Disruption to Education during COVID-19: an Innovative Tutoring Program to Support Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education globally, with school closures and a shift to teaching and learning online [1]. Due to new challenges from virtual learning, such as access to reliable Internet, digital competency, and teaching pedagogies, students' learning outcomes were largely affected, especially for equity-deserving students [2] [3]. Tutoring programs alleviated educational disparities, with few that are designed to support equity-deserving students [4] [5]. Studies have examined the positive impacts of tutoring on students' learning outcomes [4]; however, little research explores teacher candidates (TCs) who provide tutoring services. TCs are important stakeholders in the educational pipeline, and online learning halted in-person teaching requirements for their certification [6]. This study explores the experiences of TCs in Ontario, Canada, who participated in an online tutoring program, Study Buddy, from September 2020 to December 2021. Study Buddy was developed by the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University to provide free, one-on-one tutoring, primarily to equity-deserving families. A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze registration and post-program surveys, as well as end-of-placement tutor feedback, to highlight the benefits and challenges of TCs in the program. Findings indicate that Study Buddy enabled TCs to continue their journey to be educators by providing work-integrated learning opportunities, gaining interpersonal, teaching, and learning skills and developing a deeper understanding of the educational challenges faced by equity-deserving students.

Keywords: *COVID-19; education; tutoring; teacher candidates; inequity*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted education and learning. Aside from physical health measures, such as lockdowns and masking, schools shifted from in-person learning to online learning [1]. The shift impacted how students experience education and deepened inequities in educational outcomes [2]. Prolonged school closures decreased students' motivation to learn, leading to disengagement, absenteeism, and dropouts [7]. Particularly concerning was the exacerbation of inequities for students from equity-deserving groups. For instance, they faced additional barriers, such as a lack of access to computers and the Internet, insufficient learning environments, and a lack of social and emotional support [2].

Meanwhile, teacher candidates (TCs) also faced challenges during the pandemic, such as digital competency and implementing digital teaching pedagogies. Moreover, the transition to online learning led to a halt in in-person teaching practicum, which had been mandatory with required hours in their certification. As school closures could not support in-person teaching placement, TCs were left with high levels of uncertainty about their future as educators [6].

Online tutoring programs emerged as a solution to combat learning inequities while also providing TCs with professional development opportunities. Studies examine the positive impacts of tutoring on student learning and achievement [4] and the experiences of tutors who engaged in online learning at universities [8]. However, little is known about the experiences of TCs who engage in K-12 tutoring programs, especially those targeting equity-deserving groups.

2. Study Buddy Program

To address online learning challenges during the pandemic, the Diversity Institute (DI), the Lifelong Leadership Institute, and Ontario Tech University launched the Study Buddy pilot program in May 2020. The program provides free, individualized online tutoring to K-12 students, focusing on those from equity-deserving groups. To ensure high-quality tutoring, the DI partnered with multiple teacher

education programs in Ontario to recruit TCs as tutors. This program provides TCs with teaching opportunities and anti-Black racism training to enhance their capacity to support equity-deserving students.

3. Objective
This study uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate the experiences of TCs who participated in the Study Buddy program from September 2020 to December 2021. The goal was to answer: What are the benefits and challenges of TCs participating in Study Buddy during the pandemic?

4. Methods
Between September 2020 and December 2021, 331 TCs registered for Study Buddy and provided 8000+ sessions (equivalent to 5500+ hours) with 300+ students. TCs joined the program by completing a registration survey. Post-program surveys were also administered to gain insights into TCs' experiences and overall satisfaction. This survey included Likert scale questions on skills development and working from home conditions and open-ended questions.

Four cohorts of TCs registered from September to December 2021 (Table 1). Most registered TCs identified as women (79%), while the remaining 21% identified as men. Regarding equity-deserving groups, 63% of registered TCs did not identify as a member of such groups, while 20% identified as racialized.

Table 1: Tutor Registration by Cohort

	Cohort 1 (09/2020-10/2020)	Cohort 2 (01/2021-05/2021)	Cohort 3 (06/2021-08/2021)	Cohort 4 (09/2021-12/2021)
Registered Tutors	105	80	28	118

Note: From May 2020 to September 2020, Study Buddy was in a testing phase and used different data collection methods.

To understand TCs' experiences, the datasets for all cohorts were merged. The data analysis process involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Registration and post-program survey data were entered into SPSS and Excel for descriptive analysis, with 84 TCs who responded to the post-program survey. Meanwhile, responses from open-ended survey responses and post-placement feedback were analyzed using thematic analysis.

5. Discussion and results
The findings presented contextualize the realities of the program from the perspectives of TCs.

