. Adrian shared the important role their dog played when they were teaching virtually:

> This is my dog, Winnie, who has brought calmness and focus to the class and school day. Students are excited to show up for school when they know Winnie is going to be there. They ask about her all the time, which helps my students forget about what is happening in the world and at home, which relative might be in the hospital or had died from COVID. She is their therapy dog. I've heard that dogs have become dependent on us during the pandemic but I'm afraid it's the other way around**.**

Figure 10
Pets as Classroom Ambassadors

Teachers became creative in how they were able to recreate classroom spaces at home to bring a sense of normalcy when teaching virtually. Chris showed how familiar items from the physical classroom (see Figure 11) created the sense of a 'normal' classroom experience online for her students. Their intention was to develop healthy routines that would be reflected when students would return to their school for in-person instruction.

Figure 11
Having the Familiar Visible Virtually
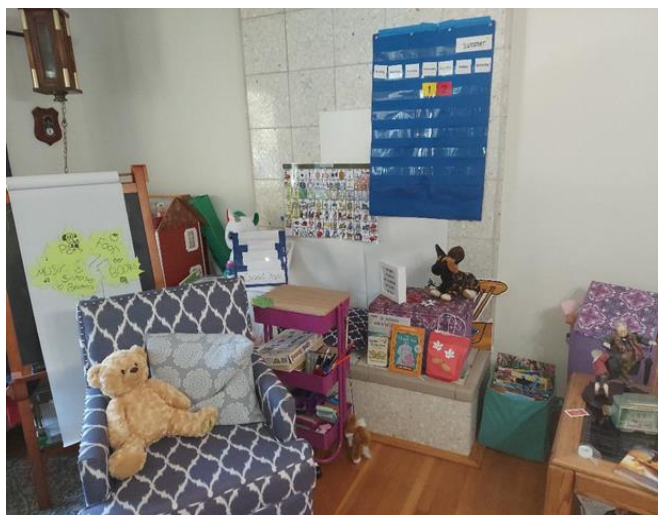
Chris reflected:

> I am struggling to be there for all of my students and do my best. My priority is
> the mental wellness of my students. Having a set routine and familiar items
> from my school classroom, like the reading chair and stuffed animals, has been
> helpful for students to focus and find some kind of sanity in all of this craziness.

While teachers understood the importance of routine and ritual in their virtual
classrooms, flexibility was a common trait in participants of the study when using technology
and developing lesson plans or activities in a moment's notice. Although this skillset was
needed to maintain a sense of order, Mick noticed the learning environment was void of active
learning and engagement, energy, and enthusiasm. Keeping positive affirmations constantly
present to support student self-esteem and mental health, they decorated the background walls
with inspirational messages and bright cheerful colors, as shown in Figure 12. Mick observed:

> We [as teachers] are becoming very adept at designing new lessons but there is
> still something missing that the kids can feel as well. I worry about my students
> because it [COVID] is tough on them. I have had twice as many counseling
> referrals for my students because they are stressed about their classes, their
> families, their friends and so on.

Figure 12
Inspiration

During COVID, not only did teachers struggle with mental health and wellness issues,
so did students. Kendall recognized how distance learning was affecting students, especially
students whom they knew did not have a supportive home environment. Kendall shared that
she connects with a former student daily to make sure he is doing well in distance learning and
to support him in completing his class assignments. Kendall retrieved the public domain image
below from the Internet to represent themself (see Figure 13). Kendall shared:

> I do have a student from last year who does not have a supportive home life. I
> worked with him closely last year when his father was in and out of the prison
> system and mom needed my help. I check in with this student daily. He is

having a hard time because he too is a "hands on" individual and not being able to see his teacher in person is hard for him. We created a great bond last year. I am a safe face for him to see. It has been difficult sometimes after a long day with my own class and then logging on with him briefly takes a lot of "Disney smiles," Not going to lie, sometimes when I log off for the day, I am totally beat and do not want to look at the computer ever again.

Figure 13
Checking In

Participants expressed the personal connection in a physical classroom with their students that the virtual environment prevented. Frankie shared that teaching at a stationary desk in front of a computer daily, Figure 14, affected her ability to directly connect with students. They noted,

I NEVER used to sit at my desk when teaching in the classroom, this allowed me to make that human connection with each and every one of my students. I miss this aspect of teaching and I miss my students. I want to be there for them, supporting their needs, listening to their concerns. The two-dimensional world of distance learning has taken away my super power.

