

TEACHER EDUCATION

A False Introduction: Becoming a HPE Teacher During a Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted health and physical education (HPE) teaching, particularly for preservice and first-year teachers. This study explored how six HPE teachers in the Eastern U.S. adapted to these challenges during the pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis revealed five major themes: (a) “You want me to teach HOW?”—navigating new instructional methods, (b) “PE without equipment and six feet apart”—adjusting to safety protocols, (c) “Behind the Scenes”—the hidden challenges of remote and hybrid models, (d) “I became a behavior management guru”—addressing increased behavior issues, and (e) “The Pandemic Crater”—the academic and developmental impacts. These findings highlight the profound challenges these teachers face and underscore the need for continued support and resources to help educators adapt to evolving circumstances during crises like the pandemic.

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School Lockdown Protocols

COVID-19 arrived in the spring of 2020 in the US and forced schools around the world to adapt to new ways to deliver instruction to students (Meinck et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2020). In the geographic area of this study, “the pandemic resulted in divisions converting to remote learning for the second half of the 2019-20 school year and much of the 2020-21 school year” (LARC, 2022, p.1). At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, school divisions had the authority to decide whether to deliver in-person instruction (LARC, 2022). At the beginning of 2020-2021, the majority of school divisions provided remote or hybrid instruction—51% used a remote model, 42% used a hybrid model, and 8% used a face-to-face model. By the end of the 2020-2021 school year, only one division remained remote, 55% were using a hybrid model, and 44% were fully in-person (LARC, 2022). Senate Bill 1303 (2021) mandated school divisions “to offer in-person instruction to students for the 2021-22 school year” School divisions were permitted exceptions that allowed for hybrid or remote instruction to be used by (a) schools during periods of high COVID-19 transmission, (b) staff who had been exposed to COVID-19, or (c) students with health and safety concerns related to in-person instruction upon request of their parent or guardian (SB 1303, 2021). This created a variety of experiences for pre-service and first-year teachers in the state.

Loss of Student-Teaching Experience

Student teaching is a form of field experience that is an essential part of teacher education (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). Studies show that teacher preparation programs that offer a school-based student-teaching experience have a significant impact on teacher preparation. (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Knight et al., 2015; Leeferink et al., 2015; Sadler & Klosterman, 2009). Studies have also linked field experience placements with increased teacher efficacy (Gurvitch & Metzler, 2009; Ronfeldt, 2015) and teacher retention. (Ronfeldt et al., 2014; Whipp & Geronime, 2015). As a result, most state departments require preservice teachers to complete a designated number of hours or days of a field placement within a school division to obtain initial state licensure (Thompson et al., 2020). The state of this study requires a minimum of 320 clock hours, of which 120 clock

hours are embedded in experiential, field-based opportunities during coursework (Virginia Administrative Code, 2018).

First Year Teaching

The first year of teaching is widely recognized as one of the most challenging and formative periods in a teacher's career. Research consistently highlights that new teachers often face a steep learning curve as they transition from theory to practice, navigating classroom management, lesson planning, and developing relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators (Ingersoll, 2012; Veenman, 1984). First-year teachers frequently report feelings of isolation, stress, and overwhelm due to the complexities of the profession, especially in balancing the dual roles of educator and disciplinarian (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). In particular, novice teachers often struggle to establish classroom routines and maintain student engagement, both critical components of effective teaching. The presence of a supportive environment, including mentorship and administrative guidance, has been shown to mitigate some of these challenges, aiding in teacher retention and professional growth (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, when such support is lacking, new teachers are more likely to experience burnout, question their career choice, or leave the profession altogether. These common first-year struggles were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many teachers had to adjust to remote and hybrid learning formats without the usual in-person support or traditional instructional methods (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Models of Instruction

Pre-service teachers, who had been completing field placements during the 2019-2020 year, experienced a shorter in-person internship due to COVID-19 school closures. Not only did they have a reduced field experience, but they were forced to find their first job as a licensed teacher in a less-than-ideal situation. As mentioned above, the start of the 2020-2021 school year had a variety of different teaching formats (face-to-face, hybrid, and online) across the state. Ninety-three percent of them started their first year of teaching in either a remote or a hybrid teaching model (LARC, 2022). Pressley and Croyle (2021, p.160) suggested that these teachers entered teaching "with lower teacher efficacy as they enter the class-

room compared to previous first-year teachers because of the limited preservice teaching internships.”

