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“We were told that the content we delivered was not as important:” disconnect and disparities in world language student teaching during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Student teaching, the most important stage of a teacher candidate’s preparation, was profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. For world language (WL) student teachers, the effects were even more pronounced, as language learning and teaching were given an even lower priority than usual. In this study we use collaborative, co-constructed autoethnographic narratives to explore how five participant researchers experienced the sudden shift to emergency remote learning during the beginning stages of the pandemic. Findings indicate an overall feeling of disconnect from classroom practices and district communication, followed by disparate student teaching experiences depending upon the districts’ socioeconomic makeup. Other findings corroborate previous research demonstrating decreased student engagement and diminished attention to world language as a content area by both districts and families. However, we also believe that our experiences during the pandemic allowed us to acquire important skills in online teaching and caring for students, which we plan to utilize in our future careers. Within the context of these findings, we offer suggestions for future emergency remote teaching situations in the context of WL teacher education.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on K-12 education worldwide, with teachers and administrators struggling to engage students and deliver material remotely. An increase in the use of technological platforms resulted in a steep learning curve for teachers and students, which in turn contributed to a notable decline in student engagement (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Herold & Kurtz, 2020; Moser et al., 2020). In the midst of these changes, teacher candidates were still being educated and, despite some altering of certification requirements, student teaching remained a key component of this training (Ferdig et al., 2020). Yet at the onset of the

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pandemic districts were forced to resort to a “build as you go” process for remote student teaching, resulting in a great deal of uncertainty regarding teacher training and expertise (Piccolo et al., 2020). Student teachers navigated these uncertainties with cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and professors who were equally unprepared for the transition. For world language (WL) teachers, these uncertainties were even more pronounced, as language learning and teaching were given an even lower priority than usual (Moser et al., 2020; Ortega, 2020).

Moreover, students attending underserved schools felt the effect of the lockdown substantially more than students in more economically advantaged areas. This issue, which began long before the pandemic, has been framed in the context of the “digital divide” by Warschauer (2011), VanDijk (2020), and others. In this study, we take Warschauer’s (2011) definition of the digital divide as “social stratification due to unequal ability to access, adapt, and create knowledge via use of information and communication technologies (ICT)” (p. 5). This divide, more of a continuum in terms of access to ICT, was both exacerbated by the pandemic and affected student teachers engaged with students in districts experiencing these inequities.

In this study we explore how we experienced the COVID 19—related shift to emergency remote learning as student teachers of French and Spanish. Using a collaborative, co-constructed autoethnographic approach (Lapadat, 2009; Benoit, 2016; Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2010), we wrote, shared, and analyzed narratives about our personal experiences during this shift. Findings indicate perceptions of disconnectedness from classroom practices and district communication, particularly at the onset of the pandemic. This initial disconnect was followed by disparate student teaching experiences, depending upon the districts’ socioeconomic makeup. Other findings corroborate previous research demonstrating decreased student engagement and diminished attention to world language as a content area by both districts and families. However, we also believe our experiences granted us additional skills in online language learning pedagogies and care for students’ socioemotional well-being, which we intend to use in our future careers. Within the context of these findings, we offer implications for future emergency remote learning situations in the context of language teacher education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emergency remote (language) teaching and learning

Studies on remote learning in higher education contexts (Seaman et al., 2018; Ho & Burniske, 2005; Dumford & Miller, 2018) demonstrate that remote learning has become both increasingly popular and has its own, unique challenges. Remote language learning is no exception, and may present even more difficulties. Although Moser et al. (2020) noted that “when designed well, online [language] courses are just as effective as face-to-face experiences” (p. 3), several scholars have taken a more cautionary tone regarding distance language learning. Hurd (2006), for example, described the difficulty in learning a language remotely due to “the physical absence of a teacher, the isolated context, and reduced opportunities for interacting in the target language.” For this reason, language learners learning remotely needed to possess a “high degree of self-regulation when compared with learners of other subjects” (in Lo Presti, 2020, p. 90–91). Though possible, this degree of self-regulation is a difficult ask, developmentally speaking, for the students with whom the participants in this study worked (middle and high school students). Oliver et al. (2012) noted that high school students learning languages online felt that they were learning significantly less and were less likely to recommend online language courses to peers compared to other content areas. One student in Oliver et al.’s study commented, “Languages are hard to learn without any direct face-to-face instruction time from the teacher” (p. 275).

These difficulties are further exacerbated in the context of a global pandemic, making it even more important to distinguish between planned distance education and the response to a global crisis (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). As we acknowledge the differences between these two contexts, we must also acknowledge the implementation of emergency remote teaching on a continuum, which aligns with Warschauer’s (2011) assessment of the so-called “digital divide.” Schools with supports already in place were able to embrace a fully remote, asynchronous model during emergency remote teaching from the start of the pandemic, while others were decidedly on the “build as you go” side of implementation. In all cases, the beginning of the pandemic was characterized by a feeling of “emergency,” or a VUCA environment (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous; Hadar et al., 2020).

