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# Voices From the Field: NC Rural Teachers' Experiences During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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**Audience:** Educator Preparation Programs; School & District Leaders ; Policymakers

**Topic:** The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, and North Carolina's rural areas were no exception. Teachers in these rural schools faced unique challenges such as limited access to technology, healthcare resources, and professional support. This research aims to understand the experiences of teachers in rural settings during the pandemic and offers recommendations for educator preparation programs.

## CENTRAL QUESTION

What were the key skills that rural teachers in NC found most beneficial in adapting to the challenges of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic that could inform EPP courses, curricula, and student teaching experiences?

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted a total of seventeen focus groups in rural public school districts across North Carolina. The study participants were comprised of 83 educators at the elementary, middle, and high school level.

## EVIDENCE

- ▶ Literature search on teacher turnover and EPP curricula
- ▶ Preliminary data from our study on workforce effectiveness in NC rural schools during the pandemic
- ▶ Focus groups

## KEY INSIGHTS

### 1. Integrate comprehensive mental health and well-being training for pre-Service teachers into existing curricula. This could include stress management, self-care techniques, and resources for accessing mental health support.

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, stressors from the pandemic including increased job demands and negative perceptions of educators impacted teachers' overall well-being and mental health. In the 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey, educators reported worse well-being than the general population (Doan et al., 2023).

Some educators in our study reported feeling unsupported, highlighting the need for better care and understanding of their well-being.

*One teacher noted, "When you're a teacher, you're put in a very strange position of if you speak up with how you're feeling...you're in a position of well 'don't you care about your students?' I care about students, but do you care about us? So if we're caring about the individual, we've got to start at this: mental health awareness...It's something that we need to continue focusing on"*

The pandemic brought mental health awareness to the forefront, prompting professional development focused on self-care and mental health for educators. *"We had to do a lot of training. It was brought to the forefront because so many lives were lost. Even though we're working, we still got to take care of ourselves."*

A positive outcome was the recognition that educators need to prioritize their own mental health to effectively support their students.

### 2. Adopt an Early Field Experience Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework to train pre-service teachers in effective school wide collaboration.

Research suggests that successful cooperation between educators can lead to higher student engagement, improve academic performance and better pedagogical practices, however, barriers such as time limits and varying degrees of preparation can inhibit productivity and effective collaboration (Riddell & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016). The pandemic fostered a significant shift towards greeted collaboration and resource sharing among teachers. Educator preparation programs and districts should capitalize on this increased desire for structured, collaborative work time by prioritizing training in successful PLC models.

*A teacher in our study shared "once the pandemic hit, everybody felt like they were just scrambling to kind of keep up. So, everybody was sharing everything, and that sense of collaboration just really exploded. And now it's kind of a norm. If you... have a great idea, a great resource, or a great lesson, you immediately share it out with everybody."*

Some districts instituted full-day professional development. Educators shared *"We did all of our planning, and it helped so much, we had time to plan and plan thoroughly...working with my department and that was [one of] the best things we did."*

Teachers supported each other by sharing strategies, technology tips, and resources, enhancing their collective ability to adapt to remote and hybrid learning environments.

One teacher shared, *“just talking to one another that really [helped]. I think that team concept and that bonding really helped me..that morale support”*

The renewed sense of community and teamwork was crucial for maintaining morale and improving instructional practices. A teacher noted, *“we were all sort of learning on the fly about new technology and lesson delivery, and all these new resources that we could access. We all became important resources for one another.”*

### 3. Prioritize comprehensive Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) training for educators.

Fewer than ten percent of educator preparation programs include coursework on key aspects of SEL such as self-management, relationship skill, and self-awareness (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017).

Teachers in the study emphasized the critical importance of social and emotional learning for students, which became more challenging with remote learning. Research from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that over 80% of public schools surveyed reported that the Covid-19 pandemic had a negative impact on students’ behavioral development and social-emotional development.

One-on-one interactions and relationship-building were seen as essential components of effective SEL, which require adequate staffing and resources. One educator elaborated, *“I’m not sure people realize how important social and emotional learning is for kids. And you can’t, you truly cannot do that without the bodies in the building to do it...one on one conversations with the kid goes so much further than people even realize. You may have a child that walks in one day and other than their classroom teacher, no one else speaks to them...”*

Other teachers echoed these sentiments, one said, *“We saw a lot of decline in our social, emotional status with the students coming back into the classroom. They didn’t know how to interact with other students or how to express their emotions in adequate ways.”*

The pandemic highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to education that includes SEL alongside academic instruction. One teacher shared recommendations *“[we need] true, good professional development...I mean true strategies that can really help teachers. Having qualified trained behavior support [and] a holistic, academic, social, emotional, behavior approach and professional development that helps teachers...that is going to be critical.”*

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