Figure 14
Missing the Connection
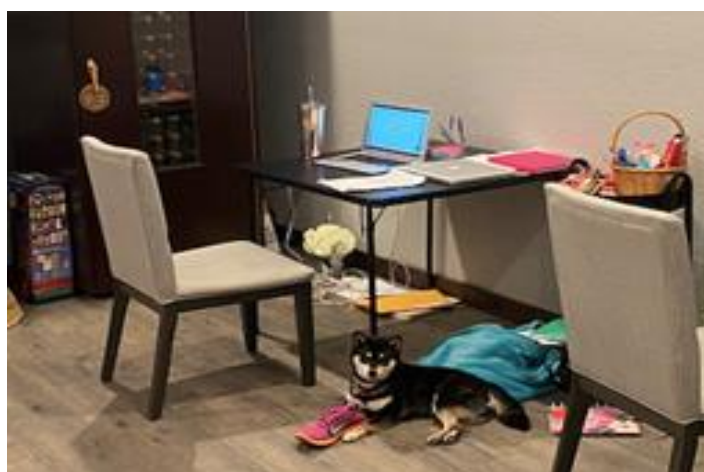
During the height of the COVID crisis, the seemingly simple acts of teaching and learning took center stage in the national collective consciousness. Everyone knew a parent, a student, and/or a teacher who was struggling to adapt to the virtual learning environment. As a society, we instinctively knew what was occurring in the homes of our teachers. Yet, there is nothing quite like witnessing the reality of what the at-home classroom looked like, in real time, through the images and words presented above. We believe this study confirmed the strength and adaptability of these teachers.

Discussion

Through this photovoice study we explored how teacher interns viewed the impact of COVID-19 on their ability to support student distance learning in a virtual classroom. The use of photovoice offered intimate insights into how participants perceived and thought about teaching during the global pandemic. To be successful teachers, these interns had to be adaptable, able to meet a fluid, novel, and unpredictable situation on short notice (Copeland & Wightman, 2021; Granziera et al., 2016; Petzold, 2020). They quickly navigated technology platforms and learned to operate new instructional online curricular tools to deliver engaging and meaningful lessons. Although adaptability has been directly associated with effective teaching and instruction (Orkibi, 2021; Parsons et al., 2018), the stresses placed on teachers during COVID to quickly modify and change teaching practices to accommodate their students' learning presented challenges (Marek & Chew, 2021). The challenges included connectivity, access to technology, resources, teaching platforms, and online curriculum (Copeland & Wightman, 2021); and strategies to invent workspaces in their homes. Although we found research support for the insights of our study, we believe these findings are unique in that they offer windows into the souls of these novice teachers. As they shared their own frustrations and challenges, they learned from their peers how each was meeting these challenges and making their own adaptations. Because the demographic mix was so diverse, combining ethnicities and genders, ranging across K-12 and a variety of content areas. Through their introspection they gained levels of metacognition that we believed helped them successfully traverse the unique hurdles they faced, individually but also collectively. As these teacher interns noted, at-home professional workspaces encroached on their family's living environment, especially when dedicated spaces within the home were not available.

These teachers used whatever space that was available, including garages, kitchen tables, bedrooms, living rooms, and home offices. For some, a physical classroom workplace was fluid based on the limitations of space in the home and the multi-functionality of such spaces. The fluidity of the home-based virtual classroom required these teacher interns to constantly set-up, break-down, and move materials to accommodate the needs of their family. Although the participants were spontaneous, flexible, and creative in their commitment to find effective workspaces to adapt and provide quality instruction to support their students (Orkibi, 2021; Parsons et al., 2018), the multi-use and shared spaces for teaching proved to be taxing on both the teacher interns and their families.

Participants realized that the technology and teaching tools they needed to be effective virtually required them to make choices as to how to use their home environment as a classroom workspace. Within theme two, participants noted the critical role technology played in their ability to effectively teach their students in real time and the first order barriers (Ertmer, 1999) they encountered due to the absence of technical support. These problems were most significant when stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and guardians encountered problems in connecting to and navigating Internet platforms (Trust & Whalen, 2021). These teachers showed their resilience as this challenging environment forced them to develop practices that pushed their knowledge of technology, curriculum, and pedagogy and stretched their personal

and professional comfort levels (Tsui et al., 2020). Thus, the participants were able to persist, evolve, and unlock their potential to meet the needs of their students.