Studies on remote language teaching during COVID-19 have mainly been in the form of national surveys of in-service language teachers. McIntyre et al.’s (2020) survey looked at language teacher stress and coping strategies during the early stages of the pandemic. They found that WL teachers characterized the workload of online teaching as very stressful, particularly when combined with additional stressors, such as concerns about family health. However, teachers who were able to adopt “approach-oriented coping procedures,” such as acknowledging the reality of the pandemic and obtaining emotional support, were more likely to succeed in this environment versus those who adopted avoidant strategies, such as denial and disengagement (p. 11). Moser et al.’s (2020) study looked at the modification of course design during COVID-19. They noted that, despite growth in online platforms for WL teaching, most WL classes were still being taught in person prior to the pandemic. However, even language instructors who had prior experience with online teaching felt unprepared for the abrupt shift to emergency remote learning. Furthermore, “basic needs took precedence over academic gains,” and teachers perceived lower educational outcomes for their students (p. 10). Most concerning, many WL teachers in Moser et al.’s study were “mandated to not engage learners in language study,” while those who were allowed to engage reported substantial constraints with respect to student technology access (p. 10).

In sum, although planned online language courses can be effective, the particular demands of learning a language, combined with the VUCA environment of the pandemic, led to increased stress, lowered educational outcomes, and a lack of engagement in WL learning. Teacher education and teacher candidates were also affected by these experiences, and a growing body of literature on this topic includes a few studies on the pandemic’s impact on teacher preparation programs in general. Given that a crucial component of teacher education is student teaching placements and training and that student teacher experiences are at the center of our study, it is
important to understand how these experiences have been outlined in the literature.

2.2. Teacher preparation before and during COVID-19

Prior to the pandemic, teacher preparation in the United States and elsewhere emphasized field experiences where teacher candidates could put methods and strategies learned during their coursework into practice in a supported setting. However, these experiences have often been critiqued as either confining student teachers to an observation role or thrusting them into full-time teaching with a “sink or swim” attitude (Heck & Bacharach, 2016). At the university where this research took place, teacher candidates were fortunate to have four semesters of clinical experience, which allowed them to move from observational roles, to teaching some lessons, to full-time student teaching relatively smoothly.

With the onset of the pandemic, however, student teachers were abruptly removed from their full-time roles, and numerous adjustments needed to take place. Research on these adjustments include Ferdig et al.’s (2020) edited volume, which comprises a series of success stories of how teacher education programs responded to the pandemic, particularly in the areas of online pedagogical strategies, alternative field experiences, and new pedagogical approaches to methods courses. The chapters on language education focus on innovations to teacher education coursework online, while the one chapter on student teaching was dedicated to program modifications, rather than the experiences of the student teachers themselves (Piccolo et al., 2020). Thus, although the volume offers mostly positive examples of how several teacher education programs managed the pandemic, particularly in coursework and programming, it does not delve into a deeper understanding of the initial struggles that motivated these successes.

Apart from this volume, three articles merit further exploration in their discussions of how the pandemic affected pre-service teachers. Hadar et al. (2020) gave student teachers in Israel a chance to evaluate their own socioemotional competencies and preparedness during the pandemic. Most of the responses denoted decidedly negative reactions to the stresses, pressures, and uncertainty of student teaching in a pandemic, similar to findings from McIntyre et al. (2020) regarding in-service language teachers. One student responded: “it feels that we are drowning from the overload, the pressure, the difficulty of keeping up with our course work and the general pace” (p. 579). An additional layer of the study included teacher educators’ perspectives on their students, which acknowledged the stress that students were feeling and emphasized a closer attention to their well-being. The study’s findings, it is hoped, will “serve as a wake-up call to increase a social emotional orientation in teacher education curriculum,” which would ideally include strategies such as mindfulness, stress management techniques, and teamwork around problems in education (p. 573).

Some of these strategies were effectively implemented in Quezada et al. (2020). This autoethnographic case study documented the various changes made by a California teacher education program in response to the COVID-19 lockdown. Through coding of qualitative data, the authors found social-emotional engagement to be one of the key themes. Allowing synchronous interaction during Zoom classes, digital office hours, and informal group texts helped to mimic face-to-face classroom dynamics. Frequent check-ins were also effective in ensuring that teacher candidates were coping personally and professionally.

Adjusting a teacher preparation program’s curriculum to give candidates the skills needed to teach remotely involves significant change. In the case of WL education, it represents additional layers of difficulty, as teacher candidates are frequently learning to teach students in a non-dominant language and/or unfamiliar online formats. We discuss preparations in these areas in the following section.

2.3. Preparing teachers for hybrid and online language instruction

The university where our study was conducted offered a course on “Wise Integration of Technology in Education,” which focused on core curriculum such as math and science, and did not include provisions for online WL instruction. Similarly, while there exists an abundance of research on online language learning, that of preparation for WL teachers is much scarcer (McNeil, 2016).