5.1 Benefits

Strengthened Skills as Educators
Post-program data highlights the program's positive impacts, particularly in enhancing TCs' skills as educators. The majority indicated that the program provided them with opportunities to participate in meaningful work-integrated learning (89.3%) and gain experience in interpersonal skills (89.3%), teaching and learning skills (84.5%), technology skills (73.8%), and problem-solving and decision-making skills (78.6%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: TCs Overall Experiences
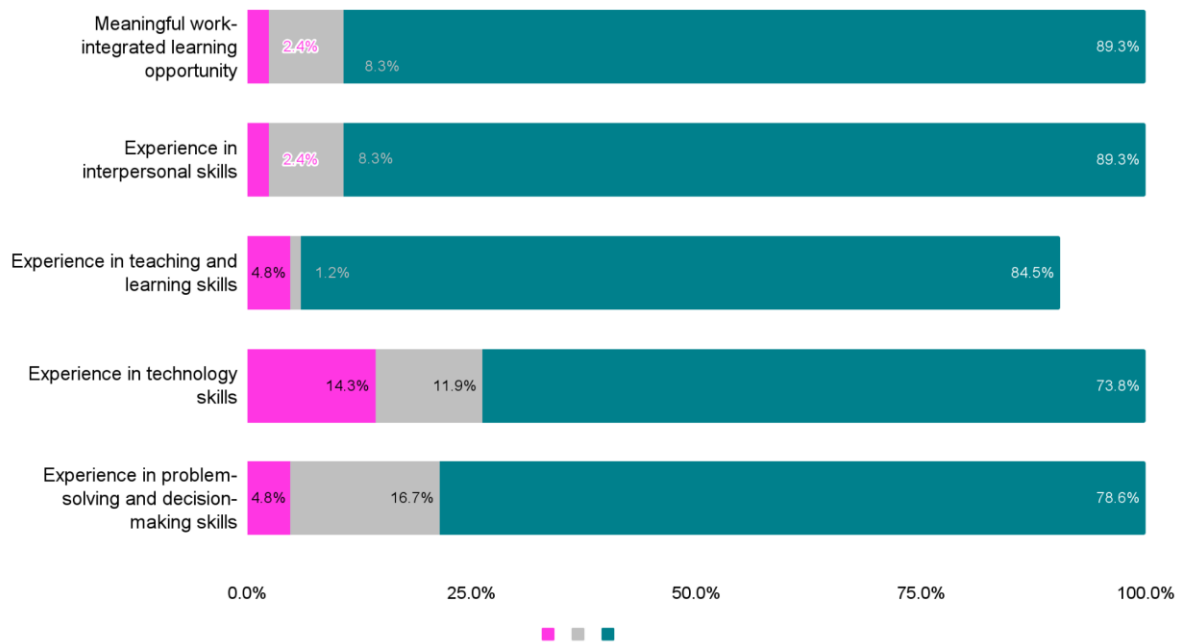
The qualitative data highlighted how TCs further developed as educators by refining their teaching practices.

> It gave me the opportunity to explore and develop my own teaching practices… It [also] made me reflect on my own practices and look at areas on what I can improve on as a future educator and as a learner.

TCs also reported that the program enhanced their understanding of the curriculum and differentiated instruction.

> Professionally, it has given me valuable experiences that I will be able to take with me and implement as I am teaching… I have learned new ways to engage students virtually, I have become a lot more well-versed in the curriculum, and I have developed new skills to differentiate instruction.

Moreover, TCs recognized the importance of effective communication, professionalism, and building connections with their students.

> As time went on, I learned about the importance of personal connections… When I took the time to get to know the students, the sessions were very smooth and we ended up having a more successful time together. I grew more confidence in my teaching abilities and learned about workplace professionalism when working with administration, parents and students to resolve issues.

Increased Cultural Awareness

Research has shown that TCs are motivated to engage with those from other cultures but lack confidence due to teacher preparation not prioritizing cultural awareness. However, TCs reported opportunities in tutoring programs as significant to developing their intercultural learning [9]. This is similar to TCs' experiences with Study Buddy, with many reporting increased cultural awareness, including a deepened understanding of inequity in education.

> I am now a more conscientious teacher who's aware of the inequality that exists within our education system. With this knowledge also comes the realization that I need to do my part to make sure my classroom teaching practices promote equity for all.

The mandatory training workshops offered in the Study Buddy program allowed TCs to recognize the systemic barriers racialized students face.

> Through taking [anti-Black racism] workshops as well as my own experience tutoring, I have really come to understand how students' educational experiences differ based on their race and where they are from. This has made me a more aware and conscientious teacher.

Echoing this sentiment, another TC expanded on the importance of access to resources when examining the inequity in education.

> Another thing that I took away from this experience is the realization that everyone does not have the same access to resources as others… Learning about it through the workshops and through the internet-access struggles of my students made me really acknowledge that this is the reality for so many students. This acknowledgement made me realize just how important it is for teachers… to take steps to ensure equitable learning for all.

5.2 Challenges

Realities of Virtual Teaching from Home

TCs reported several challenges, some related to technical issues, while others directly resulted from working from home. Post-program data revealed that most TCs (76.2%) reported being distracted from family and roommates while working at home, with 20.2% experiencing this regularly or always. Similarly, when asked about loudness while working from home, 71.5% reported it was challenging due to the noise level.

Table 2: Challenges Working from Home

	Never	Rarely/Sometimes	Regularly/Always
I am distracted by family members/roommates.	22.6%	56.0%	20.2%
It is loud.	26.2%	54.8%	16.7%

Some TCs further explained the challenges of tutoring online due to noise levels and a lack of a private workspace while living at home.

> I live with my family so their conversations can be picked up by the mic. I also have a wide-lens webcam so it ends up capturing a large portion of my room, which at times makes me uncomfortable to share.

Other challenges include time management, creating boundaries between personal and professional life, and burnout.

> I am currently living at home where I am responsible for taking care of my parents and our dogs. While working full time during the day, balancing an in-class placement for 5 weeks and my own university course material, fatigue was also an issue.

This aligns with previous research, which indicated that TCs struggled with a switch in time allocation relating to their responsibilities [10].

6. Conclusion

Overall, this paper shed light on the online tutoring experiences of TCs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study Buddy not only supported equity-deserving groups but also provided TCs with valuable professional development opportunities. Despite the challenges associated with online teaching during the pandemic, TCs reported experiencing strengthened skills as educators and

increased cultural awareness essential to their profession. The findings further suggest that when tutoring supports equity-deserving students, the inclusion lens used in the design and delivery of the Study Buddy program led to positive learning and skills development outcomes not only among students, but also TCs.

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