Most of the participants explained that working in physical isolation restricted their ability to make personal connections with their students. They described the negative impact of working in physical isolation on their mental health, including frustration, depression, stress, and confusion. These emotions were exacerbated by inadequate information (Brooks et al., 2020; Tebben et al., 2021) about executing and enforcing school policies related to student attendance and instruction. While teachers demonstrated the fortitude of psychological flexibility (Orkibi, 2021), the same participants revealed that their students also suffered negative effects of isolation that affected both their mental health and academic progression. Regardless of the grade level, students' reliance on distance learning and self-isolation affected their sense of self-efficacy (Prokes & Housel, 2021). The interns believed it was their personal responsibility to reach out to their students individually order to help prevent them from learning in a solitary space. The participants worked to display empathy and proactive communication (Marek & Chew, 2021) when they connected with their students to encourage active engagement and ensure students would want to attend school daily. That became especially important in districts without mandatory attendance policies.

The findings from this study illuminated a known but hidden reality. While interns were trying to provide the best diverse virtual learning environment possible with genuine innovation (Kidd & Murray, 2020), the workday did not end when students turned off their computers at the conclusion of the school day. The participants shared that work-family-life balance was disrupted. Having a classroom online meant endless hours of online availability to students and parents where no school-based boundaries were set; therefore, they experienced a considerably higher workload and levels of stress (Marek & Chew, 2021). The participants adjusted curriculum, class delivery, and assignments based on student needs and access to technology (Copeland & Wightman, 2021) which meant additional hours spent developing video demonstrations for students and searching for applicable programs and apps that were content focused and age appropriate. Therefore, the teacher interns were incorporating decision-factors to determine the effectiveness of asynchronous teaching techniques (Hartshorne et al., 2020) to delve deeper into a topic that a student could watch independently to further support their learning.

Interns whose children were learning at home faced unique challenges that also took a toll on their home environment. Trying to balance the help and guidance that their children required during the school day and in the evening with work obligations throughout the day caused anxiety and stress for many participants (Brooks et al., 2020; Marek & Chew, 2021; Tebben et al., 2021). Multiple obligations forced them to merge their identities of both teacher and parent (Kell, 2020). For our participants, the dual responsibilities may have impacted their effectiveness in the classroom, (Kell, 2020) as well as their social-emotional competency and wellbeing (Browning & Romer, 2020). The loss of effectiveness when teaching their students virtually meant they experienced a loss of control (Kell, 2020). The lines between teacher and parent blurred when their child encountered a school-based issue that would not wait. In many cases, the task was troubleshooting a technical problem so that their child could reconnect into their classroom. Thus, parent-educators trying to balance both roles experienced guilt set in when there was no clear distinction between work and home (Kell, 2020) environments.

Limitations of the Study

We frame the results of our study within several limitations. First, the sample only represented one master's degree teacher education program at one California based private university. Thus, this sample is not representative of all teacher licensure candidates and higher

education programs of teacher education, both public and private, throughout the rest of the United States. Second, the teacher licensure candidates were categorized as teacher interns, a practicing classroom teacher of record, within their respective TK-12 public schools. Therefore, student teachers were not part of the study. Had they been included, novice teachers working under the guidance of a master teacher might have provided different perspectives of the impact of COVID on their craft.

Another limitation is that data were collected during the Spring II term beginning March of 2020, concluding at the end of Spring I term, June 2021, for a total of 16 calendar months during the COVID pandemic. Additionally, the data used for this study were strictly archival, based on the teacher licensure candidates' perspectives as recorded in a weekly reflective journal activity. Therefore, no one-on-one interviews were conducted with the teacher licensure candidates to solicit further information, clarification, perspectives, or observations of the impact of COVID on their teaching practice and effectiveness in the distance learning classroom based on the research questions.

We think it important to acknowledge the teacher interns' level-factors that may have affected the results of this study. Teacher-level factors include age, years of teaching experience, education, training, comfort level with video-based conferencing platforms, competency in the use of technology, available resources, collaboration with colleagues, and support from their respective administration and school district. Although the goal of this study was to purposefully exam reflective journal archival data of the teacher interns to understand how they adapted their home to a work-based teaching environment and balancing teaching from home to meet the needs of their children, we believe it critical that future research directly explore teacher-level factors to understand how those factors may relate to how the teacher licensure candidates were able to effectively deliver meaningful curriculum during COVID, the level of student engagement, and what challenges were presented during this unprecedented time. Future research is needed that directly examines teacher licensure candidates' mental health and wellness and work-life balance as factors that may influence student success in the classroom.