One hurdle in preparing WL teachers is the discrepancy between which instructional methods work best in-person versus online. Studies show that learner-centered methods are more effective for student learning when there is limited face-to-face instruction (Jones & Youngs, 2006). This can be a difficult adjustment, as WL classes typically rely on a mixture of teacher-centered instruction, partner dialogues, and group work. It can also pose a challenge for the teacher, who does not have immediate access to each student to provide feedback while students work independently. We now know that this transition from teacher-centered to autonomous learning can be best supported through gradual scaffolding (Lewis & Reinders, 2008).

Another relevant study by Karataş and Tuncer (2020) explored the impact of emergency distance education on Turkish pre-service EFL teachers on their own language skills development. Not surprisingly, they discovered that while writing skills were nurtured constantly in an online learning context and therefore improved, speaking skills were all but ignored in this context. Particularly in cases where a synchronous learning model was not adopted, language practice with an instructor or classmate was practically nonexistent. Even if speaking exercises were assigned, it was difficult to hold students accountable for them.

Despite the challenges of remote language instruction, there are several studies that point to effective strategies to engage students with content and allow them to learn through peer interaction. Arnold and Ducate (2006) advocate for the use of discussion boards in teacher preparation courses as well as online WL courses. In a learning environment with limited face-to-face interaction, this medium can allow for the exchange of information and ideas, while promoting social and cognitive stimulation. The same rationale can be applied for using platforms like Seesaw, Flipgrid, and even Zoom’s breakout room feature to allow for student interaction.

Researchers such as McNeil (2016) have called for supplemental professional development to prepare teachers and teacher candidates for remote learning, as well as online webinars that can provide similar training in the event of potential future crises (Toquero & Talidong, 2020). Moreover, it is likely that teacher preparation programs will continue to make changes to their curriculum to address emergency remote instruction, as it is something that 66% of surveyed educators support, according to a study by Trust and
The literature we have examined here outlines the socioemotional, course design, and programmatic aspects of language teaching and teacher education that were impacted by the pandemic. We note that most studies examining these challenges have taken a holistic look at teacher preparation programs or language teaching in general, rather than specific content areas and/or experiences in this context. To our knowledge, there has been no research on the challenges of WL student teachers during the pandemic outside of the context of coursework or within-university program decisions. Given the essential role that cooperating schools and teachers hold in mentoring student teachers, this is a critical gap in the literature that we hope to begin to fill with this study.

3. Research questions

RQ1 How were world language student teaching experiences affected by the onset of the COVID19 pandemic?
RQ2 How did this experience vary based on how administrations were able to respond to the global lockdown?

4. Context, conceptual framework, and methods

4.1. Participants

This study focuses on the narratives of five WL candidates, who are also the co-authors of this study. Three of the candidates were studying to become Spanish teachers, while two were preservice French teachers; all candidates studied and worked in the North-eastern United States. These participant researchers ranged in age from 20 to 23 years at the time of the study and are relatively diverse by U.S. educator standards in terms of gender and racial/ethnic identity. Michele is a postsecondary instructor in world languages teacher education, and served as a facilitator for the teacher candidates’ research process, as well as co-writer of the final product. Table 1 offers more details on participant researcher demographics.

4.1.1. Context

The participant researchers in this study taught at several of their university’s partnership schools during their semester of student teaching. These districts encompass myriad socioeconomic, geographic, and racial demographics. In Table 2 we note the District Reference Group within which each student teacher worked during the onset of the pandemic. According to the Connecticut School Finance Group (2016), “the District Reference Groups (DRGs) classification system, used by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), groups local public-school districts together based on the similar socioeconomic status of their students” (p. 1). Letters that are closer to the beginning of the alphabet correspond to higher socioeconomic statuses. As will be seen in the findings, schools in different DRGs reacted differently to the pandemic.

Typically, student teachers engage in a gradual takeover of all courses during their semester-long practicum, teaching all courses for at least seven weeks before gradually transferring these courses back to their cooperating teacher. Of course, prior to the pandemic WL teaching, like teaching for all content areas, was conducted 100% in person, although technological tools such as Kahoot, FlipGrid, and Google Classroom were utilized both in class and for homework in most districts.

4.2. Conceptual framework

In this article we use a critical, collaborative autoethnographic approach to investigate our experiences as teacher candidates as we adapted to the sudden shift to emergency remote learning (Lapadat, 2009; Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2010; Benoit, 2016). Autoethnography is a well-known approach in qualitative research that positions the researcher as participant, focusing on “a researcher’s lived experience as a route to illuminating aspects of a culture or society ( Devries 2012; Ellis, 2004)” (Ohito, 2019, p. 252). Autoethnography challenges positivist research epistemologies by highlighting the personal and the emotional (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ohito, 2019; Tilley-Lubbs, 2014), rather than an artificial “objectivity.” In the words of Tilley-Lubbs:

Expongo abiertamente mi presencia en el estudio, sin tratar de disfrazarla bajo el pretexto de la objetividad. Entonces cualquier persona que lea el trabajo puede formar sus propias ideas, sabiendo como soy participante en el estudio y que mi interpretación refleja mi selección de los datos a incluir y cómo presentarlos.