Along with a lack of preservice internships, these teachers had to navigate teaching online in many instances. Online physical education (OLPE) classes left teachers unprepared, with little or no guidance on how to proceed, leading to a trial-and-error pedagogical approach (Jeong & So, 2020). The Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) research suggests that OLPE is not the same as in-person PE; they often have different focuses or goals (Goad & Jones, 2017). Seventy percent of OLPE for secondary schools did not meet national guidelines of 225 minutes of PE per week (Daum & Buschner, 2012). Daum & Woods (2015) examined K-12 Physical Education Teacher Education faculty perceptions of OLPE and were unanimous in their belief that OLPE should not be designed for elementary-aged children. Which, of course, creates a huge problem for schools forced to administer physical education remotely or in hybrid models.

Purpose of the Study

Research has examined pre-service teachers’ and teachers’ perceptions of the challenges of teaching in a pandemic. The current pandemic forced many schools to adopt different teaching methods or combinations of methods. This study aimed to focus on the cohorts of teachers who experienced disruption in preservice teaching experiences and then started their first year teaching during pandemic-related teaching formats. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate HPE teachers’ perceptions of first-year teaching following disruptions to student teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were six HPE teachers ($n = 6$; all females) who student taught and began their first year of teaching between the spring of 2020 and the fall of 2022. All six HPE teachers attended the same PETE program at the university. The HPE teachers included elementary teachers ($n = 2$), middle school teachers ($n = 2$), and high school teachers ($n = 2$). The racial/ethnic makeup

of the HPE teachers was 83.3% ($n = 5$) White Caucasian, 16.6% ($n = 1$) African American, and 16.6%. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with a range of student-teaching and first-year experiences related to the pandemic. This sampling strategy aimed to provide diverse perspectives and rich insights into the research question. All six HPE teachers' identities were kept confidential, with pseudonyms used throughout all documentation to ensure their privacy.

Data Sources

Before data collection, formal approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained to ensure compliance with ethical research standards. The method employed for data collection was in-depth individual interviews, a well-regarded approach for delving into the nuanced dimensions of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Seidman, 2013).

Individual Interviews

HPE teachers participated in individual interviews. Interviews ranged from 13 to 32 minutes ($M = 23:18$). The interview protocol for HPE teachers focused on their experiences with first-year teaching and student teaching during the pandemic. Specifically, questions focused on the format they used during both student teaching and their first year of teaching, the challenges and successes, and the overall impact of the pandemic on them as teachers. A semi-structured interview protocol was used for all individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Thomas et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews facilitate a systematic, iterative data collection process in which questions are structured within a protocol to elicit comprehensive information while ensuring the efficiency of subsequent data analysis (Galletta, 2013).

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio- and video-recorded via the platform Zoom and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis was guided by constant comparison methods (Dey, 1993; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and included an iterative procedure of reducing and triangulating the data to pull out themes gathered (Patton, 2014). Data were initially coded line by line to identify patterns and categories. This is

called open coding and allows for intuitive identification of key ideas (Marshall et al., 2021). The researchers independently compiled lists of codes paired with lines of text and later met as a group to cross-check each other's work, discuss any disagreements, and reach agreement on which codes should be used, updated, or disposed of. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Subsequently, the researchers clustered the initial codes into conceptual categories that encapsulate shared themes among the codes, referred to as axial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Fielding & Lee, 1998). Axial codes were then grouped into themes and subthemes through an iterative process. Themes were refined through multiple rounds of coding and discussions among the research team. As a group, researchers developed themes for their corresponding code groups. Using a master spreadsheet, the researcher applied clustering to develop a diagram of relationships to identify overarching themes. The researchers, through discussion, came to a consensus to identify the overarching themes. To enhance the dependability of findings, participants were provided with summaries of the emergent themes. Participants were invited to provide feedback and clarifications, which were incorporated into the final analysis.