Implications

We believe our findings have several implications for future research, practice, and policy. About research, further qualitative studies may be needed to fully understand the effects COVID-19 had on teacher licensure candidates and their ability to teach and engage students in a distance learning environment, whether they were teaching from home or at their school site. Exploring the differences in teacher licensure candidates that were teacher interns and students' teachers may uncover differences in their teaching experiences. Those studies may unveil the level of support offered by the school district, administration, or seasoned faculty, in a collaborative and empathetic manner, may have reduced the level of stress experienced by licensure candidates when teaching virtually during COVID. We encourage additional studies using the multi-modal design of photovoice to create more insights into a world that all educational stakeholders share.

The results of this study suggest that teacher licensure candidates were able to adapt and pivot from in-person teaching to distance learning, in many instances at a cost to their personal mental health and wellness (Hamilton et al., 2020). Some of the teacher licensure candidates indicated that initial support from the school in which they worked was sporadic and minimal at best when transitioning to virtual learning. Teacher licensure candidates were adapting lessons, producing videos, and researching multiple online resources that could be integrated at a moment's notice during live video conferencing classroom sessions. These teacher interns had to rely on personal innovation, perseverance, and pushing through

exhaustion at the cost of not being able to clearly delineate between their work and home lives. One possible aftermath of the pandemic's demands on teacher candidates is burnout (Sokal et al., 2020). The results of this study suggest that teacher support networks need to be established not only to collaborate on a professional level to facilitate empowered learning and establish collective efficacy (Donohoo, 2021; Gleason & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2021), but also to take care of the mental health needs of school faculty. Such networks may also prevent the mitigating factors of increased demands, limited resources, and exhaustion that cause teacher burnout (Sokal et al., 2020). Additionally, this study demonstrated intentional efforts should be required by schools to establish networks to foster deeper, trusting relationships between teacher practitioners, school site administrators, school district level governance and support staff, and the school community.

The implications for school policy are equally, if not more, relevant. Even though K-12 public school districts may have in place preparedness protocols and ethics of care for intruders or natural disasters such as earthquakes and storm or weather-related events (Lane et al., 2020), school districts may not have considered unknown or possible disasters that could dramatically affect the ability to actively teach students in-person or the mental health and wellness of faculty and students. The findings from this study could shed light on the need for K-12 public schools and other types of schools' systems, such as private and charter, to consider alternative preparatory policies that will support teacher licensure candidates, faculty, and staff when an unforeseen event may result in the physical closure of the school site. School leaders can learn from the pandemic to develop professional development training specifically focused on technology and adaptive learning strategies (Bagwell, 2020) and the importance of frequent, open, and effective communication with colleagues and education leaders (Asha et al., 2021). Through professional learning opportunities, faculty can expand and strengthen their network via sharing resources. Additionally, school and community leaders can take the lessons learned from COVID-19 to develop a bond between both entities to build a partnership with a focus on mental health and wellness (Bagwell, 2020) supporting all members of the community with a focus on teachers. Thus, addressing the challenge of distance learning and teaching to forge a more dynamic and robust school community.

Everyone is aware of the significant toll the COVID-19 pandemic has taken across all segments of the world's economies and cultures. While the effects in the U.S. may not be unique, this study focused on the experiences of American novice teachers as they battled the draconian restrictions that forced them to create virtual classrooms from their homes. Anyone who is a stakeholder in the U.S. educational system, whether educators, parents, or students, is aware of the personal and professional effects of the strictures that forced teachers and students exclusively onto digital platforms and transformed all stakeholders into learners. This study confirmed our admitted bias, that teachers are resilient, resourceful, creative, and committed to the learning of their students, often balancing the needs of their students with those of their own children, their families, and themselves.

Using Photovoice as our research design, we were able to capture both visual and narrative reflections from our participants, thus creating a multi-modal set of data not available through more traditional approaches. The visual depictions of otherwise mundane scenes – desks, computers, bookshelves, posters – emerged as poignant markers for the intrusive impact the pandemic. Our participants showed both visually and narratively that from crisis arose untapped knowledge and skills on which they will continue to draw as they pursue their mission to meet the needs of their students and their own families. We believe the application of photovoice provided unique windows into this phenomenon.

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