Table 1

Participant researcher demographics.

| Name or pseudonym | Age during study | Gender identity | Racial/ethnic identity |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Michele           | 50               | Female          | White                  |
| Kelly             | 21               | Female          | White                  |
| Benjamin          | 23               | Male            | Latino (Salvadorean)   |
| Tamara            | 21               | Female          | Biracial (Jamaican/White) |
| Jeremy            | 21               | Male            | White                  |
| Naomi             | 20               | Female          | Native American        |

* We use pseudonyms for participant-researcher reflections for the purposes of confidentiality.
Table 2
Details on languages taught and schools.

| Name   | Language taught | School Demographics                  | District Reference Group | Level of language taught          |
|--------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Kelly  | Spanish         | Urban, racially diverse              | H                        | Spanish 3 and 4 (high school)     |
| Benjamin | Spanish       | Suburban, majority White            | B                        | Spanish 3 and 4 (high school)     |
| Tamara | Spanish         | Urban, racially diverse              | G                        | Spanish 1 and 4 (high school)     |
| Jeremy | French          | Rural, majority White               | D                        | French 1 and 2 (middle school)    |
| Naomi  | French          | Rural, majority White               | C                        | French 1, 2, and 3 (high school)  |

[I openly expose my presence in the study, without trying to disguise it under the pretext of objectivity. Thus, any person who reads the work can form their own ideas, knowing how I am a participant in the study and that my interpretation reflects my selection of data to include and how to present them] (p. 271).

Our autoethnographic work for this study is critical in that its purpose is to analyze and interpret the role of our experiences on our development as teachers (Benoit, 2016), particularly within larger systems of power such as schools (Rennels, 2014). This work is also critical in its collaborative nature. Our process for constructing the narratives about our experiences enabled us to capture the “process of praxis,” while our reading and analysis of each other’s work fostered “opportunities for solidarity” among teacher candidates who are typically not engaged in academic research (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012, p. 147). We found ourselves reflected in the position expressed by Lin et al. (2004) with respect to TESOL educators:

Frontline TESOL workers (typically female classroom teachers) do not have a chance to incorporate their experiences and activities into prestigious mainstream theories and research because they are rarely given the institutional resources and time to theorize, share, and publish their experiences in the discipline’s prestigious journals (p. 496).

Finally, an autoethnographic approach determines the validity of a product by how much it is “lifelike, believable, and possible’ (Ellis, 2004, p. 124). Under Michele’s guidance, we learned how to use “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) to add lifelike elements to our story, while our collaborative analytical process allowed us to triangulate inferences across our different stories, enhancing both believability and possibility. Thus, our decision to write and analyze our own stories, rather than diminishing the validity of our findings, offered an alternative way of viewing the impact of emergency remote learning from the deeply personal perspective of those voices who are frequently not heard in academic contexts. In the process of sharing our unique stories of the same event, we began to discover patterns, outliers, and variables we had not previously considered. Through this collaboration we were able to delve below the surface of our own individual emotions and experiences to make inferences about systems of power and access to education. Our takeaways from all five case stories showed that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and that a “multi-voiced collective” can be productive and empowering. In the following section we discuss our methods of data collection and analysis in more detail.

4.3. Methods

Collaborative autoethnography was used by Lapadat (2009) with her own graduate students. Similar to Lapadat, Michele worked with the other authors to identify prompts that we would individually respond to in narrative form. These narratives were then shared among all authors to analyze for common and divergent themes. Michele probed each author for clarifying and additional information using open-ended feedback (e.g., “tell me more about what happened here”).

Once these probes were addressed, the narratives then underwent a process of thematic coding (Gibbs, 2018), including careful reiterative readings of the case stories. Similar to Lapadat’s (2009) work, this process was also collaborative, with all authors working together on Google Docs to identify key themes relating to our reflections on student teaching during the pandemic through open and focused coding (Glaser, 2016). We see the result of this work reflected in Ellis and Berger’s (2003) maxim that “(U)nderstandings that emerge among all parties during interaction—what they learn together—are as compelling as the stories each brings to the session” (p. 857). We also see glimpses of our own process in Sister Scholars’ (2021) notions of “collaborative conversations” and “co-constructed knowledge.”

Analytic memo writing organized our themes into a cohesive narrative, which was then shaped into the final product. It was important for us to include all of our voices in this textual product; thus, our findings section reflects the “multi-voiced polyphony” expressed by Sister Scholars (2021) in their own work (p. 4). By writing about the same event from different contexts, we were able to reflect upon and process the multiple variables that contributed to our experiences, while at the same time “creating space to share, construct, co-construct and reconstruct this work in a relational manner that rings true to both ‘we’ and ‘I.’” (p. 4).