Trustworthiness was achieved in several ways, in line with established recommendations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2014; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness is crucial in qualitative research to establish the credibility, transparency, dependability, and confirmability of study findings (Marshall et al., 2021). First, credibility was established through prolonged engagement with data, crystallization (gathering data from multiple sources), and participant review. Prolonged engagement allowed for a deep understanding of the data (Patton, 2015). Crystallization involved comparing data from interviews, field notes, and relevant literature (Marshall et al., 2021). This was accomplished by having multiple researchers review the findings (Patton, 2014). Participant review engages participants with the transcripts, seeking their reactions and insights (Marshall et al., 2021). This ensured that participants' voices were accurately represented and that findings resonated with their experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 2012). Transparency is the use of conceptual and empirical literature, blended with your sense of self, abilities, and intentions, that contributes to a study's being seen as sound,

trustworthy, and good (Marshall et al., 2021, p. 48). Dependability was ensured through an audit trail that documented all stages of the research process, including data collection, coding, and decision-making. The audit trail (a transparent record of data) provided transparency and traceability of research decisions (Marshall et al., 2021). Confirmability was achieved by maintaining researcher reflexivity. In the present research project, the researchers who engaged in direct, in-person interactions with study participants had to contemplate how their professional backgrounds, personal experiences, and preconceived notions might influence their interactions with the participants. The research team regularly discussed their assumptions, biases, and potential influence on the research process.

Findings

Participant responses produced five themes: (a) You want me to teach HOW?, (b) PE without equipment and six feet apart, (c) Behind the Scenes, (d) I became a behavior management guru, and (e) The Pandemic Crater. These themes were apparent across all participant interviews. Several subthemes are discussed below using quotes from interview transcripts as evidence. Pseudonyms are used in place of participants' actual names.

You Want Me to Teach HOW?

The theme "You want me to teach HOW?" encapsulates the challenges and adaptations faced by student teachers and new teachers as they navigated the complexities of pedagogy during the pandemic. As educational institutions rapidly shifted to remote learning, educators found themselves grappling with unprecedented demands, prompting significant changes in their teaching practices. Two subthemes emerged from the data: delivery methods and virtual physical education. Together, these sub-themes illuminate the profound impact of the pandemic on teaching practices, offering insights into how educators were compelled to rethink and retool their pedagogy in response to the shifting educational landscape.

Delivery Methods

Delivery methods explore how teachers adapted traditional instructional strategies to suit an online environment, often requiring innovative approaches to engage students remotely. The pandemic

significantly impacted teachers' delivery methods, requiring them to quickly adapt to new modes of instruction. Many educators transitioned to fully online teaching, requiring them to reimagine lesson plans and instructional strategies for a digital format. This shift often involved mastering new technologies, creating engaging virtual content, and fostering student interaction and participation in an online environment. Some schools adopted a hybrid approach, blending face-to-face instruction with remote learning. In these settings, teachers faced the challenge of simultaneously engaging students in the classroom and those learning from home. This approach required flexibility and innovative strategies to ensure that both in-person and remote learners received equitable instruction. For example, Bailey said:

I was in front of a computer and also teaching the in-person kids as well. So, I had to make sure that the students over the computer, were hopefully receiving the proper information. Um versus the students that were in person. So, I think that was kind of a challenge, because, of course, the cameras were off. You don't really know if they were really there, or just turned it on and left.

Additionally, educators had to navigate the complexities of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning, often employing a mix of both. Synchronous sessions provided opportunities for live interaction, while asynchronous activities allowed students to learn at their own pace. Morgan said:

So, the first semester of the year was all virtual. So, I was holding three classes a day virtually... The second semester was a little bit different. It was virtual and hybrid. So, some teachers went into the building and were completely in-person and then held like almost like a zoom with their classes with health and PE.