5. Findings

When analyzing the narratives, we noted the following common themes among our narratives: a) negative feelings of disappointment, denial and uncertainty regarding our semester and requirements; b) feeling disconnected from students, staff, and administration; c) lowered expectations for students and student teachers; and d) decreased responsibilities in the case of some, but not all, student teachers. Of note are how resources, or a lack thereof, at each cooperating school dictated student teaching experiences, even though we were all in the same certification program and worked with schools that were all within the university’s partnership
districts. This suggests that the digital divide exacerbated by the pandemic not only had a profound effect on students, but also on ourselves, regardless of our personal socioeconomic contexts.

5.1. Negative feelings: Disappointment, denial, and uncertainty

A shared experience among the five case stories was a barrage of negative feelings. Almost all of us expressed to some degree recurring feelings of denial regarding the worsening public health crisis. Benjamin expressed how he dealt with current events during early March with a certain level of “skepticism […] never [imagining] things would escalate to the point where schools would be closed.” Amidst the constant stress of student teaching, it became a survival tactic to adopt a presumption of denial and/or ignorance of the news of each day to stay completely focused on juggling the day-to-day tasks of student teaching. Kelly wrote “On my end, I thought that if I ignored the news of pandemic closures it wouldn’t happen.”

When news of the closures across neighboring districts started to reach each participant, the reality of the situation began to take hold. Like many people worldwide, we did not perceive the news of possible lockdowns as the months-long situation it eventually became. Even if we were aware of the potential interruptive effects of school closings, no one believed it would last longer than two weeks. Tamara wrote:

My initial thoughts about the pandemic were that it was not that serious and it was basically going to be a 2-week vacation from student teaching and I would be back. Then when school was shut down indefinitely, I got worried about how I would continue student teaching and fulfill all the requirements, maintain my role in the classroom, and complete my edTPA assessment.

What was born out of this period was a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety for the unknown times ahead. We, our schools, and our teacher education program all struggled to support each other and our students during this time, with no way to resume teaching in its previous form. Tamara continued, “Things started to get overwhelming and uncertain, which is something I can barely handle because I like to have a plan for things and know what is going on and what to expect.” As we were new to the profession and just starting to get accustomed to the routines and demands of leading a classroom, we felt a distinct level of disappointment. Kelly described a “complete derailment of [her] momentum that [she] had painstakingly cultivated during the in-person half of student teaching.” Benjamin echoed this idea about his own professional progress:

By the time March came around, I started to feel like I was really getting the hang of student teaching. I was past the point of “survival,” understood all of the daily routines, developed a rhythm that worked for me, and I felt I could start to refine my teaching practices and begin to challenge myself to do better.

Although we were frequently told to expect the unexpected and to be flexible during student teaching, we were unable to prepare for what took place in March 2020, which created a host of new problems that were not previously associated with student teaching. Working through these issues proved frustrating, as our responsibilities were not often dictated directly by departments; as seen in the following section, the level of control to which we had become accustomed all but evaporated.

5.2. Disconnect from students, staff, administration

During the shift to emergency remote learning, a disconnect from both the students and the cooperating school was prevalent. One common theme among us was being “low on the chain of communication;” Tamara noted that “all the information given by the district about how to respond to the pandemic was going to my cooperating teacher” who then had to “fill [her] in.” Jeremy discussed this phenomenon in more detail:

I had to hear most all the information from my teacher, who had to hear it from someone who was higher up, and so on. As a student teacher, I didn’t have the same access to the information and updates as the teachers and staff of the school.

In addition to being at “the bottom of the food chain” (Benjamin), the inability to see students face to face or even conduct synchronous lessons was another form of disconnect. Jeremy detailed how “there was no system set up to conduct synchronous lessons,” and therefore instruction became asynchronous. Benjamin also cited his district’s decision not to “implement a synchronous plan.” Naomi described her new mode of instruction as “highly individualized” and primarily “self-taught.”

The major changes in instruction style also meant that we were allotted less time to work with our students. Jeremy noted that “teachers were told to keep the daily work brief, no more than 30 min per class period” and that “Wednesday would be used as a ‘catch up’ day.” Others among us had even less time to work with students in any capacity. Tamara wrote that she was not “able to work with the students unless they needed extra support,” while Kelly described the following:

As a student teacher, I wouldn’t be able to give any new assignments or create my own lessons until the last two weeks of my semester […] When it came to distance learning, we only could assign two assignments per week.