The variety of these approaches highlighted the necessity for teachers to be adaptable and resourceful as they sought to maintain educational continuity during the pandemic.

Virtual Physical Education

The second sub-theme, virtual physical education, delves into the unique challenges of teaching physical education in a virtual setting, highlighting creative strategies to maintain student participation and physical activity despite the constraints of remote learning. Teaching physical education virtually required educators to rethink how they delivered instruction traditionally centered around physical space and equipment. Without access to gymnasiums, fields, or shared equipment, teachers had to design lessons that students could complete at home, often with limited space and resources. Jordan stated, “We were basically just all on the computer doing online health work or just online like quizzes about sports and just learning about sports. Everything was just online. So, it really did make it hard to like, connect with the with the virtual kids because everything at that point was through Google Classroom on the computer.” Tristan replied, “Well, I’m thinking what we did was we would just give them like at home challenges or posted videos and sent them like videos off YouTube, that they were supposed to do.”

PE Without Equipment and Six Feet Away

The theme “PE Without Equipment and Six Feet Away” reflects the significant shifts in physical education teaching practices brought about by the pandemic, focusing on the challenges of conducting classes under stringent safety protocols. As teachers navigated the complexities of ensuring student safety, three sub-themes emerged: equipment limitations, social distancing, and wearing masks.

Equipment Limitations

Due to heightened sanitation concerns, the use of shared equipment in PE classes was largely restricted. This required teachers to design lessons that minimized or completely avoided the use of any gear. Activities that relied on bodyweight exercises, individual fitness routines, and movements that required no additional tools became central to the curriculum. Avery said:

They couldn’t do certain activities. Um, one of my schools was very relaxed about it as long as we kept everything clean. The other one was very strict about what equipment we

could use, and what equipment could be shared. You know whether it had a porous surface or not.

Social Distancing

Maintaining a safe distance between students was another critical aspect of PE during the pandemic. Traditional team sports and close-contact activities were replaced with exercises that allowed students to stay at least six feet apart. Teachers focused on individual skills, non-contact games, and personal fitness challenges that could be conducted within a confined space, ensuring that all students remained safely distanced throughout the lesson. Morgan said:

I feel like they were constantly changing based on the levels of how many COVID cases we had. So, I think the standard was they had to stay six feet apart outside, ten feet apart inside. So, and we only have one gym space. So that was pretty tricky. We were not off. We did tag or anything of that nature. They had to use like 20-foot noodles. It felt like it was a lot of a lot of space was needed. And that was probably the biggest thing that affected us because we had very limited space.

Masks

The requirement to wear masks during PE added another layer of complexity. Teachers had to consider the impact of masks on students' breathing and comfort, particularly during physical exertion. This led to a careful selection of less-intense activities, with more frequent breaks to ensure students could participate safely while wearing masks. Teachers also had to reinforce the importance of mask-wearing and proper mask hygiene, integrating these practices into their instruction. Bailey said:

At first it was kind of challenging, because we still have, like the mask mandate. So, being in a gym with over a hundred kids wearing a mask and having to yell. It was um very challenging, so it would kind of get annoying sometimes because I would have to pull my mouth down the yell directions, pull it back up, pull it back down, make sure somebody is doing the right thing, pull it back up.

Together, these sub-themes illustrate how PE teachers had to re-think and retool their approaches to ensure that physical education remained both safe and effective in a pandemic-affected environment. Despite the challenges, these adaptations allowed educators to continue fostering physical activity and health awareness among students while adhering to necessary safety protocols.

Behind the Scenes

The theme “Behind the Scenes” highlights the often-overlooked challenges that teachers faced outside the classroom during the pandemic. These challenges, while not directly related to classroom instruction, had a profound impact on educators’ ability to teach and support their students effectively. Two sub-themes emerged under this theme: a false introduction and a lack of support.

A False Introduction

Many teachers, especially new and student teachers, began their careers or took on new roles during the pandemic, experiencing what could be described as a “false introduction” to the profession. Rather than the traditional, in-person mentoring and collaborative environments typically found in schools, these educators were introduced to a teaching landscape dominated by remote learning, virtual meetings, and limited face-to-face interaction. This unusual start often left them feeling unprepared and disconnected from the supportive networks that are crucial in the early stages of their careers. Jordan stated:

But it was to me like the false introduction. It was because it wasn't it was nothing like what it is now. Now that we've kind of came back or found some type of normalcy and like all that good stuff. It was just that during when I first started that January 2021. Like I say, it was like ten kids in each class, and then there was like ten kids divided between four teachers or supposed to be four teachers. So, like, you didn't even have really that you had behavior issues. You didn't really have those things that you had control and learn how to deal with. And then the following year, when they came back, it was like, this is reality.

Lack of Support

The lack of adequate support from administrative structures and in professional development was another major challenge. Teachers often found themselves navigating new technologies, instructional methods, and health protocols with minimal guidance. The absence of consistent and reliable support systems, such as professional development opportunities, mental health resources, and clear communication from leadership, left many educators feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Riley said:

I think maybe if we spent a little less time on the COVID mitigation protocols and we did more training via Squeegee and Zoom, I think, and then having an additional training for the health curriculum that they were handing us, I think we would have been much better off if everybody had received those same trainings instead of being like, hey, here's a YouTube link, see if you can figure it out from there. So, I think I think those would have probably been the best strategies in order to like, prepare everybody.

Together, these sub-themes underscore the difficulties teachers faced beyond their immediate teaching duties. The challenges of a false introduction to the profession, scheduling complexities, and a lack of support reveal the broader impacts of the pandemic on educators, highlighting the need for more robust, responsive support systems to help teachers thrive in any educational environment.

I Became a Behavior Management Guru

The theme “I Became a Behavior Management Guru” captures the heightened challenges teachers faced in managing student behavior as schools reopened after prolonged periods of isolation. With students returning to in-person learning, many exhibited increased behavioral issues, stemming from the social and emotional toll of being separated from their peers and routine school environments. Two sub-themes emerged from this challenge: socialization and participation/attendance.

Socialization

After months of isolation and limited social interaction, many students struggled to reintegrate into the school community. Teachers observed that students had difficulty adapting to group activities, respecting classroom norms, and rebuilding peer relationships. The lack of social engagement during the pandemic had disrupted students' ability to interact positively with others, leading to increased incidents of conflict, distraction, and disruptive behavior. Teachers had to become adept at fostering a supportive and structured environment that encouraged healthy social interactions while addressing the emotional needs of students who were relearning how to function in a communal setting.

Participation and Attendance

The return to in-person learning also brought challenges related to student participation and attendance. Some students, having become accustomed to the flexibility of remote learning, found it difficult to re-engage with the structured demands of the classroom. Issues such as inconsistent attendance, disengagement during lessons, and reluctance to participate in classroom activities became more prevalent. Teachers were tasked with finding innovative ways to motivate and involve students, often requiring them to develop new strategies for encouraging attendance and active participation. This included creating more engaging and interactive lessons, providing additional support to students who were struggling, and working closely with families to address underlying issues affecting student engagement.

The Pandemic Crater

The theme "Pandemic Crater" encapsulates the profound academic and developmental impacts that the pandemic left on students, creating a significant gap in both learning and personal growth. As schools shifted to remote learning and other pandemic-related disruptions occurred, students experienced setbacks that have had lasting effects on their educational trajectories. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme: academic deficits and developmental impact.

Academic Deficits

The abrupt transition to remote learning, combined with inconsistent access to resources and varying levels of support, resulted in significant academic deficits among students. Many struggled to keep pace with the curriculum, resulting in gaps in foundational knowledge and skills. Teachers observed that students returned to in-person learning with significant delays in key academic areas, such as reading, mathematics, and critical thinking. These deficits have required extensive remediation efforts and individualized support to help students catch up and regain their academic footing.