Another significant component in this disconnect was the strategies and activities that we could no longer utilize due to the shift to remote learning. Jeremy had this to say:

One thing that students loved was the incorporation of music and game style learning. Of course, I continued to include these themes as best I could after the switch to online learning but it simply wasn’t the same, considering the asynchronous aspect and the fact that I had so limited time for my class […]

Tamara wrote about her longing for the “classroom environment that was created and the rapport [she] had with the students,” both of which she was unable to recreate through remote learning. Naomi described a multitude of difficulties with online learning,
including scaffolding comprehensible input and checking for comprehension:

I was unable to point and use gestures as much as I was able to before. Laggy videos and the camera not always being on me made it difficult. Also, it became much more difficult to check student comprehension. I could not see their faces and reactions as clearly over Zoom.

Tamara detailed similar experiences of disconnect due to technology access or complications:

It was hard to get the students to participate because they would be muted, camera off, or did not even show up for class. In one class, there were students who did not have access to a computer or the internet, making it difficult to give them their work and receive it from them.

Naomi had a similar experience, dealing with students who simply “refused to work,” as well as emails that went unanswered from students and parents alike. The lack of parental engagement also contributed to this sense of disconnect from the school; several of us mentioned emails to parents going unanswered. When parents did respond, it was often to complain about what they perceived as excessive work from WL classes. Stated Jeremy:

In most of these emails, parents mentioned that students spent so much time on work for math or science classes, and were not left with any time to do the work for their French class. This just goes to show the mentality that math and science classes continue to be prioritized over world language classes.

As seen in this section and the section to follow, the disconnect we experienced from our cooperating schools and students was not only due to the uncertainty of the pandemic, but also to the pervasive belief that WL courses were less important than other content areas. As will be seen, these factors led to substantially lowered expectations for students and student teachers.

5.3. Lowered expectations

During the sudden shift from in person to remote learning, students and teachers alike were forced to adapt to both a new learning model and the realities of the digital divide. Districts struggled to create a reasonable, equitable learning environment for their students. Administrators were unsure what technology or resources students were equipped with at home. This uncertainty led to a shift in expectations for students from their teachers, particularly in the case of world languages. In most cases, these shifts came from school administrators, who advised a decreased emphasis on content. As Kelly states,

In talks with my cooperating teacher as we reworked our lesson plans to match those of all the other Spanish 3 teachers in the department, we noted to ourselves that expectations needed to be thrown out the window.

Instead of academic expectations, teachers were told to focus more on student engagement and mental health. School was now supposed to be a place where students could go to find some normalcy, but not be overwhelmed by content and work completion. In some districts, students were not allowed to receive grades during this time. As Naomi stated,

We were told by the administration that the content we delivered was not as important during the emergency remote learning.

We should put our focus on communicating with the students and keeping them positive.

As WL teachers, these modifications challenged the very nature of the teaching practices we had learned. Best practices in WL learning calls for a large amount of conversation, communication, and delivery in the target language. Yet due to the lack of synchronous interaction, any acquisition of the target language was nearly impossible. As Tamara said, “I noticed that the amount of Spanish being spoken in all the classes decreased a lot.” Benjamin concurred, “While we were still able to deliver meaningful, educational content, the lack of time spent speaking in Spanish in real time was devastating.” Expectations for target language use for students and teachers decreased, with classes that used to require 90% target language reduced to minimal target language communication. This lack of target language communication in class was disappointing, as we had learned in their preparation that this was essential to successful language acquisition. Tamara noted:

A big change for me was that I went from speaking close to 100% in the target language (at least trying to) with my honors students while in person, to using almost all English with them online.

Just as we were unable to provide comprehensible target-language input to our students, students were also unable to speak to each other in the target language. Even during a normal school year, interpersonal skills are difficult to encourage in the classroom. With the online platform, it became more difficult. Tamara’s class, she wrote, “featured no interpersonal activities as the district decided it was not doable.” These reduced expectations led to an even greater inability to deliver meaningful instruction, as the delivery of content in the target language was reduced to almost nothing. The lowered expectations seemed to transfer to us as well, as we saw our own roles decrease in the classroom.

5.4. Decreased roles and disparate experiences for student teachers

One consequence of the lockdown revealed different approaches to remote teaching that changed our responsibilities in unequal ways. Being visitors in the classroom meant that we were not only subject to changes implemented by the school district, but also by our cooperating teachers. Unfortunately, many of us saw a role reduction because of the lockdown, largely related to the one-to-one access to technology already set in place—or not—depending on the district. This meant that we were given varying responsibilities that were, in many cases, greatly reduced from the largely full-time position we all held equally prior to mid-March.

Those of us teaching in schools within District Reference Groups B, C, and D reported being able to get back to work relatively
quickly, in comparison to those in schools with a lower socioeconomic grouping. However, even those student teachers experienced a change in roles due to the nature of remote teaching. Jeremy and Benjamin, in District Groups B and C, respectively, did not experience reduced roles; nevertheless, they did undergo significant changes to their responsibilities and daily routines. Both districts adopted a similar asynchronous remote learning plan, featuring daily assignments intended to take 20–30 min to complete. Both participants reported spending much more time lesson planning, despite a net decrease in their workload. Jeremy reflected on the difficult adjustment to this new kind of lesson planning:

I had to spend 2–3 times longer in preparation alone, as I had to be extremely thorough and teach material asynchronously, something that I had almost no experience with. All this, coupled with the fact that I was teaching a foreign language (French), in which engagement and participation are so essential to success in learning, made the adjustment very difficult […]

For Kelly (District H), the school could not guarantee one-to-one access to technology and was forced to push back reopening to April 20th. There, lessons were submitted to the district to be screened, then delivered to students. She was still able to stay involved by participating in department meetings twice a week, where they collaborated to prepare and implement district policy. However, up until that point, there had been little to no communication from the district, leaving her unsure about the future. Tamara (District G) reported a similar experience, and discussed the rationale behind her role reduction when she was eventually able to return:

My cooperating teacher said that when schools reopened, planning lessons became more complicated for teachers and she did not want me to have to go through that, which I appreciated but I also wish I was able to plan so I could maintain the role in the classroom.

These disparate experiences intersected with the previously reported themes of lack of control and limited communication with cooperation teachers. Unfortunately, it was no coincidence that some schools were able to reopen for distance learning immediately and others were not. Districts B, C, and D had higher average family income and property values; for the most part, each student already had their own laptop or tablet. Districts G and H, having fewer resources than the others, unfortunately missed out on 1–2 months of learning due to the digital divide; those of us who taught in these districts missed out on a similar amount of time teaching.

6. Discussion

In examining these stories and common themes, we find several parallels to existing literature on language teachers and teaching during the pandemic. First, the environment of uncertainty and our reactions to that environment corresponded closely to McIntyre et al.’s (2020) discussion of avoidant coping mechanisms among language teachers. Like those teachers, many of us saw the onset of the pandemic as a temporary situation and avoided reflecting upon it in a more profound way until school districts were either temporarily shut down or transitioning. Our resulting feelings of disappointment, discouragement, and frustration with the abrupt shift in our student teaching responsibilities were mirrored in Hadar et al. (2020), whose teacher candidates also emphasized the stresses, pressures, and uncertainty of what the remainder of student teaching would entail.

Similarly, the overall feeling of unpreparedness among ourselves, our cooperating teachers, and administrators was another point in common with the literature. Moser et al. (2020) noted that even WL instructors who had taught online prior to the pandemic felt unprepared to face the particular challenges of the pandemic response; as novice teachers who had been taught the importance of in-person interaction, we felt even less prepared. The systematic nature of this lack of preparedness led to a drastic reduction in expectations for students and student teachers alike, and we struggled to modify our curriculum for online, often asynchronous contexts. This reduction closely paralleled findings by Hamilton et al. (2020) and Herold and Kurtz (2020), who wrote about the greatly reduced expectations for students and student teachers alike, and we struggled to modify our curriculum for online, often asynchronous contexts. For Kelly (District H), the school could not guarantee one-to-one access to technology and was forced to push back reopening to April 20th. There, lessons were submitted to the district to be screened, then delivered to students. She was still able to stay involved by participating in department meetings twice a week, where they collaborated to prepare and implement district policy. However, up until that point, there had been little to no communication from the district, leaving her unsure about the future. Tamara (District G) reported a similar experience, and discussed the rationale behind her role reduction when she was eventually able to return:

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Our personal experiences during our student teaching semester, as well as how these experiences were reflected in the extant literature, offered an opportunity to propose several suggestions for future language teacher candidates, which we outline below.

7. Implications

Disparate experiences for student teachers and an overall disconnect from students, staff, and the regular language routines of the in-person classroom revealed several implications for how preservice teachers and teacher preparation programs should proceed. Across all five districts, we experienced feelings of disconnect, disengagement, and disappointment with our opportunities to learn. The digital divide and lack of adequate response from the state and federal levels prompted months of setbacks and diminished access to quality education for ourselves and our students. In the emerging post-COVID world marked by the rollout of vaccines, lessening of restrictions, and the hope that schools can safely and efficiently reopen on a nationwide basis, the education landscape will nonetheless be changed forever. The stakeholders of teacher education programs, current and future student teachers, teachers in the field, and
cooperating districts must consider these findings to inform best practices and responsibilities going forward.

We have determined an action plan of steps to help close the divide of disparate experiences for student teachers and ensure that for the coming school years all relevant parties are adequately prepared to give student teachers equitable access to quality clinical experiences. First, we recommend an adjustment to curriculum and clinic expectations and requirements to reflect the rapidly changing technological world we live in, so as to accommodate the possibility of teaching remotely or within a hybrid model. The student teachers in this study noted a substantial increase in resources and training for online delivery as the pandemic progressed, and agreed that teacher preparation programs would, and should, be changed profoundly to reflect the new technological needs. Thus, teacher preparation programs should equip pre-service teachers with the skills they need to teach remotely by: Requiring some clinic hours to be done remotely; assigning some micro-teach lessons to be delivered remotely during methods courses; and, above all, communicating extensively with school districts and cooperating teachers about the role of student teachers during remote learning. The overall goal between partnership schools and student teachers should be the commitment to maintaining meaningful engagement in the classroom in the event of a transition to remote learning, or similar, so that students do not lose instructional time and student teachers can receive the appropriate experience to prepare them for the workforce.