Developmental Impact

Beyond academic challenges, the pandemic disrupted students' developmental progress, particularly in social, emotional, and cognitive domains. Extended periods of isolation, limited peer interaction, and the absence of a structured school environment hindered the development of essential life skills. Teachers noted delays in students' emotional regulation, social skills, and ability to adapt to change. These developmental impacts have made it more difficult for students to fully engage in learning and interact positively with peers, further compounding the challenges of addressing the academic deficits caused by the pandemic.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the profound and multifaceted challenges that health and physical education teachers faced during their student teaching and first-year experiences amid the pandemic. The themes that emerged, such as “False Introduction,” challenges with behavior management, lack of administrative support, difficulties with remote and hybrid models, and the impact of quarantine, underscore how COVID-19 disrupted not only the logistical aspects of education but also the pedagogical development and professional identity formation of new educators.

The theme of “False Introduction” encapsulates how many participants felt their entry into the teaching profession was inauthentic. Teaching during the pandemic did not mirror the conventional experiences they had anticipated during their preparation. Instead, it involved a makeshift, temporary model, leaving them feeling unprepared and disconnected from what “real” teaching should entail.

The absence of traditional face-to-face instruction and the reliance on remote and hybrid models significantly constrained key elements of health and physical education, such as physical engagement, movement activities, and interactive learning. Consequently, these teachers missed out on vital hands-on practice, which is crucial for developing confidence and competence in teaching physical education (Martins & Onofre, 2014).

Behavior management was another significant challenge noted by participants. With students returning from isolation, many teachers reported an uptick in behavior issues that were more complex and difficult to manage compared to pre-pandemic classroom environments. The socialization deficits among students, exacerbated by prolonged isolation and the sudden shift back to in-person learning, made it harder for teachers to maintain classroom order. Furthermore, the virtual setting of remote and hybrid learning models created its own set of management challenges, as teachers had limited ability to enforce rules or monitor engagement, particularly in subjects like physical education that depend on active participation.

The lack of administrative support was a recurring theme in the interviews, further compounding the difficulties these teachers faced. Teachers expressed frustration at the absence of clear guidance and tangible support from school leadership, leaving them to navigate novel teaching scenarios largely on their own. This lack of support was especially felt in areas such as curriculum adaptation, access to resources, and professional development, all of which were vital for helping teachers adjust to the demands of remote and hybrid learning.

Participants also spoke at length about the inherent difficulties of teaching health and physical education in remote and hybrid models. In these settings, traditional instructional methods were not feasible, and many teachers struggled to adapt their lessons to virtual platforms. Physical education, in particular, proved challenging because it typically requires space, equipment, and physical interaction, all of which were limited or absent in a remote environment. The physical and mental health implications of quarantine further exacerbated these issues, with students exhibiting decreased motivation, disengagement, and a general lack of participation in online physical activities.

Considering these findings, the experiences of these teachers reflect a broader concern about the long-term impact of the pandemic on the professional development of new educators. While many adapted and developed new skills, the conditions of their initial teaching experiences have left lasting impressions, raising important questions about the future preparation and support of teachers in times of crisis. These findings call for more robust teacher training programs that integrate crisis-management and remote teaching techniques, as well as stronger administrative frameworks to support teachers, particularly in fields like physical education that rely heavily on in-person interaction.

Overall, this study highlights the need for educational systems to anticipate and address the unique challenges of teaching in uncertain times, ensuring that teachers, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, are adequately prepared and supported.

Conclusion

Teachers were thrust into an unprecedented situation that required them to adapt rapidly and creatively to new challenges. Whether through the reimagining of teaching methods, the innovative approaches to physical education, or the increased focus on behavior management, educators demonstrated remarkable resilience and dedication. However, the discussion also highlights the need for systemic support, both in terms of professional development and resources, to better equip teachers to handle such crises in the future. As the education system moves forward, it is crucial to learn from these experiences and implement strategies that address students' ongoing academic and developmental needs while supporting educators' well-being and professional growth.

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