Second, school supervisors and responsible personnel must work to better maintain communication with student teachers about changes in district plans, as they are integral staff members during their student teaching. We ask that cooperating districts ensure that student teachers receive district email accounts and are on the appropriate listservs upon beginning their placements, so as to help ease the transition and stream of communication proactively instead of reactively. Student teachers need to be provided with the technology necessary for remote learning at the district level, including proper training on how to use technology specific to the classroom. IT/technology departments must ensure resources are allocated to ensure student teachers can engage in the classroom at home, such as school computers, software, and login information shared for all online programs.

On a state and federal level, findings regarding inequitable distribution of technology and digital access during this time reveals a greater need for the U.S. education system to do as much as possible to close the digital divide in ways that provide all students with the proper resources and opportunities to learn. This means providing training for teachers, both preservice and in-service, on how to use technology to create meaningful, culturally responsive lessons and working towards state and nationwide access to devices. In situations where students may continue to attend school remotely, schools must be prepared to provide in-home hotspots to students without high-speed internet.

With respect to teaching world languages in particular, findings from this study reinforce the already urgent need of WL teachers to advocate for their subject as an integral component of cultivating intercultural competence and global citizenship. If a global pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are more connected to other parts of the world than we ever thought possible. Consequently, remote teaching, hybrid learning models and remote learning days should be reconstructed as possibilities rather than hindrances; WL teachers will need to acquire extra skills that allow them to deliver comprehensible input, interpersonal communication and target language instruction as part of an online model. As we emerge from the pandemic it is more important than ever for WL teachers to continue on the path of advocacy for their profession by demonstrating how engaging and relevant content can be created and implemented in multiple modalities.

8. Limitations

Our autoethnographic approach proved very effective in detailing the various common and divergent experiences that we faced during student teaching. There were, however, some limitations. First, we all completed our student teaching in one state and, more specifically, in the Northeast region of the state. Additionally, we completed our certification program at one campus. Though this allowed the study some consistency, it meant that we did not take into account student teaching experiences at other universities and regions in the U.S. However, we note that studies by Hadar et al. (2020) and Quezada et al. (2020), which examined student teaching experiences in other parts of the U.S. and world, paralleled several of our own findings. Another important limitation is the number of participants. While we opted for a deeper, detailed exploration through the use of autoethnography, the addition of quantitative methods, such as a survey of how the entire 2020 cohort of the participants’ teacher preparation program navigated the early stages of the pandemic, would have been helpful to situate and aggregate the experiences and feelings of a larger number of participants.

9. Conclusions

In this article we discuss the experiences of a group of French and Spanish student teachers during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this study mainly discussed how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities in access to technology and infrastructure and the perception of world languages as a “less important” content area, we would like to conclude by emphasizing the important skills we gained in response to the pandemic, which we plan to utilize in our future careers. These skills were not only in the area of technology use, but also in increasing our “soft skills” of flexibility, patience, and empathy. We learned to give more praise, institute regular check-ins, and become increasingly creative in our ways to engage students. For these reasons, as Jeremy states, “This experience, with all its ups and downs, has helped me to become a better teacher moving forward.” It is our hope that these improvements, combined with continued advocacy for world languages and additional support from teacher education programs and cooperating districts, will contribute to further improvements in WL teacher preparation.
Appendix. Narrative Prompts

1. Before the pandemic, how was student teaching going? What were some of your successes and failures? What were you worried about? What were you doing really well at?
2. What were your initial thoughts and concerns right at the beginning of the pandemic, when schools shut down? What challenges did you face with respect to communicating with your students, your cooperating teacher, your advisor, other stakeholders?
3. What was difficult about student teaching during a pandemic? What was easy or a strength of student teaching during this time?
4. Was there anything in particular about being a Spanish or French teacher that made emergency remote teaching/learning challenging (or successful)?
5. How do you feel that world language instruction was perceived during the pandemic (e.g., with respect to importance, relevance, etc.). How was this perception relative to other content areas?
6. How do you feel that student teaching was perceived during the pandemic (e.g., with respect to importance, relevance, etc.)?
7. Can you think of any incidents, events, or stories that best exemplify how you, your cooperating teacher, the language department you worked with, and/or your cooperating school responded to the pandemic (negative or positive)? Keep in mind that, if this article is published, your name and the school you worked at will be kept confidential.
8. Looking back on your spring semester, what could you have done differently? What could the school, cooperating teacher, advisor, school, etc. have done differently to support you?
9. How do you feel emergency remote learning changed your role and identity as a teacher (if at all)?

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